

Statement by
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At a hearing on
Female D.C. Code Felons: Unique Challenges in Prison and at Home
by the
House of Representatives Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on
Federal Workforce, Postal Service, and the District of Columbia
July 27, 2010

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the incarceration and release of female D.C. Code felons. I am the director of the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where we have extensively researched prisoner reentry, documented its many challenges, and identified factors that predict both successful prisoner reintegration and recidivism. Our research on male and female incarcerated D.C. Code felons, for example, indicates that they return home in need of health care, drug treatment, jobs, and affordable shelter (Hall et al. 2009; Roman and Kane 2006). We have also specifically examined the unique challenges that women face both behind bars and upon return to their families and communities.

Our cornerstone reentry study, “Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry,” represents the only published empirical research with a sample size sufficient to identify statistical differences in the experiences of women versus men, as well as to isolate factors that predict reentry outcomes for women who are released from

prison. While this research included women returning from prison to Baltimore and Houston, the findings are generalizable to female D.C. Code felons and provide the data and context necessary to inform effective in-prison and reentry planning for this population.

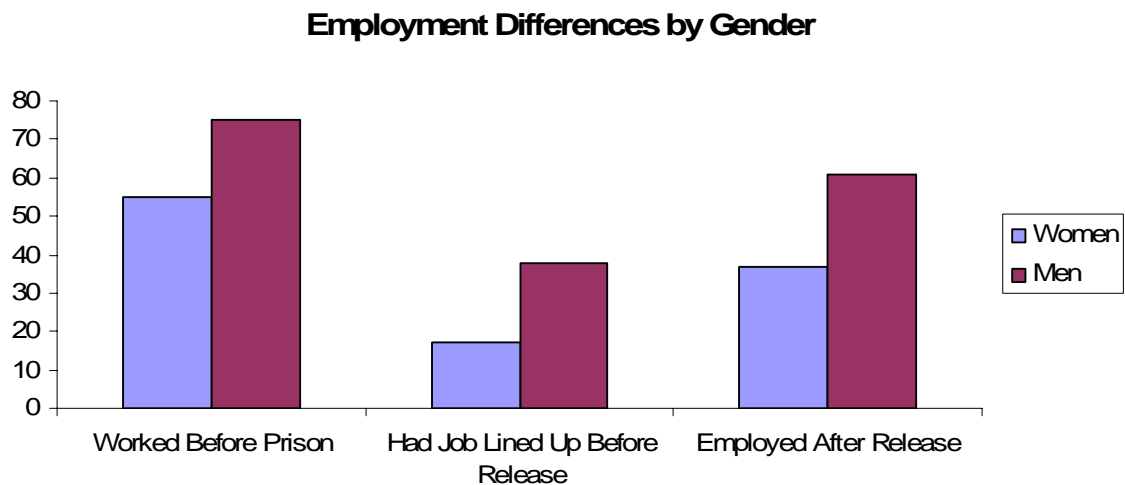
Overall, our findings indicate that while women and men share similar reentry challenges, several factors contribute to the variation in incarceration and reentry experiences for women. Chief among these are differences in substance abuse, mental health, employment histories, and residential stability. Underscoring these challenges—and the potential support systems to help women navigate them—is the role that both family and ties to children play for women returning from prison.

While each woman's story is unique, the broad brushstrokes are quite similar. Women are typically incarcerated for property or drug possession offenses, and are likely to have serious and long-term substance use problems. In Maryland, half of the women we interviewed reported daily heroin use in the six months leading up to their most recent incarceration (compared with slightly more than a third of men) (Visher, La Vigne, Travis 2004). Half of women also reported daily cocaine use during that period, compared with 22 percent of men.

These substance abuse behaviors often co-occur with mental health problems, with depression high on the list of medically diagnosed ailments. Women in Texas, for example, were more likely to be clinically depressed, have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder, and to have been diagnosed with asthma, lung disease, and sexually transmitted diseases than men (La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus 2009). It's no

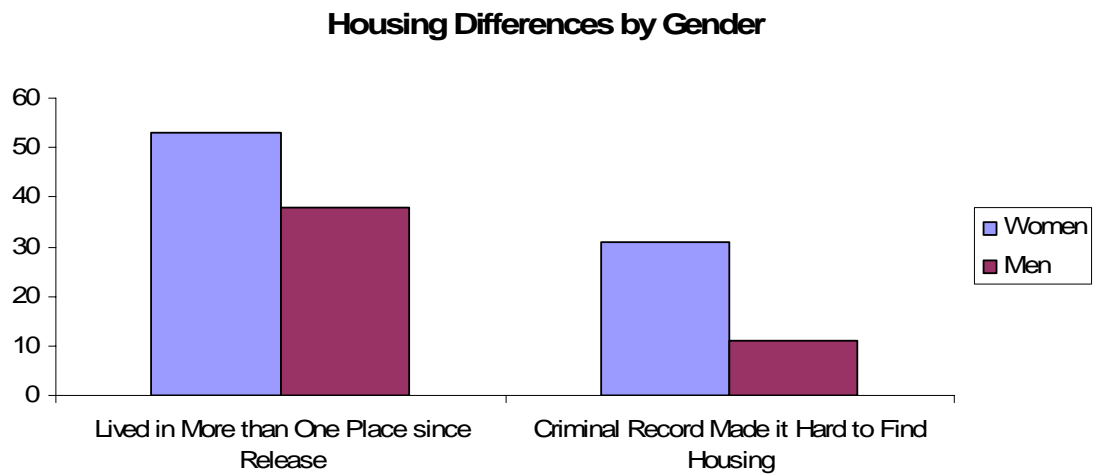
wonder that twice as many women expressed the need for “a lot of help” with their drug addictions after their release than did men.

In terms of supporting themselves financially, the goal of finding and retaining a job during the first several months following release remains elusive for most women. Women are much less likely to have been legally employed prior to their incarceration, to have received job training or to have gained vocational skills while behind bars, and to participate in job placement services and be legally employed following release (La Vigne et al. 2009).



This employment hurdle may explain the fact that women exiting prison report more difficulties meeting their day-to-day financial needs, are almost twice as likely to report earning income through illegal means, and are much more likely to rely on public assistance as a source of income than are men. Even among women who are able to obtain jobs after release, they remain at a disadvantage compared with formerly incarcerated males, earning \$1.50 less per hour on average than their employed male counterparts.

Lack of employment opportunities may also explain why women are more likely to report difficulties in paying for housing. These difficulties lead to higher levels of residential mobility, with women more likely than men to have lived in more than one place since release and also more likely to report difficulty finding housing due to their criminal records.



The unique obstacles that women face during their post-prison reintegration, driven largely by their differences in pre-prison substance use and employment histories, continue to play a role in terms of subsequent criminal behavior. In the months following their release from prison women are more likely than men to engage in drug use, to have problems stemming from drug use, and to have partners who drink or use drugs daily. Perhaps not surprisingly, women are almost twice as likely as men to be back behind bars in a year's time, typically due to a drug-related offense or a property offense driven by addiction problems (La Vigne et al. 2009).

The data presented thus far paint a grim picture for women's prospects of successful reintegration and rehabilitation. But while the challenges are great, opportunities exist that are often overlooked for this population. Perhaps the most

promising opportunity is the role that family support, both tangible and emotional, can play in successful reentry. Our reentry studies have found that families are an important influence on the reentry process, with higher levels of family support linked to higher employment rates and reduced recidivism following release (La Vigne, Visher, and Castro 2004; Visher et al. 2004; La Vigne et al. 2009). Fortunately, women report roughly the same degree of family support as men, although the source of that support is quite different, with men relying on female family members (mothers, aunts, sisters, grandmothers) and women more likely to rely upon their children (La Vigne et al. 2003). Indeed, incarcerated women's relationships with their children represent the single greatest difference between them and their male counterparts. When we interviewed men and women behind bars prior to their release, we asked them, "What are you most looking forward to after your release?" The differences in responses by gender were stunning: the top responses for men tied between "calling my own shots" and "pizza," while the overwhelming majority of women responded, "reuniting with my children." Clearly women's ties to their children can serve as an incentive to refrain from substance abuse and criminal activity.

These ties to and support from families, however, are not a given. Rather, they are closely linked to the nature and type of contact prisoners have with their family members—parents, intimate partners, children—prior to their release. Our research has found that in-prison contact with family members is predictive of the strength of family relationships following release (Naser and La Vigne 2006). Other studies have shown that family contact during incarceration is associated with lower recidivism rates (Adams and Fischer 1976; Glaser 1969; Hairston 2002; Holt and Miller 1972; Klein,

Bartholomew, and Hibbert 2002; Ohlin 1954). Such contact can maintain or reinforce attachments to children, giving exiting prisoners a greater stake in conformity upon release. This could yield major benefits, as we have learned that exiting prisoners who have strong positive attachments to their children tend to be legally employed for longer periods than those who have weaker ties to their kids (Visher, Debus, Yahner 2008).

Maintaining and even strengthening family ties during incarceration can bolster the positive impact that family can have after a prisoner's release. But D.C. Code felons are typically housed hundreds of miles from their families, and in the case of women, significant shares are incarcerated in Texas and Florida (Pelzer 2006). It stands to reason that the farther these prisoners are housed from their homes, the less contact they will have with family.

As already described in hard numbers, women have different experiences from men, both behind bars and in the community. They face reentry challenges with fewer skills and more deficits, and those differences are manifested in higher rates of relapse and recidivism. All this suggests that a focus on women as a distinct subpopulation of persons reentering society is critical to the development of effective policies and practices. Specific to this hearing, I would encourage the members of the subcommittee to consider measures to ensure that female D.C. Code violators are housed in prisons close to their homes. Doing so will enhance the ability of incarcerated mothers to maintain contact with their children, which research indicates is a critical factor in successful reintegration. A closer proximity of these incarcerated women to their communities will also aid women in linking to the substance abuse treatment and mental health services that they so critically need to successfully reintegrate. In the meantime,

efforts to connect prisoners to postrelease service providers through video conferencing should be supported and expanded to include communications with family members.

Thank you for your time. I welcome any questions you may have.

Note

The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

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