Media, Incarceration, and Healthcare: Pregnancy in the Prison System

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The racialized “war on drugs” -- coined by Richard Nixon, undertook by Ronald Reagan, and expanded by Bill Clinton -- has led to a 700% increase in the number of American women incarcerated since 1980.¹ Incarcerated women face a different set of challenges and needs than their male counterparts, yet most discourse surrounds the larger incarcerated population of men.

My interest lies within theories of media representation and its effect on public policy, particularly for marginalized communities. Here I theorize that the depiction of incarcerated women of color in film reinforce stereotypes of deviant sexuality and gender roles. This skewed perception of the hyper-violent female criminal then informs mainstream attitudes towards incarcerated women, and ultimately results in the dehumanization of this population. One symptom of this neglect is the lack of healthcare services available to pregnant and postpartum incarcerated women, including access to prenatal care and continuing the practice of shackling.

After working with The Prison Birth Project, a Holyoke-based community organization, I will be screening my documentary short film entitled “Pregnancy in the Prison State”. The film will feature commentary by reproductive justice activists, criminal justice academics, doulas that work within the jails, and formerly incarcerated women in the western Massachusetts area. My hope is that I will be able to educate the mainstream on incarcerated women’s issues and call for public health reform within the Massachusetts jail system.