

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/womens-voices/women-with-lived-experience-in-the-criminal-legal-system-must-lead-the-way>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Women represent the fastest growing segment of our prison population and are incarcerated at twice the rate of men. This phenomenon has required advocates like me to seize opportunities to change perceptions and bring about authentic systemic change.

Women enter the criminal legal system differently than men. We bring with us unaddressed trauma from violence, abuse, substance use, and poverty. We bring all of this into a system that is not equipped to deal with the compounded trauma women face.

Women also do their time differently than men. Research has found that [80 percent of incarcerated women are mothers](#). We parent from behind the walls, despite a system that does everything it can to sever those bonds including policies that terminate parental rights, impose draconian visiting room requirements, and erect barriers to maintaining contact with our children.

Women reenter our communities after incarceration differently than men. When we come home, we are expected to step immediately back into our roles as wives, daughters, mothers, or caretakers, all while juggling the immense and unrealistic demands of parole and probation supervision and establishing safe housing and employment.

The old saying that a woman has to dance backward and in high heels perfectly describes how different things are for women in the criminal legal system than men.

Prison is something I survived, but it is not who I am. It is, however, why I do what I do. Through my experience, I saw things that I knew were wrong with the criminal legal system, and I could not allow them to continue. My aha moment came one day when I saw three generations of women from the same family incarcerated in one facility. How could this possibly be okay? I then began a lifelong commitment to work for systemic change and fight a criminal legal system that considers women disposable.

Advocates like myself work every day to shine a bright light on the issue of women and incarceration. We know better than anyone that when we elevate the voices of women with lived experiences, we can shape and drive new policies. In all the work I do, I encourage outside-of-the-box thinking to develop policies that hold people accountable, while healing and strengthening them at the same time. We must remember that 95 percent of the people we incarcerate eventually come home what we do to them and what we do not do for them comes back to our communities. Left unaddressed and unchallenged, the lifelong collateral consequences, the economic disempowerment, and the ideologies that perpetuate women as less than will continue to undermine our families and communities.

If there is to be real change and an end to the stigmatization of people impacted by system involvement, we must listen to the real experts—those of us with lived experience—and be willing to engage in conversations that make us uncomfortable.

I work to create avenues for other women to bring about systemic change. I am the only formerly incarcerated woman in Maryland thus far who has written policy that has been passed into law. In 2007, I co-authored the Maryland, Got Democracy? campaign that changed our felony disenfranchisement laws and [restored the right to vote to over 50,000 people](#), an action that created a new political landscape in my state. I wrote the 2014 [Baltimore City Ban the Box bill](#) that removed the conviction question on employment applications a bill that levelled the playing field in employment by creating the opportunity for people to compete fairly for a job. In 2018, I led the Maryland campaign that ensured [free and accessible menstrual hygiene products](#) for people who are incarcerated, thus restoring some sense of dignity and reproductive health care. In 2019, I wrote Maryland's [Pregnant Women in Custody Act](#), the first bill in the nation that ended the use of solitary confinement and restrictive housing for pregnant and post-pregnant people who are incarcerated—a practice that was tantamount to punishment for being pregnant. All of these measures came about because of my own lived experience and seeing firsthand how women are treated within the criminal legal system.

Women with real lived experience are the experts, and now is the time for people to listen.

[Read more from our Womens Voices series.](#)

Kimberly Haven is a national leader in the social justice movement. She is an issue-focused expert on topics such as women in prison, women's reproductive justice, conditions of confinement, and voting rights and democracy.

Vera believes in using our platforms to elevate diverse voices and opinions, including those of people currently and formerly incarcerated. Other than Vera employees, contributors speak for themselves. Vera has not independently verified the statements made in this post.

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