

Stewart joins growing number of women behind bars

By Nancy Cook Lauer
Special to Sentinel-Voice
TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (NNPA)—The dramatic rise in female prison inmates caught the Florida Department of Corrections by surprise.

Two weeks ago, the agency had to ask a panel of state lawmakers for an emergency transfer of \$2.3 million from its budget for men's prisons to the budget for women's. That will pay for three new 131-bed dormitories at an existing women's prison in the rural Florida Panhandle.

"The number of female admissions between the last fiscal year and this fiscal year was double that of male admissions and continues to increase," said Richard Prudom, the agency's budget director. "Not only is the number of female inmates increasing, but the proportion of the prison population that they represent is also increasing." That trend is echoed nationally.

Even though women are still a tiny minority of those incarcerated — just 3.7 percent of the 2 million behind bars — their prison-populating growth is outpacing that of men. The number of female inmates in state and federal prison systems grew by 5 percent between June 2002 and July 2003, compared to a 2.7 percent increase for male inmates.

So while Martha Stewart's plan to begin serving her 6-month sentence at a remote West Virginia prison camp is claiming national attention, women across the country share her fate.

Stewart may be about to become the nation's most famous female inmate, but she is by no means typical, notes Diane Young, assistant professor of social work at Syracuse University, who has published articles on the effect of a woman's incarceration on her family and is currently researching mental health issues in prison populations.

Most women in prison are poorly educated, with no marketable skills and little or no income, she said. Many have substance-abuse problems and are led into crime by boyfriends, husbands or pimps.

Often, they get harsher prison sentences because they often are used as "mules" or drug carriers—a low-level job in drug dealing that often meets with strict sentences because it involves larger quantities of the drug than someone selling on the street

carries at any one time. Direct sales to users is a predominately male offense.

Women may also get harsher sentences in the federal system because they have nothing with which to bargain. A drug salesperson or kingpin, in contrast, might have names or connections to offer in exchange for a lighter sentence, Young said.

Regardless of how they got there, women have a harder time adjusting to prison life than men, said Christine E. Rasche, associate professor of criminal justice at the University of North Florida. Rasche was a founding member and chair of the American Society of Criminology's Division on Women and Crime and served as a trainer for the National Institute of Corrections.

Women also face the physical challenges of menstruation and pregnancy that some prisons are ill-equipped to handle, Rasche said. Tampons and other sanitary supplies, for example, can be hard to obtain and prison doctors generally aren't specialists in gynecology. Everything from the concrete floors, to the bolted-down chairs, to the hard mattresses, can be uncomfortable for a woman who was pregnant when she got to prison, or, as sometimes happens, became pregnant while there.

As Stewart's own situation dramatizes, female inmates often face isolation from family and friends. In Stewart's case there was an unusual reason for this; she wanted to get far away from the New York press.

But in many states female inmates are moved far away from their homes because there are just fewer prisons to house them. Florida, for example, has 51 prisons for men but just four prisons for women.

But most of all, women have a harder time adjusting to a lack of privacy than men do, said Rasche. Early prisons for women accommodated that fact, with some modeled after a campus design with cottages for living quarters. Today's female prisons, in the name of efficiency, look much like those of men, with huge dormitories such as the one Florida is building, with 131 beds to a room.

Women's arrest rates are rising while those of men are falling, so the female prison population could continue to climb toward parity. The

number of men arrested for all crimes declined 5.9 percent between 1993 and 2002, while the number of women arrested increased 14.1 percent, according to the Federal Bureau of Justice Statistics.

The number of women arrested in Florida has increased more than 18 percent in just the past three years.

"This just may be the tip of the iceberg compared to next year or the year after that," notes Florida prisons spokesperson Sterling Ivey.

As for what's fueling the growth in arrests, Stewart's own case does represent one explanation.

As women such as Stewart climb corporate ladders, they have more opportunity to commit crimes than they had in the past, according to Rasche. That theory is born out by federal data showing embezzlement as the fastest growing crime involving women, with an 80 percent increase in female arrests between 1993 and 2002.

The nature of women's

crimes varies from those of men, Rasche said. Women are less likely to engage in violent crime and are most often arrested for property crimes and crimes involving drugs.

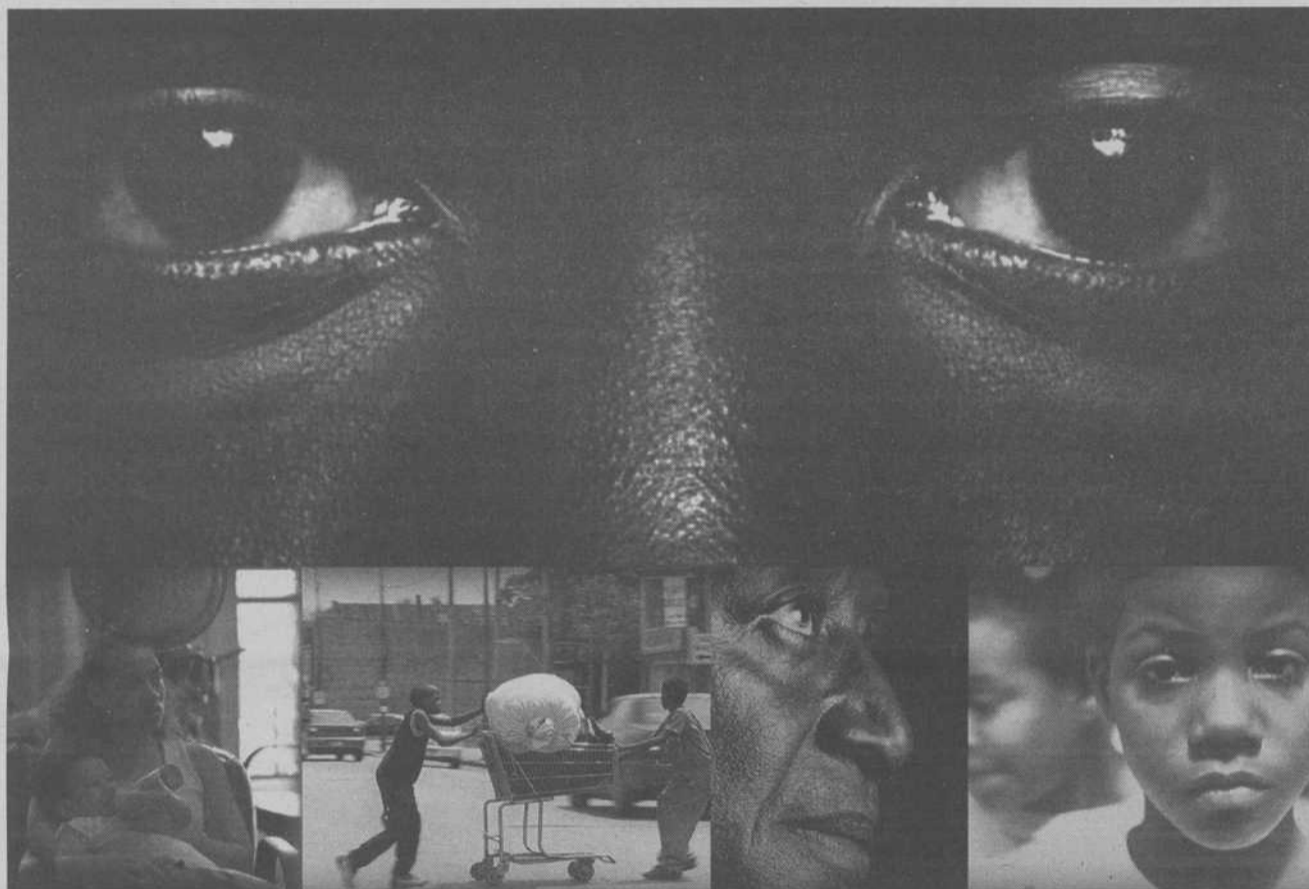
Experts aren't in complete agreement about what's causing this trend, but most agree drug abuse and tougher drug laws at both the state and local level are major factors. In fact, arrests for drug-related crimes nationwide increased 50 percent for women and 34.5 percent for men from

1993 to 2002.

"It's not that women are committing more crimes; it's that our drug laws have totally changed how we respond to those offenses," said Young.

Judges have lost most of their discretion in meting out punishment for drug crimes, as mandatory minimum sentences and sentencing guidelines usually require some prison time for both men and women.

Judges in the past may
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