Chapter 1

In the Mix:
Struggle and Survival in a Women's Prison

Both criminology and sociology have traditions of examining the culture of men's prisons,[1] but the experiences of imprisoned women have long been ignored. Giallombardo (1966), Ward and Kassebaum (1965), and Heffernan (1972) have written classic studies of women's prisons, giving us vivid and enduring pictures of the prisons of that time. But women's prisons today are larger, more plentiful throughout the country, and housing populations that grow greater in number each year (Immarigeon & Chesney-Lind, 1992). The day-to-day world of female prisons now requires a new description and analysis. Recent scholarship on women in prison covers the history of female institutions (Freedman, 1981; Rafter, 1983, 1985, 1992), the nature of female criminality (Pollock-Byrne, 1990; Simon & Landis, 1991), demographic characteristics of female prisoners (Owen & Bloom 1995a & b; Fletcher, Shaver, & Moon, 1993), and female prisoners and their children (Gilfus, 1992; Baunach, 1985; Bloom & Steinhart, 1993), among other topics. But the modern era of women's imprisonment and its prison culture requires closer descriptive examination.

This book reports the results of ethnographic research conducted at the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), the world's largest female facility. The initial question that remains the central core of this study, is "How do women in prison do time?" Once familiar with the world of imprisoned women, however, my inquiry soon found other questions equally important. How do women learn to do time? How does this meaning of time differ across the wide variety of women who come to prison? Does the length of one's sentence shape one's approach to doing time? How has prison culture for women changed from the findings of earlier empirical research? How have

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the contemporary problems of overcrowding, the "war" on drugs and gangs, and racial division among prisoners affected the way women do time?

In my observations of the women in this institution, I learned that female prisoners organize their time and create a social world that is quite different from contemporary men's prisons. I suggest that, like most experiences, imprisonment and its subsequent response is a gendered one. Just as their offense patterns seem tied to differences between men and women, so too is the social organization of their prison lives. In investigating how women organize their lives in prison, I found some support for the importation theory of prison culture, that is, that each prisoner's pre-prison experience has critical impact on the way she negotiates and lives through the experience of imprisonment. At the same time, evidence was found for the indigenous theory of prison culture, that is, that the social organization of women in a contemporary prison is created in response to demands of the institution and to conditions not of their own making. The facts of these prisoners' lives as women and girls, the pervasive influence of patriarchy, limitations created by economic and social marginalization, and the stigmatization of criminality shape both offense patterns and their response to imprisonment.

The chapters of this book describe the variety of accommodations to this imprisonment. The opening chapter offers an overview of the theoretical context for this study. In the second chapter, I describe the project site and the research methods, including "quasi-ethnographic" techniques of intensive interviewing, active observation, and a feminist perspective used to collect and later assess data. Chapter 3 describes the lives of women before imprisonment and suggests ways in which these experiences come to bear on prison culture. As discussed in chapter 4, time and place in the prison contribute to the direction of this response and the nature of women's accommodations to their living and social environment. Chapter 5 describes the relationships women develop and maintain during their imprisonment. These relationships with significant others inside and outside the prison walls have a critical impact on the way women do their time. Family members "on the street," particularly children, hold a special place in this prison culture. Within the institution, the relationships women develop and maintain with each other structure their lives, their behaviors, and their prison culture. The final chapter concentrates on the dimensions of prison culture, or the "axes of life," as Schrag (1944) describes elements of prison culture. In concentrating on the daily experience of life in this prison, this book describes the ways women create a complex society within its walls. This culture develops in ways markedly different from the degradation, violence, and predatory structure of male prison life. In some ways, the culture of the female prison seeks to accommodate these struggles rather than to exploit them. The title of this study captures my intent.

The "mix," in this context, is the "life" as described by Heffernan (1972) and is characterized by a continuation of the behavior that led to imprisonment, a life revolving around drugs, intense, volatile, and often destructive relationships, and non-rule abiding behavior. But I also found that, especially for women serving short prison terms or serving repeated prison terms, their lives in prison are intimately tied to their lives before and after their imprisonment. To be sure, men on the economic and racial margins of society face oppression that contributes to their criminality. But differences in gendered experience account for the differing pathways to imprisonment for men and women. Men do not share the same struggles with patriarchy or the pervasive sexual and personal oppression found in the lives of women.

THE STUDY OF PRISON CULTURE

The world of women in prison is markedly different from that of male prisons. Still, the study of women's prison lives has been of only minor interest in the sociological literature. Beginning with Clemmer (1940) and his analysis of the prison community, a strong social science tradition concerns the ways in which men organize and "do their time." Studies in this tradition include descriptions of the nature of the inmate social system (Sykes, 1958; Sykes & Messinger, 1960), the inmate code (Sykes, 1958; Irwin & Cressey, 1962), race relations (Carroll, 1974; Davidson, 1974), and the history of these forms of social interaction (Irwin, 1980). Thus, the picture of the prison in the minds of the public and in the pages of the literature is decidedly male-oriented. For the most part, male prison culture has been described as violent and predatory (Irwin, 1980). While there is little description of contemporary prison culture among men, current discussions suggest that men band together in these organizations to act out this violence and to gain protection from others. Much of the writing on men's prisons also examines the impact of racial divisiveness on this culture (Carroll, 1996). McCorkle (1993) further suggests that male prison culture is marked by individual accommodation to violent behavior.

Although the bulk of sociological attention to the prison has been directed toward the male world, classic studies of women's prisons exist. The first of these seminal works, Ward and Kassebaum (1965) and Giallombardo (1966), discuss a social structure based on the family and traditional sex roles and same-sex relations. In the third, Heffernan (1972) describes "the square," "the cool," and "the life," descriptive titles for three forms of orientation and adaptation in the inmate world. From these first sociological studies on women's prisons in the mid-1960s, several studies (Larsen & Nelson, 1984; Leger, 1987; Propper, 1982) have described the female inmate culture in

terms of the pseudo-family structure and homosexual relations, following themes developed by Ward and Kassebaum (1965) and Giallombardo (1966). These studies uniformly suggest that women create lives in prison that reflect elements of traditional family roles and the street life. This social structure revolves around their sexual identity and attendant social roles, mirroring their relations with males on the outside. Descriptions of inmates as mothers are related to this theme (Baunach, 1985; Datesman & Cales, 1983; Koban 1983; Henriques, 1982) and argue that a key problem for female inmates is their relationships with their children.

More broadly, several studies have been conducted on the impact of the women's movement on criminality (Adler, 1975; Hoffman-Bustamonte, 1973; Klein, 1973; Smart, 1976; Steffenmeiser, 1980). Introducing the theme of "partial justice," excellent histories of the women's prison have been conducted, suggesting that women prisoners traditionally have been afforded lower priorities and unequal treatment (Dobash, Dobash, & Gutteridge, 1986; Freedman, 1981; Rafter, 1983, 1985). These studies have also introduced the concept of the female prisoner as the "double" deviant, implying female prisoners break both gender roles and the criminal law. This monograph extends these descriptions and adds contemporary detail to the study of women in prison.

LANDMARK STUDIES OF THE CULTURE OF WOMEN'S PRISON

Three important studies provided an early understanding of the world of the women's prison. Ward and Kassebaum (1965), Giallombardo (1966), and Heffernan (1972) conducted in-depth investigations of three prisons during the 1960s. These studies found striking similarities: the world of women's prisons was quite different than that of the male culture; prison culture among women was tied to gender role expectations of sexuality and family; and prison identities were at least partially based on outside identities and experiences. Below, I summarize each of these studies with an eye toward foreshadowing the major issues and ideas that were found in my study of the world of women's prisons. As I reviewed these landmark studies, once before starting my fieldwork and again while analyzing the data, I was struck by the overall consistency and stability of their analyses. As subsequent chapters show, much of women's prison culture has changed little. Personal relationships with other prisoners, both emotionally and physically intimate, connections to family and loved ones in the free community (or, "on the street" in the language of the prison), and commitments to pre-prison identities continue to shape the core of prison culture among women. At CCWF, three additional components contribute to the shape of contemporary prison culture. First, the

size of the prison and its population have a profound impact on the day-to-day life of the four thousand women held there during my fieldwork. Second, the tremendous increase in drug offenders has placed its stamp on prison life. Third, race and ethnic identities provide a subtext to prison life, although they are clearly secondary to the dominant issues of personal relationships.

Ward and Kassebaum's Frontera

In *Women's Prison: Sex and Social Structure*, Ward and Kassebaum (1965) searched for female prisoner types that correspond with the male prisoner types found in the penology of the period. Through interview and survey data collected at the California Institution for Women (CIW) in Frontera, they found little evidence for the roles of the centerman, the right guy, the merchant, the tough, and other male identities described by deprivation and indigenous prison culture theorists (Sykes, 1958). Instead of focusing on the pains of imprisonment, the authors describe the development of identity and prison role adaptation in examining the phases of incarceration and the dynamics of the "homosexual relationship."[2]. As prisoners are processed into the prison, they experience status degradation, disorientation, and apprehension over the coming prison term. Combined with the indeterminate sentence system in place at the time of their study, these events removed feelings of autonomy or control. The prisoner social system, with an emphasis on female role expectations and the homosexual relationship, is, then, an attempt to regain some feeling of control and autonomy in the women's prison. Although they suggest several other adaptations that require further investigation, Ward and Kassebaum concentrate their study on the personalized relationships among the women at CIW. In direct contrast to a male prison culture grounded in prisoner solidarity, Ward and Kassebaum found little group cohesiveness in the prisoner population at Frontera. Instead, they suggest that identity and allegiance among the women are found in small, intimate family groups. One implication of the absence of prisoner solidarity is a greater tolerance for informing, or snitching.

While agreeing that one's adaptation to the prison world is based on degree of criminal experience or maturity, Ward and Kassebaum suggest that women prisoners suffer from "affectional starvation," the need to have emotional and reciprocal relations with another, and possess "psycho-sexual" needs for interaction with men. At CIW, they found that a female culture was developed to meet these needs through emotional and sexual dyads composed of female and male roles. While distinctions are made between women serious about their sexual identity and those "just playing around," homosexuality is seen as a functional adaptation to the gendered deprivations of imprisonment as experienced by the women.

Ward and Kassebaum conclude that this prisoner culture reflects tradi-
tional gender and sex roles in the free community. The absence of biological
men necessitates the creation of socially defined men through the substitution
of homosexual relations for heterosexual relations.

Giallombardo's Alderson

In *Society of Women*, Giallombardo (1966) describes the social order of
the prison in terms of sex role adoption and family/kinship structures. She
argues, much like Irwin and Cressey (1962), that the informal social order of
the prison is based on identities imported from the outside world. Giallom-
bardo suggests that identity in the society of women is based on adoption of
a variety of traditional feminine roles, such as wife, mother, or daughter.
Expression of this femininity, in her view, requires a juxtaposition with male
roles that are in short supply within the women's prison. She suggests that this
need for juxtaposition creates masculine roles in the all-female world. The
male role thus includes adoption of male dress, hairstyle, language, and other
specifically masculine behaviors. In Giallombardo's study, the traditions of
femininity find expression in the role of the "femme," with the masculine role
adopted by the "stud." Her evidence suggests that most women prefer the
femme role, leading to a scarcity of studs. This shortage in turn creates a form
of polygamy, in which the stud may be involved in multiple relationships at
one time.

For Giallombardo, the family or kinship structure is also based on this
sex role framework. For those prisoners who choose not to "play" (the prison
term for same-sex involvements), the family structure within the women's
prison is the basis for primary group membership. This family structure also
reflects socialization patterns of the outside world. Family bonds in the prison
take on similar forms as those in the outside world: women use the terms of
mother, sister, daughter, and sometimes cousin to denote intimate, nonsexual
relationships with other women. These relationships serve to define intimate
bonds and create trust and solidarity among the prisoners. Giallombardo's
study concludes with a discussion of the traditional and conventional role def-
initions available to women in the free world. She argues that imprisonment
blocks women from attaining the traditional goals of wife or mother and sug-
gests that the social order of the prison provides an alternative way to achieve
these internalized expectations.

Heffernan's Occaquan

In *Making It in Prison: The Square, the Cool, and the Life*, Heffernan
(1972) found that the existing descriptive and theoretical models of prison
culture were based on a male version of the prison and thus were inadequate

for describing life in the women's prison. She begins her work by asking questions about the inmate social system, its functions and levels of gender differences. She also builds on the work of Ward and Kassebaum and Gial-lombardo by investigating the interrelationship between inmate behavior and outside sex roles. Using Sykes's (1958) hypotheses, Heffernan looked for an inmate social system that functions to address the "pains of imprisonment." Specifically, she searched for key roles and norms that enable the inmate social system to act cohesively and to reject the rejecters. She found no clear-cut support for Sykes's role adaptations among her women prisoners, but her descriptions of argot labels implied a variety of accommodations to prison life. She called three such patterns the Square, the Cool, and the Life. The Square denotes the woman tied to conventional norms and values. Those in the Life embrace a more deviant criminal identity based on the culture of the street world of prostitutes, thieves, drug users, petty criminals, and the like. Those described as the Cool have developed a certain form of doing time that involves control and manipulation within the prison.

Heffernan argues, much like Irwin (1970), that a woman's initial orien-tation to prison was often based on pre-prison identities, with the noncriminal adopting the Square adaptation, the habitual petty criminal living the Life, and the professional organized criminal acting as the Cool. She found that women who create a life in the prison, often through "familying," were the "happiest around here," except when they were arguing with their "wives" because they were living in the prison and not thinking about the outside world (Heffernan, 1972:41). Like the women at CCWF who are invested in the mix, the women in Heffernan's prison sometimes lacked an outside orientation but instead enjoyed some status in the prison. For those women, prison became "every-thing." With this involvement in the life of the prison often came trouble (Hef-fernan, 1972:42). Like previous studies, Heffernan found that the family was a critical element to the social order of the prison. While some women saw the family as rubbish or manipulation, other women organized their time around this pseudo-relationship. In sections on "Doing Time" and "Keeping Busy," Heffernan discusses how women organize their prison life around pre-prison identities and differential adaptation of the three-part prison culture.

The prison culture described in these landmark studies has remained relatively stable over the decades between them and the present investigation. This study argues that the world of the women's prison is shaped by pre-prison experiences, the role of women in contemporary society, and the ways women rely on personalized relationships to survive their prison terms. Women's prison culture, then, is decidedly personal, a network of meanings and relationships that create and reproduce the ways women do their time. As the following chapters show, this culture is mediated by structural forces and

personal choice both within the prison and outside each woman's immediate control. Economic marginalization, histories of abuse, and self-destructive choices speed women along a pathway to imprisonment. The degree to which these behaviors continue to shape these lives, in turn, is dependent on the nature of one's experience in the prison and attachment to competing systems and identities of meaning.

SURVIVING THE MIX

Two central themes weave throughout my description of prison culture for women. First, as women begin to organize and negotiate their time in prison, the importance of developing a liferound (or a "program," in prison terms) emerges. The imposition of an individualized structure on the uncertainty of this world is accomplished by developing and maintaining this program. Work assignments and ongoing relationships with other prisoners and with prison staff are initial steps to avoid the self-destruction of the mix, giving women some control over their immediate living environment, particularly in their rooms. Finding privacy, providing for material needs, and developing personal, educational, or vocational skills are further steps toward surviving the mix. Most women want to do their time, leave the prison, and return to the free world. They want to avoid the mix of risky and self-defeating behavior. Women can get caught in the mix through self-destructive behaviors such as drug use and fighting or damaging relationships that interfere with one's program or limit freedom through placement in restrictive housing or the addition of time to one's sentence. Most women avoid the mix. Some dip into the mix at the beginning of their prison terms, leaving when they establish a more productive program. Others invest permanently in the destructive spiral of the mix and its attendant activities. For a small minority of women, the lure of the mix, with its emphasis on the fast life (Rosenbaum, 1981) and the excitement of drug use, fighting, and volatile intimate relationships, proves too hard to resist.

Second, the world of this women's prison, like those described in the classic studies, highlights the critical significance of personalized relationships. Both the play family and the intimate dyad form the basis of prison social structure, as well as offering a means to avoid and survive the mix. The play family, with its interpersonal satisfactions, its web of mutual social and material obligations, and its ultimate sense of belonging, creates the sense of community and protection that the tips, cliques, and gang structure provide for male prisoners (Irwin, 1980). These relationships with other prisoners mediate how women learn to do their time and may also provide some protection from the self-destruction of the mix. Thus, surviving the

mix is grounded in a woman's ability to develop a satisfying and productive routine within the prison and the nature of her relationships with other prisoners.

THE SITE OF THIS INVESTIGATION

The Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), holding over four thousand women in mid-1995, is the largest prison for women in the world. Located in the middle of California's Central Valley, this prison houses every type of female prisoner: women from all over the state, women of all security levels, short-termers, long-termers, and, as of this writing, the seven women facing the death penalty. Although of average size by male prison standards, this institution is the largest female facility anywhere. CCWF is a complex world, populated by several thousand women prisoners, hundreds of staff, and prison managers who, each on their own terms, attempts to negotiate its complexity and find a place in the prison community. The complexity of this community has an additional implication for those wishing to study, describe, and somehow understand this world of women prisoners. Life at CCWF resists a complete description, partially due to its size, partially due to its shifting nature.

FEMALE CRIMINALITY

In setting the stage for this discussion, this section reviews ideas about female criminality, the nature of the prison, and its relationship to the status of women in society. Simon and Landis (1991) review contemporary theories of female criminality and classify these approaches into four themes: the masculinity hypothesis; the opportunity thesis; the economic marginalization thesis; and the chivalry thesis. The economic marginalization theory best fits my understanding of the criminality of women that leads to this study of women in prison. The work of Chesney-Lind (1991, 1986), Feinman (1986), and Steffensmeir (1982) supports this thesis in demonstrating that female criminality is based on the need for marginalized women to survive under conditions not of their own making. In this view, women's criminality reflects the conditions of their lives and their attempts to survive. Beyond and on the margins of conventional institutions, many women struggle to survive outside legitimate enterprises.

Compounding problems of patriarchy and racism, drug use often contributes to this marginality. Drug problems and violation of the ever-increasing drug laws bring women in contact with the justice system and aggravate existing personal and social problems. Drug crimes account for an increasing

proportion of offenses committed by women and girls. Bureau of Justice Sta-
tistics (1991a & b, 1992) and FBI statistics (Greenhouse, 1991) agree that
women are much more likely than men to be incarcerated for a drug offense
and that this increase in arrests is driving the skyrocketing imprisonment of
women. Drug use is tied to criminality, oftentimes as a result of emotional and
psychological traumas caused by abuse and prostitution, as well as living on
the street (Miller, 1986) and "in the life" (Rosenbaum, 1981). According to an
American Correctional Association survey (1990), about 20 percent of the
nationwide female offender population is imprisoned for a "drug abuse viola-
tion" and 25 percent reported that obtaining money to pay for drugs was the
reason behind their crime. Several measures show that women are more likely
to use drugs, use more serious drugs more frequently, and be under the influ-
ence of drugs at the time of their crime than males (National Institute of Jus-
tice, 1991; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992).

DEMONIZING THE FEMALE OFFENDER

The trend toward demonizing the female offender (Chesney-Lind,
1993) also contributes to the further marginalization of female prisoners. This
trend (Baskin, Sommers, & Fagan, 1993) suggests that the nature of violence
among females is increasing, but evidence from California paints a different
picture. Several years ago, the California legislature convened a work group
to examine the needs of female prisoners and parolees (SCR33 Commission,
1993–4). California Department of Corrections (CDC) data for the years
between 1982 and 1992 show that there has been a significant increase in the
proportion of commitments for drug-related offenses and a decrease in both
property and violent commitment offenses. Table 1.1 highlights this trend:

Table 1.1
Offense Profiles for California Prisoners

	December 1995			
	Females		Males	
Totals	8,940		125,183	
Violent Offenses	1,969	22.0	53,880	43.2
Property Offenses	3,023	33.8	30,908	24.7
Drug Offenses	3,565	39.9	31,785	25.4
Other Offenses	383	4.3	8,436	6.7

Source: California Department of Corrections, Offender Information Services Branch
(1996).

These numbers show significant differences in degree and type of criminality of females and males, illustrating the gendered nature of offense patterns. Most notable is the difference in the nature and percentage of violent crimes committed by male and female offenders. In almost every category, males are convicted almost twice as often for violent crimes. A different picture emerges with property and drug crimes. Women are somewhat more likely to be convicted for property crimes, typically more minor offenses such as petty theft with a prior conviction. Comparisons for drug offenses show other significant differences. Women are more likely to be convicted for drug crimes, particularly low-level offenses such as possession. Almost 40 percent of the women held in California prisons in 1995 were convicted for drug offenses, while just about 25 percent of the men were convicted for that offense. Women are much more likely to be convicted for possession offenses (almost 29 percent; compared to males at under 17 percent) and somewhat more likely to be incarcerated for drug sales. These figures also provide a profile of women and their conviction offenses that identify three fundamental features: the majority of women are convicted for nonviolent crimes; women are more likely to be convicted of less serious property offenses; and women are much more likely than men to be convicted of drug crimes, with possession of drugs the modal offense for women.

These official CDC data show that the majority of women are incarcerated for crimes that are far less threatening to the community than those committed by men. These findings reject statements that women offenders "are getting worse" and suggest, instead, that the system itself is becoming more punitive in incarcerating women for drug-related crimes (Bloom, Chesney-Lind, & Owen, 1994).

The offense profile also suggests that women tend to commit survival crimes to earn money, feed a drug-dependent life, and escape brutalizing physical conditions and relationships. Rather than finding a new demon female offender, these data suggest that women in prison have been marginalized from traditional roles, becoming castaways from conventional life rather than "liberated female criminals" (Adler, 1975). Most of the women interviewed in this study held quite traditional views of gender roles. They generally saw themselves as wives and mothers, not as newly liberated, vicious criminals. These traditional views of life, when combined with drug habits, histories of physical and sexual abuse, lack of economic preparation or job skills, and decreasing financial and child-rearing support, create strata of displaced women. Once displaced from the economic security of conventional society and the dependent roles of most women, prison becomes an institutional option for women who are not able (or do not chose) to act within expectations of conventional life or traditional female roles.

Two particular dimensions to these traditional expectations are note-

worthy here. First, the promise of the status (and protection) of motherhood is not realized in the lives and experiences of women in prison. Early pregnancy, especially when combined with leaving parental homes and dropping out of school, becomes a part of the downward spiral for many women. These events further diminish labor market participation because of child-care responsibilities and lack of marketable work skills. Without the traditional economic support of a working spouse, the expected rewards and economic protections of motherhood are absent.

Sexual and reproductive capacities of women can also be tied to further marginalization and criminality. Sexual abuse and early sexual activity combine to create conditions whereby women enter into lifelong patterns of destructive and self-defeating behaviors. Much of this self-destructiveness takes the form of substance abuse. Early sexual activity, a desire for status gained through sexual desirability, and the need to escape from intolerable home situations often lead to early pregnancies. For these women, their roles in the world are defined in terms of their sexuality and reproductive status. This definition, for most women, is a double bind, often leading to decreased opportunities, moving farther and farther away from full economic participation in society. The lack of birth control, family planning, and supports aggravates these obstacles. All of these concerns are exacerbated when women are marginalized by minority membership or low level of educational achievement. Early sexual activity, and its delimited, brief status, is often a rite of passage for women. Sexual activity and motherhood are often the only bargaining chips in society available to these marginalized women. Such activity has negative consequences for their life-chances. Ironically, these activities are the very things that most women are socialized to do, and the consequences, particularly the birth of children, further limit their participation in viable economic activities. Women on the margins are often dependent on sex role socialization that assumes a middle-class, patriarchical view of the female role.

Second, many of the women interviewed subscribe to the "Prince Charming Myth" that a man will arrive to provide the care and support promised by the myth of motherhood. Commitment and investment in such romanticism are directly contradicted by these women's experience, but its existence was borne out in interviews with staff and prisoners. For most women who come to prison, societal messages of motherhood and being a good wife have limited utility. The role of women vis-à-vis men is also an important aspect of this understanding of female criminality. Abusive fathers and husbands, the absence of male breadwinners, and the pressure for early sexual activity also affect the status of these women. Supportive men for these women and children are missing. The romantic view of life is further buttressed by the lack of other economic options. These romantic images assume

a middle-class world where men are providers, not abusive or absent, and a community where viable employment is a reality. These romantic images also assume two-parent families and incomes that allow a woman to stay home and care for children. These images do not fit their reality: the world of drugs, abusive men, no jobs, and no social support for women and children that most women in prison inhabit. There is little in mainstream culture that encourages or supports alternative economic roles for women, particularly those on the margins of society. Roles that model non-motherhood, roles that encourage educational and vocational preparation outside the traditional middle-class role of wife and mother are absent in the worldviews of most women in prison. The mixed message of "staying home and caring for children" versus the negativity of the "welfare mother" plays out in the contradictory struggles of their lives. Motherhood is thus praised in principle but not supported in practice.

Even within the context of insufficient economic support, the pervasive violence against women and girls in society, gender and racially based oppression, and bad choices made within these contexts, the majority of women across all class lines find ways other than criminality to live their lives, raise their children, and meet the varying conditions of their existence. When confronted with the personal turmoil and structural barriers of conventional society, most women find ways of living that don't lead to imprisonment. But some women do, and this monograph describes a narrow aspect of their accommodation—imprisonment.

THE NATURE OF PRISON

This study raises concerns about the nature of prison and its presumed utility in modern society. Prisons, for both women and men, are misunderstood (and misused) institutions. For most of the free community, prisons are seen as abstract places of punishment and deterrence. These philosophical perceptions may not fit the reality of the contemporary prison. While the connection between the motivations for crime and the deterrence effect of imprisonment is unclear at best, the general community continues to believe that prisons should have some effect on the crime rate. In California, and throughout the nation, this has not proven to be the case. As prison populations continue to rise, there seems to be little appreciable difference in crime rates (Irwin & Austin, 1994). Irwin and Austin further argue that, particularly in California, the rising correctional-industrial complex has done little to decrease crime, with enormous social and economic costs. They suggest that this failure of prison policy to reduce crime is based on an incorrect belief in the power of deterrence (Irwin & Austin, 1994:163).

Other conditions also drive the increase in women's imprisonment rather than a rising crime rate (Bloom, Chesney-Lind, & Owen, 1994). Between 1980 and 1993, the number of women incarcerated in California increased over 400 percent, from 1316 in 1980 to 7232 in 1993. The huge increase in the women's prison population is the result of shifts in the criminal justice system response to female offenders. A punitive response to drug use is a direct result of the war on drugs. Nationwide, as well as in California, about one-third of the women in prison are serving time for drug offenses. In addition to drug offenses, minor property offenses also account for a significant proportion of female incarceration:

> The increasing incarceration rate for women in the State of California, then, is a direct result of short-sighted legislative responses to the problems of drugs and crime—responses shaped by the assumption that the criminals they were sending to prison were brutal males. Instead of a policy of last resort, imprisonment has become the first order response for a wide range of women offenders that have been disproportionately swept up in this trend. This politically motivated legislative response often ignores the fiscal or social costs of imprisonment. Thus, the legislature has missed opportunities to prevent women's crime by cutting vitally needed social service and educational programs to fund ever-increasing correctional budgets (Bloom, Chesney-Lind, & Owen, 1994:2).

PRISONS AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN

For Kurshan (1992), the imprisonment of women is tied directly to their status under patriarchy. Stating that prisons are used as social control for both men and women, she argues that the imprisonment of women "as well as all other aspects of our lives, takes place against a backdrop of patriarchical relationships" (Kurshan, 1992:230). Defining patriarchy as "the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general," she continues:

> [T]he imprisonment of women in the U.S. has always been a different phenomenon than that for men: women have traditionally been sent to prison for different reasons, and once in prison, they endure different conditions of incarceration. Women's "crimes" have often had a sexual definition and have been rooted in the patriarchical double standard. Therefore the nature of women's imprisonment reflects the position of women in society (Kurshan, 1992:331).

Thus, the study of women in prison must be viewed through the lens of patriarchy and its implications for the everyday lives of women. When women's imprisonment itself is examined separately, it may well be that the rising numbers of women in prison are a measure of the society's failure to care for the needs of women and children who live outside the middle-class protection afforded by patriarchy. The rising numbers of women in prison reflect the cost of allowing the systematic abuse of women and children, the problem of increased drug use, and a continuing spiral of marginalization from conventional institutions. Currie (1985) sees that the lack of adequate economic and social supports for women and children in society is a key feature in the rising crime rates. The poverty of their lives on the street, the lack of educational opportunity and economic advantage, makes crime a reasonable choice for some women, with subsequent imprisonment a predictable outcome.[3]

In questioning the role of women in society, more specific issues emerge concerning the gendered experience of women in prison. The imprisonment of women may be a direct result of the worst treatment of women in society. Economic and personal struggles are played out in their crimes and subsequent imprisonment. Many of the personal struggles are faced by women of all classes: physical and sexual abuse happens in middle- and upper-class families, with middle- and upper class women as victims as well (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1990). But there is some evidence that women of these classes may have wider, less self-destructive options in managing their struggles. It is clear that women in these middle-upper and upper classes have more noncriminal options for meeting the conditions of their lives.

A second perspective on the prison underlies this investigation of the modern female prison. I argue that the contemporary prison is expected to deal with the failures of other social institutions, an expectation that the prison is both philosophically and practically unable to meet. While this is also true of male prisons, the female experience is compounded by gender discrimination in contemporary American society and its inability to deal with women whose behavior is outside the traditional definitions and expectations of a patriarchical society. Violating both legal and gender norms, these double deviants perplex the criminal justice system in two ways. First, women, as a class, tend to commit fewer and less serious crimes (primarily nonviolent, low-level property and drug-related crimes) when compared to men. Second, there is some evidence that women persist in these crimes, even in the face of repeated arrests and community sanctions. While some argue that this persistence in crime is evidence of entrenched criminality, feminist criminologists argue that this persistence is evidence of the primary motivation for the vast majority of female crimes: survival (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988). This motivation includes emotional and psychological survival mechanisms as well as economic survival in a society that physically and emotionally brutalizes

women and girls and denies them competitive economic opportunities.

The concept of the double deviant can be applied as an institutional analysis as well. The increasing number of women in California prisons illustrates the double failure of conventional institutions to both protect women from the oppression and brutalization of patriarchical society and provide women economic and educational opportunities for themselves and their children. The failures of specific social institutions, such as the family, the school, and the labor market, often consign women to limited opportunities and inhibit their abilities to fully participate in conventional life. For many women and girls, the family is less a protected environment than it is a place of sexual and physical violence. Straus and Gelles (1980) found a high correlation between economic dependency and violence among married couples. As Pollock-Byrne (1990:60) suggests, "The woman who has been battered and psychologically abused by her husband or boyfriend for a period of time may see no way out of her pain and danger other than to kill him. When she does, the same criminal justice agencies that were unwilling or unable to protect her are now ready to prosecute." Gilfus (1988), Browne (1987b), and Ewing (1987) agree that childhood and adult battering has a significant effect on future violent acts among female offenders. In her 1990 study of women, crime and prison, Pollock-Byrne (1990:77–78) agrees with the characterization that women in prison may come from more disordered backgrounds than men in prison do, and cites additional research that supports the assertion that abuse, disorganized families, and other social and personal difficulties mark the lives of women prior to incarceration.

High school dropout rates among criminal justice populations are another example of the failure of conventional institutions. For many women, school is a place of failure rather than learning and achievement, further marginalizing them and handicapping their participation in economic life. For most of the women on the pathway to prison, economic participation is marginal or nonexistent. These institutions combine to further oppress and marginalize women, often blocking their participation in conventional life and leaving them with few options other than survival crimes.

Women in prison thus represent the double failures of conventional institutions: traditional life has failed these women as individuals and as important members of society—those who raise children and thus reproduce not only the members of its society but their behavior and life-chances as well. Much of the current work focuses on the importance of the parenting role (Baunach, 1985; Bloom & Steinhart, 1993), but one caution must be sounded in narrowing the focus on women as childbearers. Defining women solely as mothers continues the concentration on their sexuality and reproductive powers, excluding alternative roles such as worker or student. It is precisely this narrow definition of women that contributes to their inability to function in alternative, perhaps more self-sufficient roles, leading to the

double bind of bearing and rearing children without support.

These problems and issues—abuse and battering, economic disadvantage, substance abuse, unsupported parenting responsibilities—are best addressed outside the punitive custodial environment. Under current policy, these complex problems are laid at the feet of the prison by a society unwilling or unable to confront the problems of women on the margin. As a whole, the prison system is designed to deal with the criminality of men and their behavior while incarcerated. The women confined to California prisons are enmeshed in a criminal justice system that is ill-equipped and confused about handling the problems of women— the problems that brought them to prison and the problems they confront during their incarceration. The prison, with its emphasis on security and population management and deemphasis on treatment and programs, is left to deal with the failures of society's institutions. The institution is called on to deal with a set of deep and complicated problems of these women that society ignores. We expect too much from prisons and are puzzled when they fail to work.

But for the women who live in them—and the staff who must work with them—the prison is a world that must be lived through and negotiated daily. The women in prison struggle with and accommodate the problems of their outside lives and their lives in prison, solving them through a complex social organization and reconstitution of self. Prison culture among women is a dynamic, changing framework that provides opportunities to make their way in a world of women. The lack of a male influence (with the less immediate presence of male staff) has a significant impact on this culture, but the culture of the prison is shaped by the struggle to survive, just as the women's pathways to prison are grounded in survival as well.

FINAL NOTES

The stories of women in prison are multifaceted stories. They involve lives before prison and how their lives are set on the path to imprisonment. These stories draw attention to the interplay among the roles of women in contemporary life as well as the role of imprisonment in society. Examining how women make a life in prison requires us to question our sense of prison and our images of women. What does this tell us about prison and its purpose? What does this investigation tell us about the unintended consequences of incarceration? How is the prison experience of women different from the prison experience of men? How can this be explained—through these differences in the male and female prisons or the differences in the ways in which women confront the problems of imprisonment? While profile data and official statistics are useful summaries of the characteristics of the women of CCWF, the details of their lives inside and outside prison can only be conveyed through rich,

detailed narratives obtained through participant-observation within the prison.

As discussed in the next chapter, I used a method called empathetic observation to learn about the lives and worlds of the women doing time at the prison and count myself fortunate to have experienced a partial glimpse of this world. Many of the women "took me under their wing," and tried to explain and describe their world to this white, middle-class woman. A good number of the staff also assisted in mapping my way through this complicated world. Initially unsure of my intentions and questioning my presence, most of the staff eventually came to accept the presence of an outsider and assisted my observations in two ways—sometimes by answering my questions and describing the prison world from their perspective and, more importantly, sometimes by ignoring me and leaving me to interact and observe the women as they went about their liferound. The latitude afforded me by the staff was critical in my conducting more natural observations in this setting.

In the first year of the fieldwork, the uniqueness of the world of the lifer, and that of the HIV/AIDS population convinced me there was a need for an investigation separate from this more general study. Thus, this book discusses the ways in which lifers contribute to and live in the prison culture but excludes a detailed description of these very different worlds. The lifers are, of course, a significant part of the culture at CCWF and their world coexists with the more general culture. Women lifers are somewhat of a paradox in the terms of the commitment to criminality and a deviant lifestyle. A significant proportion of lifers are in fact first-time offenders, with the majority receiving life-sentences for the homicide of a battering partner. While hard data on this question are difficult to assess (once again supporting the need for a separate study of women lifers), many lifers are not committed to a deviant or criminal identity, an apparent contradiction in terms. This is particularly the case among older women. I also have no specific data on the experiences of women with HIV and AIDS. While I provide brief descriptions of the needs of disabled and pregnant women, much more in-depth investigation of these issues is required. Health problems and issues are complex and they, too, require separate study (Resnick & Shaw, 1980).

All fieldwork is intensive work, developing relationships with participants in foreign worlds, spending enormous amounts of time and emotion trying to understand parts of the world not normally accessible. The women of CCWF shared their world with me and helped me view an environment that is shaped by struggle and survival of conditions beyond the ability of most people. Often, in telling their stories, women would say, "You must think I am such a loser." To the contrary, the story of female prison culture is the story of survival, of conditions not of their making, conditions brought on by bad choices and illegal acts and by living in the prison world. The following chapters describe these struggles and the ways in which women survive, suffer, and, in some ways, triumph, over these conditions.