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Posudek vedoucí na magisterskou práci Zuzany Schmidtové: „Women in the U.S. Prison System: The Care They Need and the Treatment They Receive.“ IMS FSV UK, ZS 2012/2013, 77 s.

The topic of Zuzana Schmidtova's thesis is very important – the U.S. is infamous for having the largest prison population in the world. Since launching the War on Drugs in 1970s, the number of incarcerated females has dramatically increased and nowadays represents a serious social issue.

The master's thesis by Zuzana Schmidtová is exploring the U.S. prison system's reaction to the increasing rate of female incarceration. The author's basic premise is that females commit different, usually non-violent types of crimes than men and that in prison system they have different needs than men. In her research, she is trying to map out whether and how the prison system has adjusted to accommodate larger numbers of females and whether it was able to respond to their specific needs. From the very beginning, the author finds large deficiencies – she points out that facilities now serving women were hastily set up to reflect the abrupt rise of female incarceration and were often built as a mirror-image of male prisons, thus in complete disregard for female needs.

At the very beginning, the author points out that the topic of female incarceration has been underresearched. At the same time, existing inquiries have been so far exclusively researched by female researchers. In such state of the research, it is difficult to avoid bias, but it is something that the author is mostly aware of when she points out that she would favor gender-responsive treatment in prison. In her opinion, it would partly solve the issue of female recidivism.

The first part of the thesis offers a brief overview of the evolution of the U.S. prison system, the distinction among different type of prison facilities, and the sources of financing. The author points out on p. 6 that the „most important task of the ‘modern’ prison has been to change prisoners so it would be much easier to re-enter the society”. This is an important statement as it shows that the U.S. prisons were not simply intended as institutions for punishment, but also for rehabilitation. However, we do not learn whether this is still the case nowadays? Are prisons still seen as punishment or should they aid prisoners in re-entering society?

The author also summarizes the trends in incarceration by using statistics to show the growth of imprisoned populations, particularly in connection with the War on Drugs, during which the number of women in the U.S. prisons increased by 800 percent. The author also points out that the incarceration rate is greatly skewed against minority women (p. 20).

On the basis of research, the author puts together a profile of a typical incarcerated woman. She points out that only a few women commit violent crimes – and uses statistics to rebuff the generally accepted view, mostly presented by the media, that women have been becoming more violent. In fact, women most often end up in prison as a result of poverty and hence

shoplifting, fraud, embezzlement, forgery. A general profile of an incarcerated female often includes lack of education, many are single mothers or/and live in unhealthy relationship, plagued with abuse (p. 22-23). Many also have a history of substance abuse and commit drug-related crimes (p. 30). In the recent decades, many females have been incarcerated due to stricter and harsher laws and practices, not as a result of substantial change in their behavior (p. 28). The author also lists the most influential theories that try to explain the rise in female incarceration. She makes an interesting point by concluding that rise in female criminality can be explained by „masculinization of women, feminization of poverty or inefficient response towards female criminality through methods that had been adapted for men“ (p. 25).

The core part of the thesis is focusing on health care provision – including both physical as well mental health care – in female prisons. The author finds it inadequate, often completely disregarding the needs of female prisoners. In particular, she is looking in detail at the psychological deprivations female convicts suffer after being separated from their children. The author also points out the unequal treatment in parental contact – since there are fewer female prisons in each state, the physical distance between the mother and the child is often greater than for the male convicts. The lack of contact between the mother and the child can often lead to loss of parental rights. Particular attention is also paid to pregnant inmates, issues of shackling during birth, and the postpartum separation of mother and child.

Health care provision to convicts is a controversial topic. First, health care generally is extremely expensive and prisoners – no matter whether females or males - usually have greater needs of health care, since many of them are drug abusers, are more likely than majority population to have uncured condition (often mental) or disease. Additionally, the author also explores the fact that „health care standards were originally designed for male prison population and do not take into consideration the differences between male and female needs“ (p. 43). Specific female health needs are thus considerably disregarded. As the author points out there are no national standards regulating the accessibility to medical services for incarcerated people (p. 44). In the author’s opinion, such disregard may have serious consequences for possible rehabilitation of the prisoner and may ultimately add to the prison care costs in the future, as it is likely that some of the prisoners will sooner or later return to the prison system.

The cost of health care in prison represents a future time bomb. In her analysis, the author concludes that the cost of health care is bound to increase, as prison population is getting older and the general cost of health care provision is constantly increasing. However, most of the prisoners have no means of paying for their health care, so ultimately, it is the state using tax payer money to provide it. The author however only touches upon the issue of financing. Miss Schmidtova also only briefly explores the broader questions, such as to what extent should the convicts be punished by prison and to what extent the society, i.e. the law-abiding citizens, should be spending their money on investing to those who violate the law. Can we persuasively say that investing more money in prisoner care will stop the vicious circle of crime? Shall persons that have shown disrespect to the law be still allowed full constitutional rights and demand equal treatment in prison? Shall society punish people who live in poverty and find illegal activity as the only way of providing for their subsistence? Should really the goal of prison be to provide health care services to „facilitate recovery and build skills need to improve independence and engance quality of life“ (p.59)? Should prison be an institution for re-education? Is the concept of prison as punishment already outdated? While these questions are relevant to the topic, they are out of the scope of the presented thesis.

The basic question Miss Schmidtova is asking in the thesis is whether the U.S. prison system has reflected the increasing numbers of incarcerated females and whether it has reflected the differences between males and females. Her findings point to the conclusion that it has not been the case. I believe that Miss Schmidtova has successfully supported her conclusion by arguments, although they are, at certain points, contradictory– for example, on one hand, the author seems to favor equal treatment for all the prisoners, and in some instances, she would prefer gender-specific treatment. However, this seems to be a broader issue that is currently discussed by those academics who are involved in researching this issue.

There are occasional typos and grammar mistakes in the text. While I would recommend parts of the text for publication due to the unique character of this research, it is important that it goes through further stylistic, grammar and typo check first (particularly on the use of conjunctions, indefinite and definite articles). For example, on p. 9, the author writes that the War on Drugs „began around 1914“, by which the author certainly means 1974. On p. 59-60, there seems to be a confusion: „As explained in previous chapters, however, there are however what is really important for women...“ However, in the scope of the text, these can be considered relatively minor.

Despite the above-mentioned criticism, on the the whole, this thesis represents a unique case study on a topic that has too been underresearched in the Czech Republic. The paper offers an extremely detailed account of many of the problems facing females in U.S. prisons. The paper is written in a logical, well-organized, and comprehensive way. The author goes into great detail in explaining the complexity of issues related to female incarceration and provides an abundance of illustrative examples.

In conclusion, the thesis fulfills all the requirements established for master’s theses, and therefore I recommend the thesis for defense and propose final grade **excellent**.

In Prague January 17, 2013

Jana Sehnalkova