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Jessica Breen
Trinity College Dublin

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WOMEN AND IMPRISONMENT IN IRELAND, 1922-2007

Jessica Breen

1. Introduction

Since the foundation of the Irish State the number of women incarcerated has declined substantially. More recently however, there have been increases in the number of women imprisoned in Ireland. Much of the limited research on female imprisonment in Ireland has tended to focus on the possible reasons for this recent increase and the exceptional case that women present (Mason, 2006; Quinlan, 2003). Quinlan (2003), for example, has argued that the imprisonment of women in Ireland is “exceptional” for a variety of reasons including the high rate of recidivism of those incarcerated and the relatively trivial nature of the crimes they commit. In this paper, we take a historical perspective on women and imprisonment in 20th Century Ireland. By taking this longer view, we highlight that both the rate of committal and the daily average prison population were considerably higher in the 1920s and 1930s than it is currently. From the 1930s to the 1980s, the female prison population declined. This paper attempts to understand the declining rate of imprisonment for women for most of the 20th century in order to contextualize recent increases. In particular, we aim to explore the changing profile of female prisoners in Ireland from 1922 to the present and to place the imprisonment of women in Ireland in an historical context.

2. The Current Situation

At the time of writing there were fourteen institutions in the Irish Prison System, two of which provide accommodation for female prisoners. The first of these is the Dóchas Centre, a purpose built cottage-style women’s closed medium-security prison located on the north side of Dublin city centre. This same site also includes three other prisons: Mountjoy, the main committal prison in the State for adult males, the semi-open Training Unit, and St. Patrick’s Institution which houses 16 to 21 year old males in the former Mountjoy women’s prison building. The Dóchas Centre opened in 1999, replacing an earlier prison build in the 1850’s (Carey, 2000; Kilcommins et al., 2004), and consists of seven houses for up to 86 women at an average cost of €109,500 per prison place in 2007. A

separate part of Limerick (male) Prison provides spaces for the remainder of women prisoners in the country (around 20) at a cost of €82,000 per prison place (Irish Prison Service 2007). Together, these two places hold the around 100 women imprisoned on any given day in Ireland. In recent years the number of women imprisoned have been so low that data requested from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) for persons present in the State on census night in prisons broken down by gender could not be provided for confidentiality reasons for the following variables: birthplace, nationality, place of usual residence, place of usual residence one year previous, marital status, religion, ethnic or cultural background, disability, level at which education ceased, or highest level of education achieved. The only variable for which information was provided broken down by gender was age group. As can be seen in Table 1 below, the majority of women in prison on census night in 2002 and 2006 were young, with around 65% aged between 18 and 30 years old.

Table 1. Persons present in the State on Census Night and in prison, classified by sex and age group, 2002 and 2006 (statistics provided by CSO)

Age Group	2002	2006				
	All Persons	Males	Females	All Persons	Males	Females
17 years and under	114	114	–	82	82	–
18 - 30 years	1,932	1,857	75	1,748	1,673	75
31 - 44 years	811	788	23	936	912	24
45 years and over	380	363	17	367	351	16
Total	3,237	3,122	115	3,133	3,018	115

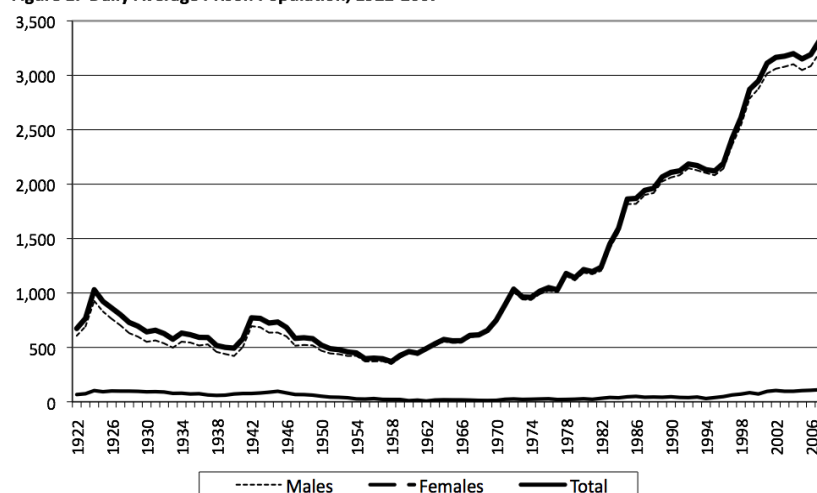
3. The Historical Context

The following section presents data from various Annual Reports on Prisons and Places of Detention from 1922 to 2007 (the last year for which data is available at the time of writing) in an attempt to contextualise the recent increase in the female prison population. This is the first attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the imprisonment of women in Ireland, a subject that has often escaped the criminological gaze.

The Daily Average Prison Population

In 2007 the daily average number of women in prison reached an historical all-time high of 111. As noted earlier, this increase in the daily average has become the impetus for much of the criminological research on women and imprisonment in Ireland. However, while it might be considered a significant increase from the lowest recorded average of 8 women per day in 1962, for much of the 1920s and early 1930s the daily average number of women hovered at around 100. As can be seen from Figure 1 below, overall the daily average number of women in Irish prisons has actually not varied considerably over the last 85 years.

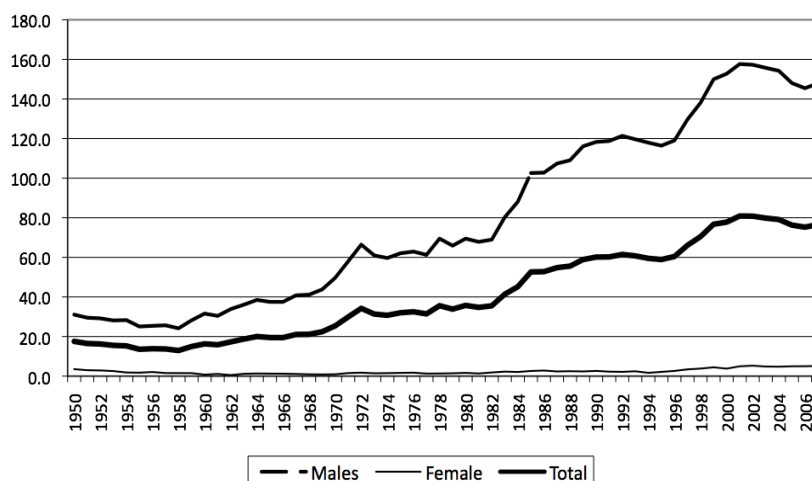
Figure 1. Daily Average Prison Population, 1922-2007



Overall, the number of women imprisoned on a given day has remained relatively stable. The average daily total from 1922 to 2007 is 54 women (Median= 46), ranging between 25 and 78 women 50% of the time. This stands in marked contrast to the total daily average and the daily average for men, which have both grown exponentially since the early 1960s. Figure 2 shows the daily

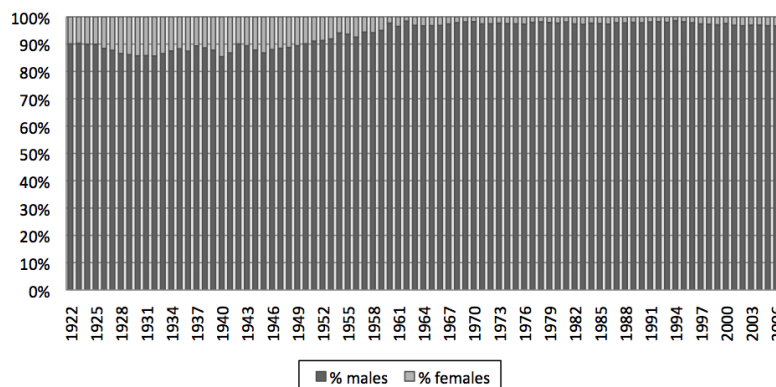
average prison population per 100,000 population from 1950 to 2007. Again, the rate of female imprisonment remains relatively stable over the time series. However, what this figure clearly shows is that from the foundation of the State in 1922, the prison has become an increasingly male dominated institution.

Figure 2. Daily Average Prison Population per 100,000 Population, 1950-2007



When the daily average number of prisoners is further disaggregated by gender as a percentage of the total daily average number of prisoners it is possible to see visually (see Figure 3 below) the decreasing presence of women proportionally in a way that is not possible through investigation of the raw numbers alone. Figure 3 shows that women never represented more than 20% of the daily average number of prisoners and that over the time period under investigation the percentage has declined, particularly since the early 1960s. Women currently (2007) represent 3.3% of the total daily average, almost a third of the figure in 1922 when they represented 9.9%. The highest proportional representation of women in the daily average was in 1940 (14.6%), while the lowest was in 1962 when women represented a mere 1.6%. On average, women have represented 6.2% of the daily average prison population (Median= 3.3%, IQ Range= 8.2%).

Figure 3. Percentage Daily Average Prison Population by Gender, 1922-2007



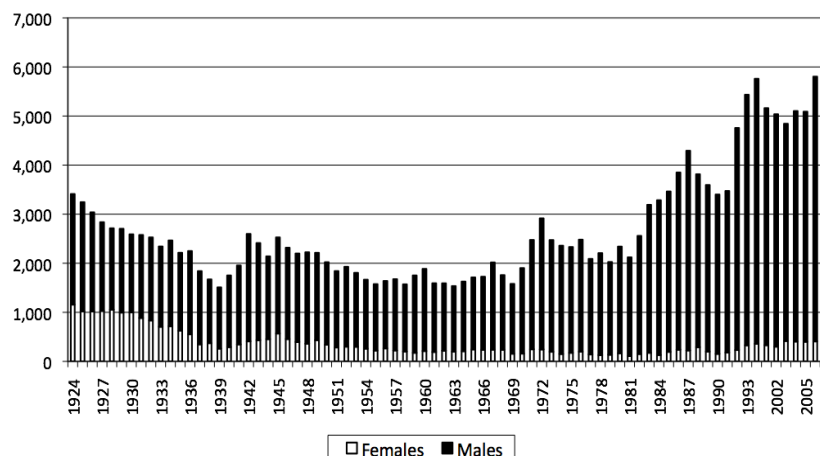
It is worth noting that the current proportion of women represented in the daily average (3.3%) is identical to the median for the time series indicating that the current proportion of women in the daily average prison population, while an all-time high in raw numbers, is not out of step with the historical norm. Investigation of the changing pattern in the daily average female prison population sheds some light on the changing role of the criminal justice system in the lives of women in Ireland over the last 85 years; however, many more people are committed to prison each year in Ireland than is captured by the daily average. The next section attempts to provide a more complete picture of the historical changes in female imprisonment by providing an overview of committals on conviction each year to prison.

Committals on Conviction

Women have consistently been under-represented in the number of committals on conviction to prison each year since the foundation of the State. Committals on conviction exclude remand prisoners, those in prison for contempt of court and in more recent years, committals under immigration law. On average there have been 374 women committed each year (Median= 276), with this number decreasing from a high of 1,158 women in 1924 to a low of 110 in 1981. In 2007 there were 476 committals on conviction of women representing around 7% of all committals for that year. In contrast to the record high number of male committals in 2007 (5,979), there are two points worth noting about female committals. First, as demonstrated below in Figure 4, the number of female committals to prison each year has decreased dramatically since 1924 with intermittent slight rises. The corresponding figure for men in that

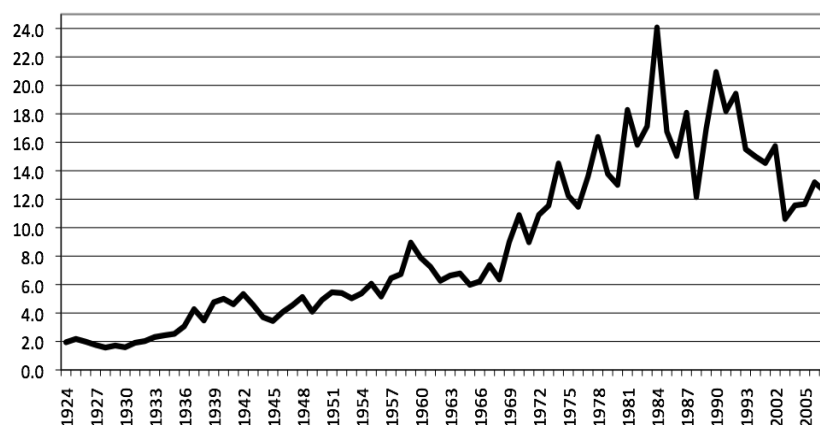
same year was 2,252; in other words, in the early years of the Irish Free State women represented around a third (34%) of all committals to prison.

Figure 4. Committals on Conviction to Prison by Gender, 1924-2007 (excluding 1995-2000)



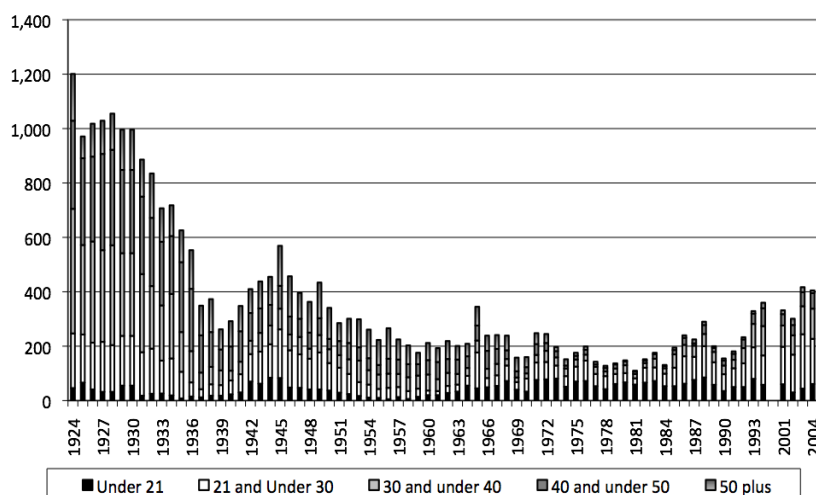
The ratio of male to female committals from 1924 to 2007 is shown below in Figure 5. The average ratio is 9:1 (Median= 7:1), ranging from a low of 1.57:1 in 1928 to a high of 24.1:1 in 1984. In 2007 there were approximately 12.6 men committed to prison for every one woman, indicating once again that women were more likely to be committed to prison as a ratio of all committals in the 1920s and 1930s.

Figure 5. Ratio of Male to Female Committals, 1924-2007



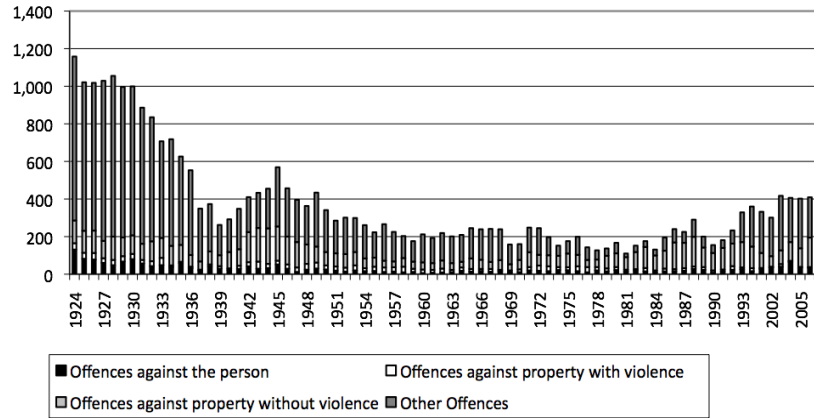
As noted earlier, women imprisoned in 21st century Ireland tend to be younger than 30 years of age. However, this was not always the case. In the 1920s and 1930s there were far more women in the 30 to 50 age range, with the number of women imprisoned under thirty only beginning to increase in the early 1940s, decreasing again in the 1950s, and then increasing yet again beginning in the mid 1970s. Those women aged 50 or older have seen the greatest decline in their numbers, with relatively few entering prison after 1970. The pattern of imprisonment of women less than 21 years older has been more intermittent with a slight increase in the 1940s back down to a relatively low number and then another gradual increase until 1981 at which they reached a peak representing 54% of all female committals that year.

Figure 6. Age Profile of Females Committed on Conviction, 1924-2005 (excluding 1995-2000)



The types of convictions for which women have been committed to prison from 1924 to 2007 have been grouped into four main categories currently used by the Irish Prison Service. These broad categories encompass a range of differently defined and named crimes over the time period which would be too cumbersome to present individually and include: Offences against the person (murder, manslaughter, assault), Offences against property with violence (burglary, robbery), Offences against property without violence (larceny), and Other offences (drunkenness, vagrancy). Changes in the number of committals by each time of conviction category are shown below in Figure 7.

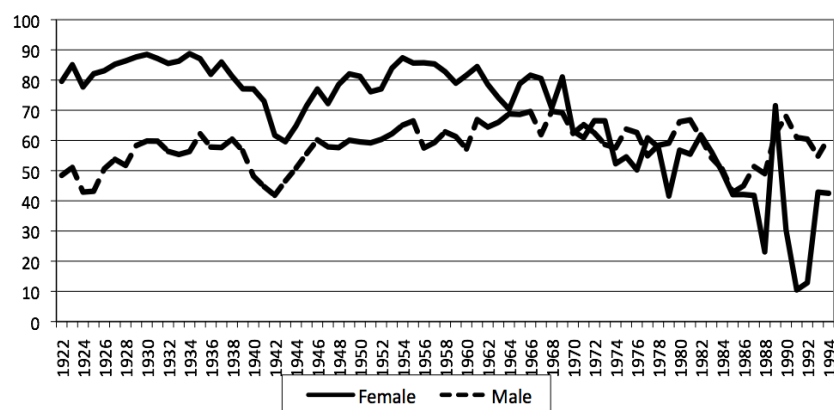
Figure 7. Females Committed to Prison on Conviction, 1924-2007 (excluding 1995-2000)



The least variability can be seen with regard to offences against the person and offences against property with violence. Both of these categories make up the smallest proportion of crimes for which women are committed to prison, increasing and decreasing only slightly over the 85 year period (aside from a slight increase for both categories in the 1970s). From this cursory examination it would seem that the crimes women have been committed on conviction over the time series have not become increasingly violent. On the other hand there have been great fluctuations in the number of women committed to prison convicted of either Offences against property without violence or Other Offences.

Figure 8 below charts committals with previous convictions as a percentage of total committals from 1922 to 1994. What is striking about this graph is that in contrast to the number of males' committals, which does not fluctuate to a great degree from the average of 58.1% (Median= 59.2%, Range= 41.8% to 69.7%), for female committals the percentage varies greatly with a range of 78.2% (from a low of 10.5% to a high of 88.7%). Furthermore, the average percentage of women committed with previous convictions is higher than the figure for men by ten percent (Mean= 69.2%, Median= 77.1%). The overall trend gleaned from this graph seems to be a decreasing one with some unexplained sudden increases in the late 1980s (particularly in 1989, which is somewhat of an outlier in the series) and then increases again in the early 1990s.

Figure 8. Committals with Previous Convictions as a Percentage of Total Committals, 1922-1994



4. Conclusion

This article has provided a preliminary profile of the women imprisoned in Ireland since the foundation of the State in 1922 to 2007. This has allowed, for the first time, a comprehensive estimate of the scale of imprisonment for women in Ireland. This analysis has shown that instead of a rising female prison population, the number of women imprisoned in Ireland has decreased substantially over this 85-year period. For example, while the number of male committals reached its all-time high in 2007 (5,979), the number of women committed to prison reached its peak back in 1924 (1,158). Furthermore, women imprisoned in Ireland tend to be younger now than in the past and the offences for which women have been imprisoned have consistently tended to be non-violent in nature.

By highlighting the historical trajectory of women's imprisonment in Ireland, the article demonstrates that while it is important that attention be drawn to the recent increase in the numbers of women imprisoned in Ireland, and the impact of this on their families (Codd, 2008; Breen, 2008), the current proportion of women imprisoned (3.3% of the daily total) is actually in line with the historical norm. If anything, it may be argued that, within an historical context, the story of female imprisonment in Ireland is one of a decreasing or marginalised presence framed within a discourse of their specialised needs both as women and as individuals. It would seem then that over the time period under investigation the prison in Ireland has become an increasingly male dominated institution. When the total

number of women coercively confined in institutions such as psychiatric hospitals, mother and baby homes, Magdalen Homes, etc., is taken into account, this decline is all the more profound (Luddy, 2007; Smith, 2007), in that slightly more females were coercively confined in mid-twentieth century Ireland than were males (O'Sullivan & O'Donnell 2007; O'Sullivan and Breen 2008). In mid-20th century Ireland, nearly 20,000 women and children were coercively confined in a range of punitive and regulatory institutions. At the beginning of the 20th century, the numbers had declined to collectively less than 1,000 despite a substantial increase in the population and the majority of the institutions that confined women and children in the name of reform, rehabilitation, rescue and redemption were closed. Our data supports Feeley and Little's (1991) argument that the decline of female imprisonment is real, rather than an artefact of reporting rules or other administrative shifts. Ironically, given all the talk about the exceptionalism of women, in Ireland adult men may be the *actual* exception to the rule when it comes to the general trend of decarceration.

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