

Gender Responsiveness In Rhode Island's Prisons

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RIDOC's Female Population:

- Eleven percent (11%) of RIDOC's population is female
- Sixty-six percent (66%) are mothers
- The majority of women are white (74%) and have never been married (70%)

Women in the Criminal Justice System

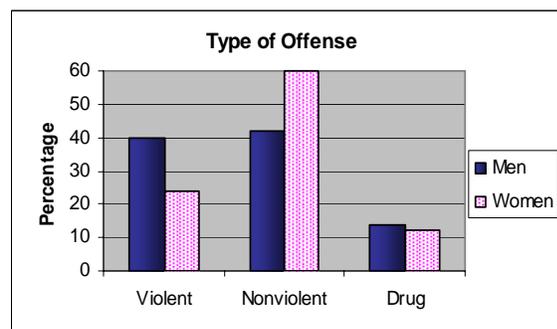
Throughout history, women in the criminal justice system have remained largely invisible due to the fact they represent such a small percentage of the total offender population.¹ As a result, operational approaches, protocol and policies within institutions have been developed and implemented based solely on findings from the male population.²

However, recent research has identified significant differences between male and female offenders, particularly in the pathways to and expression of crime. According to Bloom et al. (2005), "Among women, the most common pathways to crime are based on survival of abuse and poverty and substance abuse."³

Women involved in the criminal justice system tend to have higher incidence of: past physical and sexual abuse by others;⁴ mental health problems, especially depression; and daily use of highly addictive drugs like cocaine and heroin than do their male counterparts.⁵

Overall, women's crimes tend to be less serious than men's. In 2010, 60% of women at RIDOC

were sentenced for nonviolent crimes, while the majority of men (42%) were sentenced for violent offenses (see below).



In recognition of these gender differences, RIDOC has made considerable progress in establishing a more gender-responsive approach in the Women's Facilities. Recent improvements include: the implementation of a gender-responsive risk assessment, gender-informed staff training, revisions of programming to recognize women's experiences, and modifications to the classification and disciplinary segregation procedures.

Women's Reentry Grant

In 2007, RIDOC was awarded approximately \$300k of grant funds under the Prisoner Reentry Initiative. The purpose of this grant was to expand the use of validated risk/needs assessment to all sentenced women, expand pre-employment and vocational training programming, provide training related to gender responsiveness to all staff in the women's prisons, and to hire a Reentry Specialist, to serve as an outreach worker in the community for those women at highest risk to recidivate. In addition, those women who were referred to the Reentry Specialist were also assigned to an intensive gender-specific probation caseload. Together, the Reentry Specialist and the Probation Officer worked to help the women offenders gain stability in the community and remain crime-free.

The grant paid for the purchase of several new computers for women offenders, increased the number of computer literacy and culinary arts

courses offered, expanded the use of appropriate assessment tools, and provided staff training. Perhaps the central focus, however, was in the support and supervision offered post-release. Unfortunately, some difficulties in referral coordination and eligibility screening prevented a larger number of women from having the benefit of the community-based services.

For those women who were placed on the high-risk probation caseload with case management services via the Reentry Specialist, their outcomes were better. For the forty-four women assigned to the gender-specific caseload, only eleven percent (11%) returned to RIDOC within 1 year of their release, compared to 30% of women in general who return within 1 year. Case notes also indicated that many women were employed and had stable housing at the grant's end. This information will help inform future administration of services.

For more information, contact the Rhode Island Department of Corrections Planning & Research Unit by emailing: planning@doc.state.ri.gov or by phone: (401) 462-3920.

The LSI-R and Trailer

The Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R) is a validated risk/need assessment tool which identifies need areas and predicts an offender's risk of recidivism. Additionally, RIDOC adopted the use of the Women's Risk/Needs Assessment ('Trailer') in the fall of 2008. The Trailer, a gender-responsive assessment used in conjunction with the LSI-R, is designed to accurately classify women offenders based on risk and needs, and to provide appropriate case planning to women who are preparing for release. Significant findings from both the LSI-R and Trailer are included below. Data from the LSI-R is indicated by an asterisk (*).

Employment

Although the majority of the female population (63%) reported frequent unemployment,* 18% reported working full-time and 33% part-time within the year prior to incarceration.

Financial

Over half of the females (52%) reported having financial problems, and a like proportion (55%) reported relying on some form of social assistance.*

Furthermore, 65% reported having neither a checking nor a savings account.

Housing and Safety

Sixty-one percent (61%) of women offenders reported satisfactory housing in the community, however, 40% reported living in high crime neighborhoods.* Moreover, 83% reported feeling safe in their home, and 77% reported living in a violence-free home.

Conversely, statistics show that domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women.⁶ In fact, more than half of the women assessed (52%) reported being choked, and beaten (53%) at least once in their adult life. These statistics suggest that many women offenders may not have an accurate sense of what is "safe".

Relationships

More than half of the female population (65%) rated their relationship with their spouse or current partner as satisfactory,* yet 34% reported that their partner convinced them to get involved in criminal activity.

In addition, 46% reported putting the majority of their focus on their partner, and in turn, neglect other relationships and responsibilities.

Mental Health

The vast majority of women (81%) reported receiving mental health treatment during their lifetime. Nationally, approximately 20% of all females are treated annually for

a mental health-related disorder,⁷ in contrast, nearly two-thirds of women at RIDOC (63%) reported present treatment.* Seventy percent (70%) of the female offenders at RIDOC reported being diagnosed with a mental illness and 78% have taken prescription medication to feel better emotionally during their lifetime.

Additionally, 37% reported being hospitalized at least once in their lifetime and 34% reported having attempted suicide.

Children

Virtually half of the female population (51%) reported having children under the age of 18, with 64% expecting to have shared or full custody upon release.

Three-quarters of assessed females (75%) reported being involved in important decisions regarding their children and 88% feel prepared to be a good parent.

Self-Efficacy

The majority of the female population (67%) believe they can depend on themselves, and 61% percent report they seldom give up easily. What's more, over half (52%) feel they are capable of dealing with most problems that come up in life. These protective factors are important to note because they demonstrate the offenders' strengths and reduce the offenders' risk of recidivating.



Gender Responsive Training

Last summer, the Training Academy, in collaboration with RIDOC clinical staff, conducted trainings for all uniform, non-uniform and volunteer staff in the Women's Facilities. The purpose of the training was to address gender differences in the socialization and criminality of men and women and to encourage the daily use of gender-informed practices. Women offenders were asked to participate in pre- and post-training surveys to examine whether or not the training had

an impact on staff-inmate interactions and the availability and/or delivery of programs. Results were somewhat mixed, indicating areas of success and areas of needed growth. Below are several encouraging findings:

- Sixty-two percent (62%) felt physically safe at RIDOC
- About 75% knew the schedule and expectations
- Fifty percent (50%) felt they'd learned useful skills
- Seventy-four percent (74%)

knew how to report an incident of abuse

- Seventy percent (70%) were informed about Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) rights

As a result of feedback received from inmate surveys and follow-up with staff, a strategic planning initiative is being developed to continue implementing gender-informed practices in the Women's Facilities.

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