

The Economic Security of Female Former Offenders

There are currently over one million women in the criminal justice system, two hundred thousand of them confined in state and federal prisons or local jails.¹ This incredible number reflects the nearly seven percent increase in women arrested in the U.S. since 1998.² Often, the consequences of these women's convictions far outlast time spent in confinement or on parole and reach deeply into the lives of their families. Female former offenders often face multiple barriers to obtaining a family-supporting income. Entering job training or employment is difficult given the bias these women face, but it is made even more so given the care giving responsibilities and histories of physical abuse many of them face.

Former female offenders struggle to find self-supporting employment after their release.

- A year after prison, 60 percent of former prisoners were not employed in the regular labor market.³

There are significant legal barriers to female former offenders entering or re-entering the workforce.

- Since the 1990s, various levels of government have created more post-conviction penalties, making it harder for women leaving prison to find employment, education and housing.⁴
- In most states, employers can deny jobs to anyone with a criminal record, regardless of work history or how long ago they were convicted. State laws can also keep past prisoners from getting licenses in different types of professions.⁵
- Federal law prohibits people with drug convictions from receiving food stamps or other forms of state assistance.⁶
- All forms of federal tuition assistance are unavailable to a person with a drug conviction, making further education difficult.⁷

Many former female offenders must also cope with personal hardships that further complicate their search for employment or further job training.

- Over half of female offenders reported being abused prior to incarceration, both as children and as adults.⁸
- In 2004, 42.8% of female offenders in federal prisons were in need of drug rehabilitation.⁹
- Over half of female inmates reported having a current medical problem. The most commonly reported problems were arthritis, asthma and hypertension.¹⁰

Female Former Offenders, cont.

Female former offenders often have family care giving responsibilities as well as financial responsibilities. Therefore, child care can compound the difficulties of achieving education, training, or employment.

- The number of children under 18 with a mother in prison has more than doubled since 1991.¹¹
- More than six in 10 mothers reported living with their children just prior to incarceration.¹²
- Over half of inmates are parents, and between 1991 and 2007, the number of parents held in state and federal prisons increased by 79 percent. The likelihood of being a parent for white, black and Hispanic women did not vary by race.¹³
- Mothers in the criminal justice system were three times more likely to report living in a single parent household than in a two parent household.¹⁴
- 52 percent of mothers reported that they provided primary financial support for their minor children prior to incarceration. Of those mothers who provided primary financial support, more than 60 percent were employed in the month before their arrest.¹⁵
- Mothers in state prison most commonly said that the child's grandmother was the current caregiver.¹⁶

Sources

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