



Gender & Justice Project on Female Offenders, 2009-2012

In 2009-2012, Erika Kates, Ph.D., Senior Research Scientist and Crystal An, M.A., Project Assistant, worked with a diverse group of policymakers, advocates and administrators on three action-oriented research projects (outlined below). These projects were designed to draw attention to the special circumstances of women involved with criminal justice agencies, highlight women-centered resources, and suggest more cost-effective policies and practices.¹

Overview: Concerns of Women Offenders

The historical neglect of women in criminal justice and corrections has often been “explained” by their relatively small numbers, compared to men. However, this is a simplified view that overlooks the enormous rate of increase in their involvement; the inequities they face; and the broader social, and community impact of arresting, detaining, sentencing, supervising, and imprisoning women, the majority of whom are mothers and the primary caregivers of dependent children. The following data illustrate these trends in Massachusetts.

The Myth of “Small Numbers”

- The female prison population grew by almost 400% over the past three decades, with an average *annual rate of increase* of 8.7% per year.
- The average daily population (ADP) of women held in state prisons and county houses of correction is 1,400, but the higher prison turnover rate for women likely results in an *annual count* closer to 8,000.
- Women make up an estimated 18-20% of the 90,000 people on probation each year; 7% of the prison population; and 8% of the probation and parole population.
- In 2008, women made up 32% of all court commitments to the DOC, and in the period 2003-2007, the number of women *court commitments* to the Department of Correction doubled from 981 to 1976.
- The length of women’s sentence is typically underestimated. The average county sentence for women is 24 weeks, and the average state sentence is 4.2 years

The Inequities of “Over-Incarceration”

- In 2008, 40% of women with county sentences were held in the state women’s prison, MCI-Framingham (MCI-F), compared to 0.2% of men with county sentences held in state prison.
- In November 2009, over one third of the women held at MCI-F were in the Awaiting Trial Unit (ATU).
- In 2009, almost half of the women in the ATU were held because their counties could not accommodate them, compared to 3% of men in state facilities awaiting trial.
- In 2010, half of the women held at the MCI-F ATU were there because they could not pay \$50 bail.

The Inequities of Family Impact

- An estimated two-thirds of women offenders in Massachusetts are mothers.

¹ Funded by the Gardiner Howland Shaw Foundation.

- In 2009, an estimated 15,000 children were affected by their mothers' incarceration.
- Children are more likely to be displaced when their mothers are arrested since women are often the primary caregivers. They are more likely to be separated from their siblings and to move several times.
- Half of the women housed at MCI-F do not receive visits from their children, making them vulnerable to permanently losing custody.

Inequities of Treatment

- In 2008, 67% of sentenced women in MCI-F had a formal mental health diagnosis, compared to just over one quarter of the sentenced men.
- Over 85% of women have histories of substance abuse as well as sexual and physical abuse.
- In 2004, 2005 and 2008, blue ribbon commission and official reviews of MCI-F highlighted the poor physical conditions, lack of adequate mental health care, and poor quality care for pregnant women.

WCW Projects

Year 1 (2009-2010).

Identifying Gender-Responsive, Community-Based Resources for Incarcerated Women

The project identified gender-responsive, community-based resources for women in prison in Massachusetts. The method included extensive outreach to experts throughout the state resulting in the formation of the Women in Prison Coalition. The Coalition's members helped to identify programs meeting the project's criteria; and project staff conducted site visits to collect data from seventeen programs. The findings were presented at a forum held in the State House, June 2010, and in a final report *Promising Gender-Responsive, Community-Based Programs for Women Offenders in Massachusetts: A Resource for Policymakers*.

Year 2 (2010-2011).

Exploring Alternatives to Incarceration (ATI) for Women in Massachusetts

The project reviewed data from many criminal justice sources to document the numbers and characteristics of women involved in the criminal justice system; summarized the literature on women's experience, circumstances and concerns and the inequities many face; and produced a fact sheet, *Making Women Count: Women Offenders in Massachusetts*. Secondly, the project defined the current thinking on alternatives to incarceration in the US, collected data on ATIs in Massachusetts, and estimated the per capita cost of ATI options compared to incarceration. The final report, *Exploring Alternatives to Incarceration (ATI) for Women in Massachusetts* was presented to a forum of key policymakers and administrators, July 2011.

Year 3 (2011-2012).

Addressing Challenges to Exploring Alternatives to Incarceration (ATI) in Massachusetts

Participants at the forum in July 2011 recommended that they continue to work together to address women's concerns and many participants became members of the Massachusetts Women's Justice Network (MWJN) in 2011-2012.

These reports and fact sheets can be obtained from Erika Kates, Ph.D., ekates@wellesley.edu