How do women – mothers, daughters, aunts, nieces and grandmothers -- make sense of judgment to a lifetime behind bars? In Women Doing Life, Lora Bex Lempert examines the carceral experiences of women serving life sentences, presenting a typology of the ways that life-sentenced women grow and self-actualize, resist prison definitions, reflect on and “own” their criminal acts, and ultimately create meaningful lives behind prison walls. Looking beyond the explosive headlines that often characterize these women as monsters, Lempert offers rare insight into this vulnerable, little studied population. Her gendered analysis considers the ways that women “do crime” differently than men and how they have qualitatively different experiences of imprisonment than their male counterparts. Through in-depth interviews with 72 women serving life sentences in Michigan, Lempert brings these women back into the public arena, drawing analytical attention to their complicated, contradictory, and yet compelling lives.

Women Doing Life focuses particular attention on how women cope with their no-exit sentences and explores how their lifetime imprisonment catalyzes personal reflection, accountability for choices, reconstruction of their stigmatized identities, and rebuilding of social bonds. Most of the women in her study reported childhoods in environments where violence and disorder were common; many were victims before they were offenders. Lempert vividly illustrates how, behind the prison gates, life-serving women can develop lives that are meaningful, capable and, oftentimes, even ordinary. Women Doing Life shows both the scope and the limit of human possibility available to women incarcerated for life.
Why Consider This Book for Your Class?

- The text is compelling and accessible in challenging the images of a crime-saturated society that appear frequently in news shows, in magazines, through law enforcement warnings, and in social media and that promote and perpetuate uncritical pro-prison attitudes. It engages students in a closer look at the aftermath of those constructions revealing how public support of life sentences actively creates prisons.

- It raises significant questions for student consideration regarding the roles, responsibilities, and assumptions of punishment and corrections in contemporary society. It encourages students to deepen conventional understandings of the meanings and functions of imprisonment in America.

- It combines original observations, detailed case studies, and a framework through which students come to understand women’s life-affirming processes in carceral conditions.

- It offers a challenge to the male dominated focus of criminological theories. The women’s voices enhance student knowledge about the behaviors, perceptions, and treatment of incarcerated women, but most particularly those women “disappeared” from societal consideration through imprisonment for life.

- The narratives of life-serving women expose students to the collateral consequences—to family, community, and society—resulting from a retributive criminal-processing system.

- It presents a data-based exposition of life in prison that students can use to compare/contrast with popular media representations.

- It provides opportunities for students to learn about some of the ways that women, whose destinies have been irrevocably determined by the criminal processing system, nonetheless, find ways to grow and express themselves as substantive human beings and make meaningful contributions to others both inside and outside of prison.

- It exposes students to analyses resulting from rigorous ethnographic methods that provide in-depth information on the status of life-serving women.
SUMMARY

Chapter 1 begins with an introduction to the broad context of America’s “mass incarceration,” which includes the 646% increase in female imprisonment over the past 30 years. Lempert discusses the way the American cliché, “do the crime, do the time,” works as a narrative that encourages citizen confidence in consigning law breakers to prison as their ‘just desserts’. The implied separation between “us” and “them,” good and bad, underscores tacit social agreements that prisons and prisoners should be kept away from “us,” the “good” law-abiding majority. Lempert implicitly challenges this assumption with an argument that it is necessary to learn ‘who’ female lifers are, sociologically, to understand imprisonment and its gendered effects. Life-serving women offer an important view – from the extremities – of the criminal processing system and its collateral consequences on families and communities. Their self-determination inside prison walls undermines the fixity of prison as totally rational and in control and destabilizes the fiction of correctional hegemony. Their resistance challenges correctional presentations of reasonableness and organizational consistency. Lempert also considers the permeability of boundaries between “victim” and “offender” in the pre-incarceration lives of the women in this study. She then presents her triangulated research methodology, i.e., focus groups, life course interviews, and solicited diaries, and concludes the chapter with an outline of the book.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The opening quotations in each chapter signal both the tone and content of what will follow. What do these quotations foreshadow?

- Has the U.S. criminal justice system created a “prison leviathan”? Are we engaged in an “imprisonment orgy”? What evidence can you offer for your position?

- What factors might explain the 646% increase in female incarceration over the last 30 years?

- Discuss media representations of “prisoners,” “criminals,” and “felons” in terms of race, class, and gender. Why is it important to refer to people inside as “incarcerated” or “life-serving” women rather than as “prisoners” or “inmates”?

- What are some of the domino effects on families and communities when women are incarcerated for life?

- In what ways is crime a gendered phenomena?

- What can be learned by studying life-serving women?
Consider “agency.” In what ways might life-serving women act agentically even in constrained circumstances?

What evidence challenges the concepts of “victim” and “offender” as mutually exclusive categories in the criminal processing system?

What are the advantages of data triangulation?
Carmela: “Blurred Boundaries”

SUMMARY

Carmela’s pre-incarceration biography presents an example of what feminist criminologists Rosemary Gaarder and Joanne Belknap have called “blurred boundaries,” the simultaneous experience of being both victim and offender. These pre-incarceration experiences characterize many of the narratives of the life serving women in this study. Carmela was a victim – of racism, sexism, poverty, dysfunctional family dynamics, and sexual assault – before she became an offender. Her history is a stark instance of the inadequacy of mutually exclusive, legalistic binaries of “victim” and “offender” in understanding the motivations, actions, and responsibilities associated with female criminality. Carmela is more than an “offender.” She is a talented dancer, a prison intellectual, a caring friend, a student, a daughter, a sister. Nonetheless, she is required by law to live the life sentence of a “murderer.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

✔ What are the life choice implications of being “a person nobody really cared about”?

✔ Bruce Western argues that “the violence people bring into the world has its roots in the violence they witnessed, or which was done to them, at very young ages.” Explain how Carmela’s life experiences support Western’s claim.

✔ In what ways can it be argued that Carmela’s life story reflects the private troubles that arise from public issues? And vice versa?

✔ What features in the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are analogous to the boundaries between victim and offender?

✔ Explain why the strategies Carmela chose were logical within her adolescent framework, but counterproductive in outcome.

✔ What social institutions might have intervened early in Carmela’s life to help her cope more effectively with her life circumstances?

✔ Is a sentence of life imprisonment appropriate for Carmela’s crime? Should judges/juries consider individual life circumstances in determining sentences?
Chapter 3
Beginning the Prison Journey

SUMMARY

Chapters 3 and 5 are the central chapters of the text. In Chapter 3, Beginning the Prison Journey, Lempert identifies the trajectories toward self-actualization that life-serving women experience as they struggle to create meaningful lives while coping with their no exit sentences. After naming and discussing the six-stage typology of movement through “doing time” for women imprisoned for “natural life” – Becoming a Prisoner, Navigating “the mix,” Acting at a Choice Point, Creating a Counter Narrative, Developing an Internal Compass, and Re-Building Social Bonds – the chapter focuses analytical attention on the two stages that are common to ALL women sentenced to prison: learning how to be prisoners and learning how to navigate “the mix,” the prison culture of drugs, drama, and potential volatility. Becoming a Prisoner and Navigating “the mix” are the only stages not voluntarily assumed by women in prison; they are imposed as a consequence of sentencing where women become socially and legally defined as criminals and are remanded to prison. The adjustments to imprisonment for life-serving women are magnified by the weight and consequences of sentences without end. Lempert focuses her analysis on the centrality of women’s agency, their self-determined ability to negotiate power, as they struggle to live lives of meaning in the unnatural circumstances of imprisonment without end.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Discuss the ways that prisons are rendered “invisible” in the social landscape.
- Explain the apparent paradox that prison journeys are solo journeys while simultaneously occurring in confinement with hundreds of other women.
- Lempert uses the metaphor of erosion to explain the effects of imprisonment. In what ways does erosion capture life-serving women’s experiences? What might it miss?
- What are the features of the institutional terrain that result in ‘a steep learning curve’ for newly sentenced women?
- Explain: “‘Prisoner’ is a structural placement and a social construction: it is not an immutable identity.”
- What are the obstacles to understanding for juveniles who have sentences that extend until death?
- In what ways might “6 digits” and “wearing the same pants with the orange stripe” contribute to claims of “color-blindness”? How do the women’s own words challenge those claims?
- In what ways do informal cultural norms organize social life inside?
Chapter 4
Ann and Crystal: Juvenile Lifers as “Minnows in a Shark Tank”

SUMMARY

Ann and Crystal are juvenile lifers. Although they were 16 and 17 at the time of their crimes, both were tried and sentenced as adults to life imprisonment on felony murder charges as aiders and abettors. Although clearly implicated, neither woman was the do-er in the crimes for which they were incarcerated. Ann and Crystal have now spent more of their lives imprisoned than they spent as children in the free world. Their carceral experiences illustrate the processes detailed in Chapter 3, that is, what it was like as adolescents to be incarcerated for life and how they met the challenges of navigating “the mix.” The two grew up together inside, sharing the experiences of adolescents with “6 digits.” They consequentially formed close cross-race bonds with one another as they came to middle-aged maturity inside the prison walls. They have used their periods of incarceration to create lives of dignity and worth in the environment in which they came to adulthood.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

➡️ What was the Supreme Court ruling in Miller v. Alabama regarding the incarceration of juveniles for life? What was the compelling argument? What remained unclear in the ruling?

➡️ Why is it so difficult for adolescents to understand the meanings of a “life sentence”?

➡️ In what ways does Crystal’s metaphor of their adolescent experiences of imprisonment as “minnows in a shark tank” capture the quality of those experiences?

➡️ What is the role of humor in adapting to prison life?

➡️ In what ways might a mentor inside be important for a life-sentenced juvenile?
Chapter 5
Actively Doing Life

SUMMARY

Chapter 5 is the other central chapter of the text. Here Lempert presents the
four stages in the process of “doing time” that are particular to life-serving
women attempting to live meaningful lives. The stages are a consequence of
both their sentences and the determination of life-sentenced women to create
lives of substance in spite of their removal from conventional social interac-
tion. After Becoming Prisoners and their initial experiences Navigating “the
mix,” many life-serving women mark a moment when they choose to become
deliberately proactive, through self-reflection and resistance, in response to
their imprisonment and its personal and social attritions. Lempert identifies this
stage as Acting at a Choice Point. As the women search for new definitions and
solutions, they begin to Create a Counter Narrative, speaking their truth to the
power of the institution as well as to the “prisoner,” “inmate,” “criminal” labels
defining them. They detail the cascade of emotions and experiences that impel
them to claim identities separate from their “prisoner” identities. The process
of stabilizing a counter narrative overlaps and intersects with the next analytical
stage, Developing an Internal Compass, the route to self-discovery in this hidden
world. Because their life sentences exclude them from most ‘rehabilitative’ pro-
gramming in the prison, life-serving women report being on their own in creating
life skills, handling emotional responses, and generating intellectual interests,
as they are both part and not part of prison life. In the Re-Building Social Bonds
stage, those women who have wrestled through the earlier processes define their
own relevance, forgive themselves and those who have harmed them, develop
the tolerance essential inside, and establish the conditions under which they can
promote trust as well as the empathy necessary to move beyond a focus on self
to a sense of collective efficacy. These phases may appear discrete, but they are
supple and permeable, not static and fixed. The women report moving back and
forth through the processes feeling and being less agentic in the first two stages
(Chapter 3) than in later phases.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

➤ Think about “time” and its dimensions in your own life. How would those
dimensions be changed, modified, and/or challenged by a sentence of “natural
life”?

➤ In what ways are the processes in Lempert’s typology discrete? In what ways
are they over-lapping and fluid?

➤ Explain the meaning of: “I’m going to do my time and not let my time do
me.”

➤ Discuss the implications of the prisons’ cost/benefit allocation of rehabilitative
and educational programming opportunities.
In what ways do life-serving women utilize guerilla ingenuity to resist the erosions inherent in imprisonment?

Argue for or against Sheila T’s question: “is it fair to judge someone on a 5 to 10 minute period in their life?”

Life-serving women develop an ethic of care, while prisons operate on an ethic of justice. What might be some consequences of these competing definitions?

Why are civility and courteous behavior central elements in Developing an Internal Compass?

Discuss: A life sentence makes suicide understandable.

Consider collective efficacy in revisiting the paradox: “Doing time” is a solo journey and a communal act.

Discuss the ways that mentoring is a pro-active strategy of resistance.

What elements of prison structures and culture might contribute to the friability of trust between/among incarcerated women?
Chapter 6
A Journey Toward Self-Actualization

SUMMARY
Desiree is an example of a woman who ruminates, self-rehabilitates, and takes action. She is committed to long-term goals that will make her imprisonment, and the imprisonment of others, meaningful. She struggles against despair and its companion, depression. She reflects on a recent suicide inside. She engages in empathetic work. In the context of institutional power and definitions, Desiree’s empathy is limited in its outreach and its effects. The forms of empathy she displays - an ability to understand the emotional responses of others, to relate to them, and to treat them with care and concern - are central to what it means to be fully human. Empathy is a key factor in the development of social understanding and prosocial behavior and is fundamental to moral development and justice. Desiree’s narrative illustrates how the confinement resulting from a life sentence can engender both hope and empathy, as well as the ways that the two are intrinsically related. It is other people who kindle (or deny) hope for life-serving women and it is other women who can prompt the development of empathy and forgiveness inside.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION
➤ A suicide at any time in any place is a tragedy. In what ways might the circumstances of imprisonment intensify (or diminish) responses to the suicide of a peer?
➤ Discuss empathy. In what ways does Desiree reflect empathy in her interactions? What are the positive and negative effects of empathetic behavior inside?
➤ What evidence, if any, of remorse and rehabilitation should be sufficient to convince parole board members to grant parole to a lifer?
➤ Why might life-serving women resist invitations to hope?
➤ What are the potential benefits of mentoring inside? For the mentor? For the mentee?
➤ Discuss the informal norms of female prison culture that Desiree itemizes. Which norms are also applicable to free world interactions?
➤ Consider the ways that hope and empathy are linked in prison.
➤ What is the role of spirituality in Desiree’s life?
SUMMARY

For better or worse, officers and imprisoned women share conditions of confinement in a mutually interdependent relationship of domination and subordination with each group receiving legitimation from the other. “Correctional officer” has no meaning without the incarcerated persons who define them and “incarcerated women” has no meaning without the keepers who enforce their imprisonment. Daily compulsory interactions with officers shape the lives of life-serving women, as well as the ways that the women resist, negotiate, and often resignedly acquiesce to the conditions that influence these relationships. Within institutional constraints, there are few ways for Correctional Officers to be recognized by life-serving women as “good” and seemingly unlimited ways to be acknowledged as “bad.” The women’s narratives about their adversarial treatment demonstrate their own resistance strategies in dealing with patterns of officer incivility, such as officers’ petty power displays, inconsistent behavior, and participation in “the mix.” Locked into mutual interdependency by institutionalized penal structures, antipathy and hostility between the two groups is tempered by cooperation and collaboration, if not by respect and appreciation. After respect for basic human dignity, women identify consistency in behavior and stability in the enforcement of rules and policies as the most important quality in a “good” officer. Good correctional officers often win the affection of life-serving women in this study.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

➥ In what ways are life sentenced women and correctional officers locked into ‘doing time’ together?

➥ From an institutional perspective, why are rigid boundaries between officers and incarcerated women necessary? What behavioral guidelines might correctional institutions adopt to maintain boundaries and still be humane?

➥ What strategies do life-serving women employ to negotiate the boundaries between “us” and “them”?

➥ Explain how the women might feel antipathy toward the institutional oppression of incarceration but remain ambivalent toward the officers who enforce it.

➥ Discuss the importance of consistency in rule enforcement, interaction, and officers’ behavior.

➥ Argue pro/con: No incarcerated woman’s intimate relationship with an officer can be consensual.

➥ Describe the qualities of a “good” officer.
Chapter 8

Eating the Life-Sentence Elephant: “one day at a time”

SUMMARY

Chapter 8 presents the many strategies that life-serving women adopt to stem the erosions inherent in their sentences. As an antidote to “letting time do you,” the women in this study intentionally engage in self-actualizing behaviors. They adapt and learn to exploit opportunities that allow them to fashion portions of their lives on their own terms and to thereby resist carceral attritions of body and soul. Their efforts require daily, sometimes “minute by minute” persistence, fortitude, attention, planning, and commitment to self-imposed agendas, as well as some measure of self-defined spirituality and patience. To appreciate their agency and strategies for coping with and developing autonomy within the confines of their incarceration, it is necessary to understand imprisonment as both formal structure and informal negotiation. Lempert argues that the agentic strategies of these life-serving women converge around four axes of decision-making: 1) normalizing chosen activities inside using “as if” outside world analogues; 2) maintaining individualized action orientations generally described as “staying busy”; 3) forming affective and instrumental relationships with peers inside; and 4) developing and sustaining a self-defined spiritual center, often expressed as having “a personal relationship with God.” Prayer is the strategy most reported by women to create meaningful lives behind the prison wires.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

➡ Discuss each of these strategies as resistance to prison erosion:
1. “as if” normalizing strategies
2. “staying busy”
3. Relationships with peers
4. Having “a personal relationship with God”

➡ Explain the importance of institutional scheduling as well as the personal benefits of scheduling unscripted time.

➡ In what ways is the prison underground economy perceived by women as both a necessity and a form of resistance?

➡ What are the benefits to “daughters” and “mothers” in fictive kin relationships inside?

➡ Argue for/against: Women who engage in same sex intimacies in prison are gay.

➡ Explain how the boundaries between gay/straight sexual identities are challenged by the prison context.

➡ How does “a personal relationship with God” help life-serving women cope?
SUMMARY

Candace is the last of the case studies illustrating the life-affirming processes of women with no exit sentences. Her story typifies how women use the resources available to them - religion, spirituality, and devotional practice - to rehabilitate themselves and to self-actualize. Candace’s narrative is also an exemplar of lost time. She has spent eighteen years in carceral time that is both shaped and shapeless and, as a consequence, she has lost time as a measure of daily living. Time, as an historical link between her past self and present circumstance, has been eroded. Her resolute control of unscheduled prison time and her discipline of daily devotional practice have become the central organizing principles of her life inside. The defined, yet formless, quality of prison time creates a crucible within which Candace develops her close personal relationship with God. This relationship provides the spiritual tethering that enables Candace to reduce her emotional range and to dull her affect in response to the challenges of life imprisonment. Her “personal relationship with God” shields her from the risk of becoming too despairing, too angry, or too disconsolate. It also shields her from confrontation with the consequences of her own life choices. Indeed, the tranquil engagement with others that results from her religious practices enables her to present herself, and to be accepted by her peers, as a good person of religious character.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

➥ Aside from the removal from the “free world,” what are some of the consequences of lost time in Candace’s narrative? What are the material and experiential losses that she describes?

➥ What are the dimensions of prayer that make it the single most reported strategy for coping with a life sentence?

➥ How does Candace’s schedule challenge the public perception of imprisoned time as leisure time?

➥ What are some examples of how small pleasures become significant pleasures in prison? Why might this be the case?

➥ Describe Candace’s inner landscape and its usefulness to her.

➥ What might be some advantages of the ministry of televangelists to people in prison?
SUMMARY

Because men are incarcerated in greater numbers than women, the issues relevant to imprisoned females are often overlooked by policy makers. Consequently this chapter focuses on the suggestions of the study participants, as authorities on the experiences of female imprisonment, for correctional adjustments and broader systemic change. The National Research Council argues that criminal sentences are intended to serve three potential social purposes: they may aim to prevent further criminality through deterrence and individual incapacitation; they may aim to prevent crimes through rehabilitation of the offender; or they may be intentionally retributory, a kind of “just desserts” for illegal activity. Life-serving women argue that to be effective, sentences for crimes must have meaning. That meaning is lost when punishment is a no-exit banishment that closes off opportunities for remorse, rehabilitation, regret, and restoration. The solutions they proffer, borne out of their collective 1,088 years of imprisonment, suggest a way forward:

- Provide rehabilitative programming opportunities that include life-serving women as participants.
- Require gender training and accountability from officers and prison administrators.
- Consider the needs of the children of life-serving women.
- Imprison only those people whose crimes create fear, not the ones whose crimes generate anger.
- Stop prosecutorial over-charging.
- Revoke assumptions of equitable responsibility in felony murder statutes.
- End “the punishments that keep on giving.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why is it important for criminologists, policy makers, law enforcement personnel, prison administration and staff, and popular media to consider incarcerated women as different and distinct from incarcerated men?
- In what ways are all citizens implicated in the US “imprisonment orgy”?
- Why do policy makers talk about rather than with imprisoned wo(men)? With what consequences?
Argue pro or con: Criminal activity should be punished by imprisonment.

Should punishment be the intent of a criminal sentence? Should we only punish those we are afraid of, not the ones we’re mad at? How should the outcome of imprisonment be assessed?

Which of the women’s system modifications do you think is most important? Why?

What are the advantages/disadvantages of considering the children of life-serving women as ancillary concern for Departments of Correction?

Which of the suggested systemic solutions would be most effective in stopping the “imprisonment orgy”?

Should women who have served their time be allowed to access public services, be free of “the box” on application forms, and vote?