



TRANSFORMING JUSTICE:

Mobilizing Incarcerated Mothers and Young Women Through Community Action

Conference Report

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Jane Addams College of Social Work
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**JANE ADDAMS
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Introduction

Since 1980, the number of incarcerated women in the United States has increased more than 700%¹. At present there are more than 1.2 million women under the supervision of the criminal justice system.² It has been well documented by researchers and criminal justice advocates that women who are incarcerated are disproportionately, women of color, specifically, Black and Latino. While Black women only represent approximately 12% of the general population in America, they have represented more than 50% of the female prison population since the mid 1990's.³ These women come from primarily low-income communities and have been subjected to high rates of violence.⁴ According to the U.S. Department of Justice: Office of Justice Programs, approximately 75% of women in prison are mothers. Moreover, more than 60% of women in state prisons have a child under age 18.⁵

Although advocacy efforts and changes in public policy have dramatically reduced the number of girls placed in juvenile detention facilities, significant numbers are being confined due to

¹Carson, E.A. (2015). Prisoners in 2014. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics

²Carson, E.A. (2015). Prisoners in 2014. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics; Minton, T.D., and Zeng, Z. (2015). Jail Inmates at Midyear 2014. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics; Kaebler, D., Maruschak, LM, and Bonczar (2015). Probation and Parole in the United States, 2014 . Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

³Hartney, C., & Vuong, L. (2009, March). Created equal: Racial and ethnic disparities in the U.S. criminal justice system . Oakland, CA: National Council on Crime and Delinquency

⁴Cauffman, E. (2008). Understanding the female offender. *Juvenile Justice*, 18(2) Retrieved from <http://www.futureofchildren.org/publications/journals/article/index.xml?journalid=31&articleid=44>.

⁵ Fact Sheet: Incarcerated Women and Girls. (2015). The Sentencing Project. Washington, D.C. <http://www.sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Incarcerated-Women-and-Girls.pdf>

nonviolent offenses which include running away from home, truancy and violating curfew⁶. Furthermore, “girls of color have the highest rates of confinement to residential placements for status offenses (e.g, underage drinking, skipping school, and violating a local curfew law) with Native American girls placed at a rate of 179 per 100,000, African American girls at a rate of 123 per 100,000 and Latinas at a rate of 47 per 100,000. By comparison, 37 per 100,000 of non-Hispanic white girls are confined for the same behaviors”⁷. Research indicates that Black girls are disproportionately impacted by zero-tolerance discipline policies and that attending schools with police on-site every day makes them even more likely to enter the juvenile justice system⁸. In schools where police are present, the officers are dealing with disciplinary matters that otherwise would be adjudicated by school staff. This of course means that law enforcement becomes an extension of the school discipline policy and results in students getting arrested. With the growing, disproportionate number of young women of color in correctional facilities

⁶Cauffman, E. (2008). Understanding the female offender. *Juvenile Justice*, 18(2) Retrieved from <http://www.futureofchildren.org/publications/journals/article/index.xml?journalid=31&articleid=44>; Richie, B.E. (1996). *Compelled to crime: The gender entrapment of battered black women*. New York & London: Routledge; Richie, B.E. (2012). *Arrested justice: Black women, violence and America’s prison nation*. New York: New York University Press; Watson, L., & Edelman, P. (2012). *Improving the juvenile justice system for girls: Lessons from the states*. Washington, DC: Georgetown Center on Poverty, Inequality, and Public Policy.

⁷Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2013). *Making Detention Reform Work for Girls: A Guide to Juvenile Justice Reform #5* Retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org/resources/making-detention-reform-work-for-girls>.

⁸Skiba, R., Reynolds, C. R., Graham, S., Sheras, P., Conoley, J. C., & Garcia-Vazquez, E. (2006). Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools? An evidentiary review and recommendations. A Report by the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, Washington, DC; Skiba, R. J. (2000). An analysis of school disciplinary practice. Policy Research Rep. No. SRS2. Bloomington, Indiana Education Policy Center; Wald, J., & Losen, D. (2003). Defining and re-directing a school-to-prison pipeline. In J. Wald & D. Losen (Eds.), *New directions for youth development: Deconstructing the school-to-prison pipeline* (pp. 9–16). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons; Crenshaw, K.W., Ocen, P., Nanda, J. (2015). *Black girls matter: Pushed out, overpoliced and underprotected*. Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies. New York, New York. [http://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f20d90e4b0b80451158d8c/t/54d23be0e4b0bb6a8002fb97/1423064032396/B](http://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f20d90e4b0b80451158d8c/t/54d23be0e4b0bb6a8002fb97/1423064032396/BlackGirlsMatter_Report.pdf)lackGirlsMatter_Report.pdf

and the higher likelihood of racial factors playing a role in the residential placement of girls, it is evident that reform efforts are needed to address this disparity.

Women who return from prison face numerous challenges in getting reestablished in the community. For many, if not most, female former prisoners finding adequate housing and stable employment with the burden of a criminal record is an ordeal. Furthermore, there are no current laws that protect ex-offenders from discrimination in housing. That is, landlords are free to discriminate against individuals with criminal records. Some women face difficulties in regaining custody of children who are placed in the foster care system. Other mothers may not have lost legal custody but may still find it difficult to reassert themselves in their children's lives due to the children's resentment of their mother's absence or their mother's substance abuse or mental health issues. Despite the difficulty of community re-entry after prison, many women are able to successfully rebuild their lives. Acknowledging the resiliency of these women is often neglected in policy initiatives and is overshadowed by the mark of their criminal record. In order to promote positive re-entry into their respective communities, it is imperative that success stories are highlighted and used as a tool to help frame policy efforts in addressing the growing disparity of women of color in the criminal system.

Background

On Tuesday, April 12, 2016, the Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research (Policy Center) in collaboration with four community based organizations held a one-day conference at UIC Student Center East *Transforming Justice: Mobilizing Incarcerated Mothers and Young Women through Community Action*. The Policy Center community partners were: Alliance of Local Service Organizations (ALSO), Girls Like Me, Traffick Free and Acclivus, Inc. The

invited presenters and audience were comprised of researchers, criminal justice professionals, community advocates, practitioners and formerly incarcerated women. The goal of the event was to initiate a course of action to mobilize community demands for optimizing the opportunities for women to remain safe, healthy and treated fairly in and out of the justice system.

The conference was a supplement to a community dialogue *Fostering Community-Based Opportunities for High-Risk Young Women* in Chicago held by the Policy Center at Jane Addams College of Social Work on November 12, 2016. Thirty-six participants representing more than sixteen agencies and community based organizations as well as community members attended the dialogue. Using the information collected from the dialogue and feedback from the participants that was solicited after the dialogue, the Policy Center and community partners were able to organize the conference around the issues raised by criminal justice practitioners and community members who had experiences with the criminal justice system.

The April conference consisted of panel discussions, presentations and collaborative dialogue about policies, programs and services needed to interrupt the paths of young women at risk of incarceration. Three key topics were covered during the panel presentations: Restorative Justice Practices to Keep Young Women in School; The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline; and Prenatal Support for Incarcerated Mothers and Their Children. After the panel presentations, the audience was able to share their knowledge and experiences through a facilitator led group dialogue and conversation. The event concluded with a brief ceremony to provide “Community Leadership” and “Enduring Spirit” awards to sixteen formerly incarcerated women who have reintegrated successfully back into the community. Marketing and outreach was done

particularly to bring together people who care about racial injustice and the disproportionate incarceration rates of women and girls of color. It was important to the organizers to have strong community representation to facilitate efforts to assist formerly incarcerated women through program and policy changes. More than 80 individuals, representing approximately 20 agencies, organizations, etc., were in attendance.

Welcoming remarks to begin the conference were delivered by Dr. Creasie Finney Hairston, Dean of the Jane Addams College of Social Work and Director of the Jane Addams Center of Social Policy and Research. Dr. Hairston's welcoming remarks were followed by framing remarks by Dr. O'Brien that provided an overview of how young women become at risk for incarceration, adverse outcomes associated with being at risk for incarceration and the identification of major themes related to early system involvement. According to O'Brien, women and girls are put at risk for involvement with the criminal justice system due to an array of factors such as mental illness, violence at home and in the streets, poverty, homelessness and substance abuse. Lori Crowder, Executive Director of ALSO provided the audience a detailed overview of the purpose of the conference and the agenda. Ms. Crowder also highlighted the critical role of the audience in helping to reach a consensus that could be the basis for organizing efforts for amended or new policy to prevent women and girls from entering the criminal justice system.

Panel 1: Restorative Justice Practices to Keep Young Women in School

Moderator: Lakeisha Gray-Sewell, Executive Director, Girls Like Me Project

Panelists: Liz Alexander, Advocate for Women in the Criminal Justice System & Samantha Kyme, Dean, Phillips High School.

Recent videos of a 17-year-old female student who was knocked unconscious by a school security officer in Tampa and a Baltimore middle-school student who required ten stitches after a police officer hit her with a baton in school demonstrate the outcome of aggressive policing towards Black girls in schools. The conference's first panel illustrated that there are major risks associated with discipline of Black girls in our schools. Instead of looking at discipline as a way to punish female students, we should be examining opportunities to redirect and support them. The panel's moderator Lakeisha Gray-Sewell questioned if it were necessary to have police officers in schools and whether that results in the disproportionate criminalization of Black girls who live in disadvantaged communities. The moderator noted that nebulous violations such as being uncooperative or being disrespectful result in Black girls being suspended, expelled and arrested. In addition, the panelists explained that Black female student behavior and responses are the same as female students who are Caucasian, yet what may be overlooked for Caucasian girls can result in harsh punishment for Black girls.

The panelists recommended that restorative-justice programs be employed to engage students in peer led conflict resolutions to address conflicts and behavior issues. The restorative justice approach provides a structure that helps to empower students to resolve conflicts on their own and in small peer groups. Fundamentally, the notion is to bring students together in peer-mediated small groups to talk, ask questions, and voice their issues and concerns. Accordingly, the restorative justice model would help resolve conflicts before they turn into larger scale

issues. For encounters such as thefts, property damage, fighting or bullying, students involved as well as their peers could participate in restorative circles to help facilitate discussions in an open and safe environment. Furthermore, panelists underscored that in order for the restorative justice program to be effective, students had to be empowered and free of coercion by staff to ensure that the processes would not be undermined by teachers or administrators.

Panel 2: Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: Understanding and Addressing Deviant Behavior as a Reaction to Trauma

Moderator: Laura Ng, Executive Director, Traffick Free

Panelists: Lynne Johnson, Policy Director, Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE) & Marian Hatcher, Senior Project Manager, Office of Public Policy at Cook County's Sheriff's Office.

Human trafficking incidents in the United States has become progressively pervasive. A *New York Times* article referred to Chicago as a “national hub of human trafficking.”⁹

According to Laura Ng, the Executive Director for Traffick Free, the West Side of Chicago is a hotbed of the city's human trafficking activity. The conference's second panel provided an oral primer to sexual trafficking including prevention and intervention recommendations. Panelist Lynne Johnson explained to the audience that CAASE works with elected officials, public-opinion shapers and allies to improve the community's response to sexual exploitation. CAASE promotes policy and advocacy reforms that will hold perpetrators of sexual harm accountable and create resources for survivors of prostitution, sex trafficking and sexual assault. CAASE is the lead agency for End Demand Illinois (EDI), a statewide campaign that seeks to address how law enforcement and community responses to pimps, traffickers and johns through legislation. Ms. Johnson stated that it is critical to refrain from convicting young women who are in

⁹ Knight, M. (2011). Campaign Against Sex Trafficking is Gaining. *New York Times*. August 13th

desperate need of kindness and understanding treatment after already enduring dehumanizing situations.

Panelist Marian Hatcher cautioned the audience not to confuse human trafficking and prostitution as being the same thing. MS. Ng stated that “Generally, prostitution implies that someone is acting of their own free will and the term ‘prostitute’ is filled with negative connotations. Human trafficking automatically implies that someone is not acting of their own free will and is either a victim of force, fraud, and coercion or is under the age of 18.” Ms. Hatcher also explained that sexual abuse, physical abuse and emotional abuse have become pathways for criminality for women.

Girls and young women who are runaways and homeless are especially vulnerable to being trafficked. Substance abuse and educational delays can expose girls and women to the risks of being sexually exploited and abused. Many victims experience overt violence that is never reported. For example, many trafficked victims have reported having to trade sex with law enforcement to prevent arrests and going to jail. Therefore, it is necessary for advocates who are working towards eliminating human trafficking to address and develop policy efforts that will deprive law enforcement of tools to criminalize sexual abuse victims. In addition, law enforcement needs to be held accountable for any sexual exploitation of those victimized by the sex industry.

Panel 3: From Corrections to Community: Prenatal and Parenting Support for Incarcerated Mothers and Their Children

Moderator: Dr. Patricia O'Brien, Associate Professor, Jane Addams College of Social Work. Panelists: Deanne Benos, Former Assistant Director, Illinois Department of Corrections & Elaine Austin, Former Prisoner.

The third panel informed the audience that jails and prisons rarely offer gender informed practices and policies. According to the panelists, as a result of this shortcoming, women suffer from mental and physical health problems during incarceration or such issues become exacerbated. Since the majority of state prisoners are men (i.e. in 2014, there were 45,390 male prisoners and 2,888 female prisoners)¹⁰ women are held in one or two institutions that are in geographic locations typically far from the support of their families and friends.

The relatively small number of incarcerated women in comparison to incarcerated men is used by policy makers to validate providing limited gender specific programs and services for women. The programs women do receive are often derived from male centered models that neglect to address the unique and specific needs of female offenders such as addressing histories of abuse and domestic violence

Ms. Benos informed the audience that most women who enter the justice system are not violent, yet the system focuses on women who are violent without addressing the trauma they endured as victims of intimate partner violence. While this is indicative of a dearth of resources for women who are victims of violence, it also implies that women who are not violent may not receive any program assistance while incarcerated. She also noted that gender responsive programming frequently lacks adequate funding and therefore goes in and out of vogue. Ms. Austin asserted

¹⁰Carson, E.A. (2015). Prisoners in 2014. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics

that women in prison are a low priority when it comes to services in comparison to the services men in prison receive. During her incarceration, she felt that most incarcerated mothers were motivated to change their lives to benefit their children, however, programs and services were frequently discontinued and provided ephemeral support.

During the third panel, formerly incarcerated women from the audience shared reflections about their experiences. Although their lives back in their respective communities have become stable, their testimonies about their past involvement in the criminal justice system included a sensitive discussion about the guilt, anger and shame that mothers endure due to being incarcerated and disconnected from their families. During these very powerful moments, many speakers and audience members expressed themselves using faith based and religious expressions as coping and survival mechanisms and identified sources of support. One audience member captured the religious and spiritual sentiment by stating that due to the lack of resources available for women in prison and returning from prison, all they have to rely on is their faith in God.

The World Café Session

The afternoon of the conference began with a World Café session to elicit ideas and input on problems and issues that can be the basis for future organizing and mobilization. The World Café method is a simple, effective, and flexible format for hosting large group dialogue. The process begins with the first of three or more twenty minute rounds of conversation for the small groups seated around a table. At the end of the twenty minutes, each member of the group moves to a different table and begin dialogue about a new theme or topic identified by the organizers of the event. Participants may or may not choose to leave one person as the “table host” for the next

round, who welcomes the next group and briefly fills them in on what happened in the previous round. After the small groups, individuals are invited to share insights or other results from their conversations with the rest of the large group. The World Café session experience at the conference was valuable in two ways. First, individuals involved in sessions were able to tap into the perspectives of women who had experienced being in jail and prison. Viewpoints of former prisoners are important because the narratives and depictions by administrators often contradict that actual experiences of prisoners. Second, sessions allowed dialogue between former and current parole officers, probation officers and criminal justice administrators.

The Conclusion of the Conference

The conference concluded with a brief award ceremony. Dr. Joseph Strickland explained to the audience that even though the State of Illinois has one of the highest rates of recidivism in the U.S., there are former prisoners who reenter communities successfully.¹¹ The Policy Center and conference community partners wanted to highlight that successful re-entry is possible by providing recognition to women who have successfully reintegrated back into society. The conference planning committee solicited input from their clients, members or constituents to identify 16 women to receive two types of awards- “Community Leadership” and “Enduring Spirit”. Each of the conference community partner organizations submitted the name of one recipient for the Community Leadership award and three recipients for the Enduring Spirit award. The Community Leadership award honored women who have successfully re-entered into the community and have become leaders within their respective communities. The core

¹¹Illinois prisons held 150 percent of their maximum capacity in 2014, the highest rate of crowding of any prison system in the country, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Bryant Jackson-Green, October 13, 2015, <https://www.illinoispolicy.org/illinois-leads-nation-in-overcrowded-prisons/>

criteria for the Community Leadership award were women the promotion of positive morale through a congenial, supportive attitude and provision of service to other former prisoners. The Enduring Spirit honored women for their positive transformation after incarceration. The core criteria for the Enduring Spirit award focused on the exemplification and demonstration of post-prison transformation to healthy lifestyles and enhancement of the image of citizens with criminal backgrounds. The following individuals were recognized at the conference:

Community Leadership Recipients

Angalia Bianca
Eroica De Real
Christina Escalera
Belinda McKinley

Enduring Spirit Award Recipients

Ariel Crowder
Rhonda Bryant
Tammy Johnson
Kathy Allen
Patricia Austin
Colette Payne
Jennette Fisher
Brittany Harris
Sherri Keyes
Joan Roberts
Vallori Thomas
JaQuala Yarbro

Lessons Learned

The “Transforming Justice: Mobilizing Incarcerated Mothers and Young Women through Community Action” conference provided insightful and significant information from the panelists and audience. Listed below is a summary of current problems and issues that were raised and participant and panelist recommendations on how those problems should be addressed through new or adapted policies.

Current Problem or Issue	Recommendation
Many women who are convicted because they were sex workers are victimized by human traffickers and then by the criminal justice system.	Laws and policies need to be implemented to protect women from harm, exploitation and coercion in the community and in the criminal justice system.
The lack of resources and opportunities available to girls who become disconnected from the mainstream pushes them into survival mode and results in involvement in illegal activities.	Human service and resource safety nets need to be developed for girls who drop out of school, run away from home and who are exploited. Landing platforms for girls and women leaving jails and prison must be developed so they do not return to the same environment that put them at risk.
There is a lack of collaboration and communication from the criminal justice system and the formal and informal resources needed to prevent girls from entering the system and assist women who are in jails and prison.	There needs to be more organized collaboration between family households, communities, schools, faith-based institutions and informal social networks to both prevent girls from entering the criminal justice system and to nurture women through the criminal justice system.
Unjust social, political and economic systems that generate race-based inequalities have produced disproportionate incarceration of women of color.	Structural violence and racism need to be addressed through systemic and cohesive support structures.
Women are released from jail or prison without any official identification that would allow them to obtain a job, place to live or public benefits.	Women should not be released from prison without identification and with the mark of a criminal. The documentation needed to reenter society should be provided before they leave the institutions.
Due to violent encounters before and during incarceration, women are exposed to triggers for episodes of trauma that many times go untreated during or after prison.	There is a cycle and downward spiral for women who experience trauma, therefore resources should be provided before, during and after prison to treat women who are experiencing episodes of trauma.
Social taboos make women avoid discussing interpersonal violence and sexual abuse and therefore prevent women from seeking and receiving treatment.	It is critical to confront taboos and discuss the presently “undiscussed” issues as it relates to sexual abuse and trauma so that proper treatment can be designed and dispensed.
Correctional institutions, schools and communities lack spaces for girls and women to discuss sexual abuse without being stigmatized or traumatized.	Institutions and communities need to create safe places for girls and women to have conversations about abuse and trauma.
Pre-release and post release services are not aligned and connected to promote successful re-entry.	There needs to be a continuum of reintegration designed that facilitates successful re-entry in the community.
Policymakers are making critical decisions about jails and prisons without have attended any training to make an informed decision.	Elected officials should be provided training so that they are qualified to make policy decisions about jails and prisons.