

Women's Substance Abuse, Past Trauma, and Illegal Activity – A Local Perspective

Since the mid 1990s, the number of incarcerated individuals (in jails and prisons) has increased steadily, which has resulted in more of these men and women reentering their community and reintegrating with their family¹. Jurisdictions face a growing challenge to absorb these formerly incarcerated individuals and provide reentry support. While most of these efforts have focused on men, women are being locked up at a greater rate, due primarily to drug use².

Not surprisingly, women differ from their male counterparts in both their pathways into the justice system and the challenges they face as they attempt to reintegrate. Specifically, research has shown the correlation between women having been victims of violence (especially sexual assault, child abuse, and domestic violence) and incarceration³. These gender differences call for treatment that can specifically respond to these needs. One of the leading experts on the needs of incarcerated women, especially those with substance abuse and trauma issues, is Dr. Stephanie Covington. Recently, a local treatment program, the McAllister Institute, received funding from the California Endowment to implement Dr. Covington's curriculum, *Beyond Trauma* (BT), into KIVA (their residential treatment facility for women and children) which targets women leaving jail. The BT curriculum was interwoven into the continuum of services that also included another of Dr. Covington's trauma informed programs, *Helping Women Recover*. SANDAG's evaluation of the program revealed a population that has numerous barriers to overcome in order to successfully reenter the community (90% had a prior arrest). As Table 1 shows, women had very few resources (minimal education and work experience) to obtain a sustainable job upon release, had been arrested several times in the past, and had to overcome a lengthy substance abuse history, as well as a traumatic past.

Table 1
CHALLENGES WOMEN FACE UPON REENTRY

Less than 12 years of education	42%
Unemployed or part-time work history	54%
Average number of prior arrests	4.2 (SD = 2.8)
Experienced at least one of the following:	78%
Sexual Abuse	42%
Physical Abuse	60%
Emotional Abuse	64%
Average number of years using drugs	10.1 (SD = 7.4)
TOTAL	176 - 198

SOURCE: SANDAG's KIVA Final Report, 2006

The outcomes of women who successfully completed treatment and the BT program were encouraging and support combining the treatment of trauma and substance abuse for women. For more information on this evaluation of the BT project, please visit the Criminal Justice Research Web site at SANDAG www.sandag.org/cjc.

¹ Harrison, P. & Beck, A. (2005). **Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2004**. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

² Richie, B., Tsenin, K., & Spatz-Widom, C. (2000). **Research on Women and Girls in the Justice System**. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, The National Institute of Justice

³ Ibid.