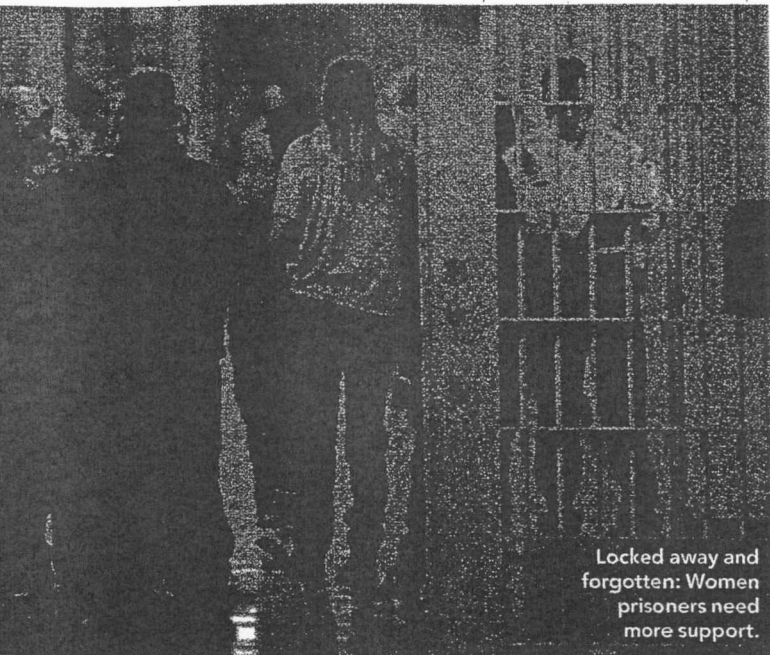


How you can help a woman reach for freedom



Locked away and forgotten: Women prisoners need more support.

This month we'll be celebrating our nation's 228th year of freedom. But thanks to bad luck, bad judgment or a toxic combination of the two, nearly 100,000 American women will strain to catch a glimpse of the fireworks from behind bars.

The female prison population has more than doubled in the past decade, outpacing the rise in the number of incarcerated men. If this rate holds steady, a woman born in 2001 will be six times more likely to spend time in prison than a woman born in 1974. And more than half of women in jail now will get arrested again after they're out.

But that soul-crushing cycle of incarceration, freedom and return to prison can be broken if women prisoners get the right kind of help. Unfortunately, the vast majority don't get the support they need during or after their incarceration. In fact, they get much less of that crucial assistance than male prisoners do.

"In spite of this huge growth of women [prisoners], men are still 90 percent of the system, so when an innovation is developed, it goes into the men's facilities first," says Ann Jacobs, executive director of the Women's Prison Association (WPA), a New York City-based advocacy group. She also notes that men's facilities get first dibs on scarce resources because "women may grumble, but men riot."

It's a terrible irony that incarcerated women may get less help because they are less violent, both inside prison and out. "People turn their backs on women in prison," says Julia Sudbury, an associate professor and ethnic studies chair at Mills College in Oakland, California, and the author of two upcoming books about the global problem of women's imprisonment. "But the vast majority are there for nonviolent offenses," she says, specifying drug-related charges, economic infractions (such as check forg-

ing) and "survival" crimes—women retaliating against violent partners or selling their bodies to feed their families. "Unlike middle-class women with health plans and access to therapy to help them cope with depression, these women often turn to street drugs," says Sudbury.

That's what happened to Carol Haigler, a 39-year-old Bronx, New York, single mother whose life slipped off the rails when she became involved with a physically abusive older man at age 16. Haigler eventually started dealing drugs to feed her own habit and to survive—if you can call that life survival. "I've been shot, stabbed and raped while on drugs," she sadly recounts. "I hated myself." She was imprisoned some half-dozen times on drug-related charges. But during her last prison stint, Haigler received assistance she'd never gotten before: The WPA's Incarcerated Mothers Law Project helped her locate her two sons in foster care and counseled her on how to regain custody when she was released. "I took parenting classes," she recalls. "I took independent living skills. I learned how to live again."

Haigler's success story is not unique. The programs that do exist for women in prison—running the gamut from drug treatment to Shakespeare Behind Bars—often achieve amazing results. One such program, a writing workshop at Connecticut's York Correctional Facility, recently produced a PEN Award-winning author, Barbara Parsons Lane (serving a 25-year sentence for killing her abusive husband). But there are too few support programs to keep women from returning to prison again and again.

You can change the odds for incarcerated women by signing a petition, giving a donation or volunteering as a mentor for a reentry program (the Web sites below have where-and-how info). Here's inspiration: "I really wanted to turn my life around, and the WPA gave me a chance," says Haigler, who has custody of her kids and was eventually hired as a mentor by the WPA. "Now I help recently released women get housing and medical care. I provide referrals and advocate for them. And sometimes I'm just here to sit and listen. I'm able to give back to them what was given to me. That's a good feeling."

For info on how to contribute time or money, go to wpaonline.org, womenprisoners.org or prisonerswithchildren.org. ©

“Without crucial support programs, women return to prison again and again.”