

## ABSTRACT

### FEMALE INMATE ADJUSTMENT IN PRISON

This study investigates variables that may be important in the prediction of female inmate adjustment to prison. Specifically, it seeks to determine whether age, time spent in prison, race and conviction type are associated with a measure of adjustment, which includes measures of eating, sleeping, anger, fear, perception of prison as “home,” privacy, violence, rule-following and participation in activities. This study used data previously collected from the Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women in Virginia, 1999-2000 (Warren, 2003). Results indicated there was a statistically significant, positive relationship between age and adjustment. A statistically significant, negative relationship was found between time and adjustment. Policy implications are discussed as are suggestions for future research.

Catherine Nakato  
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FEMALE INMATE ADJUSTMENT IN PRISON

by

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With the saying “Every Journey Starts With One Step,” I saw this come true.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	3
Main Objective of the Study .....	4
Theoretical Framework .....	5
Significance of the Study .....	6
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	8
Age .....	9
Race .....	10
Type of Conviction .....	11
Time in Prison .....	12
Hypotheses .....	12
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....	14
Introduction .....	14
Procedure .....	15
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS .....	16
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION .....	21
Recommendations .....	24
Further research .....	25
Limitations of the study .....	26
Summary .....	27
REFERENCES .....	29

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1 <i>Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Variables Age, Time in Prison, Race and Conviction</i> .....	16
Table 2 <i>Spearman's Bivariate Correlation for Time in Prison, Age, Violent and Nonviolent Offenders</i> .....	19
Table 3 <i>Spearman's Bivariate Correlation for Time in Prison and Age by Race (White, Black, Hispanic, and Other)</i> .....	20



## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
<i>Figure 1.</i> The relationship between time in prison and adjustment .....	17
<i>Figure 2.</i> The relationship between age and adjustment.....	18
<i>Figure 3.</i> The relationship between type of conviction and adjustment .....	18

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Research on female incarceration has increased significantly over the last few years. And for good reason. Of the approximately 1.5 million people in state and federal prisons, 7%, or 106,000, are women (Carson & Sabol, 2012). As the female prison population has increased, so too has the interest in their psychological adjustment to prison life (Carson & Sabol, 2012). Issues related to institutional violence, self-harm, delivery of mental and physical health-care services, and rehabilitation are more important than ever (Warren, Hurts, & Loper (2004) and each may be impacted by the degree to which an inmate either adjusts - or fails to adjust - to prison life. Several researchers have attempted to identify the factors that contribute to successful prison adjustment.

Wright (1986) has argued that three primary dimensions determine prison adjustment: social and cultural background; life experiences related to family, education, and income; and personality. Bukstel and Killman (1980) have also argued that an inmate's social and physical environments determine the nature of their adjustment to prison, which may range from healthy and desirable to hostile and even aggressive. Further, inmate adjustment is enhanced by access to rehabilitative programs and services that may be provided in the prison (Bukstel & Killmann, 1980). Incarcerated women also suffer from a variety of mental health issues.

For example, between 50% and 90% of incarcerated women report clinically significant depressive symptoms (Keaveny, 1999; McClellan, Farabee, & Crouch, 1997; Staton, Leukefeld, & Webster, 2003). James and Glaze (2006) reported that 73% of the women that they surveyed suffered from some mental health problem. This is a rate six times higher than that found among females in

the general population (approximately 12%; James & Glaze, 2006). Some researchers have presented contradictory findings. For example, Islam- Zwart, Vik, and Rawlins, (2007) found that some psychological distress is expected when entering prison but decreases within the first few weeks. On the other hand, Reitzel and Harju (2000) reported that persistent mental suffering is abnormal and is indicative of a potentially long-term, chronic condition they have labelled “prison adjustment depression.” Besides psychological issues, the general prison environment is known to have an effect on inmate adjustment.

Bowler (1982) found that the “institutional totality” of prisons, which includes rules and regulations, violence, staff punitiveness, anti-social sentiments among inmates, tolerance of coercive homosexuality, and dysfunctional staff and inmate relations also affects an inmate’s adjustment to prison life. Lack of privacy, unsafe living conditions, lack of emotional and social support, and inactivity also make adjustment to prison challenging (Hahn, 1979). Sharkey (2010) concluded that overcrowding as a leading cause of depression and anxiety among inmates. Toch (1977, 1981) has identified characteristics of prisons that promote positive inmate adjustment. For example, prisons that emphasize rehabilitation provide educational and recreational opportunities, religious activities, and job training help inmates to better cope with prison (O’Connor & Perreyclear, 2002).

McClellan (1994) compared disciplinary practices and rule compliance at two female and two male prisons. He found that women were cited more frequently for disciplinary violations and punished more severely than were male inmates. Based on McClellan’s (1994) results, Louis (1998) concluded that women are more likely to respond negatively to strict security procedures than are men. Finally, the individual characteristics of inmates may predict adjustment to prison life. For example, Wright (1986) found that inmate’s marital status was

very important: those with children were more likely to experience emotional stress, and since about 70% of women in prison are mothers (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), they are likely suffering significant psychological distress. However, there are unfortunately few studies on adaptation of female inmates to prison life. There is also a lack of knowledge in identifying those adaptive strategies that work best for reducing stress and/or resolving problems in a prison setting (Zamble & Porprino, 1984).

### Statement of the Problem

Many female offenders face significant problems associated with prison social adaptation, stigmatisation, staff conflict, prison settings, culture, and environment. Such factors negatively affect an inmates' ability to successfully cope with imprisonment and may, because of subsequent prison violations, extend their incarceration. The fact that female inmates already view themselves and those around them as criminals, it becomes harder for them to report the challenges they face while in prison to their custodians. Hence, the more difficult their prison experience is likely to be (i.e., increased likelihood of fights, more severe punishments for institutional infractions, etc.). The identity of, and extent to which, various factors may predict female prison adjustment are not very clear.

An inmate's adjustment to prison life plays a critical role in their successful rehabilitation and return to their communities as responsible citizens. Although post-incarceration services play an important role in an inmate's successful reentry to the community, the availability of adjustment services within prison represent the first step in an inmate's rehabilitation. It is essential to understand that adjustment to prison life starts by understanding the demographics or personal attributes of the female inmates. While the primary aims of imprisonment may be

to punish, rehabilitate and return the inmate to the community, it is questionable why a place meant to improve the life of an offender would make adaptation to the prison environment so difficult.

The current study measured female inmate adjustment. I relied on the Prison Adjustment Questionnaire (PAQ) by Wright (1985) that she developed to measure inmate self-perceptions of their adjustment to prison. The questionnaire covered areas such as an inmate's mental health, institutional relationships, relationship to the outside world, and overall prison adjustment. The survey was motivated by the fact that many female inmates have problems in coping to prison life. Indeed, female inmates have been found to have long histories of adjustment problems in schools, with their families and with the law (Wright, 1985).

#### Main Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study was to determine the role that age, race, type of conviction, and time in prison has on female inmate adjustment in prison. All inmates go through a period of adjustment when they enter prison, and some will have more or less difficult adjustments than others. The reasons for these differences are many but these four factors are of relevance. Age is obviously related to an individual's life experiences and level of maturity, which are in turn are related to that person's ability to adjust and to cope. Race we know affects the way that people perceive their environment and are perceived by others. The crime for which a person is convicted (i.e., type of conviction), say violent versus non-violent, is suggestive of future behavior and thus suggestive of future adjustment while incarcerated. The amount of time in prison relates to an individual's ability to adapt to the prison environment as they are integrated within the prison culture and become more familiar with the rules and regulations. A secondary objective of

the study is to introduce a new conceptualization of “adjustment.” The elements that comprise this conceptualization have a logical connection to how inmates adapt (socially, emotionally, physically) to their new living environment. These factors will comprise what I am calling “adjustment.” They are: sleeping, eating, anger, fear, violence, comfort (i.e., does an inmate consider her cell “home?”), rule compliance, physical activity, and privacy. This is not a trivial conceptualization. How we think of, and what we do about, the social, emotional, and physical conditions under which inmates live will contribute to their success in prison and ultimately their rehabilitation.

### Theoretical Framework

Two theories, deprivation theory and importation theory, may contribute to our understanding of inmate adjustment to prison. Deprivation theory attributes negative adjustment of inmates to the stresses of imprisonment (Clemmer, 1958; Sykes, 1958), imposed by prisons’ privately inherent nature, closed off as they are from the rest of society (Goffman, 1961). Prison “deprives” inmates of those connections available to them outside of prison. Isolation from family, friends, and the world in general produces what Goffman (1961) described as “dark times” for the inmates. But deprivation means more than just being disconnected from outside life. It also means that once inside prison, inmates are deprived of, besides their liberty, their freedom to decide when, for example, they sleep, eat, or engage in any other activity. Further, they must live their lives—their entire lives—according to a rigid set of unfamiliar (and what many may perceive to be unfair), rules. Violation of these rules may result in additional, harsh penalties. Deprivation theory suggests that these adverse conditions or pains of imprisonment cause inmates to act aggressively or become the targets of others’

misconduct (Goffman, 1961; McCorkle, Miethe, & Drass, 1995; Sykes, 1958; Useem and Piehl, 2006).

Deprivation theory may be contrasted with Importation theory. Importation theorists argue that the source of many adjustment issues are the behaviors and characteristics that inmates bring with them, i.e., import, from the outside world to prison (Giallombardo, 1966; Irwin, 1970; Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Lahm, 2015; Schrag, 1961; Wheeler, 1969). The resistance to change these behaviors and characteristics can compound adjustment problems. Of particular relevance to this study is prior criminal history, and specifically whether that prior history was violent in nature. It is not a stretch to suggest that individuals who have been convicted of violent crimes are going to have a more difficult time adjusting to prison life than are those who were convicted of non-violent crimes. While all offenders have demonstrated a failure to adapt to social norms, violent offenders have demonstrated the greatest failure to adapt. There is little reason to expect that they will be successful doing in prison what they could not do outside of prison. Indeed, Harer and Steffensmeier (1996) found that “the same people who commit more crime and violence outside of prison (the young, non-white, less educated, lower socioeconomic status offenders) do the same when incarcerated” (p. 14).

#### Significance of the Study

Determining how well, or poorly, women adjust to their prison environment is critical to creating and implementing successful interventions and meaningful prison policy. Specifically, what it is about either the experiences they bring with them to prison (i.e., import) and/or their experiences while in prison (i.e., deprivation) that either aggravates or mitigates their adjustment to prison?

This study is also timely because it was conducted during a period when the female prison population is exploding. It is also meaningful in that most prison-related research is focused on male offenders. The strategies that exist today to assist male inmates adjust to prison may not be applicable to women. Thus, female inmates may need specialized, strategic help in adjusting to prison. As there is a relative dearth of research on female inmates, any change in policy regarding them is likely to be ill informed and unhelpful. This study provides information that can be used by policymakers to design successful rehabilitation and intervention programs to help female inmates becoming responsible citizens upon their release. For the purposes of this study, prison adjustment is defined by how well female inmates adjust to sleeping and eating, and the extent to which they experience anger, fear, violence, and comfort (i.e., does an inmate consider her cell “home?”), rule compliance, physical activity, and privacy.



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Until recently, research on prisons and prisoners has centered on men (Blackburn, Flower, Mullings, & Marguart, 2011; Chesney- Lind & Eliason, 2006; Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005). As a result, issues that are peculiar to women in prison have been ignored. Among the many issues, there are concerns related to their physical and mental health, rehabilitation, and separation from children. Reasons for why female inmates are less well studied than men have to do primarily with their smaller numbers compared to men (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2004). Nonetheless, significant strides have been made in what is known about female inmates.

Women are more likely than men to have experienced trauma and victimization before entering prison (Benedict, 2014). The more severe the trauma (e.g., childhood neglect or sexual assault), the less likely the woman is to adapt to prison life. Ultimately, these women are more aggressive, and end up in violent encounters. They are essentially stuck in their past (Benedict, 2014). Additionally, Benedict (2014) found that the more fearful women are of prison while incarcerated the more likely they are to end up in violent encounters. Contributing to this fear and failure to adjust is the stress that women experience in the everyday prison environment: loud noises, yelling, slamming doors, cell searches, etc. (Benedict, 2014). Similarly, others have reported that failure to cope leads to increased chances of mental health breakdowns and suicide (Dye & Aday, 2013; Pogrebin & Dodge, 2001).

Transformation to prison life is complicated and harsh, because life characterized by dishonesty, deceit, and aggression (Van & Klebe, 2010). Inmates also experience a loss of identity as prison numbers replace their names (Winfrey,

Mays, Crowley, & Peat, 1994) and the everyday, grinding monotony of prison life, where others control every aspect of an inmate's existence, takes its toll on inmates (Zaitzow & Thomas, 2003). Minority inmates often feel they are the object of discrimination and double standards, where rules are applied inconsistently (Sexton, 2012).

However, other researchers have found that prisons may provide a type of sanctuary for some women from the turmoil they experience at home and on the streets (Covington, 1998; Owen, 1998). Problems associated with broken families, drugs, gangs, homelessness, physical and sexual abuse, and unemployment are mitigated by the protection that incarceration may ironically provide (Warren et al., 2004). The literature review concludes with what is known about the four variables under consideration: age, race, conviction type, and time in prison.

### Age

Like their male counterparts, female offenders range in age from minors to geriatric adults (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003; Wells, Owen, & Parson, 2013; Wesley, 2006;). Research suggests that older inmates have an easier adjustment to prison than do younger inmates, and indeed that age is one of the best predictors of institutional adjustment for both male and female inmates (Faily & Roundtree, 1979; Lindquist, 1980; Myers & Levy, 1978; Ruback & Carr, 1984; Toch, Adam, & Greene 1987).

The reasons for this are varied. According to Maschi, Morgan, Zgoba, Courtney, and Ristow (2011), young female inmates are more likely to be affected by the uncertainty and fear that a new, unfriendly environment presents, as well as recent, past life traumas. Additionally, these past traumatic experiences are not usually the object of a therapeutic intervention, further exacerbating their effect on

adjustment (Maschi et al., 2011). For example, Simkins and Katz (2002) found that young inmates were more likely to be the victims of violence and abuse by older inmates if the institution ignored past unpleasant experiences. However, some studies have shown the opposite effect of age on adjustment. For example, Haugebrook, Zgoba, Maschi, and Morgen (2010) reported that young inmates are more likely to assault older inmates.

### Race

As race is a critical factor in American society, so too is it a critical factor in American prisons. Although Black females makeup 12% of the population in the United States, they account for 22% of the overall population in prison (Carson, 2014).

Isaac, Lockhart, and Williams, (2001) argued that during the 1980s and 90s African Americans represented the highest prison population and the increase was attributed to the “drug war.” Many drug crimes changed to felonies from misdemeanors with long sentences. These changes affected African Americans disproportionately compared to other racial groups, particularly when it came to crack cocaine (Isaac et al., 2001). However, penalties for each were not equivalent; possession of crack has been more severely penalized than possession of powder, thus, the disproportionate effect of penalties on Blacks (Henriques & Manatu-Rupert, 2001). In the mid to late 1990s, 80% of the females incarcerated for charges related to crack cocaine were African American (Henriques & Manatu-Rupert, 2001). Isaac et al. (2001) also argued that African American females faced greater retaliation from prison officials when they complained of abuse or discrimination than other groups. Finally, Isaac et al. (2001) drew an interesting parallel between the experiences of Blacks in prison and the

experiences of Blacks under slavery. Although dated, there is evidence for Black females committing more rule violations than White females (Faily & Roundtree, 1979), and for committing more assaults (Lindquist, 1980). Still, in absolute numbers there are more White women (53,100) incarcerated than Blacks (22,600), or Hispanics (17,800) (Carson, 2014).

#### Type of Conviction

Female inmates convicted of violent crimes had a positive adjustment to prison and were better able to resist violent and sexual attacks (Wolff, Blitz, Shi, Siegel, & Bachman, 2007). Wooldredge and Steiner (2013), using a combined sample of male and female inmates, found that those serving time for a violent crime had a reduced likelihood of physical victimization and theft. Batchelor, Burman, and Brown (2001) made an argument that is consistent with deprivation theory. That is, whether an inmate is violent in prison has as much to do with the prison environment as it does with the type of crime that got them there in the first place. Researchers have also demonstrated that prison staff, management, and policies alone can also lead to prison inmate female violence and affect their adjustment level especially in cases where operational policies and procedures are weak (Colvin, 1992; Goldstone & Useem, 1999; Useem & Goldstone, 2002).

While not on type of conviction or females, Cunningham and Sorensen (2007) carried out a study on institutional violence that may be informative when considering violence among female inmates. They analyzed the disciplinary reports of approximately 25,000 male inmates in the Florida Department of Corrections. They discovered that acts of violence committed while incarcerated were the best predictor of institutional violence during subsequent prison terms (Cunningham & Sorensen, 2007).

### Time in Prison

The amount of time an inmate serves in prison may be related to adjustment (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2001). Studies have shown that as time served increases, so too does general rule-breaking, violent assaults, and non-violent sexual misconduct (Drury & DeLisi, 2010; Gover, Perez, & Jennings 2008; Lahm, 2017). Similarly, sentence length has been found to be positively related to institutional violence (Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2009; Thompson & Loper, 2005). But the research has been inconsistent.

For example, MacKenzie and Goodstein (1985) examined the adjustment of 1,270 male inmates incarcerated in three U.S. prisons. Their study focused on the relationship between demographic variables, measures of prosocial lifestyle (e.g., employment before incarceration), the degree of previous experience with the criminal justice system, present conviction, and a number of psychological conditions (e.g., depression, anxiety, psychosomatic illness, fear). They found that inmates who were new to prison and who anticipated serving long sentences reported poorer adjustment than inmates who had already spent significant amounts of time in prison, and poorer adjustment than new inmates with short sentences. Lahm (2017), on the other hand, found no significant effects of sentence length on sexual, drug/alcohol, violent, or property infractions among female inmates.

### Hypotheses

This study made the following predictions:

Age: Younger inmates will have more adjustment problems than older inmates.

Race: Black inmates will have more adjustment problems than Whites, Hispanics, or others.

Type of Conviction: Inmates convicted of a violent crime will have more adjustment problems than inmates convicted of a nonviolent crime.

Time in Prison: The less time an inmate has spent in prison will result in more adjustment problems than inmates who have been in prison longer.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This study looked at four independent variables: age (18-79), race (White, Black, Hispanic, and Other), type of conviction (violent or nonviolent), and time served (0-54 months). The dependent variable was adjustment and it was defined as how well female inmates sleep and eat, the extent to which they experience anger, fear, violence, and comfort (i.e., does an inmate consider her cell “home?”), rule compliance, physical activity, and privacy. Violent convictions include homicide and sex crimes. Non-violent convictions included drug crimes, fraud, prostitution, parole and probation violations, regulatory, and other miscellaneous crimes.

This study was based on secondary data collected between 1999-2000 at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women in Virginia (Warren, 2003). The Fluvanna survey was a comprehensive look at women inmates but its primary focus was on psychopathologies among the women and their adjustment to prison life. The current study looked at a small subset of these data. Specifically, it extracted data on several areas that contributed to a woman’s adjustment to prison: sleeping, eating, anger, fear, violence, comfort, rule compliance, physical activity, and privacy. Together, these factors comprise what this study will refer to as “adjustment.” Adjustment was based on a scale of 0-30: higher scores are associated with better adjustment. Furthermore, the current study was interested in a limited subset of demographic information: age, race, type of conviction, and time in prison.

### Procedure

Permission to use the dataset was obtained through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). The original survey included 812 female inmates. In the current study, inmates were eliminated from the analysis for the following reasons: no recorded test date; incarcerated fewer than 5 days (and therefore not able to provide data on adjustment); and incarcerated more than 256 months (too few in the sample). The resulting sample comprised 626 inmates whose length of incarceration ranged from 5 days (0 months) to 52 months.



## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Table 1 represents the primary demographic information collected in the study. The average age of the sample was 33.46 years; Blacks comprised the largest segment of the prison population (51.7%), followed by Whites (41.4%), Other (5.8%), and Hispanics (1.1%). About two-thirds (67.7%) of the sample had been convicted of a nonviolent crime, leaving 32.2% of the inmates convicted of violent crimes. The average amount of time in prison when the survey was administered was 5.81 months; the mean prison adjustment score was 16.9 (on a scale of 0-30).

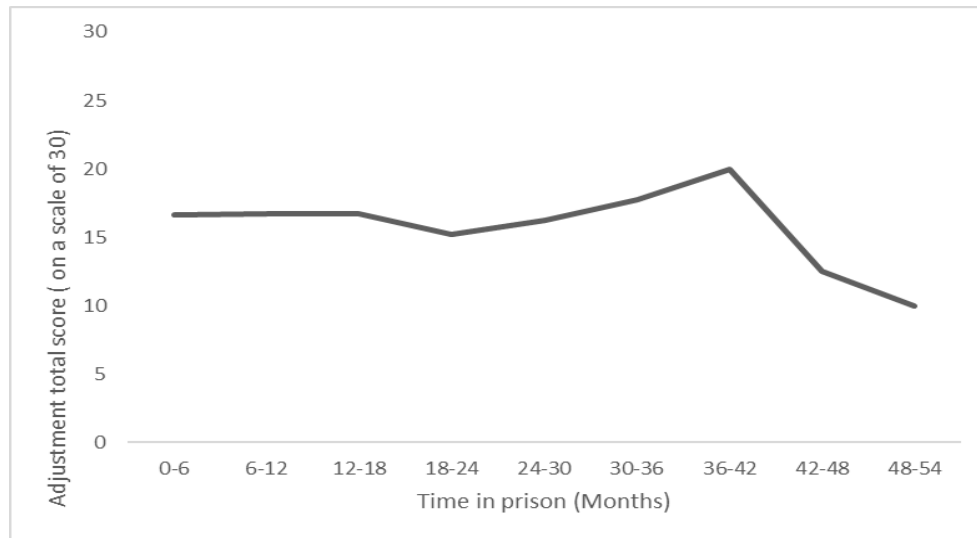
Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Variables Age, Time in Prison, Race and Conviction*

Variables	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	603	33.46 years	8.76
Time in Prison	626	5.81 months	7.30
Adjustment	594	16.90	3.70
Race	<i>N</i>	Frequency %	
White	258	41.4	
Black	322	51.7	
Hispanic	7	1.1	
Other	36	5.8	
Conviction Type	<i>N</i>	Frequency %	
Non-Violent	424	67.7	
Violent	202	32.3	

*Note.* Sample size (n) for age, time in prison and adjustment varies because the original database did not collect this information for all inmates. Adjustment was measured on a scale of 0 – 30, based on nine predictors (eating, sleeping, anger, fear, prison as “home,” privacy, violence, rule-following, and activity).

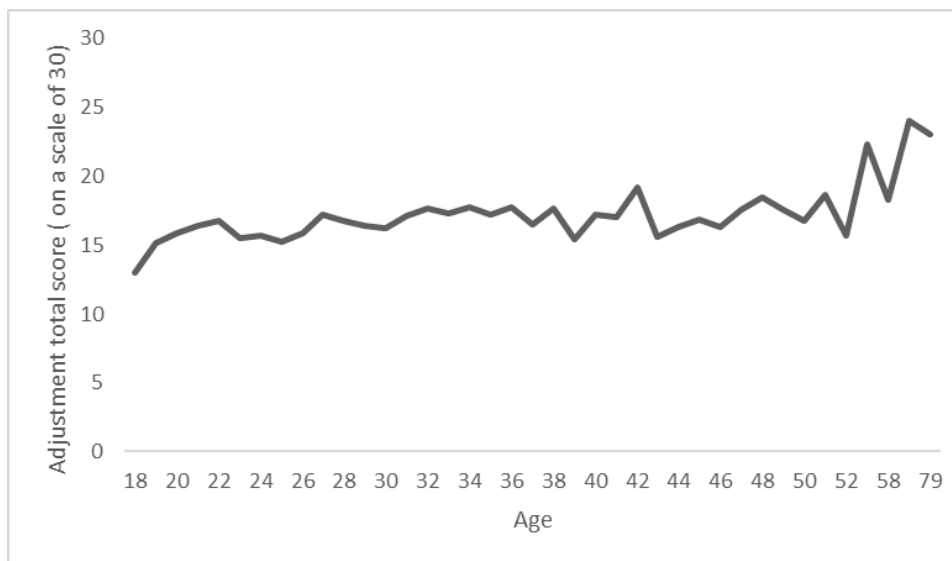
A significant, negative relationship was found between time in prison and adjustment,  $r(594) = -.108, p = .008$  (see Figure 1). Inmates showed “average” adjustment through the 30 months of their incarceration with a slight improvement between months 36 and 42. Interestingly, adjustment declined after month 42.



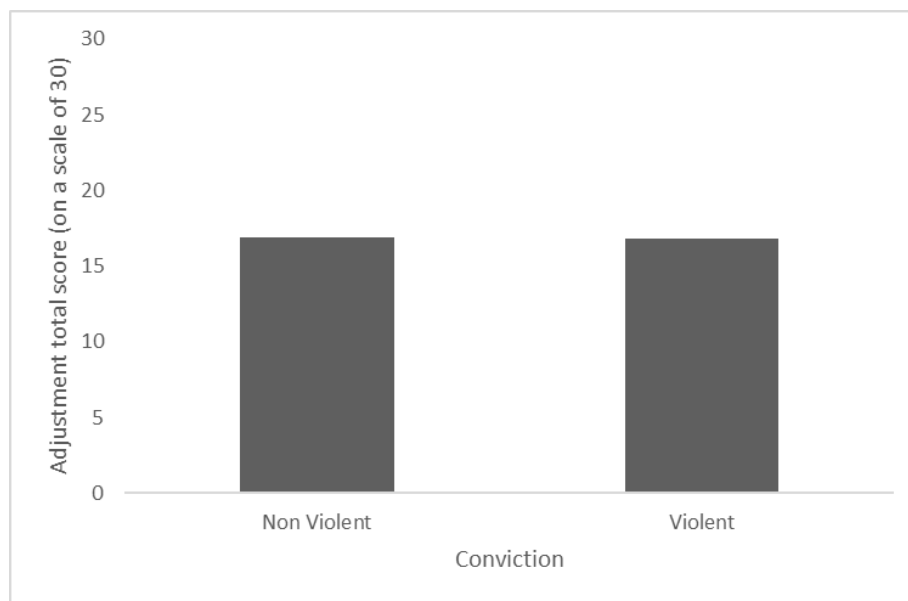
*Figure 1.* The relationship between time in prison and adjustment

A significant positive relationship was found between age and adjustment,  $r(571) = .164, p < .05$  (see Figure 2). Although not significant, the relationship was in the predicted direction: older inmates adjust better than younger inmates.

A cursory examination of Figure 3 reveals no significant difference in adjustment for inmates who committed either violent or nonviolent crimes. However, when time in prison and age are taken into consideration, some significant differences between violent and nonviolent offenders emerge. Table 2 contains the correlations for time and age between violent and nonviolent offenders.



*Figure 2.* The relationship between age and adjustment



*Figure 3.* The relationship between type of conviction and adjustment

A significant, negative relationship was found between time in prison and adjustment for nonviolent offenders,  $r(403) = -.097, p = .05$  (see Table 2). That is, the more time that nonviolent offenders spent in prison, the more poorly they adjusted.

This was not predicted. There was no relationship between age and adjustment for nonviolent offenders.

Table 2

*Spearman's Bivariate Correlation for Time in Prison, Age, Violent and Nonviolent Offenders*

Types of Conviction	<i>df</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>P</i>
Nonviolent			
Time v. Adjustment	403	-.097	.05
Age v. Adjustment	392	.026	.610
Violent			
Time v. Adjustment	191	-.133	.07
Age v. Adjustment	179	.409	.001

A significant, positive relationship was found between age and adjustment for violent offenders,  $r(179) = .409, p < .05$ . That is, older violent offenders adjusted better than young violent offenders. While it was predicted that more time in prison would lead to better adjustment overall (supported by the results), it was a little surprising that this relationship would exist for violent offenders. There was no relationship between time in prison and adjustment for violent offenders.

Table 3 reveals only two significant relationships. The first is a significant, positive correlation between age and adjustment for White inmates,  $r(240) = .239, p < .05$ . That is, as White inmates got older, the better adjusted to the prison environment they became. This is consistent with the prediction that older inmates adjust better to prison than do younger inmates. No other racial group showed this relationship. The second significant correlation was for time in prison and adjustment for Black inmates,  $r(302) = -.158, p < .05$ . This is a negative relationship, suggesting that as Black inmates stayed in prison longer, the more poorly they adjusted to prison.

Table 3

*Spearman's Bivariate Correlation for Time in Prison and Age by Race (White, Black, Hispanic, and Other)*

Race	<i>Df</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>P</i>
White			
Time v. Adjustment	247	-.084	.19
Age v. Adjustment	240	.239	.001
Black			
Time v. Adjustment	302	-.158	.01
Age v. Adjustment	289	.097	.10
Hispanic			
Time v. Adjustment	7	.555	.20
Age v. Adjustment	5	.765	.13
Other			
Time v. Adjustment	35	.054	.76
Age v. Adjustment	34	.232	.19

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study confirmed some of what was known about the incarceration of women. For example, in regards to race, more Black women (51.7%) were incarcerated than any other racial group. Previous research has revealed that Black women are incarcerated at a higher rate compared than are other races (Carson, 2014; Isaac et al., 2001). Reasons for this disparity include the “war on drugs” that has disproportionately affected Black communities, and inadequate legal representation, resulting in long prison sentences. Additionally, the limited social and economic opportunities that characterize many Black communities, segregation in education, employment, single-parent households, and residency restrictions may all have combined to push Blacks into crime. It suggests that the challenges that Black females face on outside may be finding their way in to prison, and to a greater degree than for other races.

When looking at type of conviction, there were twice as many inmates with a violent conviction (67.7%) than there were inmates with a nonviolent conviction (32.3%). The importation model (Harer & Steffensmeier, 1996) suggests that inmates “import” their troubles into prison. In light of the fact that in this study nearly two-thirds of the offenders had been convicted of a violent crime, it was expected that violent offenders would have a harder time adjusting than non-violent offenders. But this was not the case: violent offenders were no worse or better overall in adjusting to prison than their non-violent counterparts.

When looking at age, it was predicted that older inmates would adjust better than younger inmates. This was generally true, even for inmates with violent convictions, but the differences were not significant. This finding is consistent with Jensen (1977), who found that young female inmates were more likely to

violate prison rules than older inmates. Young female inmates are probably more affected by the competitive prison environment, recent life traumas, fears of uncertainty related to being incarcerated and potential victimization than are older inmates (Faily & Roundtree, 1979; Lindquist, 1980; Myers & Levy, 1978).

Policies and programs that help young women to adjust to prison should be emphasized. For example, housing older inmates apart from young inmates, mental health screening before and during imprisonment, and counseling services in anger management and depression, recreational and educational opportunities, can ameliorate the fears that all inmates are likely to experience (Haugerbrook et al., 2010).

The effects of race were particularly interesting. As White female inmates got older, the better they adjusted to prison. However, this was not true for Black inmates. As Black inmates got older, they adjusted no better or worse than any other group. There are several possibilities that may explain this result. First, White women may have experienced, as they aged, less discrimination, bias and prejudice than did other racial groups. This may very well have been the case when they first entered prison as well, but its potential positive effect on adjustment was neutralized by the negative consequences that come with being newly incarcerated. White inmates adjusted as they aged. Second, Black women may have adjusted relatively well upon their incarceration – they were in the majority in the prison, and that may have had some benefit – but as they got older, and found themselves the continued object of discrimination and prejudice, their adjustment failed to improve. Favoritism, if it existed, was more likely to have been directed toward Whites. Thus, White women learned to take advantage of it. Black women, on the other hand, were not likely to have been the object of any official, preferential treatment at any point, and when they realized that none was

to be forthcoming, their adjustment suffered. The findings in this study contrast with prior research that found good adjustment for Black women generally (e.g., Bachman et al., 2013; Chen & Ullman, 2010; Flower et al., 2010). These differences may be attributable to when the surveys were taken. The current study relies on data that are nearly 20 years old, while the other studies are all less than 10 years old.

Overall, and although the relationship was weak, the amount of time an inmate spent in prison had a deleterious effect on adjustment. Another weak relationship existed between time in prison and non-violent offenders. The longer these females stayed in prison, the greater difficulty they had in adjusting to prison life. Benedict (2014) found similar results, and suggested that non-violent offenders are more likely to be affected by the noises, yelling, slamming of doors, and cell searches. This would certainly be a problem for the current sample of inmates in terms of the way that impaired adjustment is characterized, in part, by disruptions to eating, sleeping, comfort, compliance, and privacy. It is hard to imagine prisons as ever being quiet, but “quiet zones” or quiet dorms, a reward system for reducing noise, disciplining disruptive and unnecessary noise, and noise reducing strategies (e.g., additional insulation, replacing metal items with rubber where possible) may be ideas worth pursuing. Finally, Black inmates had more difficulty adjusting as they spent more time in prison. As with the other relationships described here, the correlation was significant but weak. This finding makes sense in light of prior research. For example, Black inmates commit most prison rule violations (Crouch, 1980; Faily & Roundtree, 1979; Lockhart, 2001). This is attributed to the racial discrimination and retaliation that Black inmates experience at the hands of correctional officers (Isaac et al., 2001). Improved selection and training of the prison staff and administration, and the fair



application of prison rules and policies may go a long way in improving adjustment to prison.

Rather than getting used to the daily routine of incarceration, inmates may have been overcome by the daily grind of prison life. It's difficult to adjust when the deprivations and restrictions of prison, along with the indignities that go along with it, become a constant battle to overcome. For these women, it may have seemed that there was no hope on the horizon for things to ever get better: a prison cell would never become "home," food would never improve, relationships with fellow inmates and staff would never really be meaningful or lasting, the noise would never quit, rehabilitative services would be lacking, and privacy would always be impossible. This explanation is supportive of deprivation theory introduced earlier. That is, inmates cannot adjust in an environment in which they are deprived of nearly all that is normal and desirable. The findings in this study are consistent with prior research that has found that the longer a woman serves time in prison, the more she is at a risk of breaking a prison rule (Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2009; Thompson & Loper, 2005). Although one of the goals of being put in prison is punishment, policies that focus on positive adjustment must be put introduced. Respect of an inmate's rights and improved regulations and conditions for sleeping, privacy, food, and rehabilitative services will help inmates adjust to prison.

### Recommendations

It is always easy to say that more research needs to be done, or more money needs to be spent, but this is one instance where the statement is justified. Even though the female prison population is expanding rapidly, research on female inmates is lagging. We have the opportunity to learn about the female prison

experience and to correct the problems identified. Effective, evidence-based practices for mental health treatment, trauma-informed care, education, and vocational training are needed. Attention to often-overlooked issues, like food quality, comfort, and recreational activities, are all examples of pay now, or pay later, when these women leave prison worse off than when they entered, offend again, harm new victims, and return to prison. This is not a plea for being soft on the inmates or soft on crime. Nor is it a suggestion that prisons be turned into “resorts.” Prisons are, and must remain, places for rehabilitation, retribution, and punishment. These goals are difficult to achieve under the best of circumstances but when we ignore or marginalize the difficulties that inmates experience in adjusting to a difficult environment, we run the risk of making that environment more dangerous and less effective in achieving its legitimate penological goals.

#### Further Research

This study looked at a simple dichotomy for type of conviction: violent and nonviolent crimes. Further research must take into account the entire criminal histories of the inmates. Females have a distinct offending pattern compared to men and it must be taken into account when assessing adjustment to prison. A critical area for further research concerns our aging prison population. The war on crime—longer sentences for more criminalized behaviors, restrictions on the circumstances under which parole can be sought and won—has significant consequences: a prison infrastructure that cannot accommodate the size of the prison population, increased costs (e.g., salaries and benefits for prison employees, maintaining and housing increasing numbers of inmates), to name just two of the biggest. But the most important consequence may very well be that inmates are growing old in prison as sentences have become longer and parole more difficult

to obtain. Older prisoners are expensive prisoners. They are more likely to need special accommodations, and more complex and costly mental and physical health care. Gerontology in prison may be the next big issue for our correctional system.

The existing literature is contradictory on why some racial groups adjust better to prison than others. More research here is needed. Our nation is in a particularly dangerous and confusing time regarding race relations. The racial conflicts that exist beyond the prison walls are only exacerbated within the walls. Our prisons are potential powder kegs and what we can do now to improve adjustment and hence race relations may help us avoid some tragic consequences.

There are a few, additional recommendations. First, recreational, educational and vocational opportunities should be expanded. Some minimum-security institutions already have these in place and they seem to be an effective part in inmate rehabilitation. Second, the role that prison families play in adjustment is a largely unexamined area of prison life. Whether they are detrimental or helpful has not been fully determined (Mackenzie, Robinson, & Campbell, 1989). Third, the dataset used in this study was difficult to obtain. The application and approval process to access the data from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) was laborious and time-consuming. This was unnecessary and is a deterrent to conducting research on these important issues.

#### Limitations of the Study

A significant limitation of the study was its lack of a theoretical foundation, attributable in part to the dearth of research on female prison inmates (Cranford, 1998; Dalley, 1993). Males dominate the correctional research literature. One result of this is that few explanations for female inmate behavior exist. It may be

that the same criminological and penological theories that apply to men also apply to women. But this cannot be assumed based on the extant literature.

This study adopted the definitions of measures and behaviors that were used in the original dataset. The issue is that the meaning of, for example, violent and non-violent crimes are defined differently in some states. This limits our ability to generalize the findings of this study to other states and jurisdictions.

Further hampering generalization are the age of the dataset (nearly 20 years old) and the fact that it is drawn from a single institution. The primary questionnaire, the Prison Adjustment Questionnaire (Wright, 1985) is even older (32 years old). It may have been appropriate then but how it captures the concerns, attitudes and adjustment of today's inmate is unknown. The degree to which the female inmate population at Fluvanna Correctional Institution represents incarcerated women around the country is also unknown. These findings may be unique to Fluvanna inmates and no one else.

Finally, despite criticisms of the dataset's accessibility, it was extensive. This study examined only a few of the many dozens of variables contained within the dataset. It is a rich dataset that, despite its age, may present additional research opportunities on at least static variables. The few variables selected for study in this research report significantly reduced the size of the sample.

### Summary

The primary purpose of the study was to identify factors that affected female inmate's adjustment to prison. The study relied on the analysis of a secondary dataset. Age, race, type of conviction and time in prison served as the independent variables. Adjustment, comprised of inmate assessment of satisfaction with eating, sleeping, comfort, activity, and privacy and self-reports of their

perception of fear, anger, safety (violence), and rule compliance served as the dependent variable.

The relationships between age, race, conviction type and time in prison were weak, even when significant. The most interesting finding was that adjustment was most difficult for nonviolent inmates as their time in prison increased. Recommendations for future research on the effects of age and race particularly were made as were specific recommendations for evidence-based interventions and policies. Limitations of the study, largely pertaining to the generalizability of the dataset, were made.

In conclusion, there is a lot that takes place within a prison, and this study attempted to capture only a small portion of what happens. Positive prison adjustment contributes to successful re-entry into the community and much remains to be discovered.

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