



Female Former Offenders: Overcoming Barriers to Employment

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Achieving a family-supporting salary has been made increasingly difficult by the realities of the current economy. Many female former offenders who already had one or more barriers to employment prior to their incarceration face further complications to attaining economic security after release. Given the economy, this growing group of women is more likely than ever to need assistance for a stable and ultimately successful re-entry into the workforce – assistance that fully recognizes the interconnectedness of their challenges to employment.

The number of women arrested in the United State in the last ten years has seen a nearly seven percent increase, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), making women the country's fastest growing prison population. In fact, one million women are currently in the criminal justice system, two hundred thousand of whom are confined in state and federal prisons or local jails.

The consequences of these women's convictions will likely far outlast the time they spend in custody. The cultural bias against them is strong and, when it comes to employment, sometimes legally sanctioned. Since the 1990s, various levels of government have created greater post-conviction penalties than existed previously, making it harder for women leaving prison to find employment, education, and housing. For example, in the majority of states, employers can deny jobs to anyone with a criminal record, regardless of work history or how long ago they were convicted. According to the Legal Action Center (LAC), which fights discrimination against individuals with criminal records and works to protect their rights, state laws can also keep past prisoners from getting licenses in several professions.

A recent report by the Women's Prison Association (WPA), an organization committed to helping female former offenders through service and advocacy, says that sixty percent of former female prisoners were not employed in the regular labor market one year after their release. Negative cultural bias, however, is only one part of the equation.

As female former offenders often have family care giving and financial responsibilities, their struggle to find and maintain employment has an enormous impact on families across the country. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) says that the number of children under eighteen with a mother in prison has more than doubled since 1991 – such that over half of prison inmates are parents. (The likelihood of being a mother did not vary by race.) Their family responsibilities are especially important given that 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, says the BJS, and over half of these mothers report that they provided primary financial support for their minor children prior to incarceration.

Many incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women recognize the importance of their economic security, not only to themselves but to their families. This is demonstrated by the BJS fact that sixty percent were employed in the month before their arrest and that women enroll in higher numbers than men for education and training while in prison. These programs are often run by committed, creative programs such as Vermont Works for Women in Winooski, Vermont and the North Lawndale Employment Network in Chicago, Illinois, which provide meaningful training and counseling. Unfortunately, the WPA reports

that there are simply not enough slots in education programs like Adult Basic Education, General Equivalency Diploma (GED) prep, GED, and college courses to include all the women who wish to enroll.

If female offenders can't take advantage of education and training opportunities during their confinement, getting such services afterward can be very difficult. Former offenders are not eligible for Pell grants from the federal government and all forms of federal tuition assistance are unavailable to a person with a drug conviction.

It is critically important to acknowledge the intertwined barriers faced by female former in order to ensure not only an effective re-entry but long-term success and low rates of recidivism. Their need for education or employment services as well as their care giving responsibilities must be considered. In many cases, an additional layer of support is also necessary to deal with personal hardships faced by the individual women. Over half of female offenders reported to the LAC in 1999 that they were abused prior to incarceration, both as children and as adults. Over half are also coping with a medical problem, such as arthritis, asthma or hypertension, according to 2004 BJS data, and over forty percent were in need of drug rehabilitation. Brenda Palms Barber, Chief Executive Director of the North Lawndale Employment Network, a social enterprise helping former offenders achieve and succeed in employment, says dealing with the depression and lack of self-esteem such a strong social stigma can create is another important aspect of successful re-entry.

Conviction, and the subsequent stigma and legal impediments, present significant obstacles to economic security. The addition of care giving responsibilities and, often, histories of abuse or ill-health make attaining family-supporting employment no easy goal for female former offenders in the U.S. It is clear, however, that many of these women have the desire and drive to partner with advocates and organizations dedicated to helping them and their families achieve a stable life. The high rate of unemployment across the country creates an even greater need for these programs, especially those who deal holistically with the many barriers to employment faced by female former offenders.

To learn more about female former offenders or relevant organizations, please check back in early April for the full Female Former Offenders issue of We Work!, Women Work!'s quarterly magazine.