

Women Incarcerated in Rural Southern Prisons in the United States: A Review of Existing Multidisciplinary Literature and Suggestions for Future Directions

Susan Dewey (ORCID 0000-0002-6479-3674)

Professor, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice,
The University of Alabama
United States of America

Brittany VandeBerg (ORCID: 0000-0003-2033-4609)

Associate Professor, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice
The University of Alabama
United States of America

Ariane Prohaska (ORCID 0000-0002-4568-1167)

Associate Professor of Sociology, Department of Gender and Race Studies,
The University of Alabama
United States of America

Lauren Yearout (ORCID 0000-0002-1469-4539)

Instructor, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice
The University of Alabama
United States of America

Correspondence: Susan Dewey; scdewey@ua.edu



Abstract

Prisons in the Southern United States are a particularly unique kind of rural institution not only because of their geographic locations, social climates informed by the rural cultures of staff and prisoners, and, for many older Southern prisons, their roots in plantation agriculture. Despite these realities, rural criminology has yet to systematically synthesize and explore what existing research indicates about the everyday lives of over 30,000 women currently serving time in state prisons throughout the Southern United States. The present study fills this significant gap in the literature by uniting multidisciplinary literature to identify four prevailing themes evident in research regarding Southern women's prisons: regional culture in historical context, relationships and social dynamics, victimization and wellbeing, and journeys through the system from sentencing to reentry. Our findings suggest that rural criminology has potential to play a major role in shaping prison research by emphasizing regional culture's relevance to everyday prison life. Systematically analyzing this literature through a rural criminological lens in the scope of a single article provides important insights.

The movement of prisons to rural areas is a nationwide phenomenon in the United States, with over 1,200 new prisons constructed in post-1970 rural America as a result of mass incarceration and a pervasive, albeit somewhat misguided, belief that prisons can provide jobs to stave off rural economic decline (Eason 2017). Yet prisons in the Southern United States are a particularly unique kind of rural institution not only because of their geographic locations, social climates informed by the rural cultures of staff and prisoners, and, for many older Southern prisons, their roots in plantation agriculture. Despite these realities, rural criminology has yet to systematically synthesize and explore what existing research indicates about the everyday lives of over 30,000 women currently serving time in state prisons throughout the Southern United States. Women's pathways to prison typically include extensive trauma and abuse histories that inform lawbreaking through substance abuse, mental health issues, and troubled relationships (Benedict et al., 2012; King et al., 2018). Gender responsive approaches in women's prisons accordingly utilize a trauma-informed, strengths-based framework that includes specialized prison staffing, assessment, classification, case management, and services and programs that address incarcerated women's unique needs and life experiences.

Yet gender responsive approaches ignore the importance of regional culture, and especially rural regional culture, in shaping everyday life for women in prison. Incarcerated women remain understudied and under-resourced relative to their male peers and, to our knowledge, no study has synthesized and examined literature about the lives of women incarcerated in rural Southern prisons. The present article fills this significant gap in the literature by uniting multidisciplinary literatures to identify four prevailing themes evident in research regarding Southern women's prisons: regional culture in historical context, relationships and social dynamics, victimization and wellbeing, and journeys through the system from sentencing to reentry. Our findings suggest that rural criminology has potential to play a major role in shaping prison research by emphasizing regional culture's relevance to everyday prison life. While the studies reviewed do not provide statistics on incarcerated women's places of origin, making it impossible to ascertain if women from rural and/or non-metropolitan counties experience prison differently from their urban or suburban peers, analyzing them through a rural criminological lens in the scope of a single article provides important insights into regional culture's relevance to everyday prison life.

Regional Culture's Relevance to Everyday Prison Life

Prison social climate literature analyzes how "the social, emotional, organizational and physical characteristics of a correctional institution as perceived by inmates and staff" (Hall & Chong, 2018, p. 231) impact both everyday prison life and post-release outcomes among formerly incarcerated people (Auty & Liebling, 2020). Comparative penology in both the United States and Europe remains underdeveloped within (as well as across) national borders due to the pervasive belief that comparisons are difficult if not impossible given each prison

administration's ostensible uniqueness (Branagan, 2020). We accordingly argue for greater acknowledgment of regional culture's relevance to everyday prison life by emphasizing the worldviews and experiences that incarcerated women and prison staff bring with them to prisons, which are fundamentally rural institutions due to their geographic locations and the fact that they house so many rural people.

Regional dynamics are shaped by a host of complex forces including geography, economy, history, gender norms, social practices, family formations, and religion. Focusing on regional culture gives rise to a host of questions regarding how such complex socioeconomic and historical dynamics manifest in the context of Southern women's prisons. What is it about the South, about being Southern and female, that uniquely shapes women's pathways to prison? How do incarcerated women characterize their roles with respect to relationships with family, work, and the world more generally? What are some of the ways in which women embrace, reject, or mediate regional cultural norms that impact aspects of their identity? How does incarceration change how women engage with these regional cultural norms? What individual, institutional, and cultural factors inform women's decision-making while incarcerated? What connections exist between prison conduct and the types of relationships and communities that women cultivate while incarcerated and maintain with people in the free world? And, perhaps most importantly, what are the implications of these realities for correctional policy and practice? While this literature review certainly cannot answer all these questions, we hope it will pique readers' interest in the utility of examining prison as a gendered institution through a rural criminological lens that acknowledges the importance of rural regional culture.

Examining research findings about incarcerated women is particularly intriguing in the South because of its cultural distinctiveness as a vernacular region, defined by "how people relate to the world around them" (Cooper & Knotts 2017, p. 15). Southerners ascribe various meanings to Southern identity, including the prioritization of relationships and concern for others, foodways associated with local agricultural and food production traditions, particular accents and pronunciations, and deeply rooted ambivalence regarding the historical role of race and racism in shaping Southern identities (Cooper & Knotts, 2017). Historians and social scientists have emphasized how the ambivalence surrounding Southern identities stems in part from the Northern culture industry actively myth-making the South as a permanent "Other" through popular cultural productions that caricature the region as a rural anachronism (Cobb, 2005). Such popular cultural representations of Southern people produced by the Northern culture industry included those of "southern mountaineers as backward, lazy, dumb, and unable to cope with the modern world" (Inge 1989, cited in DeKeseredy et al. 2014, p. 180) alongside the dissolute grandeur associated with mythologized notions of the "Southern lady" (Waggoner & Egley Taylor, 2018).

Criminology has historically replicated this cultural ambivalence in studies of rural Southern crime, notably in enduring scholarly debates centered on the role of the so-called “Southern culture of violence” or “Southern culture of honor” in perpetuating high rates of violent crime in the South relative to other parts of the United States (Huff-Corzine et al., 1986). These debates first emerged in the late 1960s to explore connections between high poverty rates, widespread gun ownership, punitive religious beliefs, and cultural values that legitimize violence as a reasonable retaliatory response (Ellison, 1991). This body of work collectively argued that Southern Appalachia, an area historically associated with Scots-Irish migration and herding economies, has significantly higher rates of argument-related homicide than the rest of the region; research finds that conservative Protestants tend to express greater tolerance for defensive and punitive violence and tend toward dichotomous morality (Andreescu et al., 2011). Another critical cultural explanation for higher rates of violent crime in the South posits that defensive attitudes and heroic convictions concerning family, property, and self may be related to the notion of violence as an acceptable reaction to insults of honor; rates of homicide perpetrated by women are also higher in the South than in the rest of the United States (D’Antonio-Del Rio et al., 2010).

Rural Southern beliefs about violence are a product of their cultural context. For example, a Louisiana study found that cultural scripts condoning violence are evident across a broad cross-section of the rural population, and appear most likely when people perceive that the police or other agents of the law are unavailable or slow to respond due to rural communities’ isolation, when individuals perceive that they or their family members are in danger from an offender, or if they perceive there is a risk of re-victimization by the offender (Lee & Ousey, 2010). These rural Southern findings are in sharp contrast to literature that finds strong associations between rural group cohesion and low homicide rates across the United States, as did a study of 3,130 U.S. counties (Kowalski & Duffield, 1990). Argument-based aggravated assaults among whites are more prevalent in Southern counties with higher levels of poverty, unemployment, and familial instability among white residents (Thomas et al. 2018). Rural criminological research in this vein emphasizes the importance of cultural scripts, context, and perceptions about possible alternatives in Southerners’ decision making about violence, describing “culture as a strategy of action” (Lee & Ousey 2011, p. 905), that is most salient in the presence of others in ways that are more likely to result in escalation and firearm violence (Lantz & Wenger, 2020).

When criminologists considered gender as a variable in their analyses of rural Southern crime, they found that the highest rates of female perpetrated homicides occurred in the South, which they attributed to women’s acceptance of these values (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Doucet et al., 2014). These consistently higher than national average rates of violence perpetrated by Southern women paradoxically occur in a regional culture that places a high value on gendered propriety, maintenance of the status quo, and avoidance of behavior regionally glossed as “being

ugly” (Miller, 2017). Southern women come to prison from a socioeconomic region where, in comparison with their counterparts nationwide, women are poorer (Baker, 2020), face significant classism and racism that limits their opportunities to earn a living wage (Gray, 2014) or own their own homes, with Southern women homeowners significantly more likely than men to face foreclosure (Lichtenstein & Weber, 2015). Such gendered socioeconomic disparities manifest in vulnerabilities that compel women to remain in relationships that compromise their health and safety (Konkle-Parker et al., 2018). These realities all inform Southern women’s pathways to prison.

The eleven Southern states included in this study incarcerated a total of 32,853 women in state prisons at the time of writing, a number greater than the population of most Southern towns. We accordingly conceptualize the total population of women incarcerated in the South as a town all its own united by shared cultural norms and socioeconomic circumstances that transcend the women’s dispersal across Southern states, with 8,818 women incarcerated in Texas, 5,847 in Florida, 3,500 in Georgia, 2,042 in Kentucky, 2,640 in Tennessee, 2,634 in North Carolina, 2,091 in Alabama, 1,642 in Mississippi, 1,326 in Louisiana, 1,164 in Arkansas, and 1,149 in South Carolina.¹ The present study elucidates these shared norms and circumstances through an exploration of four key themes that emerged in our analysis of literature about incarcerated women in these eleven states: [1] regional culture and historical context; [2] relationships and social dynamics; [3] victimization and wellbeing; and [4] women’s journeys through the system from sentencing to reentry.

Methods

The present study is the result of preliminary research for a project titled “Southern Women’s Pathways to and through Prison: Developing Evidence-Based, Culturally Competent, and Gender-Responsive Approaches Specific to the Deep South.” To ascertain the state of published research about women in Southern prisons, the first author worked with a research assistant to locate many of the sources cited here, using an expansive definition of the South that, following Cooper and Knotts, included states that are part of the “Deep South” (Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Louisiana, Georgia) and the “Peripheral South” (Tennessee, Arkansas, North Carolina, Texas, Kentucky, Florida) (Cooper & Knotts 2017, p. 56).

The first author and the research assistant conducted an exhaustive library database search resulting in using combinations of the following terms: “southern states”, “women

¹ Alabama Department of Corrections 2021; Arkansas Department of Corrections 2020; Florida Department of Corrections 2020; Georgia Department of Corrections 2019; Kentucky Department of Corrections 2019; Louisiana Department of Corrections and Public Safety 2020; Mississippi Department of Corrections 2019; North Carolina Department of Public Safety 2020; Tennessee Department of Corrections 2020; South Carolina Department of Corrections. 2020; Texas Department of Criminal Justice 2020.

criminals”, “incarceration”, “gender-responsive”, “substance abuse”, “mental health”, “economic status”, “socioeconomic status”, “victimization”, “violent”, “violence”, “women”, “woman”, “female”, “females”, “female offenders”, “female prisoners”, “prison”, “imprisonment”, “prisons”, “southeastern United States”, “substance use treatment”, “substance abuse programs”, “substance abuse treatment”, “substance use programs”, “addiction treatment”, “addiction programs”, “prison programs”, “inmate programs”, “HIV”, “sexual assault”, “pathways to prison”, “barriers”, “housing”, “employment”, “transportation”, “gender”, “health”, “medical care”, “racial disparities”, “race”, “ethnicity”, “minority”, “LGBT”, “LGBTQ+”, “history”, “prison histories”, “histories of jails”, “jail”, “prison”, “inmate programs”, and “prison programs”.

Using these key terms, the first author and the research assistant located a total of 110 relevant pieces of peer-reviewed scholarship on women in Southern prisons, which the first author triangulated with literature on Southern cultures, gender norms, and theories of violence specific to the region. The first author analyzed all the sources we located to ascertain patterns in these published research findings, which she further refined to develop the four major themes that structure the subsequent discussion, which was written collaboratively by all four co-authors.

Findings

As previously mentioned, the present study unites multidisciplinary literature to identify four prevailing themes evident in research regarding Southern women’s prisons: regional culture in historical context, relationships and social dynamics, victimization and wellbeing, and journeys through the system from sentencing to reentry.

Rural Southern Women’s Prisons in Historical Context

The historical development of Southern women’s prisons has been fraught with underfunding, overcrowding, abuse, and gendered and racialized inequalities, reflecting broader regional sociopolitical trends. States were slow to establish separate facilities for women prisoners and the services and programming in women’s prisons were inferior to those of the male prisons. While acknowledging the uniqueness of each state, several commonalities underpinned the broader development of women’s prisons across the South: racialized inequalities in labor and treatment, underfunding and overcrowding, and gendered rehabilitation focused on religion and domestic skills.

Racialized inequalities in labor and treatment can be evidenced as far back as the treatment of incarcerated females during the antebellum period, when most incarcerated women were white because enslaved women were legally considered property (Hahn, 1980). During the

post-Civil War Jim Crow era, when the number of incarcerated women first began to increase in the South, a stark division of labor emerged between white and African American prisoners. In Georgia, white women constituted a protected class who could not perform hard labor in prison, whereas African American women prisoners either labored on state government-run chain gangs alongside male prisoners or carried out domestic labor in white homes (Haley, 2013; LeFlouria, 2015). In Arkansas prisons, African American women lived in segregated housing where prison staff physically abused and raped them (Smith, 2018). In Mississippi, African American women were incarcerated on a remote part of the Delta on isolated medical grounds where prison staff purportedly subjected them to experimental gynecological and obstetric procedures ostensibly designed to advance the field of gynecology (Shankar, 2013). Living conditions for African American women prisoners were particularly abysmal, violent, and unsanitary in comparison with their White peers, with 10% malaria infection rates (infection rates for African American men, however, were 50%) (Shankar, 2013). African American women were forced into forms of labor that closely resembled slavery for minor criminal offenses, including on chain gangs making bricks, mining, and farming, faced indiscriminate torture, and required to perform domestic service in White homes as a condition of their parole (Haley, 2013).

Women's prisons emerged slowly and unevenly throughout the South, with most Southern states initially separating incarcerated women from their male peers in the late 1800s and early 1900s, although separating women and men often meant that the women were not allowed to access the same services and programming (Hahn, 1980; Sobel, 1980). Whether states created women-only cell blocks or separate all-female prisons, they were often underfunded and overcrowded. With the rate of women's incarceration growing faster than states' abilities to house them, Alabama was forced to transfer incarcerated women to private prisons in Louisiana for four years while Alabama constructed additional women's facilities (Dodge, 2008). The early construction of a Tennessee women's prisons physically manifested gender inequality, with women's facilities lacking exercise areas, educational programming, and other services regularly provided to incarcerated men (Hahn, 1980). Under pressure from prisoner-led class action lawsuits (Dodge, 2008), prison reform advocates (Smith, 2018), and the federal government (Yackle, 1989; Pannell et al., 2004), many states began to make progress in improving incarcerated women's living conditions and opportunities for rehabilitation.

From their inception in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most Southern states historically promoted rehabilitation programs focused on cultivating women's religiosity and domestic skills, largely based on the Progressive Era belief that incarcerated women lacked socialization and job skills (Dodge, 2008). Although some groups, such as the Florida Women's Prison Association, initially believed that rehabilitation was impossible for woman who broke the law (Holt, 2005), Southern Progressive Era reformers, including professional women's organizations, successfully campaigned for vocational and religious training designed to inculcate incarcerated women, who predominantly came from poor and working class

backgrounds, with domestic norms and ways of life that were realistically only available to middle-class white women (Dodge, 2008). Religious training in the form of bible studies, religious services, and trained religious workers has always been a key feature of Southern women's prisons (Swearigan, 1946). Vocational skills taught in women's prisons often reflect gendered regional cultural expectations for women, such as cosmetology, floral arranging, knitting and sewing, data processing, which is taught in Alabama prisons (Dodge, 2008), and cooking, sewing, and laundering, which are still taught in North Carolina prisons (Sobel, 1980). These programs are designed to benefit both the prison and the state by occupying women's time and providing them with skills to help ease their transition out of prison and into employment. These vocational programs have not gone without critique, and government and non-profit groups continue to monitor the delicate balance between labor exploitation and skills development in prisons throughout the South.

As women's incarceration rates began to rapidly increase in the 1970s, scholars became interested in an array of issues relating to Southern women's prison cultures (Jensen & Jones, 1976; Corrales, 2007), administrative challenges including lack of space, overcrowding, sexism in sentencing and treatment (Potter, 1978), leadership roles among incarcerated women (van Wormer & Bates, 1979), and how best to prepare female offenders post-prison life (Lawrence, 1974). The 1980's saw an uptick in research focused on understanding the trauma incarcerated women experienced when separated from their children. These studies explored possible policy changes including overnight visits with children and special visiting hours for children (Hadley, 1981; Sobel, 1982). Scholars also became interested in the lived experiences of incarcerated women with disobedience and reprimand (Faily et al., 1980), coping and adjusting techniques (Sultan et al., 1985) educational and vocational programming, access to health services (Leonard, 1983), and the "functionality" and "dysfunctionality" of pseudo-families formed among incarcerated women (van Wormer, 1981; 1987).

Post-1970s rising incarceration rates for women and the burgeoning research on women's prisons that accompanied this rise quickly revealed important differences between incarcerated women and incarcerated men. First, women in prison are more likely than their male peers to have extensive trauma and victimization histories and are accordingly more likely to suffer from co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders (Chamberlain, 2015; Maruschak et al., 2021). Second, incarcerated women typically committed non-violent offenses, unlike their male peers (Hackett, 2013; McCorkel, 2013). Third, widespread gendered socioeconomic inequalities mean that incarcerated women are more likely than their male peers to suffer from economic dependency on family members or intimate partners and, accordingly, to remain in abusive relationships due to their inability to earn a living wage and childcare responsibilities (Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014; Giordano & Copp, 2015). A specific gendered focus on women in rural Southern prisons adds a significant contribution to rural criminology because it emphasizes connections between prison social climate and gendered regional culture, illuminates

socioeconomic aspects of gendered relationships between prisons and the rural communities in which they are located, and emphasizes how rural women experience incarceration.

Beginning in the 1980's and continuing to the present day, research on women's prisons has taken particular interest in recording and reflecting upon the various social, economic, and legal factors that contribute to women's imprisonment, which has continued to outpace men's throughout the beginning of the twentieth century and linked to a growth in the number of crimes committed by women as well as changes in prosecutorial and judicial decision-making (Frost et al., 2006). Important studies exploring the intersections of gender and race in women's experiences of Southern prisons have also challenged scholars to rethink the residual impacts of slavery on contemporary carcerality (Forret, 2013).

These historical developments took place in a context that criminologists have called "the Southern culture of violence", as the South as historically been associated with high levels of violent and lethal crimes (Hackney, 1969). Some scholars have attributed this "Southern culture of violence" to 18th and 19th century emigration from the Scottish Lowlands and Northern England to the Carolinas, Appalachia, and across the South. These scholars argue that such migrants brought with them a unique culture where socialization processes condone violence and killing as an honorable retaliatory response to threats against family and property (McWhiney, 1988; Webb, 2005). For several decades, researchers have argued that being raised or residing in the South is a stronger predictor than poverty of being involved in a violent crime (Gastil, 1971; Hackney, 1969), particularly in rural areas (Ayers, 1991).

Southern culture of violence scholars have also included gender as a unit of analysis by suggesting that Southern culture reflects the patriarchal power integral to Southern families and a reliance on and/or socialization of more traditional gender roles among Southern women (Glass, 1988; Lynxwiler & Wilson, 1988). Researchers have suggested that unmeasured status indicators associated with Southern culture were more predictive of women's participation in homicide than structural predictors such as lower pay and limited social capital (Deweese & Parker, 2003). Conversely, a later study found that cultural processes were inconsistent by gender and argued that the Southern culture of violence does not explain higher rates of violent crime committed by women—prompting a more in-depth examination of the relationship between structural factors and homicide committed by women (Berthelot et al, 2008).

The creation of a Southern Subculture Index in the last decade has renewed and strengthened arguments linking culture, gender, and violence in the South. D'Antonio-Del Rio et al. (2010) sought to operationalize Southern cultural influence by creating an index that combined factors including if a person was Southern-born, Evangelical Protestant, and of Scots Irish ancestry. Their findings suggest that Southern culture is in fact associated with female-perpetrated homicide. The Southern Subculture Index was subsequently employed in a later

study of female-perpetuated homicide in the 1970s to test whether Southern subculture influenced lethal violence during other historical periods (Doucet et al., 2014). The study found that as the presence of Southern subculture increased in a county, so too did the rate of female perpetrated homicides. The authors further suggest that despite the patriarchal socialization that most women experience in the South, both men and women are socialized with values that support violence as a reasonable response to insults and threats.

Relationships and Social Dynamics

Research on relationships and social dynamics in rural Southern women's prisons falls into four primary areas: relationships women cultivate in prison, motherhood and pregnancy, prison-based education, program, and activity participation, and religion. All these issues are interconnected and have historically overlapped with one another in incarcerated women's everyday lives, as is evident in a report compiled in 1975 after a five-day riot over poor conditions at the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women. Originally the North Carolina women's prison was inside the men's medium security facility, with women banned from the vocational shop and only allowed to go to the gym once a week and the library twice a week; staff told the report investigators that they could not allow the women access to areas meant for the men because:

males may be shot during an escape attempt, but females cannot. Prison officials said that in some cases it is difficult to determine whether an escapee is male or female. Also, if a male and female attempt to escape together, the guard would not be able to shoot the male because of the danger of hitting the female (North Carolina Governor's Advisory Council on Children and Youth 1982, p. 4).

Even writing several decades ago, the authors found that alternatives to incarceration should be pursued for women and that prison programs must account for the importance of relationships in women's lives, as 75% of women incarcerated in North Carolina at the time had children and 80% of the women were non-violent offenders.

A study of women incarcerated in two rural Texas prisons explored how women form and rationalize close relationships with one another known as "pseudo-families". The researchers found that, despite many correctional officers' perceptions that these bonds between women were inherently detrimental to the overall prison social climate and officers' beliefs that most of these relationships were sexual in nature, women perceived the close emotional bonds they formed with one another as important to their wellbeing and most women were not involved in a sexual relationship with another woman while incarcerated (Huggins et al., 2006). A South Carolina study of incarcerated women's relationships found that these relationships can have a positive role in women's lives by discouraging them from committing future crimes. Yet

structural realities limit women's abilities to make changes they believe to be necessary for them to abstain from substance abuse, maintain healthy relationships, and find work that pays a living wage. Women in the study shared that while their relationships with family members, friends, significant others, and their children provided them with some social capital, support, opportunities, and motivation, the positive impacts of these relationships were mitigated prior to their incarceration by the women's substance abuse and various forms of disadvantage, as well as their sense of pride and/or shame (Wright et al., 2013). For women incarcerated in all of these rural Southern state prisons, their distance from children and other loved ones exacerbated the difficulties they faced in their relationships with children and loved ones.

A Louisiana study of incarcerated women's conceptualizations of sexual relationships between women in prison built on this focus on personalized relationships as a central component of everyday life in women's prisons. The researchers found that widespread cultural and institutional homophobia led many participants to talk about sexual relationships between women in the third person. Women's accounts of these relationships emphasized that incarcerated women's sexual experiences with other incarcerated women are shaped by women's overall prison experiences, their life experiences prior to their incarceration, and the degree of fluidity they associate with gender as a concept (Forsyth et al., 2002). These realities are exacerbated by the reality that most women incarcerated in rural Southern prisons are a great distance from their loved ones, as well as widespread cultural homophobia among rural people who staff the prisons at which the women are housed.

Motherhood and pregnancy are significant themes in the literature on incarcerated Southern women's relationships and social dynamics, often by emphasizing the important role of prison-based education programs in promoting parenting skills, which is significant in a region that culturally valorizes motherhood. For example, a Kentucky study found that parenting education courses instigate positive changes in incarcerated women's parenting knowledge and skills, with even just a twelve-week course resulting in a short-term knowledge change regarding parenting skills and parent-child relationships (Sandifer, 2008). Yet lack of attention to women's unique needs as mothers is often the norm rather than the exception, as is apparent in findings from three separate studies conducted in North Carolina

Researchers in the first North Carolina study emphasized that, despite the disproportionately high health risks facing incarcerated women, prisons for women lacked classes and programs for pregnant women on parenting and prenatal care. Incarcerated women as a collective group experience victimization, substance use, and sexually transmitted infections at a much higher rate than their peers in the free world (Byrne, 2005). The second North Carolina study examined the effect of incarceration during on pregnancy on birth outcomes matched North Carolina prison records with birth certificates and health services records to examine the impact of incarceration on birth weight. Women gave birth to babies with a higher birth weight

while incarcerated, indicating that shelter and regular meals may improve birth outcomes among extremely disadvantaged women (Martin et al., 1997). The third North Carolina study, conducted with pregnant women diagnosed with opioid use disorder, found that, despite clinical research supporting the use of medication for opioid use disorder during pregnancy to improve both maternal and neonatal health outcomes, many incarcerated women did not receive this medication and/or did not receive a referral to a community provider they could access post-release. Half of all incarcerated women with opioid use disorder did not receive any opioid medication to treat their condition, although women who had received this treatment prior to their incarceration were more likely to receive it in prison. Nearly half of all women who received opioid medication during their incarceration received no referrals to community providers accessible upon their release (Knittel et al., 2020).

Incarcerated women are often known as “forgotten offenders” because, in addition to often being housed in one central facility far from their homes, they often have fewer opportunities for prison-based education, program, and activity participation relative to their male counterparts. Administrators justify this disparity by citing a lack of financial resources, space, and staff to supervise women in these activities, as well as the difficulty of attracting staff and volunteers to spend their time at a women’s prisons. For example, prison staff allow men incarcerated at a Louisiana prison to form musical groups, attend rehearsals, perform in “yard shows”, and teach their incarcerated peers how to play an instrument. Women incarcerated in a Louisiana women’s facility just across the street, however, only have the opportunity to participate in a single sponsored church choir using a limited number of musical instruments that are only available for use during church services, which effectively excludes incarcerated women from the opportunities available to incarcerated men in using music as an outlet to generate hope and overcome feelings of loneliness, abandonment, and helplessness (Harbert, 2013).

Critical analysis of a North Carolina arts-based project at a women’s prison that combined music, writing, and theater found that workshops that took place as part of this project helped to temporarily liberate women from the constraints of everyday prison life. Engaging in artistic creation by making music together allowed the incarcerated women who participated the freedom to temporarily escape from the stigma, long-term consequences of a felony conviction in terms of limited employment options, and the hardships of everyday prison life (Lucas, 2013). Prison-based groups can create transformational spaces for women to create camaraderie, particularly in the pandemic context that eliminated family visits and dramatically restricted opportunities for participation in educational classes and therapeutic groups. An Alabama study found that a six-week psychoeducational health group allowed women to feel safe in discussing their trauma histories and related issues that disproportionately impact incarcerated women (Beech et al., 2020).

Women's perspectives on and beliefs about the future are an important predictor of their success in completing programs while incarcerated. An Alabama study found that women with greater orientation toward the future were more likely to succeed in completing a vocational training program, indicating that the ability to set proximate goals aids in establishing longer-term goals, such as graduation from an education or training program (Chubick et al., 1999). A North Carolina study of incarcerated women's reading preferences found that true crime books' popularity reflects this genre's popularity among women in the free world, albeit for different reasons. A North Carolina prison librarian estimated that 75% of library patrons read true crime books. Women report reading true crime books because it helps them to process their crimes, and the emotions they feel surrounding them, in the absence of meaningful therapeutic treatment and support groups (Sweeney, 2003).

Religion is another prominent theme in the research literature on incarcerated Southern women's relationships and social dynamics. A Tennessee study found that older women serving life sentences regarded religion and spirituality as significant to their ability to cope with their prison experience and maintain hope for the future, including hope for the possibility of release from prison. Women emphasized how religion helped them to cope with stress surrounding interpersonal relationships, trauma, and health issues, even if they did not practice a religion while growing up (Aday et al., 2014). Depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem are common in the prison environment, as many women who enter prison feel unprepared for the everyday realities confronting them. Religiosity plays a profound role in the lives of many women serving life sentences in Tennessee by reducing the sense of isolation women feel, lowering anxiety about death, and helping women adjust to the prison environment through a broader sense of connection to a higher power (Huey Dye et al. 2014)

Religiosity has complex cultural meanings, and in the rural South "religion" is usually a synonym for "Christianity" (Swearingen, 1946). For example, a study conducted in Florida and Alabama explored why, in contrast to incarcerated African American men, African American women in prison do not often convert to Islam while in prison. Findings suggest that women's majority membership in African American churches creates a resistance among African American women to converting to Islam due to the social support they perceive they would lose in the process. Perceptions that women receive poor treatment in Muslim communities, that women lack leadership roles in Islam relative to African American churches, and higher sociability levels/social bonds among incarcerated women all help to explain African American women's lower rates of conversion to Islam relative to their male peers (Dix-Richardson, 2008).

Taken together, incarcerated Southern women's relationships and social dynamics directly connect with their previous life experiences in the particular regional context of the South, including their past histories of victimization and its long-term consequences for health and wellbeing.

Victimization and Wellbeing

The theme of victimization and wellbeing coalesces around studies of rural Southern women's prisons related to mental health, substance use, healthcare, sexual health, victimization across the lifespan, and victimization in prison, with many studies emphasizing connections between these various aspects of incarcerated women's health. Victimization causes long-term health consequences that manifest both in women's offending and in overall negative health and wellbeing. Interviews with 125 women in a North Carolina prison identified correlations between childhood victimization, subsequent mental health issues, substance use, and sexual victimization (Tripodi & Pettus-Davis, 2012). Interviews with 60 women incarcerated in a rural South Carolina prison similarly found that the cumulative impact of multiple forms of trauma beginning with caregivers who provide alcohol or drugs to minor girls and coerced girls or young women into lawbreaking—typically stealing or selling sex—generate indirect impacts on women's offending through internalizing feelings of worthlessness and pervasive loss (DeHart, 2008). Life course analysis with 24 HIV positive Alabama women with incarceration histories in a rural Southern prison indicated that the women experienced repeated childhood physical and sexual abuse followed by the onset of substance use, intimate partner violence relationships, and associated behavioral and mental health problems in adolescence, leading to criminal justice involvement as an adult (Sprague et al., 2017; Sprague, 2018).

Victimization is also correlated with the likelihood of engaging in problematic substance use and self-harm. A study of 256 women incarcerated in an unspecified Southern state found that women who engaged in self-mutilation, in comparison with women who did not, were younger, significantly more likely to have attempted suicide, engage in bingeing and purging behaviors, and to have sold sex (Roe-Sepowitz, 2007). Tennessee researchers found that nearly half of 214 women serving life sentences experienced suicidal ideation prior to their incarceration, a majority were abuse survivors, and those experiencing suicidal ideation at the time of the study had high levels of depression, low levels of social support in prison, and less extensive abuse histories (Huey Dye & Aday, 2013). A Texas research team found that lifetime victimization dramatically impacted the mental health of the 545 incarcerated women surveyed, with particularly high incidences of depression among women unemployed prior to their incarceration, higher post-trauma stress disorder (PTSD) among young women and women who had never been married, and depression and PTSD highest among women abused as both children and adults (Cabeldue et al., 2019). Isolation from family and loved ones in a rural Southern prison likely compounds these mental health issues.

The negative consequences of victimization manifest in totalizing ways that negatively impact incarcerated women's well-being. Some of these long-term consequences can impact decision-making and behavior, including the limited impulse control associated with

lawbreaking, as is the case with traumatic brain injury. A South Carolina interview-based study of 316 women found that over 70% of incarcerated women had experienced symptoms of a traumatic brain injury that altered their consciousness, with more than half reporting ongoing symptoms (Ferguson et al., 2012). These problems persist throughout the lifespan along with other aspects of the aging process, and are exacerbated by poor quality healthcare both prior to and during women's incarceration in rural Southern prison. For example, a study with older incarcerated women in five Southern states identified an average of 4.2 chronic health conditions, high rates of mental health issues, and extensive victimization histories (Aday & Farney, 2014).

Victimization shapes survivors' worldviews and abilities to relate to others in profound ways that can result in the inception or intensification of substance use and offending, such as a Kentucky study of 100 women which found that women with smaller or nonexistent social support networks more likely to engage in severe substance use and lawbreaking (Staton-Tindall et al., 2009). Yet, despite victimization's totalizing impacts on and health and wellbeing and the near-universality of victimization among incarcerated women, gender-responsive approaches remain nascent at best (and nonexistent at worst) in Southern women's prisons. Interviews with 113 women in North Carolina and Florida prisons found that while childhood abuse and adult intimate partner violence dramatically impacted women's self-worth, relationships, mental health, coping skills, and offending, women reported that the sentencing process and the prison environment failed to address these realities (Kennedy & Mennicke, 2018).

The patterns of victimization and offending that most women experience prior to their incarceration follow them to prison and can result in further harms while women are incarcerated. A focus group study with women incarcerated at eight prisons, some of which were in the South, found that, because victimization is a pathway to incarceration, women may replicate pre-incarceration abuse they previously experienced in the relationships they form in prison through intimate partner violence, extreme forms of jealousy, economic exploitation, and sexual violence (Muscat et al., 2011). Interviews with 40 women incarcerated in an Alabama prison found barriers to reporting sexual victimization, including stigma and gossip, fear of retaliation, and the expectation that their experiences will be disbelieved (Surrell & Johnson, 2020). These barriers closely resemble that that follow women in their journeys through the system from sentencing to reentry.

Women's Journeys Through the Prison System From Sentencing to Reentry

Women's journeys to and through prison in the South are gendered, beginning with the decisions to incarcerate and sentence lengths. Although studies conducted in the South conclude that generally, women receive greater leniency in sentencing than men, this chivalry is dependent on a woman's race/ethnicity, type of crime committed, and seriousness of the offense (Koons-

Witt et al., 2014; Crawford, 2000). For example, a study using data from the South Carolina Sentencing Commission from 1982-2003 found that women were sentenced more leniently than men in terms of both the decision to incarcerate and sentence length, supporting the chivalry hypothesis (Koons-Witt et al., 2014). Women were denied leniency, however, as their crimes increased in severity. In terms of race, Black women's and white men's odds of being incarcerated (.38) were equal. The authors explain that courts are using both the "evil woman" hypothesis and focal concerns perspective, perceiving black women as violating gender norms, immoral, and dangerous. Racial sentencing disparities between women were also uncovered in a study of 1,103 women admitted to the Florida Department of Corrections in fiscal year 1992-1993 who were eligible to be sentenced under the habitual offender law (Crawford, 2000). When controlling for prior record and seriousness of offense, Black women were twice as likely to be habitualized as their white counterparts, and nine times as likely as white women to be habitualized for drug offenses, again showing support for the "evil woman" hypothesis.

Sentencing disparities based on skin color were also found among black women in the South. Data on the incarceration experiences of 12,158 black women from the North Carolina Department of Corrections found that women who were perceived to have light skin received shorter maximum sentence lengths and served shorter actual sentences than their counterparts who were perceived to have darker skin, controlling for body size, criminal background, parole arrest, and type of offense, which all significantly affected sentencing outcomes (Viglione et al., 2011). Interestingly, thinner body size was also related to shorter maximum sentence lengths and shorter actual time served for Black incarcerated women.

Incarcerated women in the South also experience difficulties adjusting to prison. In terms of psychological adjustment, a 2009 study of 90 women in a rural Texas prison who were incarcerated for the first time did not uncover significant differences in terms of race, age, marital status, levels of substance use, education, or occupation on depression, prison adjustment, and anxiety scales (Clay, 2009). However, higher levels of depression were found among black and Hispanic women, with scores on the Beck Depression Inventory indicating high-moderate depression versus low-moderate depression for their white counterparts. Overall, scores on mental health inventories demonstrated that a considerable number of women in each ethnic group could be considered maladjusted to prison, depressed, or anxious. Another study of 141 incarcerated women in Louisiana found differences in coping and adjustment between three distinct sentencing groups: (1) women with short sentences (less than 48 months) who were new to prison; (2) women with long sentences who were in prison less than 48 months but were sentenced to 96 months or longer in prison; and (3) women who were sentenced to longer than 96 months but had served at least 48 months (MacKenzie et al., 1989). Newly incarcerated women were more likely to join prison families and felt less control over events in prison than those who had been incarcerated for a longer period. In contrast, those who were in prison for longer periods of time and had longer sentences expressed more situational problems. Authors

concluded that whereas newly incarcerated women were more concerned about safety, those with long sentences were missing interaction with loved ones, social life, and social stimulation. This suffering increased with time served.

The gendered impacts of incarceration follow women as they re-enter society. Formerly incarcerated women in the South consistently report troubles with securing housing and employment, achieving economic independence, and reuniting with families (e.g. Johnson, 2014; Harm & Phillips, 2001). For example, a study of 60 women parolees in Alabama are often the sole caregivers for their children, thus finding full-time employment and housing is crucial to reunification and economic independence (Johnson, 2014, 2015). These women experienced difficulties finding employment due to lack of education and marketable skills, criminal background checks, and absence of reliable transportation (Johnson, 2014). In terms of housing, women parolees experience difficulties finding safe, affordable homes, securing permanent housing, and dealing with family conflict. Similarly, a study of 38 women recidivists in Arkansas reported similar difficulties, including issues with accessing stable jobs with decent wages, affordable housing, and substance abuse treatment (Harm & Phillips, 2001). Additionally, these women reported problems with family members, including lack of support, distrust, violence, and strained relationships with children.

Women parolees in Alabama believed that emotional and financial support from family members, along with supportive parole officers, were vital to them meeting the conditions of their parole (Johnson, 2015). However, these women perceived that transportation problems, lack of financial resources, and substance issues hindered their ability to meet their parole conditions. Despite these hurdles, women parolees in Alabama developed strategies to meet their conditions of parole, including limiting their movements to home, work, and other trusted location; using their family members as “protective covers” when they ventured outside the home; and using mothers and children as motivators towards making lawful decisions (Johnson 2015, p. 803-804).

Addressing mental and physical health needs is crucial to women’s success after prison. A study of 2,311 women released from North Carolina state prisons between June and July of 2001 revealed a 16% greater chance of recidivism for women with severe mental illness, controlling for race, marital status, parental status, and prior incarcerations (King et al., 2018). Another study by the Urban Institute examined the barriers to re-entry of the 142 formerly incarcerated Houston women, and found 55% suffered from depression or other mental health issues (LaVigne et al., 2009). Mental health and substance use are also often co-occurring issues for formerly incarcerated women. In the Arkansas study, women identified substance use as a significant barrier to successful re-entry, particularly when paroled to family members using drugs, reunited with using friends, experiencing economic difficulties, and experiencing mental health issues (Harm & Philips, 2001).

In terms of physical health, 67% of women in the Houston study reported chronic health issues such as back pain, high blood pressure, and asthma. HIV is also a health concern of many formerly incarcerated people; each year about 150,000 people living with HIV or AIDs are released from American prisons (National Minority AIDs Council and Housing Works, 2013). A study of 25 formerly incarcerated women living with HIV and 16 service providers at community-based organizations in Alabama revealed a lack of planning for discharge from prison, and an absence of comprehensive services for formerly incarcerated women living with HIV outside of those in two major cities (Pantalone et al., 2018).

The research is conclusive that several resolutions are necessary for formerly incarcerated women to succeed post-prison. However, these services are currently deficient in the South: (1) discharge plans that connect soon-to-be parolees with service providers; (2) the availability of centrally located service providers (for employment, housing, counseling, medical treatment and substance abuse treatment, etc.) upon release; and (3) family support (Johnson, 2014, LaVigne et al., 2009, Harm & Phillips, 2001). It is also important to recognize and build upon the existing assets of formerly incarcerated women, such as supportive intimate partners, families, and children, as well as not reintroduce women into non-supportive environments (LaVigne et al., 2009). Additionally, supportive relationships between parolees and parole officers also lead to less reoffending (Johnson, 2015). Finally, more intensive case management may serve to reduce recidivism, particularly for women with mental health and substance issues (McDonald & Arlinghaus, 2014).

Concluding Thoughts

Rural criminology has great potential to play a major role in shaping prison research for three reasons. First, rural criminology could provide insights into the significant impact of regional culture on everyday prison life. No other area of criminology is as closely attuned to the importance of culture as rural criminology, making this subfield especially well-suited to studying connections between prison social climate and regional culture, especially in the South where a predominantly agricultural rural context intersects with ideologies about gender and race in complex ways. Understanding the South as a rural “vernacular region” (Cooper & Knotts, 2017, p. 15) with distinct cultural norms and values regarding gender, violence, and incarceration provides insights into how cultural context informs prison social climate for women. Southern women routinely face greater socioeconomic disadvantages than their peers in other parts of the United States with respect to earnings, homeownership, and gendered decision-making and related power disparities in relationships (Baker, 2020; Lichtenstein & Weber, 2015; Konkle-Parker et al., 2018). These disadvantages become amplified in a prison setting as a result of rural cultural beliefs about women who break the law held by staff in prisons as well as by regional

values held by prison administrators who make important decisions regarding the everyday lives of women in prison.

Second, theorizing prisons as an essential component of rural criminology can help to illuminate the sociocultural and economic aspects of relationships between prisons and the rural communities that provide the land and staff necessary for them to exist. Prisons, and the social climates that suffuse them, are products of their historical and cultural contexts. In the rural South, these contexts include historical abuses of African American women during slavery and, following abolition, prison settings as well as poor treatment of economically disadvantaged White women in prison (Haley, 2013; LeFlouria, 2015). Rural prison staff bring their cultural values to work with them every day, and these may include traditional gender roles that support punitive criminal justice approaches (Lee & Ousey 2011). Understanding how these rural and regional cultural values work in practice to provide or deny opportunities to women in rural Southern prisons offers meaningful insight into comparative penology as well as rural criminology by emphasizing the significant impact that staff attitudes and beliefs have on prison social climate.

Third, a rural criminological lens could help to unpack how rural people experience incarceration, including their unique pathways to and through prison, thus adding a new and more complex dimension to studies of mass incarceration, which criminologists typically characterize as a phenomenon that solely impacts urban populations. Prison is all too often theorized in criminology as an urban institution that disproportionately houses people from urban areas, with very limited attention paid to the experiences of prisoners from rural areas. Rural criminology would benefit from emphasizing prison as a fundamentally rural institution because of the reality that prisons typically are located in rural areas and staffed by rural people, who bring their rural values and cultural norms with them into prison each day. Prisons likewise are often touted by their proponents as engines of economic growth, despite the reality that most jobs in a prison setting are performed by incarcerated people (Eason, 2017).

Some questions that rural criminologists might consider when reconceptualizing prison as a fundamentally rural institution include the following. How do rural prison staff and prisoners from urban areas perceive one another? Does this perception differ among and between rural staff and prisoners from rural areas, or take different forms in female prisons versus male prisons? How does theoretically and conceptually re-envisioning prisons as rural institutions help to recast contemporary debates about prison reform? And, perhaps most importantly, how can policymakers and prison administrators utilize rural criminologists' research recommendations to overcome the significant problems that continue to plague prisons nationwide?

At a historical juncture in which more people than ever before have served time in jail or prison, rural criminology is uniquely positioned to provide insights into how prisons' geographic

location in rural areas impacts contemporary manifestations and experiences of mass incarceration.

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