

# Study of a Diverse Population: Prisoners the Left out Group

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Populations or groups are often broken up into subgroups. Prisoners are a subgroup that is not often looked at when looking at diverse populations. There are many stigmas that are on prisoners and other reasons that they are tended to be left out. Benaquisto and Freed (1996) studied the culture of prisoners to see if they as a subgroup have significant cultural differences from the overall population. Although there are many differences, much of the culture can be related to the population at large.

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## Cultural Background, Tradition, Norms and Values

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Studying a diverse population helps the social worker to know better practices for working with members of that population. It must be stated that these cultural generalizations do not carry over to every member of that population, and each individual that a social worker has as a client needs to be treated as an individual. Although there are many aspects of a population that must be addressed the culture acts as a sort of foundation to the population. This foundation consists of cultural backgrounds, traditions, norms, and values.

Culture consists of characteristics that are passed on from generation to generation by learning alone (Wikipedia, 2007). The cultural background deals with various aspects of the culture that has brought the group to be where they are. For prisoners, this is a very diverse topic and one that could be approached in a variety of ways. One approach to this is looking at the demographics of prisoners. There are an estimated 5.6 million adults who had ever served time in State or Federal prison. An estimated 64% of prison inmates belong to a racial or ethnic group. In our local jails, 31% grew up with a parent or guardian who abused alcohol or drugs, about

12% had lived in a foster home or institution, 46% had a family member who had been incarcerated (United States, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006).

Traditions or norms are a part of the culture that is passed from generation to generation. Some common traditions and norms for prisoners are gang involvement and violence. Walker (2007) describes inmates joining gangs as “as a means to protect themselves from other groups and inmate predators” (para 1). Another tradition that is often associated with prisoners is violence and rape. Stop Prison Rape (2006) cites a study that looked at four Midwestern prisons that approximately one in five male inmates reported a pressured or forced sex incident while incarcerated. About one in ten male inmates reported that they had been raped.

The values that prisoners hold can be very different from those of mainstream society. Honesty, treatment of others, intelligence, and attitude are arguably highly respected concepts to society overall. Winfree, Newbold, and Tubb (2002) show that prisoners respectively only placed value on these concepts in the following numbers; Honesty 33.8%, treatment of others 23.1%, intelligence 10.8%, and attitude 12.3% with 10.8% reserving comment. In summing up various open ended questions, they stated that the following were common values held by the prisoners;

'Don't interfere with inmate interests'; 'Play it cool and do your own time'; 'Don't break your word'; 'Don't steal from the cons'; 'Don't waltz on debts'; 'Don't weaken'; and 'Be sharp'  
(pg. 229)

Prisoners partake in a culture that is all their own. To gain a better understanding of them and how to work with them, social workers need to look into this culture. An in-depth survey into their culture utilizes; cultural background, traditions, norms, and values.

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This article was written for either Jacob's BASW or MSW program while at Eastern Washington University. It is being self-published at his website, <http://jacobrcampbell.com/resources> to help other social work students in their practice and give ideas.

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