

Poverty, Crime and Economic Polarization in America

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Every day I read about the increasing income inequality in the United States. This very morning I saw an article written by Hope Yen [1] of the Associated Press, which stated, "worker's wages and salaries are growing at the lowest rate relative to corporate profits in U.S. history." Yen's article helped to shed light on a statistic released just last week by the U.S. department of agricultural, which reported that 20% of all American households made use of food stamps. Yen asserts that a significant number of food stamp recipients are low-wage workers with some college. Though her article focuses on young working people, I can't help but draw a link to the large majority of poor women in America's prison system. I caught a glimpse into the lives of some of these women while reading Piper Kerman's bestselling memoir, *Orange is the New Black*.

Because so many of my university students are watching the Netflix television series that Kerman's book is based on, and because I have a particular interest in women and crime, I picked up the Spiegel and Grau paperback edition of *Orange is the New Black* several months ago. At the beginning of Kerman's account of life in prison, I learned that she served time after being convicted of a non-violent crime she had committed ten years before. She spent most of her 13-month period of incarceration at a low-level security Federal Correctional Institution known as Danbury as it is located in Danbury, Connecticut.

Throughout this memoir, Kerman relays many of her fellow inmate's dramatic and heart wrenching stories. In this regard she continually reminds the reader that the majority of Danbury inmates were "poor, poorly educated, and came from neighborhoods where the mainstream economy was barely present and the narcotics trades provided the most opportunity for employment" [2].

The fact that Kerman was an unusual inmate in that she was a blond female who obviously held upper middle class social class status, did not go unnoticed among prison staff members. Kerman recalled that she was often asked questions like, "What are you doing here?" Yet Kerman shared at least one commonality with many of inmates at Danbury: they had all been convicted of a non-violent drug offenses.

While Kerman's crime, which consisted of laundering large sums of drug money for an international drug operation, occurred at the upper echelons of the drug world, the offenses that most other inmates engaged were reflective of their poverty. Working at the bottom levels of the drug economy, their transgressions typically included "low level drug dealing, allowing apartments to be used for drug activity, serving as couriers, and passing messages, all for low wages" [2].

Kerman goes on to state that a lot of the women were fearful of being released and writes that "many women grow very, very nervous before they go back to the outside world - they face uncertain future," (p. 202). This comes as little surprise

as a good number of the inmates certainly knew they would be going straight back to their lives of impoverishment. Recounting the story a woman who was released from prison while Kerman was still incarcerated, Kerman provides a vivid example of what often happens to a former Danbury resident when they return to their lives outside the institution. Upon release, a woman called PomPom wound up sleeping on the floor of a relative's apartment located in a crime-ridden neighborhood where gunshots could be heard throughout the night. In a letter sent to Kerman, PomPom wrote, "God I miss you. It's sad to say I miss the place because it's crazy out here.... All this freedom but I still feel like I'm locked up" (p. 247). It's little wonder that some of the women preferred the low security prison system to life in the outside world because at Danbury they had food to eat, a roof over their heads, and even jobs.

But apart from her lack of physical security, PomPom lamented the fact that she was now, all alone. "I could truly say that you all were my family," she wrote. "It was my birthday and what did I get? Nothing and I had to beg for a Thanksgiving dinner." (p.247) At Danbury, PomPom had taken part in Thanksgiving celebrations and her birthday had been commemorated. This sense of belonging was certainly one of the unexpected advantages that many of the incarcerated women shared. And indeed Kerman remembered that, "nothing about the daily workings of the prison system focuses its inhabitants' attention on what life will be like back on the outside." (p.124) Hence PomPom's story sheds light on the fact that once released, many former inmates are faced with a dearth of job opportunities and a lack of social support.

So as we continue on with this public discourse about the rising economic inequality in the United States, let us remember this largely forgotten population who Kerman succeeds so well in humanizing. America's increasing income inequality does not only lead to a surge in food stamp use, but also a growth in individuals who turn to illegal work in a desperate attempt to survive. To combat crime and recidivism, it is crucial that correctional institutions provide inmates with psychological services and job placement programs. But assisting women in prison goes beyond reforming prison programs. We also need to create an economy where everyone can obtain a job that pays a livable wage. When this occurs there would be far fewer people using food stamps and far fewer women engaging in illegal activities.

References

1. Hope Yen (2014) *The New Face of Food Stamps: Working Age Americans*. Associated Press, USA.
2. Piper Kerman (2011) *Orange is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison*. Paperback edition, Spiegel and Grau.

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