

**Best Practices for Trauma-informed Jail Reentry
Programming for Incarcerated Women**

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Abstract

The bulk of the research literature within the criminal justice field focuses heavily on the male population. Additionally, research related to reentry has primarily considered the impact of prison rather than jails. The following paper explores best practices in jail reentry services for women, as well as how these best practices are shaped by trauma, gender, and racial considerations.

Keywords: Jail, Re-Entry, Gender, Race, Best Practices, COVID-19

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Introduction

As our society grapples with the long-term realities of COVID -19 and the implications of mitigation efforts, it must also contend with the lasting impact of mass incarceration. While a slow and steady pulse of change has been beating in the social work realm regarding trauma and its impact; the complexities of childhood, communal and societal trauma have become interwoven in many of the local institutions that tend to house our society's most traumatized individuals.

The racial and class implications of mass incarceration have gained recognition in recent years, particularly the disproportionate impact on Black male offenders. In 2020, Black males were 5.7 times more likely than white males to be incarcerated; this increases to 12.5 times for males aged 18 to 19 (Carson, 2021). These staggering statistics have highlighted racial disparities but have tended to overlook the impact of incarceration on women, particularly women of color. Although they make up a smaller percentage of the total population that is incarcerated, Riley et. al. (2016) found that the number of women in the correctional population has increased by 14-fold from 1970 to 2014-making women the fastest growing population in the correctional system. Yet, attention and research on women in prison and jails continue to lag behind.

The literature surrounding women's experience of incarceration is inadequate at best, particularly for women that are incarcerated in jails (Riley et. al., 2016) The data that is available, however, highlights that women's needs and experiences are unique compared to those of men (Bloom et. al., 2004). Women are more likely to be incarcerated in jail than in prison, they are a growing segment of the population that is placed on probation, they are more likely to be victims of sexual and childhood violence, and they are more likely to be mothers and primary caretakers of children, and they report different biopsychosocial needs compared to men upon their release (Bloom et. al, 2004; Kajstura, 2019; Riley et. al, 2016). These gender-related differences have practical consequences for implementing successful reentry policies and programs for women offenders.

While research numbers vary, SAMHSA estimates that among women within the criminal justice system, as many as 96% have experienced a traumatic event (SAMHSA, 2020). Trauma and its lasting impact continue to be explored and understood across race, class, and gender within the criminal justice system and across disciplines. This review of the literature highlights these considerations. This work is a piece of a current collaborative research project that entails working with multiple stakeholders to explore trauma-informed and gender-sensitive best practices in reentry programming for women after a period of incarceration in a jail setting. It also highlights one local jail in Pennsylvania and the programs it has utilized for women.

Gender Differences in Reentry

National recidivism rates for those leaving jail continue to be alarmingly high with 73% reoffending (Spjeldnes, Jung, & Yamatani, 2014) and approximately two of every three individuals being reincarcerated within three years of release (Jenkins, Dammer, & Raciti, 2017). Although incarceration rates have been decreasing, Freudenberg (2006) notes a 47% increase in the jail population between 1995 and 2004. According to Jenkins et al. (2017), being incarcerated in jail, even for short periods, can lead to significant negative outcomes for individuals. This can include an increased likelihood of criminal behavior, harsher sentencing, and a decrease in economic success (Jenkins et. al., 2017). Despite these consequences, there continues to be a dearth of

research on reentry and recidivism for previously jailed individuals. Jenkins et al. (2017) cite brief jail terms and lack of adequate funding as causes for this gap in research (p.58). While research does highlight the disparity in studies of jail populations in comparison to prison, they do not identify a reason for this gap. It is reasonable to consider the short nature of sentences and knowing that longitudinal studies have greater rigor that more research would focus on prisons. (Vera Institute of Justice, 2019; Riley, Subramanian, & Swavola, 2016).

There is often a lack of coordination between jail programming and community programs, and this means reentrants often do not find the services they need. This can be especially of concern for women who represent the greatest increase in jailed inmates (Spjeldnes et al., 2014). Although the overall rate of incarceration has been decreasing, from 1996 to 2011 women's rate of incarceration in jails increased by 45%. (Spjeldnes et al., 2014, p.75). As shown in this graph from a Vera Institute of Justice fact sheet, the number of women in Pennsylvania jails increased from 242 in 1970 to 4,752 in 2015, a 19-fold increase (Vera Institute of Justice, 2019). Additionally, according to the same fact sheet, women now make up almost 1 in 4 of all jail admissions. The number of women in jails nationally increased from 8000 in 1970 to nearly 110,000 in 2013, a 13-fold increase. Importantly, women in jail make up about half of all incarcerated women in the country (Vera Institute of Justice, 2019).

Freudenberg (2006) also notes gender differences in the precipitating factors to incarceration as well as in self-reported needs upon release. In their study, they noted that as high as 60-90% of incarcerated women have experienced prior physical and/or sexual abuse (Freudenberg, 2006). Women face additional challenges upon reentering society as they may be escaping an abusive partner or reuniting with children as a primary caregiver (Freudenberg, 2006; Spjeldnes et al., 2014). Women were also twice as likely as men to report family problems as a post-release issue (Freudenberg, 2006; Spjeldnes et al., 2014).

Adding to the challenges they face in reentry; female jail inmates are also more likely than male inmates to be unemployed and to receive public assistance before incarceration. In comparison, 60% percent of female versus 40% of male jail inmates reported that they were unemployed before incarceration (McCampbell, 2005). In addition, 30% of females compared to less than 8% of male prison inmates reported receiving welfare assistance prior to their arrest. This data was specific to women in prison and no comparable data were available for those in jail (Spjeldnes et al., 2014). Full explanations for these differences are nuanced and beyond the scope of this paper. The lack of research on both women and jails makes this understanding more difficult. However, there is a theoretical basis that has helped to define reentry best practices and gives a framework for understanding gender-based subtleties regarding women who have been touched by the criminal justice system.

Theoretical Background and Data

Many best practices for the treatment of women under incarceration rely on a study by Bloom, Owen, and Covington (Bloom et al., 2002). This study has provided the theoretical framework for recommendations outlined by SAMHSA and the Department of Justice as well as being the kicking-off point for gender-responsive intervention research within both the academic and legal fields. According to this study, a relational context is critical to understanding how and why women commit crimes. This relational context can also be understood as the best way to address women's behaviors and work towards their rehabilitation during and after incarceration. In the work of Bloom et al. (2002), women who struggle with substance abuse, in particular,

tended to connect this to painful personal relationships; abusive families and domestic violence tended to be a theme for them, and the authors argue that these themes are integral to understanding relational therapeutic interventions necessary for these women. (Bloom et. al., 2002) They further highlight that most theories of crime were developed by men and about male criminals. Perhaps because of this, men have generally been theorized regarding systems-level assumptions while women tend to be pathologized for similar behavior and crimes.

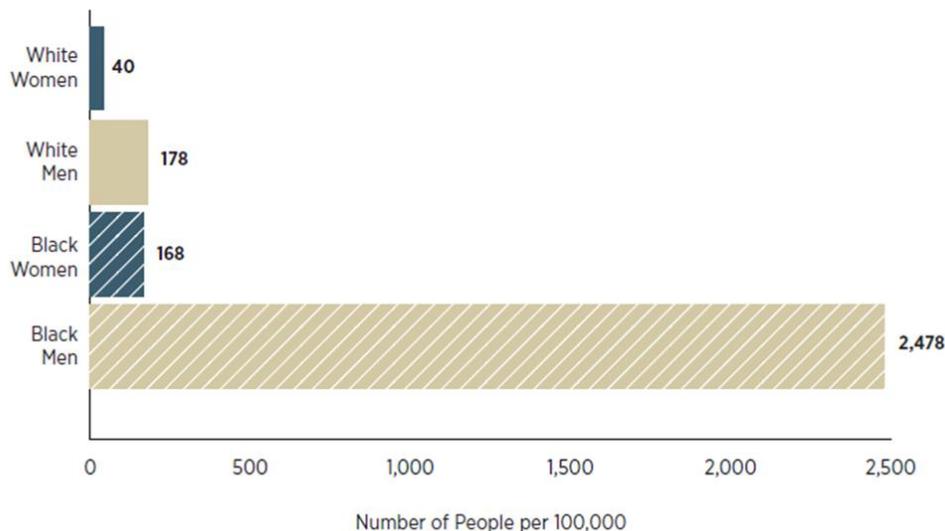
Bloom et. al. (2002) also completed a review of studies looking at racial and ethnic differences among women offenders. They discovered that women of color from low-income communities have experienced the greatest impact of current criminal justice approaches and have experienced the most criminal justice control. This disparity is referred to as triple jeopardy; or the compounding impact of systems control via the intersection of race, gender, and class (Bloom et. al., 2002).

Allegheny County Disparities

More locally, the following graph from an Allegheny County Department of Human Services study shows the rate of the jail population by race and gender, per 100,000 Allegheny County residents aged 18 and older (Allegheny County Department of Human Services, 2020). This data highlights the more commonly recognized disparities among the male population. Within this group, Black men were almost 14 times as likely as white men to be in jail. Because of the staggering difference, this topic has been discussed, theorized, and researched across various disciplines. Yet, while this disparity is inarguably egregious, it also tends to dwarf and minimize the disparity amongst Black women.

Black women were 4.2 times more likely to be in jail compared to white women; 168 compared to 40 per 100,000 (Allegheny County Department of Human Services, 2020). As the percentage of women in comparison to men incarcerated in jails continues to rise, it is yet unclear if this rate will remain stable, decrease, or increase with the wider sample size. What is clear, though, is the impact that trauma has on women under incarceration.

FIGURE 15: People in the ACJ by Race and Gender, Rate per 100,000, September 30, 2018



Trauma in the Criminal Justice System

Often when discussing trauma, it is in reference to the generally accepted SAMHSA definition, which focuses on individual trauma. “Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 7). However, there are other types of traumas that are of particular relevance to the criminal justice population.

There has recently been a recognition of community trauma, which can be referred to as a historical, community, or intergenerational trauma, according to SAMHSA (2014). Insidious trauma is a third type of trauma that was explored by Bloom et al. (2002). In their work, insidious trauma is an expanded concept that includes emotional abuse, the experience of poverty and dislocation, as well as discrimination based on race, religion, and age (Bloom et al., 2002, p. 23). Additionally, insidious trauma is, by definition, not easily or typically recognized and often overlooked by a culture that normalizes the violence and trauma experienced by individuals experiencing poverty, particularly urban poverty (Lopez, 2014). Bloom et al. highlights women of color as being particularly susceptible to insidious trauma. They further explain that the consequences of insidious trauma can ‘activate survival behaviors’ and these may be mistaken for pathological behavior (Bloom et al., 2002). This misdiagnosis, then, can be from a lack of understanding of the impact of trauma, particularly from an intersectional lens. In this way, insidious trauma theory recognizes the ways in which women experience trauma through racism, heterosexism, and/or class discrimination, stuck in triple jeopardy.

There also exists a plethora of statistics about the pervasiveness of trauma, particularly for those impacted by incarceration. A Bureau of Justice Statistics study showed that 55% of women compared to 13% of men in jail have experienced prior physical and sexual abuse, making women about four times as likely (James, 2004). This history of sexual trauma is often associated with higher rates of substance abuse and mental health issues for females (James, 2004; Spjeldnes, et. al., 2014). Additionally, according to a 2009 study, 30% of female vs 14.5% of male inmates reported a serious mental illness (Spjeldnes et. al., 2014).

Women are not only entering jails in increasing numbers, but they are also presenting with an array of complex needs that are different from men (SAMHSA, 2020). Women are more likely to need support upon reentry regarding their mental health, physical well-being, family concerns, substance use treatment, and new trauma or re-traumatization from the experience of incarceration itself (Fehr, 2004; SAMHSA, 2020; Spjeldnes et. al., 2014). Addressing women through a gender-responsive lens recognizes these unique needs while also considering racial and ethnic disparities, women’s relational needs, and the prevalence of trauma in criminal justice-involved women (SAMHSA, 2020).

Best Practices and Programs

SAMHSA has highlighted some best practices for reentry that incorporate the realities of gender-specific needs and the impact of trauma. These include:

- Utilizing a trauma-informed approach
- Being gender-sensitive and incorporating a gender-responsive approach
- Beginning reentry at the first intercept

- Utilizing non-punitive models
- Utilizing intentionality in acknowledging and treating historical and communal trauma (SAMHSA, 2020)

When thinking of best practices, it is also imperative to consider the importance of family and children for women that have experienced incarceration. Women are more likely to be a parent and have needs related to this upon reentry. These needs tend to relate to both maintaining connections and ensuring a path to reunification post-incarceration. Unlike males, the majority of women that are incarcerated have custody of children under the age of 18 (Fehr, 2004; Miller, 2021). Women that were incarcerated tended to have more parenting responsibilities and were more likely to have custody of their children than men. Women were also more likely to need alternative living arrangements for their children while incarcerated and more women than men communicated their needs for parenting services, 7.5% and 3.9% respectively (Fehr, 2004; Spjeldnes et. al., 2014). Reunification after incarceration is particularly difficult, especially considering the lack of specialized services available to assist with this. There are also numerous barriers to remaining connected with their children while serving their sentences.

The following is a sample of standout programs regarding reentry for women that incorporates many of the best practices that have been discussed thus far:

- Family Sentencing Alternative Pilot Programs
- Community Prison Mother Program
- Female Offender Treatment and Employment Program
- MATCH, Mothers and their children
- Family support program
- Residential Parenting Program
- Post prison program at SFC
- Diane Wade House

These programs incorporate various forward-thinking approaches that capture the spirit of the best practices outlined by SAMHSA. They include initiatives that utilize sentencing alternatives for women, sometimes allowing them to live with their children. One program provides transportation for family members to visit their incarcerated loved one, as well as free phone/video calls. Some programs support the family and provide resources while the parent is incarcerated. This helps to keep family members connected and supports both the incarcerated individual and their family in the community with supervised visits and counseling.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to individually discuss each of the programs listed. However, the Diana Wade House is one program that directly addresses the needs of African American women. It is self-described as, “the first-of-its-kind Afrocentric transitional housing program for women involved in the criminal justice system.” (multco.us, 2022). It also provides culturally specific mental health services. This is a unique program that is largely funded through foundation and grant money. While this is a prime example of treating and acknowledging communal and insidious trauma, it is also a small program serving only 38 women (multco.us, 2022). Further research and funding to evaluate this (and other) programs is necessary to continue to develop programs that directly address the needs of all people, including women of color.

Allegheny County Jail Programs

Directly related to our ongoing study, Allegheny County Jail has implemented numerous programs to reduce recidivism. This includes the Jail Collaborative and Reentry Program, which was shown by an Urban Institute study to be effective in reducing rearrests for jail inmates upon release (Allegheny County Jail Collaborative, 2019). The Allegheny County Jail Collaborative has created various in-jail as well as post-release programs. Some general programs that were highlighted in their report, *Women in Allegheny County CJ System* include:

- Alternative Housing Sites: These are ‘residential facilities’ that serve as an alternative to incarceration. Here they provide various services and treatment geared toward rehabilitation
- Batterer Intervention Program: This program utilizes education that incorporates accountability as well as community members to treat domestic violence
- Justice-Related Services: These services are geared towards those with mental health or co-occurring substance use disorders. They utilize various stakeholders including the jail, courts, and behavioral and other community service providers to support these individuals in the criminal justice system
(Allegheny County Department of Human Services, 2020, p.6)

In this report, they also highlighted reentry programs that are particularly helpful for women, including:

- Allegheny County Jail Family Support: Utilizes education and support to assist parents in preparing for family visits at the Allegheny County Jail. This includes weekly structured family phone calls as well as modeling and assisting with communication. This allows the jailed parent to better reconnect with their families during and after incarceration
- Training to Work: This program is run through the Allegheny County jail Collaborative as well as partner4Work and assists individuals in learning skills to make them more employable as they approach release from Allegheny County Jail
- A female pod coordinator: There are numerous pods, including a reentry pod. This pod coordinator works specifically on a women’s unit to do “risk/needs assessments, helping women enroll in programming in the jail, and assisting with re-entry planning.” They serve as a main contact for women to access services
(Allegheny County Department of Human Services, 2020)

*[Note these are pre-covid program offerings]

Post-COVID Restrictions at the Allegheny County Jail

The Allegheny County Jail (ACJ) is currently finalizing data regarding the programs that were impacted by COVID-19 and where they stand today. While not ready for publication, they have provided tentative data. In this preliminary data, the ACJ included 36 of its programs. Two of these were suspended before the pandemic and two do not have data back yet. It is currently unknown how many total programs will be included in the final study. Of the 32 programs that were fully operational before COVID-19 and have data available:

- 2 remain fully operational
- 18 are operating with adjustments
- 12 have been suspended

Adjustments include offering 1-on-1 drug and alcohol and/or mental health services in place of groups, offering paper ‘take-home’ packets rather than continuing hosting groups or classes, and offering limited video services. Fortunately, some community-based programs remained, serving families of those that were incarcerated even when connectivity services were discontinued. Per the available initial data, educational programs were the most likely to be adjusted while support, substance use and mental health initiatives were the most likely to be canceled. Reentry PODS have been paused during the pandemic, making it more difficult for coordinators to access individuals and to implement services.

The impact of COVID-19 and the program changes that ACJ had to implement have yet to be evaluated. The pandemic has forced the jail and prison industry to adapt and change. In the future, the effectiveness of these programming changes and additions should be explored to see if they still meet best practice standards for this population. The list of 36 programs will be a starting point to identify what had to be adapted, suspended, or created during this new “post-COVID” era.

Discussion

This review of the literature and local trends serves as a beginning stage for future research. It is necessary to further explore access to reentry supports and services by demographic. This next stage would include interviewing both re-entry staff as well as participants in the re-entry process, preferably within the local context of Allegheny County. It is important to get a first-hand account of the re-entry experience for those that returned to the community. In particular, the team will explore any differences related to race, ethnicity, and gender.

Additionally, the next phase of future research would be remiss not to explore any changes to re-entry practices that occurred during COVID-19. An extensive review of which services were cut, added, or modified would provide important information to the corrections community. Moving forward as facilities return to more typical functioning, what programs do they intend to retain.

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Links to highlighted programs

<https://www.oregon.gov/cjc/SAC/Documents/FSAPPJointReport2019.pdf>
<https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/adult-operations/community-prisoner-mother-program/>
<https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/rehabilitation/fotep/>
http://www.mothersandtheirchildren.org/about_us.aspx
<https://www.moed.uscourts.gov/family-support-program>
<https://doc.wa.gov/docs/publications/fact-sheets/400-FS003.pdf>
<https://www.sfc.edu/academics/institutescenters/postprison>
<https://multco.us/lpscc/diane-wade-house>

Open Peer Review Comments

1. The article provides valuable information and attention to the gender shifts in jails. While women still make up a small portion of the overall inmate population, it is important to discuss the spike of incarceration specific to them, their uniqueness within the system, and related reentry efforts. Additionally, this article highlights the importance of understanding victimized offenders, which is often specific to women.
2. The article mentions the issue of funding for research related to short term jail sentencing. It would help to have a deeper understanding provided related to this issue. If there are identifiable issues, why the continued limitations? Are rationales provided for limited funding? An explanation here could solidify the needs mentioned throughout the article.
3. The article provided direct evaluations, which is very helpful for localized initiatives. It is interesting that only two of 32 programs remain fully operational. Are the programs with adjustments mainly due to COVID-19 implications? Is it due to other concerns? Clarity on the rationale of adjustments or cancellation of programming would be helpful to gather the full scope of the issue at hand. Additionally, is the full intention of the article to stay within the localized community in examining COVID-19 effects? Clarity is needed for the next step intentions in the research.

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1. The article examines an understudied population – women in jails. Most research tends to focus on men, and individuals incarcerated in a prison setting, leaving research pertaining to women and those incarcerated in a jail setting, lacking. It is important to examine women incarcerated in jails, as it adds to the literature and provides information on an understudied population. In its examination of women incarcerated in jails, this article highlights the importance of and need to understand how victimization influences offenders. Abuse, especially sexual abuse, is an overwhelmingly female phenomenon, so analyzing such variables is key to understanding the experience of women incarcerated in jails and what programs might best suit their successful rehabilitation back into society.
2. While the article demonstrates a lack of research pertaining to women in jails, it goes one-step further to demonstrate an immediate need of how incarceration affects not only women, but also specifically, women of color. The article clearly demonstrates through graphs and previous data, that black women are incarcerated at similar rates of white men, but research and reentry programs tend to be created based off the needs of the incarcerated men, ignoring the needs of incarcerated women, especially the needs of women of color.
3. The article identifies insidious trauma as a key factor women of color experience. With such trauma being identified and defined, it seems as though there is a basis for the creation of reentry programs for women of color. It would be helpful if the article demonstrated current programs that target insidious trauma, or at least explain why such programs do not

currently exist. Best practices for reentry are listed, but it is not stated which are best suited for women of color. Additionally, a description of what these best practices are would be helpful to understand what programs are currently utilized. This applies to the programs listed – it would be helpful to know the best practices used for each of the listed programs and how they assisted specifically women of color.

4. The article highlights programs at a specific jail in Pennsylvania. The programs utilized are explained, demonstrating programs that are of particular help to the women population. Such information demonstrates how jails are recognizing some of the issues female inmates experience, and have begun utilization programs aimed at tackling these issues, in an attempt to increase successful reentry of women.

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Author Amendment Synopsis

- On page 3, an additional explanation on the lack of jail research was added.
- On page 8, additional explanation of preferred next steps for research was added. Note, further information regarding the local context is not available at this time.
- On page 6, a paragraph was added to provide additional detail regarding the Diana Wade House, a first-of-its-kind Afrocentric transitional housing program; citation added. (multco.us, 2022)
- On page 5, additional literature was added regarding insidious trauma and its lack of recognition. (Lopez, 2014)