

Sexual Violence Awareness Fact Sheet

Women in Prison

Overview

Incarcerated women present a unique challenge to advocates. Limited access to resources, myths and stigmas attached to incarcerated women, and the prison system itself make it tremendously difficult for victims who are incarcerated to receive the support and services they need. As the number of women in prison continues to increase, so does the need for advocates to understand how to work with this population.

The number of women in state and federal prisons is at an all-time high and growing fast. According to the Justice Department, there were 103,310 women in state or federal prisons in 2004, compared to 12,300 in 1980. *Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bulletin, Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2004 and Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 1994.*

Thirty-nine percent of female inmates in state prisons and nearly 23 percent of females in federal prisons reported being sexually abused before they were incarcerated. Another three to six percent reported that someone had tried unsuccessfully to rape them. *Bureau of Justice Statistics, Selected Findings, Prior Abuse Reported by Inmates and Probationers, April 1999.*

Women who are incarcerated may also experience sexual abuse while in prison, most likely perpetrated by male prison guards. The rates of rape against women vary among institutions. In one facility, 27 percent of women reported a pressured or forced sex incident, while in another facility, seven percent of women reported sexual abuse. *Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape, Pinnacle, Fall 2004/Winter 2005.*

Sixty-three percent of women in state prison and 67 percent of women in federal prison are Black or Hispanic. *Bureau of Justice Statistics, Special Report, Women Offenders, December 1999.*

Women who are incarcerated often have a variety of issues that complicate their situation – past abuse, abuse within the system, separation from children and family, living in a system designed for men that affords little, if any, privacy. In most prisons, guards have total authority, and the women cannot even take care of their basic hygiene needs in a secure atmosphere free from intrusion. In the name of security, male guards can take down or look over a curtain, walk into a bathroom, or observe a woman showering or changing her clothes. All of these factors make the need for effective advocacy services even more important for this vastly underserved group.

Support for this fact sheet provided by Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services Grant 05-F3476SA04 and Office on Violence Against Women-Sexual Violence Grant 2004-SWAX0060.



Myths

Fact:
Given their circumstances, many women in prison may not have seen committing the crime as a choice, but rather as a necessity to survive.

Myths about women who are incarcerated can make it more difficult for them to access and receive appropriate services if they have experienced sexual violence. They may fear being stereotyped based on these myths or they may have internalized the myths and believe these things are true themselves. As advocates, it is important to understand these myths and the realities in order to provide appropriate services.

Myth: *All women in prison are the same.*

Fact: Women in the prison system come from a variety of backgrounds and cultures and can be of any race and economic position. While we often see profiles of women in prison, it is important to remember that each one is an individual with different experiences, different beliefs and different needs. Be sure to assess the individual woman's situation and needs to determine appropriate services.

Myth: *Women in prison chose to commit the crime.*

Fact: While this is true in some cases, it is important to understand the situation behind the crime. Some women are incarcerated for killing or attempting to kill an abusive partner in order to protect themselves and/or their families. Many women report engaging in illegal activities to support themselves, their children, their parents, and/or their partners. Given their circumstances, these women may not have seen committing the crime as a choice, but rather as a necessity to survive.

Myth: *All women in prison committed violent offenses.*

Fact: According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 28 percent of women in state prisons and seven percent of women in federal prisons committed a violent offense. The vast majority of women are incarcerated on property, drug or public-order offenses (D.U.I., etc.). Further, when women do engage in violent crime, it is often fundamentally different than when men commit similar crimes. Women are much more likely to kill a male partner than to kill anyone else. Women are much more likely to kill in self-defense in response to their male partner's physical aggression and threats, and recidivism rates for such crimes are extremely low. That is, it is unlikely that a woman will commit another homicide.

Myth: *Our center's funding doesn't allow us to work with incarcerated/criminally charged women.*

Fact: Unfortunately, the guidelines for VOCA (Victims of Crime Act) funds prohibit utilizing these funds to provide services to women who are incarcerated. However, agencies can ensure support for work with incarcerated survivors by diversifying their funding base and ensuring that each staff position is supported, at least in part, by a different funding source. Religious organizations, for example, have historically been very supportive of funding work with people who are incarcerated and may be responsive to requests for funding for this work. It is important to remember that sexual violence services are for all survivors of sexual violence, and many women who are incarcerated are also survivors of sexual violence.

Barriers

Separation from family support

Half of all women in prison are incarcerated more than 100 miles from their families and children (Source: A Portrait of Women in Prison, Women's Prison Association). In many cases, families and children help provide the support and strength women need to seek help. Separation from these supports can lead to isolation and continued internalization of issues related to abuse, as it can be difficult to form similar trusting and supportive relationships within the prison system.

Advocates can reach out to the survivor to provide resources and services to the best of their abilities. One way that this can be done is through written correspondence—letting the survivor know that there is someone on the “outside” who is supportive and willing to help them address their experience of sexual violence.

Restrictions on personal freedoms

Prison systems by nature are very restrictive. Women who are incarcerated are often not allowed access to a telephone to call a hotline or seek services when they need support. Resources and support systems within prisons are very limited and there are few options for a victim who is incarcerated and in need of support.

Advocates can work with the prison system to establish protocols that allow some level of service provision or access to sexual violence and peer counseling.

Survival skills

Female inmates often present themselves as strong in order to survive. They are often reluctant to show any vulnerability, and it is extremely difficult for them to find someone to trust and confide in.

As is true with any group, it is even more vital that advocates create the safest place possible when facilitating a group or training within the prison system. At the very least, it is important to be aware what level of confidentiality and safety is possible for a group setting within the prison system and to ensure all group members are aware of those parameters. This way, the client may make an informed decision about what she shares.

Fear of retaliation

The majority of women who are incarcerated and experience sexual abuse within the prison system are abused by male guards (Source: Stop Prisoner Rape). The guards have an excessive amount of power over inmates and some may use sexual violence as a way to manipulate and control an inmate. Victims often do not talk about the abuse for fear of retaliation by the guards.

It is important for advocates to remember that reporting an incident of sexual violence can often be a difficult decision for anyone and increase the risk to the survivor. Sexual violence perpetrated by a guard exemplifies this risk. Often after reporting, the victim is identified as a “snitch” by other inmates and guards and may be at risk of being seriously harmed. It is vitally important that advocates become familiar with the specific prison system and its administration and utilize outside resources such as Stop Prisoner Rape to best determine how to handle these situations.

Half of all women in prison are incarcerated more than 100 miles from their families and children.

Separation from these supports can lead to isolation and continued internalization of issues related to abuse.

Helping

What Crisis Centers Can Do To Make a Difference

- Reach out to the prison system. An advocate's ability to support women who are incarcerated may be limited by the restrictions within the prison system. Regardless, it is important to continue networking with the prison administration and offer services, providing all of the resources you can in order to best serve women who are incarcerated.
- Work with community systems on reentry plans. Women transitioning from prison to communities are faced with a number of challenges, including housing, reuniting with children and family, and employment and economic support. In addition, many still may be struggling with sexual violence issues. It is important for advocates to collaborate with all related community agencies to ensure that advocacy and support are a key part of transition services offered to women as they reenter the community.

Resources

Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance (VSDVAA)

provides technical assistance to advocates wishing to work with survivors within the prison system.

www.vsdvalliance.org

866.3.VSDVAA

Stop Prisoner Rape provides a variety of resources for survivors who are or have been incarcerated, as well as information for advocates and others concerned about the issue of prison rape.

www.spr.org

National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women provides information and resources on how to work with battered women and women who have been criminally charged.

215.351.0010



Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence
ACTIONALLIANCE

1010 North Thompson Street, Suite 202 • Richmond, VA 23230

Phone: 866.3.VSDVAA • Virginia Family Violence & Sexual Assault Hotline: 1.800.838.8238 (v/tty)