



NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT

WOMEN AND REENTRY



Each year, nearly 2 million women¹ are released from prison or jail.² These women experience unique challenges during their reentry³ — the period of transition from correctional confinement to the community⁴ — but correctional programming to support successful reintegration has largely focused on men.⁵ Despite evidence that findings from men's reentry programs may not be generalizable to women,⁶ there has not been a commensurate investment in research, development, implementation, or evaluation of programs that integrate gender-specific factors in their designs.

Here are five things we know about women and reentry based on available data and research.

1. One in 138 women was under correctional supervision — in prison, jail, or on community supervision — at year-end 2021, but little is known about their characteristics on a national scale.

Although the number of females under correctional supervision fell 25% between 2011 and 2021, nearly one million women remained in prison, jail, or on probation or parole as of December 31, 2021, a rate of 720 per 100,000.⁷ This included 85,100 women held in local jails — a 22% increase from 2020.

While women make up nearly 18% of the correctional supervision population,⁸ national-level data on their characteristics is scant, restricting the ability to discern sex by race, ethnicity, age group, offense type, or conviction status.

Available national data indicate that Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaskan Native women experience higher rates of imprisonment than white women,⁹ but the degree to which this over-representation is mirrored in community supervision populations remains unclear.

One consistent finding for this population is that many women who have experienced incarceration are mothers. Past estimates indicate that 58% of women in prison¹⁰ and 80% of women in jail¹¹ have minor children, with two children on average.¹²

2. Compared to men, women have distinct trajectories into the criminal justice system.

Females follow unique pathways into the criminal justice system compared to males.¹³ Researchers have documented differences in family histories of dysfunction, substance use, co-occurring disorders, and victimization, all of which are associated with criminal justice involvement.¹⁴ Histories of sexual abuse and trauma are especially overrepresented in the female incarcerated population.¹⁵ Most reentry programs available for women have been designed for men and do not address the distinct trajectories of how women become involved in the criminal justice system.¹⁶

3. Gender-responsive programming shows promising results for women reentering society.

Women reentering communities from incarceration can experience the associated hardships differently than men, as they are more likely to be victimized and economically disadvantaged, suffer from mental illness or co-occurring disorders, use drugs regularly, be a parent to an underage child, or face any combination of these challenges.¹⁷ All of these factors likely impact the odds of reoffending.

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Gender-responsive programming is based on an assessment of risks and needs that includes gender-specific factors and incorporates treatment targets, such as those focused on mental health, substance use, or familial relationships.¹⁸ Gender-responsive interventions that include mental health components, treatment for trauma, childcare, and parenting classes are associated with reduced recidivism and increased treatment retention following release.¹⁹ Female-specific programming that incorporates cognitive behavioral therapy, mutual or peer support, or all-female group sessions is recommended for women experiencing reentry.²⁰

Despite these findings, research evaluating gender-responsive programs is relatively limited. Researchers need to develop and evaluate more of these programs to better understand how to ensure successful reentry for women.

See “Women’s Reentry Programs Rated Promising on CrimeSolutions” (below) for a summary of reentry programs designed for justice-involved females currently rated promising on CrimeSolutions.²¹

4. Programming that addresses substance use, mental health, or co-occurring disorders before, during, and after supervision can be especially helpful for women.

Because justice-involved women are more likely to experience substance use, mental health, and co-occurring disorders, treatment before and during reentry

is especially beneficial.²² Analyses of substance abuse treatment programs for women have found that those that are gender-responsive, use individualized case management, target co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders, or are transitional programs are most effective at reducing recidivism and substance use.²³

Research suggests that reentry programs can increase women’s access to post-release mental health or substance use disorder treatment services, ideally through implementation of a reentry plan developed prior to release.²⁴ These services also play an important role in substance use-related reentry outcomes for women, including return to treatment, continuity of care, and post-release abstinence from drugs and alcohol.²⁵

5. Culturally responsive strategies for reentry programming may enhance success for justice-involved females.

Some preliminary studies suggest that culturally responsive programs — those that consider race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other identities — may be more effective than traditional programming in reducing recidivism and improving program engagement.²⁶ Accordingly, gender-responsive reentry programming may be improved by also using culturally responsive strategies that consider client characteristics and intersecting identities. However, more rigorous research is needed.

Women’s Reentry Programs Rated Promising on CrimeSolutions

PROGRAM	DESCRIPTION
Forever Free	The first comprehensive, in-prison, residential substance use disorder treatment program designed for incarcerated women. In one quasi-experimental study, the intervention group reported fewer arrests during parole, less drug use, and more employment at follow-up than the comparison group.
Gender-Specific Drug Treatment Court	A drug court program that provides treatment services to women on probation to reduce their risk of reoffending. The program gives preference to women who have higher need and risk profiles, are mothers, and have substance use problems. In one quasi-experimental study, women in the treatment group were statistically significantly less likely to have a new conviction after two years when compared with a control group.
Moving On	A curriculum-based, gender-responsive intervention addressing incarcerated women’s different cognitive-behavioral needs. Based on one quasi-experimental study, the program significantly reduced recidivism (as measured by rearrests and reconvictions), but it did not significantly affect reincarcerations for a new offense or technical violation revocations.
“Seeking Safety” for Incarcerated Women	A cognitive-behavioral intervention for incarcerated women with co-occurring post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance use disorders. In one quasi-experimental study, results suggest it significantly reduced PTSD and depression scores in program participants.

¹ For the purposes of this article, sex refers to sex at birth rather than gender identity and may reference both adults and juveniles, depending on the population under study. Generally, the research presented here focuses on women, but some samples include girls under age 18.

² Sawyer, Wendy. “Who’s Helping the 1.9 Million Women Released from Prisons and Jails Each Year?” Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, 2019.

³ Cobbina, Jennifer E. “Reintegration Success and Failure: Factors Impacting Reintegration Among Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women.” *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 49, no. 3(2010): 210-232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509671003666602>; La Vigne, Nancy G, Lisa E. Brooks, and Tracey L. Shollenberger. “Women on the Outside: Understanding the Experiences of Female Prisoners Returning to Houston, Texas.” Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center, 2009. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/30401/411902-Women-on-the-Outside-Understanding-the-Experiences-of-Female-Prisoners-Returning-to-Houston-Texas.PDF>; Visher, Christy A. and Nicholas W. Bakken. “Reentry Challenges Facing Women with Mental Health Problems.” *Women & Health* 54 no. 8 (2014), 768-780. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03630242.2014.932889>.

⁴ National Institute of Justice, “Five Things About Reentry.” Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2023. <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/five-things-about-reentry>.

⁵ Blanchette, Kelley, and Shelley L. Brown. *The Assessment and Treatment of Women Offenders: An Integrative Perspective*. (Boston, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2006); Haywood, Thomas W., Howard M. Kravitz, Laurie B. Goldman, and Anderson Freeman. “Characteristics of Women in Jail and Treatment Orientations: A Review.” *Behavior Modification* 24, no. 3 (2000): 307-324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0145445500243001>.

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⁹ Carson, E. Ann. "Prisoners in 2021 – Statistical Tables." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh236/files/media/document/p21st.pdf>.

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¹¹ McCampbell, Susan W. "Gender-Responsive Strategies for Women Offenders." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections. 2005. <https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/sites/default/files/library/14genderresponsivestrategiescommunity.pdf>.

¹² Greenfeld, Lawrence A., and Tracy L. Snell. "Women Offenders." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999. <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/wo.pdf>.

¹³ Blanchette and Brown, *The Assessment and Treatment of Women Offenders*; Fattore, Liana, Miriam Melis, Paola Fadda, and Walter Fratta. "Sex Differences in Addictive Disorders." *Frontiers in Neuroendocrinology* 35, no. 3 (2014): 272-284. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yfrne.2014.04.003>; Hall, Elizabeth A., Michael L. Prendergast, Jean Wellisch, Meredith Patten, and Yan Cao. "Treating Drug-Abusing Women Prisoners: An Outcomes Evaluation of the Forever Free Program." *The Prison Journal* 84, no. 1 (2004): 81-105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885503262456>; Richie, Beth. *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered, Black Women*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).

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²⁰ Fretz, Erickson, and Mims, "Reentry Programming and Female Offenders."

²¹ CrimeSolutions ([CrimeSolutions.ojp.gov](https://www.crimerecovery.org)) helps practitioners and policymakers understand what works in justice-related programs and practices and make practical decisions on program selection and implementation by gathering information on programs and practices and reviewing evaluation and meta-analysis research against standard criteria. Programs that are not designed for reentry, per se, but are rather single-approach rehabilitative initiatives are not included, nor are reentry programs targeting males or juveniles. In the table, a reentry program or practice is conceived as a system of continuous care that begins in custody and continues following release. Considerably fewer programs and practices meet these criteria than are listed under a general search for "reentry" on CrimeSolutions. Further, the table only includes those programs rated promising; there were no programs that met the criteria for inclusion that were rated effective.

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