

**Empowerment Not Entrapment:
Providing Opportunities for Incarcerated
Women to Move Beyond "Doing Time"**

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Abstract

The popularity of imprisonment as a sanctioning tool has significant implications for corrections, which traditionally has allocated few resources for institutional or community-based programs for female offenders. Many women who are imprisoned have backgrounds of economic disadvantage and have limited resources at either a personal or social level to change their circumstances. Moreover, institutional rules and programmatic opportunities available to women in prison, contribute to the continuation of their disadvantaged status. Thousands of women are being released from prison each year with no safety net to assist survival and combat recidivism. The hurdles and barriers that present themselves are often cumbersome and challenging. In light of the growing numbers of women who are affected by the imprisonment experience, a critical assessment of current prison programs for women is necessary to move beyond the mere acceptance of limited program offerings as a means to manage the “doing time” experience toward a realistic re-entry approach that promotes the successful reintegration of women offenders.

About the Author

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Introduction

Invisibility is a fact of life for women in prison. All too often when we envision an inmate behind bars, we see a male face. The reality is quickly changing, however, as prison inmates are increasingly female. The rapid growth of women’s incarceration – at nearly double the rate for men over the past two decades – is disproportionately due to the war on drugs. Women in prison are more likely than men (30% vs. 20%) to be serving a sentence for a drug charge (Sentencing Project, 2004). This exponential growth has resulted in a situation where thousands of women are trapped in a system that is designed for and dominated by men. Consequently, the system fails to address the often vastly different concerns of women prisoners.

At present, both a need and an opportunity exist to bring knowledge from other fields into the criminal justice system to develop effective programs for imprisoned women. Until recently, theory and research on criminality focused on crimes perpetrated by men, with male offenders viewed as the norm. Historically, correctional programming for women has thus been based on profiles of male criminality or paths to crime. However, the policies, services, and programs that focus on the overwhelming number of men in the corrections system often fail to identify gender- and culturally responsive options for women’s specific needs. While men and women face some similar challenges upon returning to the community, the intensity, multiplicity, and specificity of their needs, and the most effective ways for addressing those needs, are very different (Bloom, B., Owen, B. & Covington, S., 2005).

Demographic and Crime-Related Characteristics of Female Offenders

In order to design system wide services that match women's specific strengths and needs, it is important to consider the demographics and history of the female offender population, and how various life factors impact women's patterns of offending.

Currently, women represent the fastest growing segment of prison and jail populations even though their crime rate is not increasing dramatically. Since 1995, the number of women being held in the nation's prisons has increased 50% and at year-end 2003, 101,179 women were imprisoned in state or federal prisons - 6.9% of the total prison population. Yet, the profile of the typical female prisoner has changed little over the years. Women in prison are increasingly members of a minority group; they are more likely to be older than in previous years; they continue to be undereducated and underemployed before incarceration; and most women in prison (80%) are mothers of young children. Moreover, a distinguishing characteristic of incarcerated females is their significantly increased likelihood of having survived sexual and/or physical violence, particularly by a male relative or intimate partner (Harrison, P.M. & Beck, A.J., 2004).

Despite media portrayals of hyper-violent women offenders, drug-related sanctions have fueled much of the increase in women's incarceration. Nearly half of all women in prison are currently serving a sentence for a non-violent crime. The increased incarceration of women appears to be the outcome of forces that have shaped U.S. crime policy over the past two decades: government policies prescribing simplistic, punitive enforcement responses for complex social problems; federal and state mandatory sentencing laws; and the public's fear of crime (even though crime in this country has been on the decline for nearly a decade). "Get tough" policies intended to target drug dealers and so-called kingpins, has resulted not only in more

women being imprisoned, but also women are serving longer and harsher prison sentences. Unfortunately, the rise in imprisonment of women for drug-related crimes has not been met by a rise in addiction treatment and rehabilitation programs for these women.

Women's Prisons: Historical Roots of Dependency

Historically, the women's correctional system was not to replicate that of the men's but rather, was to differ along a "number of key dimensions, including its historical development, administrative structures, some of its disciplinary techniques and the experience of inmates" (Rafter, 1983:132). The reformists demonstrated their philosophy in the architecture of prisons for women. Instead of the massive fortress-like penitentiary housing used for men which had high concrete walls, armed personnel, and gun towers, the "domestic model" for women provided each woman her own room in "the home."

Today, women's facilities have changed little from those at the beginning of the twentieth century: on the surface, most women's prisons are more attractive than men's. Whether converted from country mansions or children's homes, the campus design of most women's prisons reinforces the image of the "soft" touch surrounding their treatment and the obvious aspects of security (such as gun towers) are often lacking. Yet, as the inmates point out, there is only the appearance of a campus. Repression is every bit as strong as in men's prisons; it is simply much more subtle. The social control in women's prisons is best described as "pastel fascism;" control glossed over and concealed by a superficial facade of false benevolence and concern for the lives of inmates (Zaitzow, 2004). Despite the less threatening appearance of women's prisons, the conditions for women prisoners are usually worse than those for male prisoners. For example, women prisoners have more restricted access to legal libraries, medical and dental care, and vocational and educational opportunities. What few possessions they have

are often confiscated or destroyed, and they are subject to arbitrary body searches at anytime (Cambanis, 2002; personal communications with women inmates housed in a maximum security prison in the southeast, 1994-present). When women in prison fail to conform to expectations, physical control is quickly instituted.

And the one commonality that institutions of the past share with modern facilities are the “traditional values, theories, and practices concerning a woman’s role and place in society...The staffs, architectural design and programs reflected the culturally valued norms of women’s behavior” (Feinman, 1986:38). Penal institutions built for women “established and legitimated a tradition of deliberately providing for female prisoners treatment very different from that of males” (Rafter, 1983:148). The differential treatment of women prisoners - also known as the chivalry factor - meant that women should be treated more leniently than men. Yet, as noted by many criminologists, once a woman enters the correctional facility, she has not necessarily benefitted from the benevolence of the criminal justice system. In fact, she may be treated worse than male prisoners.

Women’s “Doing Time” Experience: Perpetuating Dependency

After arriving at her assigned correctional home, the new female prisoner must go through a series of orientation or "reception" procedures. She may come in handcuffed and be re-fingerprinted and photographed for institutional records. She soon loses all remaining dignity when she is stripped and searched for contraband, showered, and issued prison attire and bedding. When she is given her prison number, she is officially “Property of the State.”

Being processed was like an assembly line. Each person had a job to do.

You go in there, you weren’t a person anymore, you weren’t human anymore, they could care less. About forty-two of us came in together. They threw us

all in the same room, and we, four of us, shower together, it was awful. We were in orange jump suits, with no underwear. For some girls, it was that time of the month. One girl had to keep a pad on with a jump suit with no panties on. That's just the way it is. And they don't care. The phrase is always, "Welcome to the real world." (Vanessa at the Central California Women's Facility)

Over the next two to six weeks the incarcerated woman, who is relegated to a communal segregation living unit during this period, goes through medical and psychiatric examinations for everything from venereal disease to mental illness. Most women describe this experience as stressful, frightening, and dehumanizing (DeGroot, 1998; Girshick, 1999; Owen, 1998).

Female inmates make adjustments to prison life. For many, faced with years behind walls, life becomes a strategy of survival. The most obvious fact of life in women's prisons is that women are dependent on the officers for virtually every daily necessity including food, showers, medical care, feminine hygiene products, and for receiving "privileges" such as phone calls, mail, visits, and attending programs. To ask another adult for permission to do things or to obtain items of a personal nature is demeaning and humiliating. Their attempts at survival often mean that, compared to male inmates, women are more likely to be rule-breakers. Correctional officers describe female inmates as more emotional and manipulative. They are perceived by guards to be more difficult to supervise than men because they are seen as less respectful to authority and more willing to argue (Pollock, 1986). They are written up for twice as many infractions as men, but usually the infractions are less serious than those committed in men's prisons (Lindquist, 1980; McClellan, 1994).

A woman inmate's feeling of inadequacy is heightened by the constant surveillance under

which she is kept. The prisoner is confronted daily with the fact that she has been stripped of her membership in society at large, and then stands condemned as an outcast and outlaw such that she must be kept closely guarded and watched day and night. She loses the privilege of being trusted and her every act is viewed with suspicion by the guards. The experience of being incarcerated - of having one's self-esteem stripped away, of being deprived of regular contact with the outside world - plays havoc on one's mental and emotional well-being. Because of prior emotional problems or those induced by the stresses of incarceration, especially the separation from their children or loved ones, female inmates are more likely to engage in self-aggression, including suicide and self-mutilation (Pollock, 1998). The reality of women's prisons is that they create just as much frustration and pain as men's prisons (Freedman, 1981; Giallombardo, 1966:Ch. 7; Rafter, 1990).

Numerous historians and researchers have critiqued the tradition and current practice of treating women prisoners as wayward children, as distinct from men prisoners who are at least accorded adult status (Burkhart, 1973; Carlen, 1985). As noted by Watterson (1996), the controls of prison that attempt to regulate lives, attitudes, and behavior are synonymous with those used during infancy. The women prisoners, like children, are told when to get up, how to dress, what to eat, where to go, how to spend their time - in short, what to do and what not to do. The prison - represented by officers, staff, and administrators - acts as a "parent," imposing rules and sanctions, much like the model of a punitive parent who seeks to control the child through sanctions and punishments. For instance, women have shared instances when they have angered authorities and, as a consequence, were moved from a choice living unit and/or job but were told that such actions were "for their own good." Ironically, the closed, punitive prison environment can re-create many of the dysfunctional family and social dynamics many of the women

experienced as children and as adults, with the resultant negative self-representations and impulses. This is particularly significant given the large percentage of women in prison who report experiences of physical, sexual and emotional abuse as children and/or adults (Girshick, 1999; Zaitzow, 1996).

However, for some women, whose lives were out of control by being caught in a cycle of drugs and violence, they may, indeed, feel relief from the restraints imposed by imprisonment.

Where would I be if I hadn't been busted? Probably dead. Everyone I was with out there is either dead of AIDS or in prison. I was in a prison within myself. The drugs controlled my life. If I'd been thinking about my child, I wouldn't be here today...I loved my child. I did. But that's not what controlled me. (Judith Clark at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility)

Prison forces that break and provides a "time out" from such destructive behaviors and driven activity as well as a space away from the pressures and problems women faced outside. Although external controls may mask problems, they do not solve them. Moreover, some women become dependent on the controlled prison environment. Forced dependency can undermine a woman's sense of autonomy and responsibility needed to succeed as an individual on the outside.

Although punishment takes precedence over rehabilitation as the goal of incarceration in prisons today, there are still prison programs that can help the inmate (Pollock, 1998). But it is questionable whether the environment inherent in a prison setting lends itself to promoting personal growth and change. Rather, powerlessness, dependency, re-traumatization, stress, fear, lack of autonomy, monotony, and arbitrary rule enforcement - and its accompanying degradation - promote retreat (repressing their anger and pain) or hostility (acting out or speaking up) as

inmates' primary coping mechanisms.

Where to now?: Specific Needs of Female Inmates

Women in prison have multifaceted, interacting needs resulting from abuse (childhood and adult), addiction, low education levels, poor work histories, family disorganization, and poor health care (Girshick, 1999; Zaitzow, 2004). Many of us who have worked with and/or conducted research with women in prison know, first hand, that many of these women crave self-respect and self-worth. They respond to people and programs that help them feel like worthwhile human beings. It is when the women themselves reach their individual threshold and decide they are ready to change the destructive patterns in their life - those they have control over - that change is possible. Among the most pressing issues confronting women in prison are access to programming for abuse treatment, drug/alcohol treatment, parenting programs, and educational and job training (Bloom, B., Owen, B. & Covington, S., 2005).

Abuse treatment. To leave prison in better shape than when they entered, women coping with the trauma of incest, rape, or battering can benefit from abuse counseling in the form of one-on-one therapy, psychological group counseling, or peer group support. In many prison, one-on-one meetings with psychologists or psychiatrists are rare, often limited to occasional assessments or crisis situations. Abuse groups can examine the circumstance of abuse itself as well as the coping mechanisms survivors develop that require modification due to the maladaptive nature of such coping strategies. Here, some strategies include dissociation, alcohol, drugs, compulsive behaviors, self-mutilation, and inappropriate risk-taking (see the New Pathways Program at FCI-Dublin, California).

Drug/alcohol treatment. Women are primarily arrested for drug and property offenses. Moreover, female inmates are more like to test positive for drug use at the time of their arrest

(Mann, 1995; Merlo, 1995) and to use more drugs regularly than male inmates are (Snell, 1994).

By the time women enter prison they may have attempted drug treatment on the outside one or more times. Treatment may have been a condition of probation or previous parole. Their efforts may have been thwarted by one of several possible barriers (e.g., paucity of in-patient programs that accept children, ability to pay for such programs, lack of family support). Complex reasons surround women's drug use and must be examined in the context of the person's entire life. Histories of family physical and sexual abuse, adult victimization, eating disorders, anxiety, and depression all contribute to many women's substance abuse.

It is fruitless to attempt drug or alcohol treatment without addressing the underlying reasons someone uses drugs, as well as current issues that might be exacerbating their addiction. Female addicts might have health problems ranging from mental illness to HIV/AIDS, may be under- or unemployed, poor support networks, or losing their children to social services or abusive family members. Inmates' individual circumstances vary, and treatment that will succeed for one inmate may not work for another.

With the large numbers of women entering prisons for drug offenses, in order to deliver successful drug treatment programs to female offenders, a "systems" approach is essential. Women offenders manifest multiple problems that require the services of many different agencies. Corrections "needs to move toward a more system-oriented approach...that emphasizes linkages and coordination among programs and agencies, joint planning, shared resource allocation, and continuity for clients (Prendergast, Wellisch, & Falkin, 1995:254). More attention and financial support is necessary to increase the availability of drug treatment programs, case management must be improved, support services based on the woman's needs must be examined with a critical eye toward the creation of transitional components of/for

prison-based programs as well as programs that are gender- and culturally-sensitive (see DART programs, LATCH program in North Carolina, Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step programs).

Parenting. Programming on parenting roles and the developmental needs of children is a priority for incarcerated mothers as most of them want to reunite with their children when they are released. Separation from their children and worries about their children's welfare is probably the most difficult aspect of incarceration for mothers (Clark, 1995; Lord, 1995). The separation strikes at their self-definition as women. While education about children's developmental needs is important, it is perhaps more crucial to work with these women on their sense of what it means to be a mother, and how this role affects their self-esteem.

Mothers in prison suffer not only from the physical separation but also from restrictive prison visiting and contact policies and from problems with child-welfare agencies. They are not involved in their children's lives and must struggle later to regain custody. There are very few visitation programs where there is meaningful contact (see MATCH programs located in various prisons throughout the U.S., Choices and Changes at Bedford Hills, Summit House in North Carolina).

The value of such programs is the sense of motherhood she may be seeking as a parent. That she can mother well, that she is vitally important to her family, gives a sense of accomplishment that is then transmitted to the children. Sadly, in many instances, imprisoned mothers likely did not feel this from their own parents. Most women in prison were raised in families with high rates of dysfunction, disorganization, substance abuse, domestic violence, child abuse, and criminal activity. Prison programs are needed that help restore or even create a new sense of self. In this way, an inmate can leave stronger for her children and the well-being

of her family. Again, she needs support, especially if she fights to regain custody, and most likely faces multiple challenges of locating housing, finding a job, and staying clean and/or sober.

Education and job training. Most women in prison have poor work histories and low education levels. This 2-strike situation is frustrating at best. It is difficult to find a job without a high school education, and it is impossible to support oneself and a family on a minimum-wage job. Education and job skills can be very valuable to the inmate when combined with other programming that helps build a sense of self. Completing certificate programs, obtaining a GED, and taking college courses can instill a sense of accomplishment as well as provide entry into a new job. Naturally, the responses of prospective employers to job applicants who have “done time” are addressed in most educational or training programs. Here, additional support is necessary by virtue of “links” with the community to which the woman will be returning.

With respect to vocational training and placement, the training available in correctional institutions typically “does not necessarily assist women offenders in obtaining meaningful and financially rewarding work” (Prendergast, Wellisch, & Falkin, 1995:242). Historically, the justification offered for the differential programming available to women prisoners was that women’s primarily domestic - rather than “breadwinner” - responsibilities did not necessitate a need for remunerative employment. While such views have diminished with time, there is still the theme in prison programming for women to reflect society’s bias that the most acceptable role for women is that of wife and mother (Diaz-Cotto, 1996, Zaitzow, 1998). However, we can not be blind to the fact that there is a growing number of single women who are heads of households. Moreover, assumptions about who “deserves” jobs and programs are often sexist. Excuses offered for the limited number of nontraditional programs for incarcerated women are

that women constitute a small portion of prisoners and that they are in prison for shorter periods of time compared to men. The reality of the situation is that specialized and nontraditional programs for women in prison are rare. And when available, the programs do not have the capacity to serve large numbers of imprisoned women necessitating the use of long waiting lists.

The underutilization of nontraditional programs may be due to various issues/concerns: (1) qualifications for program entry which may be too difficult or have disadvantages attached to them that outweigh the advantages (e.g., a particular level of reading which they may not qualify for); (2) it may be that women in prison are more committed to traditional feminine roles when it comes to choosing vocational programs; (3) staff resistance to such programs. Thus, work assignments available to women incarcerated in prisons throughout the United States are not considered prison industries with marketable job skills. Most women's prisons have programs in cosmetology, food service, laundry, sewing, clerical work, and keypunch but few train women in skills to help them become legitimately independent on their release. It seems that few changes have been made in programs and opportunities offered to women prisoners since the beginning of the century.

Why Should We Care: The Social Investment

The gender stereotypes that influenced the first women's reformatories - instilling feminine values by providing domestic training to incarcerated women to facilitate their acceptance of their expected social role of homemaker - continue to affect the treatment, conditions, and opportunities of incarcerated women today. Because the overall proportion of women prisoners is still small relative to the total prison population, the special problems of women prisoners - while creating a wide range of recent individual and social concerns - continue to be minimized. Without providing these women the necessary individual as well as

social skills with which they may become viable contributors to/for society, their chances for successful assimilation as well as day-to-day survival will be impeded.

The experience of women in prison is severely under-researched, and the voices and views of these women are silent. As a society, we know even less about the experience of women on returning to the community. Although women make up only a small percentage of the current prison population, the impact upon the broader community is greater than that of their male counterparts, and affects our social fabric for generations to come. The impact of imprisonment upon women includes loss of their status in the community, loss of relationships and disintegration of family ties. This will have an ongoing negative effect long after their time is served in prison. Before release, women often feel their hope renewed and look forward to a fresh start. On the day of release, women feel quite differently, and within a month the honeymoon period is truly over. Faced with this knowledge, the release day is one of mixed expectations and fears.

Women get out of prison every day, and the hurdles and barriers that present themselves are often cumbersome and challenging. The initial problems experienced by most women upon release are very practical, however for some women who have been institutionalized, even seemingly simple tasks can present a shock. Women find themselves struggling with decision-making dilemmas and too much choice, the experience of surveillance and control having disempowered and de-skilled them.

As social scientists, prison reformers, and citizens who still have a heart, we observe that the day to day tasks required of a woman who has just been released are countless, and that success or failure for these women unwittingly resonates to the very core of their self esteem. Managing a home, the bills, rent and its atmosphere, is as any good woman's magazine

prescribes, a 'woman's domain'. Nurturing the family within its walls and being a 'good parent' are also skills that women are expected to take for granted, and the measuring sticks which society uses to assess a woman's ability to care for her children. Complex living skills are required for women to 'succeed', but the resources and opportunities provided to women released from prison to re-establish themselves are paltry compared to the costs designated to keeping women in prison. Incomes are well below the poverty line and the public housing system is a labyrinth of applications and priority waiting lists. The bravado to stand up to the constant stigma and labeling experienced by these women, is exceptional. The health concerns of these women are also a major factor in their ability to move on with their lives. Many women exiting prison are heavy smokers, have poor nutrition and a variety of other medical conditions such as Hepatitis C, epilepsy, diabetes and so on. Many women require intense emotional support via a counselor, as a high percentage of women are carrying trauma and abuse issues from early childhood and beyond. Some women have mental health issues, many of which are undiagnosed, and often women have 'dual disabilities'.

In essence, the old adage of the 'personal is political' remains, and the day to day personal struggles of women exiting prison reflect the day to day failings of our social system. The effects are borne by a generally vulnerable group of women and their children, and have an emotional impact upon them at a deep psychological level. The issue is about social exclusion and inclusion, and women returning to the community after a period of imprisonment are relegated to the peripheries of society, until they effectively prove themselves – if they can. Without support, resources, or the state of mind and body required to fulfil expectations, most women find returning to the community very frightening.

Recommendations for Correctional Change

It has been suggested that many of the women currently serving prison terms could safely and more economically serve their sentences in community-based programs. For those with drug problems there is a need to expand treatment programs. For many others, the economic crimes they committed resulted from their disadvantaged position and lack of marketable skills. For many of these women, as well as for society, incarceration may serve no useful purpose, especially if it fails to resolve their drug problems or enhance their economic position. This is particularly true for women with children, whose offspring may be the ones to suffer most from their mothers' criminal behavior and subsequent incarceration. Many children of incarcerated mothers suffer from a variety of debilitating problems, which tend to be later expressed in school failure and delinquency. If these mothers, particularly those who are single parents, can acquire vocational skills resulting in jobs paying enough to enable them to support their children, they will no longer need to resort to criminal behavior. If they can also enhance their parenting skills their children may be more likely to escape from the cycle of criminality.

Yet, the current wave of crime control strategies suggests that we will continue to rely on incarceration as the exemplar in punishment. Thus, if we hope to facilitate the successful re-entry and reintegration of these women to "free" society, we must attempt to reform current policies and programs which tend to reinforce women offenders' dependency upon the system. Here, to expand the role of, and to improve the services of, correctional treatment in the future, several recommendations are in order:

1. Involvement in treatment should be entirely voluntary. Participation, or the lack of participation in these programs should not be related to the length of institutional stay or to the length of supervision in community programs.
2. Adult inmates should have the opportunity to become involved in meaningful and

adequately paid work during incarceration.

3. Both juvenile and adult inmates should have the opportunity for some degree of self-governance during confinement.
4. Safe environments must be provided for institutionalized offenders. Only when inmates feel safe can they be concerned about much more than personal survival.
5. A variety of programs should be offered in correctional institutions. These interventions should be grounded on good program design, implemented with program integrity, and evaluated on an ongoing basis with sophisticated research methods.
6. More care must be taken to ensure that common elements of effective programs thrive in correctional environments.
7. A progressive array of services must be established for offenders in the community. Such a network of support services, as therapeutic communities have demonstrated, is imperative to improve the positive impact of correctional treatment.
8. Career and economic incentives must be made available for persons who have the motivation and skills to become effective treatment agents so that they will be persuaded to seek out such employment and to stay involved in correctional service.
9. Only through well-planned and soundly executed research can further development of treatment concepts and practices take place; therefore, research on correctional treatment must be given a much higher priority than it presently has.
10. Provide post-release services to help women incorporate themselves back into non-prison life.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of “the war against terrorism” and the resulting budget cuts that have had a nationwide impact, the last thing on most people's minds is spending money on programs for prisoners. But, the reality of the situation is that exponential increases in incarceration have resulted in more than two million people living as “residents” in various local, state, and federal institutional settings. Additionally, over half a million ex-prisoners reenter communities each year. The crisis in American prisons, the record numbers of prisoners

returning home, and escalating costs have profound implications for corrections and communities. While formidable, these challenges provide an opportunity to think more broadly about prospective partners in navigating the prisoner reentry landscape.

The future of correctional treatment ultimately depends on three factors: funding research, so more effective technologies can be developed for the treatment process; the identification of what works for which group of offenders, so that offenders interested in treatment can be given the interventions most compatible with their needs and interests; and the creation of more humane correctional contexts so that the environment will not interfere with the treatment process.

The United States is not a pacesetter for corrections and has not been for a long time; merely being content with warehousing offenders will put our nation back in the Dark Ages of corrections. Considerable fanfare went into the burial of treatment in the mid-1970s, although treatment programs continue to exist in community and institutional settings. We need to put the same burst of energy into reemphasizing treatment, not as a panacea or as a condition of release, but as a viable option for those who are interested in change, growth, and positive movement in their lives.

A Call For Action

In pragmatic terms, we must analyze existing ‘prison programs,’ meager though they may be, to assess precisely how they work or do not work, while forming ourselves into political organizations to structure our recommendations. We need to gather and duplicate whatever is valuable and bring in persons to impart and interpret information and share experiences. If our efforts are to succeed, we must be adamant in showing to people in society the importance of mandating prisons to provide all prisoners with a decent education, tangible job opportunities,

and hope for the future. The nation's prisons warehouse countless numbers of people who refuse to settle for passivity. That is one reason why it is absolutely imperative that people in and out of prison move into a renewed stage of communal activism to assert leadership in effecting change.

In October 2000, 20 women prisoners testified at two days of moving and historic hearings held by California Sen. Richard Polanco's Joint Committee on Prison Construction & Operations. These courageous women spoke of medical and sexual abuse, the difficulties of maintaining relationships with children and the impossibility of receiving adequate medical care if a prisoner speaks no English. Led by these women, family members and former prisoners are speaking up more than ever before about conditions that make re-entry impossible. They are demanding that their loved ones be treated with respect and that their medical needs be met. We must continue this work so that, together with the women inside, we can force the changes that are necessary to slow down the reliance on the punishment industry as a way to solve our society's problems. (Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, 2002)

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