



ETHICAL ISSUES

Too Old to Be in Prison?

In 2005, NPR interviewed the oldest female inmate at a prison, in Shakopee, Minnesota—Lucille Mary Keppen, who was 91 at the time of the special report.

In 2002, Keppen was 88 when she shot and wounded a man who lived in the same senior public housing complex. She pleaded guilty to first-degree assault and was sentenced to 7 years in prison. She described her life in prison as “comfortable,” clean with a private bathroom and a TV. Like other elderly prisoners, Keppen required 24-hour attention. According to the report, “She can’t always wait to use the bathroom, she can’t stand in line for long periods of time and prison staff often has to stop her in the hallways when she gets confused.” Keppen was released after serving 5 years of her sentence and passed away in April 2012, a month before her 98th birthday.

Think About It

1. Was the community safer because Keppen was put in prison?
2. Do you believe she should have served her entire sentence?
3. What arguments would you make for early release or no prison time?
4. What were the viable alternatives to incarceration?
5. If you were responsible for determining Keppen’s sentence, what factors would you consider?
6. Should age make a difference?
7. Should gender make a difference?
8. What about the costs of caring for an elderly prisoner?

Source: Sullivan, L. (2005, July 26). Woman, 91, is oldest female inmate. *NPR*.