

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/understanding-the-needs-of-women-in-the-justice-system>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Last week, the Department of Justice (DOJ) announced a new series of [prison reform initiatives](#), including a push to expand resources for incarcerated women.

The DOJ's new plans suggest a shift in public understanding about the needs of incarcerated women, emphasizing the importance of communication between women and their families, providing treatment for mental illness and drug abuse, and creating more women-specific reentry opportunities.

The announcement comes during a period of unprecedented visibility for justice system-involved women. Vera's recent report, [Overlooked: Women and Jails in an Era of Reform](#), revealed that the number of women in U.S. jails has increased 14-fold since 1970, and [statistics](#) from the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights show that one in four women in the U.S. has an incarcerated family member for black women, it's one in two. Many prison reform organizations and advocates have begun focusing on women's issues including Michelle Alexander, best-selling author of [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#).

Recently, Alexander moderated a panel discussion titled Invisible Woman: The Experience of Women and Girls in the Era of Mass Incarceration at Union Theological Seminary, where she is now a visiting professor. The event took place before the largest audience Union has ever had a testament to what we've lost by erasing women from the conversation on criminal justice reform. During her conversation with panelists [Gina Clayton](#), [Susan Burton](#), [Andrea James](#), and [Teresa Younger](#), Alexander acknowledged the role her own work has had in emphasizing only the experience of men in the criminal justice system:

Alexander encouraged the community to help bring women to the forefront of the justice movement by recognizing their unique and often invisible struggles. For example, one problem facing women is how incarcerated mothers experience stigma differently than fathers. Incarcerated mothers are thought to be careless and negligent, and this affects society's perception of their families. Earlier this year, [Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch said](#), "We know that when we incarcerate a woman we often are truly incarcerating a family, in terms of the far reaching effect on her children, her community and her entire family network."

Additionally, nearly [60 percent of women in state prisons](#) across the country have a history of physical or sexual abuse, and entering the justice system often leads to re-victimization. Vera's report on women and jails explored the many ways in which incarceration traumatizes women, leading to a cycle of trauma for survivors who end up in the system. Returning to society may also be more difficult for women who have experienced abuse before and during prison, as reentry often focuses on the needs of men. Until now, however, there's been little discussion on the specific kind of emotional support necessary for women.

Thanks to popular media like Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* and [Ava DuVernay's 13TH](#), mass incarceration has become a topic of national conversation but even those critical works fail to recognize the experiences of justice-involved women. Efforts like Alexander's panel discussion and the DOJ's new initiatives demonstrate a necessary shift forward so that women can finally be freed from the margins of the conversation and the nation can focus on justice reform for everyone.

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