



Grandma doin' time

A disturbing look at the growing number of geriatric women in prison.

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There is plenty that's just plain insane about this country's criminal justice system (see the [Pew Center's recent report](#) on discriminatory incarceration trends for some fun facts.) But Viji Sundaram's excellent article, [Golden Girls Behind Bars](#), sheds a whole new light on the American penchant for locking people up and leaving them there. Yes, that's right, it's the growing number of geriatric women in prison.

Over the course of the nation's three-and-a-half decade (and counting) incarceration boom, the number of women in jails and prisons across the country has multiplied by more than ten. Combine the explosive increase with mandatory-minimum sentencing and three-strikes laws that keep people in prison for longer stints than anywhere else in the Western world, and it turns out that you get, well, a whole lot of little old ladies behind bars.

"I've seen 70- and 80-year-old women with arthritis trying to crawl up to the upper bunks," says one inmate in Sundaram's article. Prisoners talked about the difficulty of paying for wheelchairs and hearing aides out of the \$14 per month they earned as prison janitors. Mostly, women were just terrified of the idea of growing infirm and dying in prison. "My fear of being here even five more years, even two more years," said one inmate, "is ending up in a wheelchair and having to depend on people that can care less whether I lived or died."

Unsurprisingly, geriatric prisoners experience high rates of hypertension, osteoporosis, asthma and diabetes. Taking care of these problems in prison is not exactly cost-effective. As Sundaram points out, an elderly prisoner generally costs taxpayers \$60,000-\$90,000 per year -- two to three times as much as the average, younger inmate and far more than the price of a hospice or nursing home.

Now, you might imagine a seventy-year-old woman with chronic health problems would be a good candidate for parole. And in fact, you'd be right. Nationally, only 2-4 percent of people over 55 who are released from prison end up committing another crime. (The odds go down even further if the prisoner was originally [convicted of a violent felony](#)).

But when it comes to the American criminal justice system, bad math doesn't get in the way of good politics. "Tough-on-crime" candidates still get plenty of mileage out of promising to keep scary people locked up, long after they've served their minimum sentences. Since politicians control the parole boards that decide whether individual prisoners still pose a threat to society, the result is that parole has been virtually eliminated in many parts of the country. Back in 1993, more than 28 percent of people convicted of A-1 felonies in New York were released the first time they appeared before a parole board. Since 2001, that rate has hovered at about 3 percent.

None of this has made any difference to recidivism rates, or to how safe you and I are when we walk down the street, but it has undermined the idea that rehabilitation is a goal of criminal justice. Liz Gaynes, the executive director of the New York-based advocacy group [The Osborne Association](#), puts it like this: "I have changed a great deal in the last 25 years, but people in prison are presumed to be frozen in time, judged always for the worst thing they ever did."

If there's no chance of parole, then it doesn't matter if an inmate earns her college degree or starts a support group or keeps a squeaky-clean behavior record. It doesn't matter if she's a sick, old lady who wants to die with a little dignity, in a hospice or at home. Did the crime, Grandma? Well, do the time.