

National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women

Ten Truths That Matter When Working With Justice Involved Women Executive Summary April 2012

This document reviews ten truths about justice involved women—gleaned from the research over the last few decades—that must be recognized if we are to successfully manage this population, achieve greater reductions in recidivism, and improve public safety outcomes. It is our hope that by understanding these truths, criminal justice policymakers and practitioners will be more aware of gender differences and take steps to enhance their approaches to managing justice involved women.

One

Women are a fast-growing criminal justice population, yet they pose a lower public safety risk than men.

Women typically enter the criminal justice system for non-violent crimes that are often drug and/or property-related. Justice involved women are less likely than men to have extensive criminal histories. Within prison settings, incidents of violence and aggression committed by incarcerated women are extremely low. Women released from incarceration have lower recidivism rates than their male counterparts; this holds true for rearrests, reconvictions, and returns to prison with or without new sentences. The finding that women pose a lower public safety risk than men is critical to informing future changes in criminal justice policy and practice.

Two

Women follow unique pathways into crime and present risk factors that signal different intervention needs.

The reasons or ways that women become involved in crime is qualitatively different from that of men. Women are more likely to have experienced poverty, sexual abuse and/or other forms of victimization. A large proportion of justice involved women have engaged in criminal behavior while under the influence and/or to support their drug use. Justice involved women are more likely to experience co-occurring disorders, in particular substance abuse problems interlinked with trauma and/or mental illness. Fewer vocational skills, underemployment, and employment instability are more common among justice involved women than men. Not only are these factors more prevalent among justice involved women, they play a criminogenic role that must be addressed.

Three

Women's engagement in criminal behavior is often related to their relationships, connections, and disconnections with others.

Theories of female development consistently emphasize the importance of relationships in women's lives—both in shaping their identities and

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in contributing to their sense of self-worth. This can create difficulties for women involved in the criminal justice system for several reasons. First, exposure to dysfunctional and abusive relationships in childhood elevates risk for future victimization and the perpetration of violence. Second, women will often commit crimes to maintain a relationship regardless of the outcome. For example, some women will override their personal values and beliefs in the commission of a crime to meet the needs of their children or to demonstrate loyalty to a significant other. Criminal justice programs and interventions should encourage women to maintain a desire for healthy connection, while providing them with opportunities to learn new ways of connecting and relating to others.

Four

Traditional criminal justice policies and practices have largely been developed through the lens of managing men, not women.

The increasing number of women entering the criminal justice system, coupled with a growing body of research on this population, have drawn attention to justice involved women and signaled the need for gender responsive policies, procedures, and services. The current programs and services that are available to women—within institutional and community settings and during reentry—may not adequately meet their needs (e.g., vocational/education training, healthcare, safe housing, family reunification). Furthermore, access to appropriate healthcare for incarcerated women may not be adequate. Criminal justice professionals must begin to develop and modify systems to be more responsive to women’s risk and needs in order to achieve successful outcomes with this population.

Five

Justice involved women often report histories of sexual victimization and trauma, and continue to be vulnerable to victimization within correctional settings.

Trauma such as sexual victimization is often linked to mental health, substance abuse, and relationship difficulties and contributes to crime pathways for women. Research indicates that traumatic experiences cause chemical and structural changes in the brain, which affect an individual’s future reactions and ability to respond to interventions. In addition, incarcerated women with a history of trauma and accompanying mental health concerns are more likely to have difficulties with prison adjustment and misconduct. Therefore, trauma-informed policies and practices should be a core element of a gender responsive system.

Six

Traditional prison classification systems tend to result in unreliable custody designations for incarcerated women.

These tools have generally been normed for male offender populations and have not been validated for women, yet they are often used to guide key housing decisions for women. In contrast, research shows that institutional misconduct, prison adjustment and, ultimately, recidivism among women is more closely linked to specific intervention needs—and to the lack of services and supports to address these needs—than to current offense severity and criminal history factors captured in traditional tools. Utilizing tools that take into account the unique risk factors and pathways into crime for justice involved women provides a more reliable risk determination and better prediction of correctional outcomes for women.

Seven

Gender responsive assessment tools can enhance case management efforts with justice involved women.

Dynamic risk and needs assessment tools commonly used in the criminal justice system (such as the COMPAS and LSI) do not, on their own, incorporate information about women’s pathways into crime, risk factors, strengths, and intervention needs. Gender informed assessment tools, however, capture both *gender neutral factors* (e.g., criminal

history, antisocial attitudes) that are associated with recidivism among women and men, and gender responsive factors that are specifically linked to outcomes for women. Gender responsive risk factors include depression, psychotic symptoms, housing safety, and parental stress. Gender informed assessments also account for women's assets, or strengths, which in turn play a protective role and mitigate the risk of negative outcomes. The use of *gender responsive* tools helps practitioners to identify the most salient needs faced by women and informs case management and service delivery.

Eight

Women are more likely to respond favorably when criminal justice staff adhere to evidence-based, gender responsive principles.

While there are a number of gender informed programs which are beginning to report positive outcomes, *all correctional staff* that work with women must utilize a comprehensive and coordinated case management approach to achieve successful outcomes. Staff should be knowledgeable and understand the implications of the research on evidence-based and gender informed practices including the following: targeting interventions, dosage, and intensity based on risk level; understanding the importance of developing professional working relationships with women; having the skills necessary to engage them appropriately; and recognizing women's strengths and mobilizing their personal and social supports.

Nine

Incarceration and reentry are particularly challenging for justice involved mothers of minor children.

Over 66,000 women incarcerated nationwide are mothers of minor children. They are more likely than men to have primary child-rearing responsibilities and are often single parents. A key source of stress for these women is their limited ability to maintain a connection with their children

while they are incarcerated, as well as how they will reunite with their children upon release. Another significant source of pressure includes the challenges that women face in financially supporting their families. Given that emerging research indicates that parental stress for women is linked to institutional misconduct and post-release recidivism, practitioners must recognize the importance of promoting ongoing contact with children, facilitating effective parenting skills, and supporting family reunification.

Ten

The costs of overly involving women in the criminal justice system are high.

Unsuccessful supervision outcomes for women under community supervision are remarkably high given the relatively low level of public safety risk they pose. Although 60% of women released from incarceration are re-arrested and nearly a third are returned to prison, these new criminal justice contacts are largely for technical violations, rather than new crimes. These technical violations often stem from unmet "survival needs" such as difficulties meeting financial obligations, lower employment skills, or the inability to secure safe housing. In addition to the high monetary costs to state and local jurisdictions from this revolving door, repeated exposure to the criminal justice system is detrimental to justice involved women and their children. Supervision agencies have the opportunity to interrupt this flow by reconsidering their responses to parole and probation violations.

For a more in-depth discussion of the "Ten Truths," research citations, and a complete list of references go to:

www.cjinvolvedwomen.org/resources.

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