

# Staying Out or Going Back: Re-Entry Experiences of Women Prisoners

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# Oklahoma

- Highest female incarceration rate (135/100,000 compared to US average of 67/100,000)
- Approximately 45% turnover of female prison population each year, resulting in more than 1,200 women per year being released. Approximately 46% are released with no supervision
- Recidivism rates within three years range from 14-19% for 2008-2010
- 2/3 of these women have histories of physical or sexual abuse in childhood
- About 80% have experience rape or domestic violence as adults

# Current Data

- **Survey**: 103 of the 301 women surveyed in 2009: 103 had returned to prison after release. They were asked about the problems experienced between incarcerations
  - interviewed 21 women who were reincarcerated at the time of the interview
  - interviewed 14 women who had successfully stayed out of prison for a year or more after release

# Problems Experienced Between Incarcerations (N=103 women who were serving a second or subsequent incarceration, 2009 Oklahoma Study of Incarcerated Women and Their Children)

<b>Problem:</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Finding a job	58	56.3
Finding an affordable and safe place to live	51	49.5
Paying court costs, restitution and fees	64	62.1
Staying drug free	77	74.8
Staying away from friends/family who engaged in crime or drug use	70	67.9

# HOUSING

## ➤ Reincarcerated:

### ☐ Sweet:

Unable to find housing that would rent to her and had to rent an apartment with her addicted sister – this put her back around drugs

### ☐ Vivian:

Unable to find a place to live, ended up in what turned out to be a “meth” house. Leaving there, she ended up with an older man who pressure her to exchange sex for housing

## ➤ Stayed Out

❑ Gina (out 6 years):

“Um, when I got out the second time, I didn’t have any fear and - I was very well resourced...my aunt, everything, she orchestrated. She put together, like, my plan of living, um, she financed that.”

❑ Tara (successfully out 8 years - released to Halfway House for 5 months), then to grandfather’s home, finally able to get into an apartment for low-income families (her felonies did not show up)

❑ Misha: Released to her grandparents home in a middle-class mixed race neighborhood

# Housing Revisited

- It appears from these women's experiences that having family or a halfway house to go to upon release is important in successful reintegration
- However, for family to enhance success, they must be stable. In Gina's case, a family member paid rent for her to live in a good part of town in her own apartment.
- In contrast, having criminal/drug-using family to whom they return increases the likelihood of relapse and reincarceration
- Homelessness also linked to reincarceration

# Employment/Job Training/Education

- Finding employment was difficult for all of the women
  - Those who returned to prison had more difficulty finding and keeping a job
    - 15 of the 21 reported serious difficulties
  - Those who stayed out often found jobs through family or friends
  - Those who stayed out were more likely to enroll in education or training programs shortly after release

## ➤ Reincarcerated

☐ Vanda:

“But as soon as they see that prison or ex-felon, you’re out. They’re not even gonna look at your application.

Six women who went back to prison lied on their applications to get work. However, when background checks were eventually done, they were terminated

## ➤ Stayed Out:

❑ Misha: (took two months to find a job)

“I looked for work for – I used my computer, I got bonded... I got the felon-friendly job list. Some of them don’t hire felons. Some of them weren’t hiring. Some of them were out of business... the only reason I got the job I have now is because my friend is the manager... And I just happened to walk in there and she asked me if I was still looking for a job.

❑ Gina:

Gina’s situation was unique in that her aunt supported her so that she could go to school.

# Employment/Education Revisited

- ❑ Most of the women who were successfully staying out enrolled in higher education programs. Two attended a local community college first, and five were eventually able to obtain degrees from a large public university.
- ❑ One additional benefit was experienced by those who enrolled in school. Some were able to apply for and obtain grants and loans, which helped support them and their children.
- ❑ However, schools in the state now carefully screen applicants for felony convictions, asking questions about convictions on the application form. This results in automatic denial of admission, and the applicant must appeal to a board for a waiver

# Overwhelming Fees, Fines, Etc.

- Upon release, most women face significant debt and financial challenges
- Court costs, fines, restitution, child support
- Driver's license reinstatement
- Parole fees (\$40 per month)
- Electronic monitor (\$140 per month)
- Mandatory treatment and counseling

## ➤ Reincarcerated

### ☐ Young:

Based on her multiple felony convictions and traffic tickets, she had lost her driver's license and was required to go through supervision meetings with her parole office, as well as counseling and drug classes that she had to pay for and complete before she could regain her driver's license.

- Counselor \$75 per visit
- Parole supervision fees.
- \$600 to have her license reinstated
- \$125 in required minimum payments for \$8,000 in fines
- Also had to pay for a babysitter while she was attending her counseling and parole visits.

## ➤ Stayed Out

### ☐ Gina:

Her aunt helped her pay on her fines, court costs and restitution.

However, she still owes significant amounts on restitution due to added interest while incarcerated

### ☐ Tara:

She owed on a student loan that defaulted while she was incarcerated, but she was able to work out a payment plan with the college and thus able to enroll in school.

### ☐ Cassie:

No fines, minimal court costs

# Drugs and Alcohol

- About 75% of the women incarcerated by the Oklahoma Department of Corrections have a moderate to high need for substance abuse treatment.
- Access to programs is severely limited due to budget constraints, so women often do not receive any treatment
- Relapse on alcohol and drugs is one of the main reasons for reincarceration

## ➤ Reincarcerated

### Tamara:

- Used the same day she was released, based on pressure from the boyfriend who picked her up from prison

### Sweet: (Never received substance abuse treatment in prison)

“I mean, you know, it’s just waiting until you can get into it and they prioritize those people that are in delayed sentencing...So, for anybody that’s just waiting on the yard, you just be waitin’ up to a year, two years to get out to those programs.”

### Lone Wolf – severe alcohol problem, never received treatment

## ➤ Stayed Out

### ☐ Darlene:

- Able to get a coveted spot in “Helping Women Recover,” program based on Stephanie Covington’s work
- Receiving substance abuse counseling through mission as well as relapse prevention through a community-based program

### ☐ Tara:

- No drug problem
- Mental health issues – received counseling in prison

# Transportation

- Limited geographical location of where they could seek work
- Transportation issues for the two groups were very different:
  - Those who ended up returning to prison had no assistance with transportation and often lived or worked in areas without bus service, at least during the hours they needed it
  - Those who have stayed out almost invariably had access to reliable transportation, often cars given to them, or they lived near public transportation

## ➤ Stayed Out

- ❑ Misha: “My grandma, she’s retired, my grandfather, he gets off work at a certain time. And, if I was looking for a job they’d take me, or pick me up. ... I only got a car like two months ago. My Mom sold me her car. So, I’ve just lucked upon a car.”
- ❑ Cassie: “So, my sister had an extra car and let me use it until I got my own. The hardest part was saving up enough to get my license back.”
- ❑ Gina: “My aunt ... was very, um, very, very, very supportive... she bought me a vehicle.”

# Transportation Revisited

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# Support

- As one might expect, those who returned to prison had little healthy support on the outside
  - They either had no family or friends willing to help, or,
  - They had only family and friends who were using drugs and remaining engaged in the activities that sent the woman to prison

- In contrast, the women who successfully stayed out reported extensive support
  - ❑ Gina's aunt bankrolled her getting back on her feet and going to school
  - ❑ Misha's and Tara's grandparents let them live with them so that she could work to pay off fines, save money, and also attend school
  - ❑ Some received support from non-family, including members of the faith community, that helped them find and furnish apartments, etc.
  - ❑ Most were able to reunite with children

# The Motivation

- All the women who successfully stayed out of prison reported high levels of motivation to change everything in their lives.
- Although those who returned indicated they had planned to stay drug free, most returned to old haunts and friends

# Conclusions

- These women's experiences indicate that there are often qualitative differences in the experiences of re-entering society between those who return to prison and those who stay out
  - Success is enhanced with the **provision of safe housing**. Several suggested most women should release to a halfway house for the first few months
  - Success is enhanced when **a job opportunity is available**, but often that is happenstance – both groups experienced problems finding someone willing to hire them. Lining up work opportunities prior to release is highly recommended
  - Success is enhanced by **continuing to obtain more education or training**

- Success is more easily obtained when the woman is **not burdened with seemingly insurmountable financial obligations** at the time of release
- Success is increased with **extensive and appropriate substance abuse treatment and trauma counseling** prior to release
- **Transportation is an issue that should be taken into account in release planning.** This may mean careful planning about job, living arrangements and parole requirements

- **Support from healthy family or friends is essential to success.** For those who do not have strong family support from safe individuals, strong mentoring relationships should be developed.
- **Being reunited with children plays a protective role**
- **Individual motivation** plays a large role in successful re-entry. Programs designed to enhance self-esteem and teach healthier responses to stress and trauma increase motivation and perceptions of ability to succeed