

Female prison population rises

By JACKIE KLEIN

Steel prison doors slam shut on more and more female convicts in Michigan. But correction officials are either at a loss to explain why the state has the dubious honor of having one of the nation's fastest-growing women prison populations or they blame it on a variety of reasons.

One of the primary causes, according to criminologists and correction department personnel, is women's liberation. But opinions differ.

Female criminality, old and new, was the topic of a recent conference in Washington. Its purpose was to help cities and local officials with problems of crime and justice.

Emancipation of women, according to Freda Adler, professor at Rutgers University who spoke at the conference, appears to be related to the increase in female criminals.

"It seems perfectly natural that if you don't permit women to act as bank tellers or presidents, they can't embezzle," Ms. Adler said. "But I don't believe female criminality is the unavoidable accompaniment to women's emancipation."

"I've never met a woman in prison or in a drug center who said to me, 'I'm liberated. I will go rob a bank.' Yet I can't imagine societal changes as massive as those going on in the last 10 years don't infiltrate all strata of society."

OTHER PROFESSIONAL women at the conference maintained females in the criminal justice system are deprived and aren't participating in or concerned about women's lib. These

women, it was claimed, are concerned about their families and the economic ability to survive.

Women who rob gas stations, jewelry stores and banks often make headlines because they're females. One man at the conference conjectured that the dramatic rise in robbery percentages among women is related to prostitution. Massage parlors, he claimed are invitations for men to be robbed.

A woman who was doing research on women in federal prison claimed the same percentage of women in the 1970s were being convicted for drug and money-related crimes as in the 1930s. Many female convicts were under economic stress and supporting families, she said.

Women who get stomped on in the criminal justice system, according to some theories, are those who have stepped out of the motherhood role. There are variables to the generalization that the women's movement leads to increased crime, it has been pointed out.

"Prisons and jails aren't ready for women," said District of Columbia Councilwoman Willie Hardy. "Female convicts sit in rooms making flower arrangements while men are kept busy. They aren't given the social arm they need when they return to society."

THE ISSUE of women and crime is complex. It's also ambiguous, research data is limited and unclear and questions of concern are diverse.

Virginia McLaughlin, warden of a federal reformatory for women in

West Virginia, said at the conference she had been working with female offenders for 35 years.

"We differ in degree and not in essence," she said. "We differ in quantity and not quality. The difference in offenses are in the areas of violent crimes. Women are taking guns today instead of just driving getaway cars."

"You can't live in a little prison world. You can take 500 of 600 women out of jail and put them in some kind of a program. We'd all be better off. We're not going to rehabilitate anyone in a penal institution. The total system has to tell women the kitchen and bedroom are good places, but there are alternatives."

As more doors are opened to women, she said, they're going to get involved in behavior which is identified as criminal. But the women's movement doesn't tell females to go out and knock everybody off, she added.

Statistics show a decline in female crime. But there's no data about crimes for which no one is arrested. They could be males, females or grasshoppers.

RITA SIMON, director of the graduate program in law and society at University of Illinois, maintained women aren't committing burglaries in great numbers because they don't know how to burglarize. They lack training for the technical organization, she claimed.

"We don't know whether more educated women are committing embezzlement than women committing other types of crimes," she said. "Some statistics, though inadequate, show more women are

convicted for violent crimes than for property offenses. Statistics suggest arrests haven't increased.

"Usually, young girls were arrested because they were runaways or violated curfews. Now they're being arrested for violent crimes at a higher rate. If these girls enter the criminal world as adults, we may see more women participating in crimes of violence."/>

Discussions and varying opinions, even verbal slingshots, went on and on at the conference. The conclusion was there can be no solution when nobody can agree on the problem of women and crime.

Prevention of criminal behavior among women was a topic. It was determined programs must be instituted to train women for well-paying jobs and independent community living. Consumer education, child care courses, and budget and household management training also was suggested.

IT WAS also agreed that before prevention strategies can be mapped out for delinquent girls and criminal women, the attitudes of those administering the criminal justice system must change. More understanding of women is needed and Victorian standards of morality must be dealt with.

Further research on the nature of female criminality is desperately needed for prevention to be implemented. This includes information about women's criminal motivations and roles, weapon use and the type of offenses in which they're involved.

(Editor's note: This is part of a continuing series on women criminals and victims of crime.)



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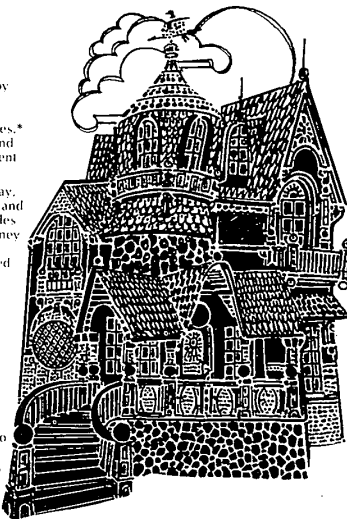
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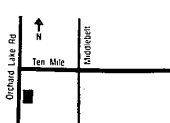
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