SAFER FOUNDATION

COUNCIL OF ADVISORS TO REDUCE RECIDIVISM THROUGH EMPLOYMENT (C.A.R.R.E.)

REDUCING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR WOMEN EX-OFFENDERS: MAPPING THE ROAD TO REINTEGRATION

POLICY PAPER #2

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Preface

This is the second of a series of policy papers being written and disseminated in collaboration with the Council of Advisors to Reduce Recidivism through Employment (C.A.R.R.E.). The Council is a newly organized collaboration between directors of prisoner and ex-offender advocacy groups, employment and social services agencies, and community / civic organizations; senior public policy analysts; executive and senior managers of city, county, state and federal agencies; legislators and other public officials; university administrators and professors; and leaders of the faith based and business communities in Illinois. C.A.R.R.E. was established in June of 2001 as part of the Safer Foundation’s new Public Policy and Advocacy Initiative that began in March 2001.

Given the tremendous increase in the rates of female incarceration and recidivism in America during recent decades and the special gender specific support needs of women ex-offenders for successful re-entry, we are especially gratified that Dr. Patricia O’ Brien, a nationally recognized expert in this field and a participant of C.A.R.R.E., consented to write this paper. Hopefully, its contents will provide additional information and insight into the type of policies, and employment and supportive services needed to significantly reduce recidivism among women ex-offenders.

Note that the content of this paper does not necessarily represent the official views of the individuals or organizations that participate with C.A.R.R.E. or of the Safer Foundation. This document is a statement by the author regarding policy issues and recommendations that the Council may consider for collective implementation.

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Reducing Barriers to Employment for Women Ex-Offenders: Mapping the Road to Reintegration

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Patricia O’Brien, Assistant Professor, is the author of Making it in the “free world”: Women in transition from prison (2001, SUNY Press) and numerous publications on the nexus of issues that challenge women in reentry after release from prison. She is also a member of the Council of Advisors to Reduce Recidivism through Employment (C.A.R.R.E.), a collaboration sponsored by the Safer Foundation in Chicago, Illinois.
Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to identify and examine the barriers that have an indirect and direct impact on women’s employability after release from prison. The paper also proposes action steps to address these barriers in five areas: supporting families, housing, domestic violence, substance abuse treatment, and employment/economic well-being.

Free?
They open wide the door
‘You’ve done your time, you’re free’
But I still feel locked and chained
Deep down inside of me.

Anonymous (1982)

Introduction

Although far fewer women than men are sentenced to prison, their rates of incarceration are increasing faster than those of men and they are reentering communities with unique needs and challenges related to children and family issues, employment, and substance abuse. While men greatly outnumber women in state or federal prisons, since 1990 the annual rate of growth of female inmates has averaged 7.5%, higher than the 5.7% average increase of male inmates. While the number of male prisoners has grown 80% since 1990, the number of female prisoners has increased 114%. By mid year 2001, there were almost 95,000 women in state or federal prisons.

While the dramatic increase in the number of men and women incarcerated in state and federal prisons in the United States over the last ten years has become a matter of common knowledge, a less recognized, but perhaps more alarming phenomenon is the growing number of individuals returning to their neighborhoods after serving a prison term ill-prepared for the process of reestablishing their lives. The Department of Justice estimates that 600,000 federal and state prisoners were released to communities across the nation in 2001. A promotional flyer for a conference on Restorative Justice asks, “Are they prepared?” The question might instead be
directed to us: “Are WE prepared as neighbors, co-workers, family members, and employers to make room for former inmates in our communities?” The needs of women transitioning from prison to the community is a pressing national issue and one that merits examination that can inform policy and practice in responses. We have some understanding of who goes to prison and the factors that relate to women’s criminal behavior and consequences, however, we know far less about how women exit prison and manage the process of reentry. This paper describes some of the challenges women face as they attempt to make their way back to society after having completed prison sentences. It particularly highlights some of the conditions that prevent women from becoming employed in jobs that pay a livable salary and that consequently may lead to their reincarceration. Drawing from other findings and women’s direct experiences, the paper closes with a discussion of recommended action steps to address these conditions.

**Background--Women Reentering Communities After Release From Prison**

For some offenders, the process of reintegration will follow a smooth path: their families will accept them back, jobs await them, and supportive networks are available to encourage restoration of their status as residents in their communities. For most, however, the transition following release from prison is loaded with land mines that seem too easily tripped to bring the person back to prison.

A national study of all released individuals in 15 states in 1994 found that within three years, 58% of the women were rearrested, 40% reconvicted, and 39% returned to prison for either new prison sentences or because they had violated a technical condition of parole. In all categories the indicators of recidivism were lower for women than for men. While many recidivists return to jail or prison due to the commission of new crimes, an emerging trend is the

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increasing number of individuals reincarcerated for violating parole or other release conditions, having committed no new crime. A higher percentage of women in this study were returned to prison for technical conditions (22%) as compared to sentences for new crimes (17%). In addition, the report indicated that the first year after an inmate is released is critical to his or her success in reentry since two-thirds (66%) of those rearrested were rearrested within the first year of their release.\footnote{Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, \textit{Recidivism of prisoners released in 1994}, June 2002 (available at http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/rpr94.pdf)}

State and local governments spend a significant amount of money sustaining the criminal justice system, including maintenance of large police, parole and probation departments, paying for the costs of arrest and judicial processes, and building and maintaining correctional facilities. When first time offenders become repeat offenders, the results are thousands of new victimizations each year, with associated psychological, physical and material costs to individuals and communities. Parole violations and new crimes are often committed because reentering prisoners lack the skills and supports to adapt to community life. Many are unable to find employment not only because they lack significant work histories and work skills, but also due to societal stigma related to their criminal and substance use histories. Typically, time spent in prison has weakened family and community ties. Without means of financial support or family and community networks, women released from prison are at high risk of returning to crime to support themselves.

Missing from the general description of the re-entry process is how women fare in the transition from prison to community. Some of the identified obstacles that women face after their release include:

- Reestablishing a home and family life, including regaining legal and physical custody

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of children;

- Finding affordable housing and meeting other basic needs;

- Securing employment that pays a sufficient income, even though many women enter prison with few job skills or experiences and have few opportunities for vocational training while incarcerated;

- Making decisions about continuing prior intimate relationships, which may have been exploitative, or sexually or physically abusive;

- Creating a new relational web of connections that reinforces non-criminal attitudes and behaviors;

- Fulfilling the multiple conditions of a parole plan, including continued sobriety, if not recovery, from alcohol or drug addiction; and finally;

- Negotiating the stigmatized perception of women ex-prisoners by the general public—potential employers, landlords, and community members.

Men exiting prison likely face some of these same barriers, however women, due to sexism coupled with racism, may be less equipped to overcome obstacles to reentry. Women in prison are typically young and unmarried women of color. Compared to men, they have more childcare responsibilities, fewer job skills, less work experience, and more significant problems with substance abuse. Moreover, women prisoners have extensive traumatic abuse histories, both as children and as adults, at the hands of intimate partners. Few have practical knowledge about how to secure resources in the community, and most lack a sense of hope for their futures outside of prison. Comprehensive knowledge of reentry processes and factors that facilitate or hinder successful reintegration into community life are essential if we are to develop more effective policies and intervention strategies to manage reentry so that fewer crimes are committed and former inmates, their family members, and their communities can heal from the ruptures caused
by incarceration.

As we strategize about rectifying the needs of women in the transition from prison to community it is important to acknowledge that basic to any proposed policy change is the adoption of a new paradigm of responding to crime and criminal behaviors. A recent study from the Open Society Institute[^3] found that public opinion on crime and criminal justice has in fact shifted over the past few years. In every demographic group surveyed, and even among the groups thought to be most conservative or “hard on crime,” this progressive opinion translated to support for an approach that deals with the causes of crime rather than continued spending on warehousing prisoners. The study also recognized that many nonviolent offenders (the greatest bulk of women inmates) are receiving prison sentences that are not productive in regards to rehabilitation and are longer in length. Nearly two-thirds of all respondents in the study, which was a representative national cross section of adults, agreed that the best way to reduce crime is to effectively rehabilitate prisoners by requiring education and job training so that once released, they have the tools to turn away from a life of crime and develop pro-social behaviors. The sea change in opinion from a more punitive to a more rehabilitative approach to crime as represented by this study provides a backdrop to serious consideration of how we might provide better support for women offenders and their communities in regards to successful re-entry and re-integration.

What are the tools that women need to turn ‘away from a life of crime?’ The next section discusses the variety of individual needs that together form the complex web of obstacles that women exiting prison face and recommended actions for alleviating them.

Family Life and Children

Across the country, an estimated 1.5 million children have a parent held in a state or federal prison in the U.S., an increase of more than half a million since 1991.\footnote{Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, *Incarcerated parents and their children*, August 2000. Available at http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/iptc.htm} We have yet to observe the repercussions of the multiple losses experienced by these children made into intermittent orphans by the measures that have sent the prison population skyrocketing. Many of these children grow up in foster care, with grandparents or other relatives, or bouncing among an array of temporary caretakers. Children of African American families are hit particularly hard: nearly half the parents behind bars are black; another 20 percent are Hispanic. One of the differentiating factors for women in prison is not so much that they are parents but that they had lived with their children prior to incarceration and would be more likely to resume custody of their children after release. This contrasts with males whose children are more often in the custody and care of female spouses or partners.

As these mothers struggle to make a fresh start, they will encounter a myriad of legal barriers that can make it extraordinarily difficult for them to succeed in caring for their children including the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families welfare reform legislation of 1996 (TANF) and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA). The TANF legislation, a complete overhaul of our social welfare system meant to reduce welfare dependence through work, has had some negative unintended effects. These effects include an increased proportion of people of color remaining on welfare unable to get or keep adequate employment, the lack of adequate financial support for poor relatives caring for children whose parents are incarcerated, and the lack of adequate support for poor parents who are drug felons when reunited with children upon release from prison.
As a consequence of the federal and state “war on drugs,” the increasing convictions and mandatory minimum prison sentences of women who possess even small amounts of controlled substances has been the largest single factor accounting for the rapid increase of women in prison. A provision in the TANF legislation stipulates that persons convicted of a state or federal offense involving the use or sale of drugs are subject to a lifetime ban on receiving cash assistance and food stamps. The ban is partially enforced in Illinois in that it limits eligibility to persons convicted of sale of drugs or possession of a large quantity of drugs for cash assistance (although the woman’s children may still be eligible for cash assistance). Convicted persons remain eligible for food stamps.

It is estimated that as many as 92,000 women in 23 states that enforce the ban in full or in part will be affected by the lifetime welfare ban, over 10,000 of those in Illinois. In Cook County, 86% of the women affected by the lifetime ban are African American. The lifetime ban on welfare assistance, especially for women who have children to support, will have a serious effect on women’s ability to overcome addiction, to raise their children, find work, and access drug treatment services. Welfare assistance is a pivotal transitional mechanism for poor and low-income families who face economic insecurity in the weeks and months after release from prison. Loosing access to public benefits is likely to make it harder for mothers with criminal records to stay clean and sober, avoid abusive relationships, regain custody and take care of their children, seek and retain employment and resist engaging in criminal activity. At this moment the TANF legislation is being tweaked as we move toward re-authorization—it is the right time to advocate for a focused use of funds to address the range of needs faced by ex-offenders.

The second major policy effect relates to the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997.

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This Act had as its goal the reduction of children in foster care, increased permanent placement with relatives, increased adoptions, and the increased number of children safely reunited with biological parents. The negative unintended effects of this law have been the increased terminations of parental rights with the limited increase of adoptive homes (especially for children who are older and those with mental or physical disabilities), increases in both formal and informal kinship care, disproportionately among the poor and persons of color and often without the necessary financial support for these kinship arrangements, and a lack of adequate time to achieve reunification with incarcerated parents and parents needing substance abuse treatment. Due to the expedited timeline for termination of parental rights, any parent who goes to prison, even for a short time, faces the risk of losing her children forever. To protect their rights, incarcerated mothers must work consistently, and against difficult barriers, both while in prison and afterwards.

Conviction of a crime or incarceration does not mean that a parent cannot continue a loving relationship with their child. Children as well as parents are affected by the dissolution of their families. Many children in foster care value their relationships with their parents and it is important that these relationships be sustained wherever possible. In addition, there is some evidence that children whose mothers are incarcerated are at higher risk for problems at school and drop out as well as delinquent behavior that can be a precursor to greater involvement in the criminal justice system as adults.

Recommendations: Supporting Families

We must advocate for changes in laws and policies to assist women in maintaining their ties to their children while incarcerated and provide the legal and economic support that will enable them to regain custody of their children, as they are able to do so after their release from prison.
• Repeal federal lifetime bans under TANF, or if not repealed, states can opt out of the ban or modify it (as Illinois has relating it to sales rather than a possession conviction).

• Consideration of not only drug treatment programs that could allow women to maintain eligibility for TANF, but also alternative programs such as job training or GED programs following an in-depth assessment of their individual needs and the reasons they became involved with drugs.

• Development of strategies aimed at informing women who are denied cash assistance and food stamps of the other benefits and services for which they are eligible, particularly Medicare, job training and employment programs.

• Encourage use of TANF funding flexibility to target resources to assist ex-inmate women to secure job training and education on the state level.

• Encourage and support formalized kinship care placements with family members with subsidy equitable to that of non-family foster care without restrictions on the time in care.

• Ensure that child welfare authorities remain in touch with incarcerated parents so that they have every opportunity to attend hearings on the status of their children in state care.

• Facilitate visitation between children and incarcerated mothers whenever possible.

• Make appropriate reunification services available to incarcerated mothers beginning prior to release.

• Explore alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent and drug-related offenses that could make child welfare intervention and child removal unnecessary.

**Housing**

Safe, decent, and affordable housing is critical to the well being of women with and without physical custody of their children after they are released from prison. The Chicago
Coalition for the Homeless in their ‘snapshot’ survey of women detained at Cook County Detention Center found that 54% reported being homeless (defined as residing in an emergency or transitional shelter, doubled up with family and/or friends, staying outside, or in cars) in the 30 days prior to entering the jail. Furthermore, the study reported that those women without housing are likely to be detained more than six times. Of those women who were unemployed, 23% indicated they were not employed because they had no place to live. The need for “a safe place to be,” what most of us define as home at the end of the day, is paramount for getting and keeping a job, kicking a drug habit, escaping an abusive relationship, and moving back into the community.

Disinvestment in communities and deterioration of housing stock has led to the displacement of lower income households all over Chicago. In addition, the federal government’s “One Strike Initiative” provided for under Section 9 of the Housing Opportunity Program Extension Act of 1996 allows public housing authorities to evict or refuse housing to applicants based on their personal use of an illicit substance or their felony drug convictions. The law holds particular risks for low-income women of color who are most often the head of household in public and subsidized housing. Not only can a tenant be evicted due to her own drug use, but she can also be evicted because a visitor possesses or uses drugs without her knowledge. Once a family is evicted from public housing, it may be years before it can be readmitted. In Illinois the bar on admission to public housing is five years for all felony convictions. This effectively precludes many released women who served a sentence for a drug offense from reapplying for public housing. While the policy was designed to promote safe, livable communities, it denies ex-offenders who have already paid their debts to society an

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opportunity to restart their lives.

Residential “halfway” houses for ex-inmates in the transition back to community from prison have been proven to be effective in facilitating participants’ reentry. One of the few halfway houses for women in transition from prison in the Chicago metropolitan area is Grace House. An evaluation of Grace House found that over the first five years of operation, only 20% of former residents returned to prison after departure as compared to the state recidivism rate of 43.7%. Most importantly, a safe residential setting like Grace House provides women with the time and structure they need to address emotional issues related to their incarceration as well as previous traumas, and information and resources for taking the steps toward obtaining employment.

Recommendations: Improving Access to Safe, Decent, and Affordable Housing for Female Ex-Inmates and their Families

- Congress should consider increasing the stock of subsidized housing so that mothers reentering the community after their incarceration can have access to subsidized housing for their families to begin rebuilding their lives.

- Public Housing Authorities require the flexibility to begin evaluating evictions and admissions on a case-to-case basis, to look at mitigating circumstances, rehabilitation efforts, and to fully weigh the consequences of a loss of subsidized housing for a family.

- For families with children, Public Housing Authorities should use the “best interest of the child” standard when determining whether to grant admission to a felon or evict families based on drug activity.

- Create a comprehensive housing plan with women while they are incarcerated to help them secure housing upon release by augmenting existing resources for transitional,
residential housing and investing in the development of affordable housing for formerly detained women.

Relationships

Common to the stories of women’s moral, social, and psychological development is the ethic of care. Women’s focus on relationships with others is a major source of self-worth and empowerment that defines their perceptions of the world and their role or place within it. Relationships however, can also inhibit personal growth and be physically and emotionally debilitating.

Among incarcerated women, the rate of abuse they have experienced either within their families or by intimate partners is quite high (estimates vary from 44% to 80%). It is much higher than the incidence of violence reported by women in the general population (30% lifetime occurrence). Women in prison reported childhood abuse three times more often than incarcerated men, and sexual abuse or abuse since age eighteen at least six times more often than men. In addition to the multiple physical problems women experience as a result of violence, the psychological effects have been identified as low self-esteem, clinical levels of depression, overcompliance or lack of assertiveness, feelings of powerlessness, strong fear reactions to threatening situations, and vulnerability to medical illness. There is also some evidence that women’s involvement in drug use and sales, as well as other criminal activity, may be an extension of their relationship with their intimate partner.

In a book based on the legal notion of “gender entrapment,” Beth Richie discusses a model of African American women’s experiences of violence and their consequent entry into illegal behaviors that she developed on the basis of interviews with incarcerated women at a New

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York correctional facility. Richie persuasively argues that it is gender inequality, economic marginalization, criminal justice practices, racism, and violence against women that intersect to “entrap” women of color and send so many to our nation’s prisons with little access to the counseling and services they need to change their lives.

Reconstructing relationships can be a source of healing, connection, and support that women exiting prison require in order to manage their social worlds. Although not an area of policy intervention directly, women’s ability to develop and sustain relationships that are affirming are instrumental for helping them rebuild their lives—these include relationships with children, family members, friends, parole officers, former or new intimate partners, neighbors, future employers, and co-workers. Healthy relationships become a crucial ingredient for a woman reconstructing her life after release from prison but as Richie’s book serves to remind us, along with support for developing sustaining relationships must be attention to the other complicated weaves of women’s lives that constrain their choices.

Finally, the retributive nature of incarceration results in women being separated from their children, their communities, and other sources of regeneration and positive support. Women’s contacts with people “outside the walls” can help them stay connected to goals and opportunities beyond their prison sentence. For example, a woman I knew in a prison facility in Kansas got involved first as a participant, later as a co-leader in an educational group that was sponsored by a battered women’s shelter. When she came out of prison, she got her first job at the shelter that then provided her with enough stability that she was later able to buy a house.

Recommendations: Reconstructing Relationships

- Correctional facilities should assist women prisoners in maintaining contacts with positive people in their support system and to help them identify and develop free world contacts.
• Correctional facilities should widen the scope of rehabilitation services available to address women’s multiple and complex needs related to distress and trauma in past relationships.

• Programs for women within prison should assist women to draw upon each other’s strengths as they manage the incarceration and engage in post-release planning.

• Association with other prisoners, and other parolees after released, should be considered on a case-by-case basis, as a potential source of support in lieu of a violation.

Stigma

Depending on the length of the incarceration, many women when first exiting from prison will say that they believe they have a tattoo on their forehead that proclaims them as “ex-con”. Transforming the “ex-con” label, a deviant identity in mainstream culture, is extremely complex. A former prisoner not only has to construct a new self based on the personal desire to create a non-criminal life, but also has to deal in some way with others’ expectations. Such expectations are often derived from ignorance, outdated notions, or judgmental preconceptions. Stigma feeds into the forces of isolation and denial that push women deeper into a self-hating process and farther away from the hope of rehabilitation and reintegration. The person who is trying to harmonize self and role, therefore, has the added difficulty of remolding and reformulating others’ expectations of herself. Although there are some sociological theories for how one transforms the “ex” identity including some that are analogous to people in recovery from alcoholism or substance addiction, it is most crucial to explore how we can help women manage the societal stigma related to being a felon that is both real and perceived. An important aspect of managing stigma is making choices for when and how a woman discloses her ex-inmate status.
Groups can be one method for women to rehearse how they can deal with questions about their ex-inmate status. The “everyone in the same boat” phenomenon can provide a mutually supportive context for women to effectively address some of the issues they will have to face once they are released. One of the most successful ex-inmates I know is a woman who spent almost 8 years in prison but drawing on both her spirituality and her basic positive attitude, she would say with her head up high that she “had 8 years of experience in the criminal justice system!” Now of course, she had to discuss what that meant but she was able to communicate that she had in fact gained something positive from this “experience” that she would bring to her employment.

Recommendations: Stigma Management and Elimination

- Pre-release classes should provide avenues for articulating and addressing the venues where women will be expected to discuss their ex-inmate status (e.g. job interviews, housing applications, etc.).
- Reentry programs should make use of women’s ability to be mutually supportive in assisting each other to address some of the issues for managing stigma.
- Public education efforts should include social marketing and media strategies to put a human face on rehabilitation programs and women who are successful after release from prison.

Substance Abuse/Recovery

As a direct result of a public policy paradigm shift often referred to as the “war on drugs” as a response from legislators to be “tough on crime,” there have been and continues to be dramatic increases in the number of men, women and youth of color in urban areas arrested, convicted and incarcerated. Drug offenses now account to a larger degree for women than for men, for the rapid growth in the number of African American women and Latinas under criminal
justice supervision. Many women who previously would have remained in their communities under supervision are now being incarcerated. The Sentencing Project found that drug offenses accounted for half the rise in the number of women incarcerated in state prisons from 1986 to 1996, as compared to one-third of the increase for men. The number of women incarcerated for drug offenses rose by 888% from 1986 to 1996, in contrast to a rise of 129% for all non-drug offenses. African American and Latina women represent a disproportionate share of the women sentenced to prison for a drug offense.

Though some have referred to the incarceration of thousands in this country as an “addiction,” there is no question that drug use among female offenders is far greater than is represented by the numbers of those who are sentenced for drug offenses. A BJS report found that 40% of the victims of violent crimes committed by women perceived them as being under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs at the time of the crime. Although 43% of the women surveyed in the IL recidivism/reintegration study were convicted of drug crimes, 75% of the women reported a substantial substance use problem, defined as daily use of alcohol or illegal drugs in the 30 days prior to incarceration. Women’s severe and chronic use of illegal drugs is related to an array of both individual and social difficulties. While their peers and intimate partners initiate some women into the world of drugs, others turn to drugs as a response to the emotional, physical, or sexual abuse they suffered during their childhood and/or as adults at the hands of intimate partners or family members. Involvement in drug dealing and sales is one manifestation of women’s economic marginalization. Regardless of cause, comprehensive drug treatment of at least 90 days has been demonstrated as effective.

10 Bureau of Justice Statistics, Women offenders, 1999. Available at http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/search97cgi/s97_cgi
Research has shown that drug treatment, when linked to aftercare, plays a critical role in the successful reintegration of ex-offenders into their communities. In Illinois state facilities, due to the demand for treatment and the shorter sentences that women serve, only about a third of the women who need treatment receive it. Nationally, it is estimated that only 25% of state and federal prisoners participate in either drug treatment or other drug abuse programs.

For many women released from prison, residential treatment programs constitute a critical step in their recovery process, and toward successful reintegration into society. Women who are unable to find housing may find that residential drug treatment programs provide a viable temporary alternative for them. A shortage of treatment slots coupled with increasing demand in the community may mean that women exiting prison will not have access to these facilities. In addition, the unavailability of residential care for children to accompany their mothers to the facility while the woman is engaged in treatment, means that women may be forced to choose between regaining custody (after they’ve been separated from their children while incarcerated) and treatment.

*Recommendations: Addressing Substance Abuse Addiction/Convictions on the Way to Employment*

- Expand the availability of drug treatment both within and outside the criminal justice system.
- Make welfare and education benefits available for persons convicted of a drug felony.
- Create state-financed alternatives to incarceration for women convicted of drug offenses.

*Employment*

Single status, having minor children, being a substance user (or a previous addict), and having less education than is necessary in today’s economy—all of these factors place women

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ex-inmates in a disadvantaged position when they have to compete with other women and men for employment. A significant number of women under criminal justice supervision have a history of low educational attainment and limited work experience, thus reducing their prospects of finding work with living wages following a conviction. Forty-four percent of women in state prisons (and 27% of women in federal prison) have not graduated from high school or received a GED. In Illinois, a study of released women in 2001 found that nearly three-quarters did not graduate from high school. Lack of formal education is a key factor contributing to the high levels of low-wage work, underemployment and unemployment experienced by a significant number of women entering the criminal justice system. In addition, fully 49 percent of respondents in the IL study did not hold a job in the year prior to incarceration, 18 percent held part time or temporary jobs and 33 percent held full time jobs.

Since incarcerated people have limited educational opportunities while in prison, few women will have the necessary qualifications to successfully compete in the labor market immediately upon their release from prison. Although correctional institutions have increased the availability of general education programs (adult basic education and GED) available to prisoners, as of 1996, prisoners were declared ineligible for college Pell grants, leading to the inability of an increased number of incarcerated women to overcome their socioeconomic disadvantages prior to their release. Low levels of educational attainment will affect the employment opportunities of women, requiring greater emphasis on educational opportunities as they reenter their communities. Low level of education is exacerbated by race and ethnicity. The unemployment gap dramatically widens between African American and white women, and between Puerto Rican and white women, with low levels of education. Studies of prison

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12 BJS, Women offenders, 1999.  
vocational training and employment experience during incarceration indicate that there is often a mismatch between prison jobs and employment availability in the communities to which they will return. In addition many states, including Illinois, have laws restricting employment in various fields, generally childcare, security, nursing, and home healthcare, where “vulnerable” populations are concerned.

Of the multiple hurdles facing women finding employment, the reality of the stigma and bias that women who have a criminal record face is one of the most serious. Many employers are hesitant to hire applicants with conviction histories. When a woman’s criminal history is coupled with previous substance use, the perceived liability increases exponentially. This third rung of jeopardy (along with racism and sexism) increases the difficulties and frustrations of women who want to become self-sufficient and contributing members of their communities.

Recommendations: Increasing the Odds for Women Securing Employment

• Ensure that women released from prison have proper documentation so they can apply for transitional benefits and unsubsidized employment.

• Ensure vocational training in and out of prison that is tied to viable labor market opportunities.

• Educate ex-offenders about their rights and potential employers about the illegality and consequences of improperly rejecting job applicants with criminal records. Assist employers to understand how they can address their concerns about “negligent hiring.”

• Educate potential employers and employees about the Federal Bonding Program that offers employers who hire ex-offenders bonding insurance that protects them from theft, larceny, or embezzlement.

• Identify sources of transitional income to assist women to participate in secondary and post-secondary educational programs to enhance their competitiveness in the job market.
• Link women during their incarceration with job training centers in the communities to which they will be returning.

To improve reentry prospects of women in the transition from prison to home, and to ensure greater public safety and reduced costs associated with crime, changes are needed in policies that serve to delay or deny women who are ex-inmates access to vital social benefits, including grants or loans for education, transitional financial assistance, subsidized housing and viable employment. These women’s inability to access various social entitlements critical to successful reentry undermines their commitment and efforts to turn their lives around, and to provide for their families and become more effective contributing members of their communities.

Selected Bibliography on Women in Prison and Reentry


