

Professor Voices — Incarcerated women need help through criminal justice reform, too

Mar. 8th, 2016

 Send to Kindle



The public demand for criminal justice reform in the United States has grown exponentially over the past couple of years, evident in media coverage and the current presidential election. Incarcerated people of color and imprisoned non-violent drug offenders are often cited as examples of the Department of Justice's flaws — however, some experts believe that another group deserves significantly more attention in these DOJ reform conversations: women.

One such expert is Boston University professor Danielle Rousseau. An expert on criminology, justice policy and women's studies, Rousseau serves as an assistant professor of criminal justice at BU's Metropolitan College (that boasts the nation's top-ranked criminal justice online graduate program). She also serves as the faculty coordinator for BU MET's Prison Education Program, which offers undergraduate courses to inmates at area prisons.

Rousseau discussed the need to reform the criminal justice system to better serve women in the following Q&A:

Q: Can you talk a little bit about women's experience in the U.S. criminal justice system?

DR: The issue of mass incarceration and the need to address disparities in the justice system are important public policy issues that deserve significant

attention. Within that, it is crucial to recognize that women's experience within the U.S. criminal justice system is unique from men's and needs to be approached as such.

Women make up less than 10 percent of the incarcerated population both globally and within the United States (currently the federal rate of incarceration for women is 7 percent). However, this has unexpected consequences. For example, because there are fewer women than men in the prison system, there are fewer prisons that house women. Thus, in some states (such as Massachusetts) there may be only one facility serving women, and as a result, women are often sent further from their communities of origin, making it difficult or even impossible for children and family to visit. This takes women away from potential support networks.

It is important to also remember that women in the prison system tend to come from low-income households and are often survivors of violence. They are typically undereducated, and are disproportionately women of color. Women are significantly more likely to be the primary caretaker of children upon entering prison than men, and thus the impact of incarceration reaches beyond the individual, deeply affecting families and imparting a multi-generational cycle of trauma. Women also face distinct health and mental health issues, such as pregnancy and postpartum-related disorders.

Q: Why do you think women, as a demographic, are often overlooked when politicians and activists discuss the need for this reform?

DR: Women are often overlooked because on the surface, they make up a small part of the criminal justice puzzle. In reality, though, women's experience in the criminal justice system has an immense effect on future generations of our society. The incarceration of women has an immediate and direct impact on their children. Thus, women's incarceration can result in a cycle of systemic involvement from one generation to the next. We need alternative pathways and

examples. We need trauma-informed approaches that are intergenerational. Think of how incredible it would be for these women to have tools for resilience — for both personal empowerment and for the empowerment of their children.

Q: Is it true that one of the country's fastest-growing rates of incarceration is among women?

DR: Yes. Policy changes and enforcement practices, including the “War on Drugs,” have led to an increase in female incarceration. Historically, there has been a negative shift in the treatment of women within the criminal justice system, from rehabilitation and reform to imprisonment and punishment. The majorities of these women are in prison for nonviolent offenses and often are suffering from trauma, substance abuse, and mental health issues. These women are in need of care, but instead end up in the criminal justice system where they often do not receive the treatment that they so critically need.

Q: What can be done to address this alarming trend? How can the U.S. criminal justice system better serve women?

DR: We need to implement empirically based approaches that are gender-responsive and trauma-informed, and we need to do so across the board. Some recommendations:

- Prisons need to recognize and address ways in which correctional practices can be re-traumatizing.
- Practices should be transparent and predictable, structured and safe.
- Women are relational in nature, and treatment should encourage social connection.
- Policy and practice should promote healthy connections to children and families.
- Issues of trauma and substance abuse must be addressed through approaches that have proven to be effective and culturally competent.

- Mental health must be made a priority.
- Socioeconomic disparities must be addressed and collaborative approaches implemented with a strength-based model in mind.
- There should be a continuity of care —treatment and services should be translated from one system to the next, making successful reentry into the community more possible.
- Prison has become a de facto mental health system. We should explore other, less-restrictive options for treatment where appropriate.

I would argue that many of the practices arising out of the empirical research around trauma-informed care would also significantly benefit men. Appreciating the unique experience of women brings with it an “ethic of care,” and I believe that that would help both genders.

Q: Criminal justice reform has been a large topic of discussion in the United States over the past couple of years. Why now?

DR: This focus is much needed. Policy on criminal justice practices is often like a pendulum, swinging between punitive ideologies on one end to rehabilitative approaches on the other. Programs such as BU’s Prison Education Program often face significant resistance. A common misconception includes the question, “why should inmates receive a college education, when I cannot afford to send my son or daughter to Boston University?” Such a response, while potentially understandable, is limited in its perspective. Schools often provide scholarships for underserved populations and in this case, there are multiple and specific benefits to doing so. Research indicates that correctional education and post-secondary prison education is cost-effective, reduces recidivism, and increases success in areas like employability after incarceration.

Over 95 percent of incarcerated individuals will return back to society. This means we must ask questions — have correctional policies and practices left these individuals in a better place? Has the system addressed their treatment

needs in order to foster personal development and positive change? The answer is often no. Things appear to be moving in a positive direction, but we have a long way to go.

For additional commentary by Boston University experts, follow us on Twitter at @BUexperts and on Instagram at @buexperts.

<http://www.bu.edu/news/2016/03/08/professor-voices-incarcerated-women-need-help-through-criminal-justice-reform-too/>