
NIC Services

in Managing

Justice-Involved

Women

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The National Institute of

Corrections (NIC) was established by legislation (Public Law 93-415) in 1974 in response to the 1971 riots at Attica in which at least 39 people were killed, including 10 correctional and civilian staff. Now, just as then, the mission of NIC is to “shape and advance effective correctional practice and public policy” in our Nation’s pre-trial, jail, prison, and community corrections systems.

The Truth About Us

Terri Haven, M.S.W., L.C.S.W.

(With deepest respect and admiration for the women of the Hampden County Correctional Center, October 1997.)

The truth about us is that we've been in jail—some of us many times, some only once
We might as well go ahead and say that first 'cause most of you think that's who we are before anything else
The truth about us is most of us have been addicted to drugs or alcohol and did just about anything we could to make a buy
Yea, *the truth about us* is some of us sold our bodies, stole money, wrote bad checks, sold drugs, and a few of us have hurt other people in a blackout rage, but mainly we take it out on ourselves
That's *the truth about us*
The truth about us is that we're women and mothers, and sisters, and daughters, and partners
We miss our kids and our families, we cry at night, and we wonder what's happening at home
That's *the truth about us*
The truth about us is we're scared and confused and angry and sad and lonely and desperate
We don't know how to be in a relationship that's good—whatever that is—but we're really good at taking care of other people
We don't know a lot about boundaries—we'll trust everybody, but really we don't trust anybody
That's *the truth about us*
The truth about us is we're hopeful and eager and creative—we can learn
We're artists and writers and store managers
We get depressed and we have nightmares
We know how to act real tough
We cry a lot
We sometimes get confused about whether it's today or a long time ago
We can't remember a lot about being kids
We remember a lot about being little—about being raped by people we trusted
We've kept a lot of secrets
That's *The truth about us*
The truth about us is we don't know how to ask for your help
We don't know the names of your agencies, but we do know the faces of the people that treat us with respect
We can tell when you really don't want us around
We can tell when you really care
We feel safer in jail than we do out there
We are survivors
That's ***the truth about us***

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NIC employs a broad range of methods to accomplish its mission through training, technical assistance, policy and program development, information services, and the development of materials that reflect

current and emerging research and practice. These materials draw upon the skills and expertise of correctional professionals working throughout criminal justice. It's important to note that NIC's poten-

tial constituency is significant, with more than 1,000 Federal, State, and privatized prisons; countless permutations of community corrections entities numbering well into the thousands; and, of course, the 3,313 small, medium, large, and mega-jails across the country (American Correctional Association, 2013).

NIC received its first request for technical assistance specific to women offenders in 1977. Since those early days, NIC has continued to focus on a broad range of topics specific to women who are detained, sentenced, and supervised within criminal justice. In addition, NIC has supported an ongoing initiative building upon evidence-based and gender-informed research and practice. The various training and technical assistance offerings as well as documents and models of good correctional practice are applicable across the corrections continuum—from pretrial detention to community supervision. However, it is critical to acknowledge that jails present challenges (and opportunities) that are unique and distinct from other parts of the criminal justice system. Chief among these differences is that length of stay in jails is often measured in days and months versus years for women in prison settings, which significantly impacts programs and services. Other distinctions include the myriad ways in which jails are funded and where they “fit” within a community's list of funding priorities, as well as a range of organizational structures.

Over the past few decades, the field of corrections has begun adopting evidence-based practices, significantly increasing professionalism and improved practices that are more consistently applied. It has also helped correctional leadership establish policy and practice with an increased focus on the risk and need presented by both male and female inmate populations.

Evidence-based practices have been found to be effective for both men and women, but in many cases, they may either downplay or ignore

some significant differences that women bring to correctional settings. Accepted policy and practice in the correctional profession have been established and implemented for the largest population, which is overwhelmingly male. That holds true for programming, facility design, assessment and classification tools, and all operations foundational to the management of an institution.

Missed are the issues that are either unique to women or that occur with more frequency with female offenders. Although a percentage of women is high risk to both the community and within an institutional setting, that number is small. Female inmates, on average, present a significantly lower risk than the majority of male offenders. Other differences include the impact of women entering the jail pregnant, the high number of women who are the primary parents or sole caretakers of children, and the impact that separation from their children has on them as inmates. Nationally, it is estimated that 6 percent of women who are either detained or sentenced in jail are pregnant (Maruschak, 2008) and 62 percent of women in State prisons are parents (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

Research shows the heavy toll that childhood physical and sexual abuse have on women's use of drugs and alcohol, how they contribute to behavioral health challenges, and how such early experiences contribute to women's involvement in the criminal justice system. Research indicates that male inmates have also experienced physical and sexual abuse as children; however, whereas the level of interpersonal violence and sexual assault continues into adolescence and adulthood with women, it seems to taper off for men.

Administrators and leadership who manage populations of women in their jails are encouraged to contact NIC for assistance and/or information. Much of what has been developed specific to managing women in corrections will apply to

jail systems. Following is a summary of some areas of interest:

- **Technical assistance**—Assistance on a wide range of evidence-based and gender-informed issues designed to meet the objectives of the requesting agency.
- **Training programs**—Blended learning, webinar, and online offerings that welcome participants from detention/jail settings and focus on the various aspects of working with justice-involved women.
- **Documents and publications**—The Gender-Responsive Bulletin series has covered topics regarding jails, community corrections, gender-responsive principles and practices, research on employment and women offenders, and legal issues impacting justice-involved women. Other documents are specific to women's risk and needs assessment, design considerations for women's jails, mother and child programs, and various other titles. Visit www.nicic.gov/womenoffenders or go to the NIC Information Center (<http://info.nicic.gov/Custom/Ask.aspx>) for further information.
- **Models of Practice**—In collaboration with other professional organizations, NIC has developed a number of products—again covering a wide range of topics—that can be advanced through technical assistance. Some of NIC's areas of focus include:
 - Valid women's risk/need assessment tools (i.e., Women's Risk/Needs Assessment).
 - Model of case management specific to women (i.e., Women Offender Case Management Model).
 - Process for assessing gender-responsive practice within institutional settings (Gender-Informed Practices Assessment) and a shorter version that is an internal agency assessment tool to help identify gaps in services specific to women (Gender-Responsive Practices Assessment).

Each of these tools is designed to improve both systemic and individual outcomes and can also be used to support strategic planning initiatives. Other relevant items include assessing sexual safety within women's institutions and the various Prison Rape Elimination Act offerings.

NIC strongly encourages correctional professionals in detention/jail settings to become familiar with the resources available through NIC and to pick up the phone to inquire about issues either specific or broadly applicable to women in detention/jail settings. If NIC does not have the information you are seeking, we will do the work to find a resource that can provide assistance and guidance, often another system that has faced similar challenges and worked through them. An excellent resource is the Bureau of Justice Assistance-funded National Resource Center for Justice Involved Women (NRCJIW) located at www.cjinvolvedwomen.org. NRCJIW and NIC work closely together to provide the broadest range of assistance to the corrections field and to ensure that there is no duplication of services. This continues to be a productive and successful partnership. ■

References

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