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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/correcting-corrections-for-women>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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In recent weeks, the ACLU decided to urge Michigan's Department of Corrections to ban the practice of what many consider to be unnecessarily invasive strip searches that are performed on female prisoners. The concern is that these particular searches are unduly invasive, depart from prevailing institutional practice and may be taking place as a means to humiliate and/or control female prisoners. This critique comes at a time when we have access to, more than ever, important research on system-involved women research that compels us to update our correctional policies, practices and norms so that they more adequately reflect what we know.

What we know is at least two important areas of interdisciplinary research can and should inform policy and practice in Michigan and every other state in the country. First, research shows that women have unique pathways into the system and respond positively when provided with gender responsive services those that account for the unique experiences, perspectives, strengths, and needs of a particular gender group (see the document [Ten Truths That Matter When Working with Justice Involved Women](#)). Second, we know that one of the most common experiences women in prison share is a history of often profound trauma and sexual assault (Browne, Miller & Maguin, 1999). Research in developmental psychology and neuroscience, as well as important feedback from advocates and corrections professionals, continues to teach us that the effects of trauma and sexual assault on victim-survivors are significant and often helped create the context for criminal behavior. Victim-survivors can experience intense feelings of fear and anxiety that can be exacerbated or modulated by the quality of their immediate environment. This has huge implications for prison practices, as various aspects of prison life can function as significant trauma triggers for women, especially but not exclusively those that mimic sexual assault like strip and body cavity searches.

Being trauma informed in corrections requires that we take trauma into account by training staff on ways to be skillful with victim-survivors, including specific ways to avoid re-traumatizing practices, and ways to support prisoners when they have been triggered (Gillece et al., no date; NCTIC, forthcoming). It also requires that we design policies and practices that create psychological and physical safety among female prisoners, both of which translate into safer institutions for staff and prisoners alike. Research shows that the safety created by such services can actually change the brain; diminished stress responses leave room for engagement in recovery and rehabilitation. Many of the survival behaviors women tend to adopt, often unconsciously, to cope with trauma can be managed and prevented if humane, gender responsive and trauma informed policies and practices are implemented consistently.

Strip searches are just the tip of the iceberg. Research on gender and trauma challenges traditional approaches to creating prison safety and offers improved approaches that can transform how we work with male and female offenders. There are a variety of prison practices that are unnecessary and, in addition to being physiologically and psychologically harmful to women, contribute to institutional instability by creating the very behaviors that administrators and staff aim to eliminate. There are also practices that, though quite necessary in current prison environments, can and should be implemented differently in light of what we know about women and trauma.

The pioneering work taking place in different states and agencies to implement gender responsive and trauma informed policies and practices are improving outcomes for women and offer glimpses of a correctional system in the United States that is innovative, effective, and a vehicle for creating sustainable community safety, one human being at a time. Lessons learned have the capacity to transform corrections for women and men and the correctional professionals that do this critically important work. Let's use this spotlight on Michigan as an opportunity to maintain this important national dialogue but also to look at our own systems and take steps to translate research into improved policies and practices.

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