

## A PROFILE OF HAWAIIAN AND NON-HAWAIIAN WOMEN INCARCERATED IN A COMMUNITY RESIDENTIAL TRANSITION PROGRAM

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Although the number of female inmates in Hawai'i's correctional facilities has increased dramatically in recent years, little is known about these women. Native Hawaiians comprise the largest ethnic group in the state's prison system. This article presents the findings of interviews with 51 women, 33 Hawaiian and 18 non-Hawaiian, incarcerated in a community residential transition program. Respondents reported multiple negative life events. No significant differences were found between the 2 groups in the occurrence of these events except for domestic violence, which occurred more frequently among non-Hawaiians. Incarcerated Hawaiian women generally experienced negative events earlier in life compared with non-Hawaiians, with home violence and domestic violence occurring significantly earlier. The findings are discussed from a developmental perspective and have implications for prevention and treatment programs.

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According to the U.S. Department of Justice (Harrison & Beck, 2004), there were more than 2.2 million individuals incarcerated in various facilities—federal and state prisons, local jails, military and juvenile facilities, jails in American Indian reservations, and other institutions—in the United States in 2003. Among the 1,470,045 prisoners under the jurisdiction of federal or state adult correctional authorities in that year, 93% were male and 7% were female. Hawai'i's 5,828 prisoners were less than 1% of the national incarcerated population, and women comprised a higher percentage of the inmates in the state (12%) than was found nationally.

Women represent the fastest-growing group in the nation's prisons and jails. Data reported by the U.S. Department of Justice (Harrison & Beck, 2004) indicate that between 1995 and 2003, the female population in federal or state prisons grew at an annual average rate of 5%, which was greater than the 3% rate increase in male inmates. During the same period, Hawai'i's incarcerated female population increased at an average rate of 10% per year, twice the national rate increase for females and triple the national rate increase for males. Hawai'i had 312 female inmates in federal or state facilities in 1995, and that number more than doubled to 685 women in 2003. The high proportion of women incarcerated in Hawai'i is also reflected in the 2003 incarceration rate per 100,000 female residents: 68 for Hawai'i versus 62 for the nation.

Nationally, the majority of women in prisons have at least a high school education, more than one-third have never been married, and three-quarters were sentenced for nonviolent offenses involving drugs or property (Greenfield & Snell, 1999). Among those in federal or state correctional facilities, White women constituted the largest racial group (42%), followed by Blacks (38%), Hispanics (17%), and others (3%), including American Indians, Alaska Natives, Asians, Native Hawaiians, and other Pacific Islanders (Harrison & Beck, 2004). However, despite the fact that there were more White women in prisons, Black women had a higher probability of being imprisoned. The incarceration rate for the latter in 2003 was 185 per 100,000 U.S. residents compared with a rate of 84 per 100,000 for Hispanics and 38 per 100,000 for Whites (Harrison & Beck, 2004).

Hawai'i has three prisons for men (Hālawa, Kūlani, and Waiawa Correctional Facilities) and one prison used exclusively for women (Women's Community Correctional Center, located in Kailua, O'ahu). Four jails (Hawai'i, Kaua'i, Maui, and O'ahu Community Correctional Centers) service both men and women. A

point-in-time count conducted on June 30, 2004 by the Hawai'i Department of Public Safety (personal communication, April 7, 2005) indicated there were 5,269 (88%) males and 689 (12%) females under its jurisdiction (i.e., physically housed in a correctional facility, on furlough or intermittent leave, in hospitals or transitional housing, or in other situations). About two-thirds of these inmates were younger than age 40, and approximately three-fourths were of Hawaiian/part-Hawaiian, Caucasian, or Filipino ethnicities. The men comprised 39% Hawaiian/part Hawaiian, 21% Caucasian, 13% Filipino, 5% Japanese, 5% Samoan, 12% other, and 5% not reported; the women comprised 45% Hawaiian/part-Hawaiian, 23% Caucasian, 10% Filipino, 4% Japanese, 3% Samoan, 9% other, and 7% not reported. Hawai'i's female inmate population has increased significantly over the past 25 years: 30 women in 1980, 172 in 1990, and 542 in 2000 (Department of Public Safety, 2000). At the end of March 2005, a total of 545 women were incarcerated within the state, 297 in the Women's Community Correctional Center and 248 in the four jails. An additional 87 women were imprisoned in a contracted facility in Colorado or in a federal detention center in Honolulu (Department of Public Safety, 2005).

Substance abuse, mental illness, spousal abuse, and prior victimization have been identified as risk factors that can contribute to women's criminal behavior (National Criminal Justice Reference Service, 2004). Sanders and McNeill (1997) found high rates of alcohol and drug usage among female offenders in the Nevada Women's Correctional Center. More than two-thirds of the incarcerated women in Oregon (Fickenscher, Lapidus, Silk-Walker, & Becker, 2001) had a history of physical or sexual abuse, and those who were maltreated were more likely to report using drugs and being homeless than were those who were not abused. A large majority of the women in a maximum security prison in New York reported physical or sexual abuse as children and domestic violence by an intimate partner as adults (Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999). These findings are in keeping with a national report (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999) which found that about half of the women in state prisons had been using alcohol, drugs, or both at the time of the offense that resulted in their incarceration. In addition, more than 40% of women under correctional authority reported being physically or sexually abused, and most of these assaults occurred before age 18. In a summary of the research, Bloom, Owen, and Covington (2003) concluded that women offenders were more likely than men offenders to have been the victims of physical and/or sexual abuse, substance abusers, and primary caretakers of young children at the time of arrest.

Moreover, compared with men, women have distinctive physical and mental health needs, are less likely to be convicted of a violent offense, and pose less danger to the community.

Women offenders in Hawai'i have been described as being between the ages of 21 to 39, requiring substance abuse treatment (95%), and having a history of mental health problems (33%), childhood physical and sexual abuse (60%), and violence in their lives (80%) (Department of Public Safety, 2000). These negative life experiences can be traced to an earlier period of development. Interview data (Chesney-Lind, Pasko, Marker, Matsen, & Lawyer, 2005) from Hawai'i's at-risk youths and key informants of the juvenile justice system indicated that, compared with boys, girls are more likely to have histories of sexual abuse and assault, unhealthy relationships with older boyfriends, oppressive family environments, and psychological problems. In contrast, a key factor in boys' delinquency is peer pressure to "prove" their bravery and toughness; however, academic failure, mental health problems, and troubled families are also factors.

Despite their increasing number, there is a dearth of information about Hawai'i's incarcerated women, including those of Native Hawaiian heritage. For example, there is scant demographic data and an absence of both quantitative and qualitative information regarding the life histories, needs, and personal and family relationships of this population. The purpose of the present report is to present a descriptive profile of a sample of the women who are incarcerated in Hawai'i, with a focus on Native Hawaiian women. We hope this exploratory study will contribute to building a knowledge base that can be used to develop effective prevention and intervention programs for these women.

## METHOD

A survey instrument was developed to obtain information relating to the developmental histories of incarcerated women. It consisted of both open-ended and close-ended questions and focused on demographic and family backgrounds, youth and adult experiences, employment and health histories, and future aspirations of the women. The instrument was reviewed by staff members in the criminal justice system who worked with the target population and was pilot-tested with

women who had previously been imprisoned. The feedback received and experiences in the field provided valuable information that was used to modify the initial instrument and to develop the tool for the present study. This article reports on the demographic characteristics and experiences in childhood and adulthood of Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian women who were imprisoned in a transitional facility located in the community.

Interviews were conducted in 2004 with 51 women who were incarcerated at Matlock Hale (a community residential transition program), which is administered by T. J. Mahoney & Associates. Female offenders at this 36-bed furlough and treatment facility have 24 months or less to serve on their sentences. The one-on-one interviews generally ran for about 2 hours. The women who consented to be interviewed did so voluntarily; they were able to terminate the interview at any time and could refuse to answer any of the questions. As an incentive, the interviewees were given 2 hours of community service credit for their participation.

## RESULTS

The results are presented by demographic characteristics, experiences in childhood, and experiences in adulthood. The experiences were categorized on the basis of the mean age of the event's occurrence for the *total group* in the sample: experiences reported at 17 years and younger were grouped in childhood, and experiences reported at 18 years and older were placed in adulthood. This categorization is somewhat arbitrary in that for some events the mean ages of the Native Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian women in the study occurred earlier or later than the aforementioned age ranges.

### *Demographic Characteristics*

Of the 51 women in the study, 33 (65%) were Hawaiian/part Hawaiian, whereas 18 (35%) were non-Hawaiian (see Table 1). The Hawaiian women ranged in age from 24 to 59 years (vs. 27 to 48 years for non-Hawaiians) and had nearly the same mean age as other inmates (37.5 years for Hawaiians vs. 37.6 years for non-Hawaiians). A majority of the Hawaiian women had a high school degree (55% vs.

41% for non-Hawaiians), and three-fourths were born in Hawai'i (75% vs. 47% for non-Hawaiians). Although two-thirds of the Hawaiian women were never married (67% vs. 39% for non-Hawaiians), some may have lived with a partner but never formalized the union through marriage.

**TABLE 1** Demographic characteristics of the study sample

	Hawaiian		Non-Hawaiian		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Study sample	33	65	18	35	51	100
Mean age (in years)	37.5		37.6		37.5	
<i>Place of birth</i>						
Hawai'i	24	75	8	47	32	65
Out-of-state	8	25	9	53	17	35
<i>Marital status</i>						
Ever married	11	33	11	61	22	43
Never married	22	67	7	39	29	57
<i>Education</i>						
Less than high school	8	24	5	29	13	26
High school degree	18	55	7	41	25	50
More than high school	7	21	5	29	12	24

*Note:* No statistically significant difference was found when comparisons were made between Hawaiian versus non-Hawaiian women using the chi-square test at  $p < .05$ .

### *Experiences in Childhood*

Although the differences were not statistically significant, considerably more of the incarcerated women reported that their parents' or caregivers' use of alcohol (42% of Hawaiian and 29% of non-Hawaiian women) than drugs (15% of Hawaiian and 11% of non-Hawaiian women) had negative effects on their parents' or caregivers' work and family life. A series of chi-square tests was conducted to determine whether Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian women differed in their reports of family members' (parents, siblings, children, and grandchildren) involvement with the criminal justice system. No significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) were found. However, more Hawaiian women than non-Hawaiian women indicated that members of their family had been arrested, were on probation, or were in jail

or prison (see Table 2); this was true for all types of family relationships: parents (22% vs. 6%), siblings (47% vs. 33%), children (19% vs. 11%), and grandchildren (3% vs. 0%). Note that these percentages include biological as well as nonbiological relationships, such as stepmother(s) and/or stepfather(s) and stepsister(s) and/or stepbrother(s). Two of the Hawaiian women indicated that three generations of their family members had been previously incarcerated.

**TABLE 2** Women reporting involvement of family members in the criminal justice system

	Hawaiian		Non-Hawaiian		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Parents	7	22	1	6	8	16
Siblings	15	47	6	33	21	42
Children	6	19	2	11	8	16
Grandchildren	1	3	0	0	1	2

*Note:* One Hawaiian woman did not know if members of her family had criminal justice system involvement.

Many of the women in our study reported troubled lives during childhood (see Table 3). Fifty percent or more of both the Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian women reported being sexually abused, running away from home, using alcohol and drugs, and having a child during their teen years. Higher percentages of the Hawaiian women reported home violence (55% vs. 44%) and foster home placement (18% vs. 17%), whereas higher percentages of the women of other ethnicities experienced sexual abuse (56% vs. 52%), teen pregnancy (67% vs. 64%), ran away from home (83% vs. 61%), dropped out of school (50% vs. 42%), and used alcohol (83% vs. 82%) and drugs (94% vs. 91%). When chi-square analysis was applied to the data for each event, no significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) were found in the events experienced by the two groups in childhood. The ages at which these events occurred as reported by Hawaiian versus non-Hawaiian women were also analyzed. A significant difference,  $t(24) = 2.34$ ,  $p < .05$ , was found only for home violence, which Hawaiian women indicated occurred at an earlier age in their lives than was reported by non-Hawaiian women.

**TABLE 3** Experiences in childhood reported by women in sample

	Hawaiian				Non-Hawaiian				Total			
	No.	%	Mean age of occurrence		No.	%	Mean age of occurrence		No.	%	Mean age of occurrence	
			Age	SD			Age	SD			Age	SD
Home violence <sup>a</sup>	18	55	3.9	3.4	8	44	8.5	5.1	26	51	5.3	4.4
Foster home	6	18	9.2	5.7	3	17	10.0	6.0	9	18	9.4	5.4
Runaway	20	61	12.8	2.7	15	83	13.5	3.4	35	69	13.1	3.0
Sexual abuse	17	52	9.6	4.6	10	56	18.6	14.1	27	53	12.9	10.1
Alcohol use	27	82	13.8	5.0	15	83	15.0	3.8	42	82	14.2	4.6
School dropout	14	42	15.4	2.9	9	50	15.0	2.6	23	45	15.2	2.7
Teen pregnancy	21	64	16.5	1.7	12	67	16.1	1.7	33	65	16.4	1.6
Drug use	30	91	17.2	9.1	17	94	17.7	6.6	47	92	17.4	8.2

<sup>a</sup> Difference in mean age of occurrence between Hawaiian versus non-Hawaiian women was statistically significant  $t(24) = 2.34, p < .05$ .

*Experiences in Adulthood*

Many of the women in our study continued to experience traumatic life events as adults. Before the age of 25, 33% to 80% of the total sample were involved in an abusive domestic relationship, were engaged in illegal activities, and experienced homelessness (see Table 4). Compared with Hawaiians, non-Hawaiian women reported higher percentages of domestic violence (94% vs. 70%) and illegal activity (83% vs. 79%). The percentage of homelessness was the same for both groups (33%). A significant difference was found between the two groups of women only in the occurrence of domestic violence,  $\chi^2 = 4.22 (1, N = 40) p < .05$ , which was more likely to occur among non-Hawaiian women. When comparisons were made on the *ages* when these three events occurred, the results indicated that although these events occurred earlier in the lives of Hawaiian women, a significant difference was found between the two groups only for domestic violence,  $t(38) = 2.26, p < .05$ . The number of discrete events that occurred in the lives of the women during childhood and adulthood was also examined. On average, the Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian women reported about the same number of negative life



experiences: 6.6 events for the former and 7.1 events for the latter. High percentages of the women in the sample reported that the use of alcohol (55% of Hawaiian vs. 44% of non-Hawaiian women) and drugs (67% of Hawaiian vs. 94% of non-Hawaiian women) had negative effects on their school, work, and family life. The differences between the two groups were not significant.

**TABLE 4** Experiences in adulthood reported by women in sample

	Hawaiian				Non-Hawaiian				Total			
	No.	%	Mean age of occurrence		No.	%	Mean age of occurrence		No.	%	Mean age of occurrence	
			Age	SD			Age	SD			Age	SD
Illegal activity	26	79	17.4	10.5	15	83	21.0	6.9	41	80	18.7	9.4
Domestic violence <sup>a,b</sup>	23	70	17.6	4.0	17	94	21.9	7.1	40	78	19.5	5.9
Homelessness	11	33	20.5	11.0	6	33	24.5	11.8	17	33	21.9	11.1

<sup>a</sup> Difference in likelihood of domestic violence between Hawaiian versus non-Hawaiian women was statistically significant, chi-square = 4.22 (1, N = 40)  $p < .05$ .

<sup>b</sup> Difference in age of occurrence between Hawaiian versus non-Hawaiian women was statistically significant  $t(38) = 2.26$ ,  $p < .05$ .

## DISCUSSION

The results of our study indicate that, except for domestic violence, there were no significant differences in the occurrence of negative life experiences of Hawaiian versus non-Hawaiian women incarcerated in a community transition center. High percentages of both groups reported multiple traumatic experiences in childhood (home violence, foster home placement, sexual abuse, running away from home, dropping out of school, alcohol and drug use, and teen pregnancy) and in adulthood (domestic violence, involvement in illegal activity, and homelessness). Our exploratory study found greater similarities than differences in the events that influenced the course of these women's lives.

The present study is based on interview data from a small sample of incarcerated women and, therefore, its findings may not represent Hawaii's total female inmate population, particularly those in prison rather than a community residential

transition facility. This is also a retrospective study in which individuals reported on their past and present experiences. Findings based on self-disclosures are valid only to the extent that respondents recall accurately and are truthful when answering the interview questions.

When harmful experiences occur, they often have a cascading effect that results in other negative experiences. For example, girls who are sexually abused may cope with the trauma through drug use, which in turn makes them inattentive students who fail academically and eventually drop out of school. With diminished opportunities for economic success, these girls may resort to illegal activities to support themselves and their drug habits, which can result in arrest and imprisonment. This pathway to criminality is confirmed by research (Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Zingraff, Leiter, & Johnsen, 1993) that indicates maltreated children have higher rates of delinquency and violent behavior. Gilfus (1987, 2002) and DeHart (2004) outlined how violence against females increases their risk of arrest and imprisonment through the intersections of interpersonal and structural violence. Gilfus found that sexually and physically abused girls who ran away from home were not able to continue their schooling. While living on the streets, they had no viable employment options; experienced prostitution, sexual abuse, and abusive relationships with coaddicted male partners; and eventually were imprisoned. DeHart examined the links between victimization and women's crimes and found that most women suffered from multiple traumas. The pattern outlined above is further supported by a longitudinal study indicating that being abused or neglected as a child increases the probability of running away from home, arrest as a juvenile and an adult, and arrest for a violent crime (Widom, 1993, 1999; Widom & Maxfield, 2001).

Our study found that negative life experiences generally occurred earlier in the lives of the Hawaiian women, with home violence and domestic violence taking place significantly earlier among Hawaiian than non-Hawaiian women. It may be that violence in the home triggers other events in a child's life, such as running away, foster home placement, and dropping out of school. These situations accelerate the time when girls enter into intimate relationships and domestic living arrangements. Such circumstances often lead to involvement with unsuitable partners who are likely to abuse and further victimize these women, repeating the cycle of violence that was experienced in childhood.

From a developmental perspective, experiences early in life help to shape the life course of individuals. As Werner and Smith (1977, 1992) and other researchers in the field of resiliency indicate, throughout development there is a shifting balance between stressful events and factors that protect and sustain individuals. When the stressors outweigh the protective factors, even resilient individuals are likely to encounter problems and succumb to behaviors that lead to negative outcomes. People are particularly vulnerable when multiple stressful experiences occur at critical periods of life and persist over time.

Although most individuals who experience traumatic events as children do not engage in criminal activities, considerable numbers do. Two strategies aimed at stemming the growing rate of incarceration among women are consistent with the developmental perspective: (a) prevent or reduce the occurrence of severely negative events in the lives of children, and (b) intervene swiftly when negative experiences do occur. The first strategy focuses on the people in the lives of children—particularly family members—and strives to ensure that they provide the care, nurturing, and role modeling that all young people need to develop into competent and successful adults. The second strategy is aimed at providing individuals with the supports needed to overcome acute traumatic stress and to avoid risk behaviors that compound problems.

The circumstances that require intervention have been identified and include situations when children run away from home, experiment with drugs and alcohol, or encounter academic failure. Intervention is also needed when women are incarcerated, not only because they are so accessible during this period but also because their life trajectories can still be improved. Virtually all of the incarcerated women will be released; their future experiences and the effect they have on their children, families, and community can be altered by events during confinement. A survey conducted by the Community Advisory Board for Female Offenders (Brady, 2005) on 205 of the 241 women incarcerated at the Hawai'i Women's Community Correctional Center indicated that a majority of the women want to change their lives but lack the tools to effectuate the change. The women identified the need for improved access to medical care, better access to their social workers and case managers, college-level courses, and training for employment as plumbers, electricians, and construction workers. Service providers with cultural competence and the provision of culturally based interventions ensure the delivery of high-quality care that leads to improved outcomes (Mokuau, 2002). Unfortunately, the

necessary supports and positive interventions are too often lacking early in life when prevention is most effective and at the points when females encounter the negative experiences.

In the long term, keeping women from engaging in criminal behavior is considerably less expensive than the much higher costs—both economic and social/emotional—of imprisonment. The results of our exploratory study on a sample of Hawai‘i’s incarcerated women are consonant with findings on imprisoned women in other states. Women who engage in illegal activities that lead to imprisonment have often encountered multiple and severe negative experiences earlier in life. Additional research is needed to identify the protective qualities that build resilience and keep females from engaging in illegal activities. These investigations will increase our knowledge and understanding of a very vulnerable population so that appropriate and effective prevention and treatment strategies can be developed for incarcerated women and women who are at high risk of being incarcerated.

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