

Gender Responsiveness in Rhode Island's Prisons

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RIDOC's Population:

- Less than seven percent (7%) of RIDOC's population is female
- Seventy-seven percent (77%) are mothers
- The majority of women are white (68%) and have never been married (66%)

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Women in the Criminal Justice System

Historically, female offenders have been largely neglected from theoretical criminology and the criminal justice system. As a result, the criminal justice system has been "designed to control and rehabilitate men" and has proven to be severely inadequate in addressing the needs of female offenders.¹

Despite leadership's commitment to changing practices, recent recidivism statistics indicate that RI's current system of management and rehabilitation of women offenders could still be improved. Women released from

RIDOC return to prison, as pretrial inmates, at a statistically quicker rate than men; usually in *less than 90 days* from their release from sentence. Nearly one-third of all women return to prison under sentence within 12 months of release.

The revolving door of female offenders has contributed to a substantial growth in population, increasing from just 54 women in 1986 to nearly 250 in 2007. Further, the women's population is projected to grow by 30% over the next ten years.²

Gender Differences in Crime and Behavior

Current research describes gender differences in the pathways and expression of crime. According to Bloom et al. (2005), "Women and men enter the criminal justice system via different pathways. 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 others¹; mental health problems, especially depression; and daily use of highly addictive drugs like cocaine and heroin than do their male counterparts⁴. Additionally, women's crime is often relational in nature; that is, they commit crimes in the context

of a relationship with a significant other.

Women's crimes tend to be less serious than men's. In RI in 2006, 53% of women were sentenced for nonviolent crimes and 13% for drug-related crimes. In comparison, the majority of men were sentenced for violent offenses (42%).

Once incarcerated, women behave differently from men. "Women are less violent while in custody but have higher rates of disciplinary infractions for less serious rule violations."³ This national trend holds true for RI's female offenders. Women in RI receive a statistically greater number of disciplinary bookings, albeit for lesser offenses.

What Do the LSI-R Data Show?

At the end of 2005, adult counselors in Women's Division began administering the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R) to all female offenders sentenced to a term of more than six months. The LSI-R is a validated risk and needs assessment tool which identifies need areas and predicts the risk of recidivism for particular categories of offenders. Need areas identified via the LSI-R can be targeted by prison rehabilitative interventions and have the effect of reducing an

inmate's likelihood of recidivating.

To date, more than 80 LSI-R assessments have been conducted. Below is a summary of the greatest need areas for incarcerated women in RI identified by those LSI-R assessments:

- Nearly ¾ of women report dissatisfaction with their current spouse or partner (73%), and 54% report involvement with a criminal spouse/partner
- 64% report unsatisfactory housing

in the community, including 44% who report living in high crime areas

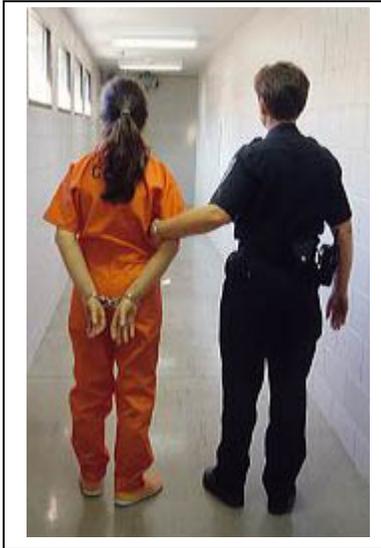
- 44% report frequent unemployment

During their lifetimes,

- 73% have had a drug problem
- 49% have had an alcohol problem

In the 12 months prior to incarceration,

- 68% report having problems with drugs and 46% with alcohol
- 57% report receiving mental health treatment



The first step toward better management and care of incarcerated women is acknowledging that gender matters.

What Can We Do ?

Given the clear differences between female and male offenders, distinct management strategies should be employed. The first step toward implementing gender-responsive approaches is increasing our awareness of the problem and of current best-practices for working with female offenders.

Toward that end, RIDOC has sought funding to provide staff in the women's facilities with specialized training in custodial management and transition to the community practices for female offenders.

RIDOC is also planning to streamline the assessment and programming process so that identified need areas will be addressed

through relevant programming. These changes will hopefully help break the cycle of criminality for women that so often combines substance abuse, involvement in harmful relationships, and an inability to support themselves and their families. RIDOC believes that, ultimately, these systemic changes will result in a reduction in recidivism for women.

Recent and Upcoming Events

1. In May of 2006, the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) provided an intensive 2-day training on gender-responsiveness to RIDOC staff.
2. In November of 2006, as part of a technical assistance project, NIC conducted a site visit of the women's facilities to examine programs for effectiveness and gender-responsiveness. The consultants have provided a report and recommendations to Director A.T. Wall and Carole Dwyer, Warden of Women's Facilities.
3. Warden Dwyer is currently researching correctional officer training to help guide interactions with women.
4. In January of 2007, RIDOC submitted a grant proposal seeking funding under the federal Prisoner Reentry Initiative to augment the vocational and pre-

employment services offered to women, provide outreach services post-release, and provide additional training to staff.

References:

1. Chesney-Lind, M. (2000) Women and the Criminal Justice System: Gender Matters. Topics in Community Corrections Annual Issue, 2000: Responding to Women Offenders in the Community. Washington, DC: National Institute of Corrections.
2. Population projections completed by Wendy Naro of JFA Associates/The Institute in Washington, DC.
3. Bloom, B., Owen, B., & Covington, S. (2005) Gender-Responsive Strategies For Women Offenders: A Summary of Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders. Washington, DC: National Institute of Corrections. NIC accession number 018017.
4. Berman, J. (2006) Women and Reentry. Center for Effective Public Policy, Washington, DC.