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County sees sharp increase in the number of women in jail

Male inmates also increasing, but not so quickly

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Female inmates make up an increasingly large presence in the Minnehaha County Jail, many of them for drug-related crimes, and their growth in numbers outpaces the men.

The number of female inmates at the jail has doubled every five years since 1997, a trend that will continue into the foreseeable future, according to jail officials. The rate of growth has outpaced that of men for more than a decade.

"I see nothing to indicate that we'll see a change or reduction in that percentage," said Minnehaha County Sheriff Mike Milstead.

Since 1997, the female population of the jail increased from 26 to 102 as of June 7, while the male population increased 228 to 382 during the same time period, according to jail data.

The culprit behind the increase in female incarceration could be drugs, Milstead said. Some two-thirds of the females in the jail are there for drug-related offenses, the majority stemming from methamphetamine, he said.

"We're seeing more women arrested on drug offenses, and meth possession is becoming more common," Milstead said. "There seems to be a disproportionate number of women that are getting tied up in that downward spiral."

Other offenses commonly seen are DUIs, writing bad checks and theft, he said.

The state's prison population is showing a similar increase.

According to a study published in 2006 by the Women's Prison Association, an advocacy group for female prisoners, from 1999 to 2004, the female prison inmate population in the state grew 53 percent. From June 30, 2004, to June 30, 2005, the number of women under state and federal custody increased 3.4 percent, compared to 1.3 percent for men, according to the Justice Department.

When women are released from the jail system or from state prisons, they often need to stay in halfway houses, said Amy Hartman, director of clinical services at the Carroll Institute in Sioux Falls. Many of the institute's clients are referred from the Department of Corrections or the jail system.

The Carroll Institute has seen an increase in the number of women who need the agency's housing, Hartman said. At this time last year, the agency had 18 women in its housing programs. This year, it has 27.

"The prisons see the increase in numbers, so in turn we'll see an increase in numbers," she said. "We've actually opened up a second facility for women at the end of May."

Low-level crimes

As a passive participant in the criminal justice system, jails have virtually no control over their population growth, said Ann Jacobs, executive director of the Women's Prison Association. Women tend to be arrested for low-level crimes that are not punishable by prison sentences, which can contribute to swelling numbers in jails, she said.

Jails and prisons often are of little benefit for women imprisoned because of drugs, Jacobs said.

"I understand the impatience with people who steal or don't take care of their kids because they have drug problems, but I'm absolutely convinced that sending them to prison or jail is very expensive and unproductive," she said. "The corrections setting is designed for care, custody and control. It's not designed to help somebody change the course of their life."

An increase could be a symptom of a jurisdiction short on jail alternatives, such as drug treatment programs, she said.

The problem is complicated further for women by the "sensationalism" surrounding methamphetamine and those who use it, similar to what previously happened with crack cocaine and angel dust, Jacobs said.

"People that use meth have been demonized, like they couldn't be redeemed," she said. "The conversation about crack was very similar."

Others say jail can make a difference. For women, jail can be the spot to begin treatment for the drug addiction that put them there, Hartman said.

"Jail can be that controlled environment they need to begin treatment," she said.

Might need expansion

Minnehaha County Jail officials said they have been able to adapt to the increase in female inmates, but if it continues, they will have to expand.

The inmate capacity of the jail is 400, and jail officials said they try to keep the population between 300 and 350 inmates. Extra space allows the jail to house inmates from federal and other agencies, which pay \$70 a day for that service, adding up to about \$6,000 a day, Milstead said.

"We try to never be in a situation where it would fill all 400 beds," he said.

Should the jail's population continue to increase, the jail might have to house fewer inmates from other agencies or expand the jail, which was designed to allow two additional floors to be added on, Milstead said.

"Right now, I'm really comfortable with our bed numbers," he said. "But if our inmate population goes up faster than predicted, we'd have to move other agencies' inmates out of here sooner than expected."

Jacobs said the costs and space crunch caused by the increase in women prisoners could be reduced by intensive monitoring of female offenders through community corrections programs. Also, treatment programs for those with drug problems and mental illness could decrease the burden.

"The jail becomes the place you go because the social services you get to help you get treatment and get on with your life are not present," she said.

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