

Background

Dr. Catherine Mitchell Fuentes is a senior lecturer of Anthropology at UNC Charlotte, an Affiliate faculty member in Urban Studies, Women and Gender Studies and University College. She holds a PhD and MA from the University of Connecticut in Anthropology, and BA in philosophy from North Carolina State University. Her research interests focus on medical anthropology, intimate partner violence, women's health, and the effects of incarceration on women. Dr. Fuentes' service extends beyond the academic: she is a domestic violence victim advocate for women inmates in Mecklenburg County. She has published frequently about women and incarceration, family violence, and has written on topics as broad as bride prices and aboriginal dream time. Dr. Fuentes has received numerous awards for her work, including The Eleanor Roosevelt Global Citizenship Award from the Center for Public Anthropology.

Research

Dr. Fuentes comments "my research investigates the causes and consequences of women's/girl's (ages 16 and 17) incarceration in North Carolina. A great deal of research on men's incarceration has resulted in community engagement and policies aimed at improving the lives of incarcerated men and preventing recidivism, but while women are the fastest growing segment of the incarcerated population in the United States, little comparable research has been conducted with women. My work began in the Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office in 2009. I employed an interdisciplinary approach, based in both qualitative and quantitative data, to better understand women's/girls' service needs while in jail and upon release. I have built rapport with incarcerated women by teaching a voluntary class on healthy relationships. Over a period of several years I have talked to hundreds of women, collecting their life-histories to better understand their pathways to incarceration and found that lives fraught with trauma and abuse characterized most of the women's lives. In fact, most of the women's crimes stemmed from attempts to cope with the outcomes of this trauma and violence. Poorer women and women of color in particular were often unable to access positive coping mechanisms (e.g., counseling, safe housing free of abusive man, etc.) and so often resorted to drug and alcohol use to cope with the pain of untreated trauma and violence. This often resulted in a circular pattern of making bad choices in terms of relationships, suffering more violence, dropping out of school, lacking financial resources to take care of themselves and their children, financial dependence on abusive men, and increase alcohol/drug use.

Relevance

"I believe that by better understanding women's gendered pathways to incarceration as "choiceless choices," the jail was better able to design trauma-informed programs meant to empower women, such as trauma-informed addiction services, trauma-informed parenting classes, yoga and other relaxation techniques and others. My goal is to use research-informed strategies to better address women and girl's prevention and treatment in a holistic and trauma-based. I am applying this to understanding jails across the US."