



*Bring my soul out of prison,  
That I may praise Your name;  
The righteous shall surround me,  
For You shall deal bountifully with me."*  
**Psalm 142:7**

*Prison Lullabies  
contains strong  
language and adult  
themes. Mature  
audiences are  
suggested.*

**Prison Lullabies** is the first documentary to take an in-depth look at a prison nursery program and its long-term effects on the women who participate in the program. Filmed at Taconic, a medium security correctional facility located in Westchester County, New York, **Prison Lullabies** follows Amy, Anne Marie, Monique, and Joann, all arrested pregnant, from their time in prison, through their release, and to their re-integration into society.

The nursery program at Taconic is one of only five prisons in the U.S. to provide a nursery program for inmates. The program provides incarcerated women with the opportunity to live with their newborns for 12 to 18 months after birth. The first part of the film documents the four women while they are in prison. They deal with life in prison, try to address the personal issues that led to their incarceration, and learn to be responsible parents. They attend counseling sessions where they reveal and discuss the mistakes they've made and the difficult lives they have lived. They talk openly about their addictions, hopes and fears.

While the women all have other children, this is the first time they have concentrated on parenting. The film shows them struggling to be good parents, but also demonstrates the bond that develops between the mother and child.

They want to put the past behind them and be good mothers to their children, but they worry about what will happen when they are released. The documentary continues to follow the women upon release, as they work to rebuild their lives and care for their children. The women struggle to stay sober, find and maintain employment, and rebuild relationships with their families. In the film, all of the women achieve moments of success and deal with varying degrees of failure. As the film ends, two of the women have returned to prison, one for relapsing and another for failing to maintain her employment. The other women, while continuing to struggle, remain incarceration-free and are raising their children.

**Amy**

Amy, 28, a substance abuser is always concerned about her weight and whether or not she is tan enough. Amy tries to bide her time at Taconic by distancing herself from the other inmates. Amy has not used drugs for a long period of time and she prides herself on the fact that she hasn't "squandered her life on the street." Yet Amy was pregnant when incarcerated and her second child, Carissa, is born in prison. The child's father, Emmanuel, is Amy's drug dealer, crack being her drug of choice. Her son, Paulie, 12, is living with his father.

As her release date nears, Amy's already shaky confidence begins to crumble. She is wracked with doubt and anxiety about her ability to succeed on the outside. "I will not have the walls to protect me," she confides in a starkly intimate moment.

### **Anne Marie**

In her short 34 years, Anne Marie has managed to accumulate a rap sheet of staggering length. Among her crimes: 13 years of prostitution, fraud, grand larceny, and drugs. Her first two children, taken away at birth, were born addicted to crack. A daughter is being cared for by her grandmother. The other child, a son, is adopted.



When Anne Marie talks about her past, it is as if she is talking about someone else's hard times. In a shocking revelation during group counseling, Anne Marie admits that, when she had her second baby, she was not only still using, but managed a hit of crack just before giving birth. That, she says through tears, is the past. The difference for her now is that she is clean. She brought her new son Nicholas into the world with the support and guidance of the prison nursery program. As a result of the birth of her son, Anne Marie was able to reconcile with her parents after a 13-year estrangement.

### **Monique**

"I can't bear to be with women twenty-four-seven," 27-year-old Monique says. Even by comparison with years of hustling, dealing drugs, and living with abusive boyfriends and relatives, Monique shares that she finds prison comparatively intolerable. On the streets, she says, people feared and respected her. At Taconic, she is not feared or respected as the system works to break down her individual spirit. Her aggressive behavior and quick mouth bring reprimands from her counselors and warning tickets from correctional officers. Even the other women threaten her with being "written up" if she doesn't do what's required. While many wouldn't care, Monique knows that she is on dangerous ground. Any more negative reports will get her kicked off the prison nursery floor and back into the general population where she will have no hope of keeping her child.

As months pass, Monique slowly begins to adjust. She relaxes in the prison nursery program and begins to open up about her past, sharing her stories with other women

whom she grows to appreciate and care for. Kareem is Monique's fifth child, but the first that she has had the opportunity to mother. Her first baby died of SIDS and the other three are being raised by her sister.

### **Joann**

"In prison, I have time for myself," declares 31-year old Joann. "On the outside, I was stressed out." Indeed, with four children, the offspring of four different men, and the downward spiral of her own alcoholism and life as a drug dealer, there was not much time left to consider what she was doing to herself or her kids.

Her three-year sentence, the longest of the four women, creates a bitter situation that none of the other women need to experience. While the others will be able to leave prison with their babies, Joann will have her son (child number five), Carmelo, taken from her on his first birthday. One of the unshakable rules of the prison nursery program is that children may only stay with their mothers for 12 months or, upon exception, 18 months if the mother's sentence does not extend beyond that time. Carmelo will join his four half-siblings in upstate New York, where Kathy, a friend of Joann, cares for them.



*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me,  
Because the LORD has anointed Me  
To preach good tidings to the poor;  
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to the captives,  
And the opening of the prison to those who are bound*  
**Isaiah 61:1**

**Prison Lullabies**, and this companion guide, are intended to aid communities of faith, as well as interested secular organizations, in discussing their roles in the successful re-integration of mothers when they leave prison, and in formulating a plan of action. They can begin the process by creating an understanding of addiction, abuse, and other societal issues that contributed to the incarceration of many women, and that continue to affect their lives upon release from prison.

This guide is organized into two parts – for secular and for faith communities – and is a starting point for clergy, lay leaders, and community supporters to welcome and support the thousands of women who are released from jails and prisons each year. The following issues are explored in this guide:

- ❖ **Family** – What can congregations and communities do to assist these mothers with developing their parenting skills?
- ❖ **Education and Employment** – How can faith communities and other supportive agencies assist ex-prisoners in increasing their educational levels, being successful in obtaining and maintaining viable employment, and managing their financial resources?

- ❖ **Housing/Transitional Housing** – What can be done to insure that women who are former prisoners have safe, appropriate housing?
- ❖ **Additional Resources** – Books, Web sites, existing programs, and training create opportunities for further dialogue and provide action steps.

**Suggested Uses for *Prison Lullabies***

Community forums	Parenting classes
Substance abuse recovery	Mentoring programs
Prison ministries	Sermon topics
Halfway Houses	Teen-age parenting classes
Staff retreat/workshop for correctional officers, police officers, probation and parole officers	

## COMMUNITY ISSUES RELATED TO *PRISON LULLABIES*

*Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
Like a weaned child with his mother;  
Like a weaned child is my soul within me.*

**Psalm 131:2**

Unfortunately, the women depicted in *Prison Lullabies* are representative of the many thousands of incarcerated women across the country. Upon release, these women face myriad problems. Most must struggle to find safe, affordable housing, repair strained familial relationships, meet parole obligations, learn parenting skills, care for their children, find and maintain employment, and deal with their addictions. These obligations can be overwhelming and some fail to meet all of them. In fact, it is extraordinarily difficult to meet all of these obligations without some support from community organizations and/or loved ones.

The number of women incarcerated in the United States has increased seven-fold since 1980 and there are currently about 90,000 women in state and federal prisons. Of these incarcerated women, 70% are mothers of children 18 years of age or younger and 6% of them were pregnant at the time of their incarceration. There are approximately 1.5 million children with a parent incarcerated in this country. A child with an incarcerated parent is much more likely to end up incarcerated him or herself. This generational cycle of criminal behavior and incarceration needs to be addressed and halted.

Characteristics of incarcerated women:

- Median Age -- 31
- 53% were unemployed at time of arrest
- 50% were using drug, alcohol or both at time of arrest
- 41% used drugs daily in month prior to arrest
- 44% report previous sexual and physical abuse
- 58% have or have had an immediate family member incarcerated
- 70% had sole custody of their minor children prior to incarceration

The prison nursery program detailed in *Prison Lullabies* is one attempt to support incarcerated mothers and their young children. While the prison nursery program affords women the opportunity to bond with their young children and learn parenting skills, the issues facing many of these women run deep and cannot be solved with one year of parenting training. Support systems need to be in place upon release. The following are some possible ideas for exploration by audiences viewing the video that would be beneficial to incarcerated mothers in a similar program, both while incarcerated and upon release.

### Discussion Questions

- Is the prison nursery program depicted in the film a good idea? How could the program be improved upon?

- Is it good for the mother? For the child?
- Were there any specific criteria for entering the program? Time of sentence? Type of crime?
- What exactly were the supportive programs offered in conjunction with the nursery program? Are parenting classes offered? Can mothers take education and/or job training classes?
- Is prison an acceptable environment for a child to grow up in?
- How much do the institutional aspects of incarceration affect child development?
- What happens on a daily basis in the nursery?
- How much fresh air time do the children get?
- Is it a safe environment?
- Is it conducive to child development to be raised around so many women who are struggling with a number of serious issues?
- How do the women get to choose where the kids go? Is it entirely up to them?
- If they don't have family or a friend who will care for the child, does s/he go to a foster family?

All four women in ***Prison Lullabies*** have other children remaining in the community in the care of friends, relatives, or social service agencies. While Taconic offers a nursery where the mother can bond with and learn to care for her newborn child, the siblings left in the community are not afforded the same opportunity.

The impact of a mother's incarceration on her, her child/ren, and the caretaker can be devastating. The children often feel abandoned, struggle in school, have difficulty making friends, and experience acute emotional and psychological problems. The caretakers often report feeling overwhelmed and unsupported and, because most caregivers are relatives of the family, often the grandparents, they feel emotionally devastated by the incarceration of their loved one. Finally, the mothers not only struggle with the feeling that they have deserted their children, but must also deal with the trauma of incarceration and the prospect of reentering society with a criminal record and the additional emotional baggage of the incarceration experience. Given the complex and interwoven problems faced by the children, caretakers and parents, it is important that services directed at incarcerated mothers be based on explicit knowledge and experience with the issue of incarceration.

According to the Correctional Association of New York's Women in Prison Project, "the incarceration of a caretaking parent often places the children at an increased risk of involvement with the criminal justice system, substance abuse, truancy, and other anti-social behaviors. These children experience greater levels of anxiety, depression, attention disorders, aggression, and poor scholastic performance."<sup>1</sup>

As members of our communities, these women return to us attempting to lead drug-free, law-abiding lives without the necessary support systems in place. Viewing ***Prison Lullabies*** can be the first step towards identifying what actions community groups, faith-based organizations and service providers can take to develop necessary supports for these mothers and their children.

## Incarceration versus Treatment

*As one whom his mother comforts,  
So I will comfort you;  
Isaiah 66:13*

The women depicted in ***Prison Lullabies*** have histories of alcoholism and/or drug addiction. National statistics indicate that 70% to 80% of women in prison are biological mothers and that 95% of these mothers have histories of substance abuse. Although women prisoners typically have different needs than male prisoners, they remain the most neglected and overlooked population in our prison system.<sup>2</sup> Discharge planning for prisoners to prepare them for their release into their communities is the exception rather than the norm. Nationwide, fewer incarcerated individuals are now participating in educational or vocational programs that could help prepare them for reintegration.<sup>3</sup> According to the Correctional Association of New York, "female prisoners receive less than adequate services when they are incarcerated, including deficient family reunification planning..." Furthermore, according to the Correctional Association, during the mother's incarceration, "... visitation with family and friends is the single most important factor in ensuring a prisoner's successful return to society. Prisoners who maintain continuous, quality contact ... while they are incarcerated, for example, are only one-sixth as likely as others to be back in prison a year after their release."

Incarceration isolates the prisoner from her community and family, providing little in terms of holistic, therapeutically sound drug treatment that has the ability to incorporate children and community stakeholders in the recovery process.

### Discussion Questions:

- Should the women portrayed in this documentary be incarcerated or in drug treatment facilities?

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<sup>1</sup> Correctional Association of New York. Women in Prison Fact Sheet. March 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Correctional Association of New York. Women in Prison Fact Sheet. March 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Rand Corporation. Research Brief. Prisoner Reentry: What Are the Public Health Challenges? June 2003.

- Would these mothers and (all) their children be better served within a drug treatment facility capable of working with the entire family?
- What resources exist in our communities to serve these families?
- Is there an action committee in our community advocating for Alternatives to Incarceration?

## **Outcome Possibilities:**

Set up action oriented committees to:

- Investigate the laws concerning drug offenses in your communities
- Research the effectiveness of Alternatives to Incarceration as a means of providing community-based treatment
- Advocate for changes in sentencing laws that punish rather than treat addiction
- Support programs treating the entire family by volunteering as a tutor or mentor

## **Addressing the Employment and Job Readiness Needs of the Formerly Incarcerated Client**

The single-most effective deterrent to crime is employment. However, because of the lack of discharge planning, women are all too often released to the community ill-prepared to enter the workforce or resume parental responsibilities. As Monique said in the film, she never held a “legal” job. Upon release she loses her job because she hasn’t learned the importance of being punctual. This basic concept of being on time and prepared for work is virtually unknown to incarcerated women who do not have a history of employment. Added to this toxic mix are the requirements of parole “to seek and maintain employment” and the reluctance of employees to hire persons with criminal justice histories.

In working with formerly incarcerated clients in the field of employment and job readiness, in addition to many problems encountered with other “hard-to-serve” groups, the service provider will encounter many problems unique to the population. What follows below are descriptions of some of the difficulties faced by this population. The subsequent section details some training, counseling, placement and retention concepts that can be considered in dealing with these issues.

### **Challenges:**

1. Attitude: The typical formerly incarcerated client emerges from a prison environment in which attitudes antithetical to those required in the workplace help ensure daily survival and success. In what is, in essence, a “reverse job training,” individuals are socialized to watch their back and not trust anyone, maintain a flat and distant affect to avoid potential challenge or alternatively be confrontational to enhance stature, avoid any unnecessary interaction with anyone in authority while simultaneously depending on these authorities for the basics necessities of survival (food, clothing, etc), do only what is specifically asked of them and then only to avoid further punishment or tickets, as demonstrated in the group discussion in the documentary when Amy threatens Monique with getting a ticket from the officer, and otherwise to “go along to get along” – to avoid difficulties from those that supervise them.

On their face, these attitudes prevent difficulties with respect to finding and maintaining employment. When these attitudes are coupled with employer demands for “soft skills”, their desire for a demonstration at interview that an individual will “fit in” with other staff, their need to hire individuals with the ability to work collaboratively with fellow employees and supervisors, their mandate that employees be willing to learn on the job and work both entrepreneurially and independently, as well as society’s movement away from a system of entitlements – clearly prisoners leave custody with an enormous set of attitudes learned behind bars that must be changed if they are to succeed in the job world.

2. **Low Self Confidence:** For most formerly incarcerated individuals “the world of work” is either something new or an area in which they have had limited, if any, success. As Monique states, most women in prison have never held a “legal” job prior to their incarceration. Furthermore, they may have committed their offense, self-medicated, or not pursued their own personal growth because of a feeling that they could not ensure their success through means accepted by society.

Their incarceration defined them as apart from “mainstream” society and they have emerged from an experience in which the state has, in essence, told them that they are more fit to be warehoused than worked on. Additionally, they quite often lack personal role models to look to with respect who have come from their neighborhoods and achieved mainstream success after incarceration.

3. **Lack of Viable Work Experience:** Quite simply, long periods on the streets and long periods of incarceration do not allow individuals to build suitable work experience for many jobs. Many members of the population, even those who are trained and skilled, lack the formal work experience to obtain anything but entry - level positions. Employers do not want to pay for someone’s learning curve and they have a hard time believing that the individual truly comprehends what is expected of him/her unless they have successfully done it once before. Clients’ lack of experience, of course, further jeopardizes self-confidence and hampers individuals’ ability to earn a living wage.
4. **Literacy/Formal Education:** Just as many members of this population lack viable work experience, the vast majority of formerly incarcerated persons lack the literacy skills to perform many jobs in today’s economy, and the levels of formal education necessary to qualify in they eyes of employers. According to a State of New York, Department of Corrections survey, 15% of incarcerated women tested scored below the 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. Of the 2902 incarcerated women included in this survey, only 45% scored above an 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level<sup>4</sup>. They quite often lack the basic ability to craft a cover letter or resume even to obtain an interview at a job they could successfully hold.

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<sup>4</sup> Profile of NYS Female Prisoner Population, State of New York Department of Correctional Services, Profile of Inmate Population, January 1, 2003

5. **Hard Skills:** Like literacy and work experience, employers are often not willing to train individuals in the hard skills necessary to work at their places of business. In the instance of the man or woman who were formerly incarcerated, most have little or no skill training or certification – some because they did not make the best use of their time, some because they were moved from institution to institution, others because they had little or no counseling. Even those who do have certifications frequently have not retained their documentation, have certificates that are not industry standard and clearly indicate their ex-inmate status, have been trained in hopelessly out-of- date skills or in an area for which there are few openings or, in some cases, have been prepared for professions from which they are legally barred.
6. **Lack of Salary Realism:** Some members of the population are so committed to turning their lives around that in a rush, they will take any job at any salary. This can create a problem when an individual takes a job that cannot support his or her lifestyle, which again can push them into potentially illegal ways of building income. Quite often, however, a lack of salary realism works the other way, with clients demanding wages well above what their skill set entitles them to at market rate.
7. **Employer Attitudes/Sanctioned Discrimination:** In attempting to place the formerly incarcerated client, the service provider may encounter a bias against his client, even one who has shown growth and made a genuine change. Even the changed formerly incarcerated individual must still labor under their “boogeyman” status and face legal state- sanctioned discrimination, where employment policies have been crafted to keep out those individuals with convictions.
8. **Social Service Needs:** Employment difficulties do not exist in a vacuum. All too often further service is needed to address and treat root causes. These can include related difficulties such as a lack of adequate clothing and housing support. Furthermore, in the case of the formerly incarcerated client, the reality of reentry is that many social services must be pursued at once – quite often causing conflict between appointments to obtain benefits, and the schedule of a job-training program.

## **Program Elements**

To truly help formerly incarcerated individuals succeed in addressing these difficulties, a service provider must create a robust and flexible program that includes soft skills and attitudinal training, hard skills training (or referral to hard skills training), in-program individual, one-on-one counseling, job placement and retention. The service provider must also have the ability to make referrals for those services it cannot provide, such as substance abuse treatment or housing. Issues to consider in establishing such a program include:

- The manner in which individual client's attitudinal hurdles can be identified
- The manner in which individual client skills are identified
- Determining which problems should be addressed in-house as opposed to those that should be solved through referral
- The extent to which written materials should be utilized
- Whether the program should seek to make individuals comfortable and build confidence or challenge them in a safe environment
- The length of the training and its schedule flexibility
- The amount of time spent on traditional soft skills and resume preparation topics and the amount of time focused on exploring and addressing attitudes
- The extent to which the client is assisted in their job search process vs. the extent to which they are empowered by their own efforts
- The minimum qualifications for a client to participate in the program
- The extent to which the training and job search environment focuses on the needs of the employer vs. the social service needs of the client
- The manner in which clients' skills are marketed
- The amount of time spent identifying and targeting open-minded employers as opposed to working to overcome and correct other employers' misperceptions
- The identification of jobs that correlate with individuals skills
- The length of time an individual should be supported and counseled upon obtaining a placement and how that support should be carried out
- Which problems must be addressed before a client can seek work and which can be addressed through ongoing counseling once employment is obtained

## Discussion Questions:

- Are there adequate resources in our community to support formerly incarcerated men and women in developing skills necessary to secure and maintain employment?
- Within our social networks are there potential employers of individuals who were formerly incarcerated?
- What can concerned community advocates do to encourage business leaders to provide on-the-job-training and employment to people who were formerly incarcerated?

## Family

***Prison Lullabies*** demonstrates the need for ongoing parenting sessions for mothers, counseling for children, and mediation sessions with parents and caretakers. While all the women in the documentary have the chance to bond with their newborns, they are ill-prepared to face the demands of post-prison supervision requirements and rebuilding their families. This film demonstrates in numerous ways the need for ongoing substance abuse treatment, as in Amy's case, and for parenting support as is evident in Joann's case.

During a prison visit, Joann clearly exhibits her own neediness in the scene where she reminds her daughter that her birthday has just passed with no recognition from her children. After release, Joann displays frustration and feelings of inadequacy when discussing the difficulty she experiences caring for her children. She clearly lacks effective communication skills and is in a struggle with the caretaker for the children's affection. When visiting Joann in prison, her daughter is obviously distraught when it is time to leave her mother. While back at the caretaker's home, the daughter states she doesn't know whether she wants to return to live with her mother.

The caretaker discussed Joann's absence, in her children's presence, as her making a choice. How would you change this scene? What advice would you offer the caretaker? During her visit in prison, Joann appears indifferent to her child's needs. How could Joann have handled this visit differently? At home, Joann laments that she reads to the children, listens, and cares for them. She may be saying, "I am doing everything I learned in parenting but my children are not responding accordingly!" What suggestions would you give Joann to gain her children's cooperation? What suggestions would you give Joann in dealing with her frustration?

Support systems need to be in place upon release for the mothers and their children such as; parenting, communication skills building, mediation services, respite care, positive and affordable family recreational activities, and support groups for parents and children, both separately and together.

## Discussion Questions:

- What support services can our community provide to children left behind by a mother's incarceration?
- Are there respite services in our community for overwhelmed parents?
- Does our community have a resource book for newly-released prisoners?

## Housing

Housing is among the most pressing needs of someone coming out of incarceration. Some 75% of the women who are released from Taconic will return to New York City to live. Some will return to supportive and stable homes and families; more will return to the same troubled and dysfunctional families that they left when incarcerated. Too many will return to no housing at all. Studies suggest that 30 to 50% of parolees in New York City are homeless following their release.<sup>5</sup> Many others live on the edge of homelessness, as they return to unstable or short-term living arrangements.

The housing challenges faced by women leaving Taconic are mirrored by those facing prisoners who are released across the country. Affordable housing is scarce and much of what is available excludes those with recent criminal convictions. It is extraordinarily difficult to build a new life without a safe and supportive place in which to live, and yet a substantial percentage of released prisoners must struggle to do just that.

## Discussion Questions:

- How stable and supportive were the housing settings that the women in *Prison Lullabies* were returning to?
- How often were they returning to the same environments in which they had previously gotten in trouble?
- What factors in their housing and immediate environment would:
  - Support their successful reentry from prison?
  - Support their reunification with their families?
  - Increase their odds of relapse into drug use and/or return to prison?
- For each of the four women, what do you think the most suitable housing environment would have been upon release from prison? How did reality compare?

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<sup>5</sup> Joan Petersilia. When Prisoners Return to the Community: Political, Economic, and Social Consequences. *Sentencing and Corrections*, November 2000.

## **Outcome Possibilities:**

Set up action-oriented committees to:

- Investigate the percentage of prisoners released to homelessness or unstable living conditions in your communities
- Explore the options for supportive and/or affordable housing available to released prisoners. How many of them preclude individuals based on nature of conviction? How many of them require a track record such as months of “clean time” on the streets, thus precluding individuals who have just been released from prison?
- Conduct an experiment with one or more teams. Imagine that you are just out of prison, have succeeded in landing a job at \$8.50 an hour (nicely above the minimum wage) and have 30% of your gross annual income available for rent (the federally recommended standard). Conduct a search of the housing opportunities in your community to see what options are available. Conduct a field trip to personally view the options that you find. Walk around the neighborhood at different times of day (at the time you would go to work, when your children would come home from school, when you would come home from work, when you would go grocery shopping in the evening). What is happening in the neighborhood at those times? If you lived there as a single adult, what would your chances be of remaining free of relapse, becoming a crime victim or returning to prison? What would work for you and what would work against you? If you were a mother with three children living in one of those options, what would living there be like for you; for your children? What challenges would your family face and what resources would you have to address them?
- What unmet housing needs do you see in your community, and what recommendations would you make to address them?

# FAITH-BASED ISSUES RELATED TO *PRISON LULLABIES*

## FAMILY STRENGTHENING

### *Home to the Exile*

You are home to the exile  
touch to the frozen  
daylight to the prisoner  
authority to the silent  
anger to the helpless  
laughter to the weary  
direction to the joyful:  
come our Lord, come.<sup>6</sup>

Janet Morley

When a woman is incarcerated, the impact on her children is significant. Any stability they may have experienced is snatched away in an instant. Their primary caretaker is abruptly removed from their lives. They are removed from their home and familiar surroundings, often to be placed with strangers and separated from their siblings. In many instances, they do not even see their mother for a long period of time.

- Kathy (who is the caregiver of Joann's children, when asked how she is preparing the children for Joann's return): *"The only two that I know that would be willing to go back [to their mother] would be the two younger ones. You know Carmelo, he may take a while to adjust, because, like I said, he thinks I'm mommy."*

In the majority of cases, they are children of women who had a similar life experience; who grew up without strong parental support, in an unstable home environment. They learned that love and trust were liabilities; that the ability to manipulate any situation to their advantage was a sign of strength.

- Linda (Amy's mother): *"Now that I take a big, long look at it, my grandfather was an alcoholic. He was very abusive to his wife. My father was an alcoholic, very abusive to my mother. Her biological father, alcoholic, made many attempts to kill me."*

Parenting is not something that comes naturally. It requires commitment, control, and the willingness to learn through trial and error, through seeking out resources, and learning good parenting techniques. Many women who are incarcerated do not know how to be kind to themselves. The ability to be kind and caring to another human being is an even greater unknown.

National statistics indicate that between 70 and 80% of women in prison are biological mothers, many with four or more children. 95% of these mothers have a history of drug

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<sup>6</sup> *Laughter, Silence & Shouting: An Anthology of Women's Prayers*, compiled by Kathy Keay (HarperCollins Publishers, 1994)

abuse, and 85% report experiencing significant sexual abuse, most beginning in childhood. Other statistics regarding incarcerated women and their children are:

- Children whose mothers are incarcerated are five times more likely than their peers to end up in jail.
- 60-70% of arrested women have substance abuse problems that are likely to resurface after release without family or social support.
- The greatest indicator of a child's ability to succeed in school is the mother's level of literacy.
- In the United States, hundreds of thousands of children are separated from their mothers by prison.<sup>7</sup>

There are a myriad of psychological symptoms that many mothers who are incarcerated might experience:

- Depression – Mothers in prison may become emotionally despondent or “close up” to bury the pain of separation. This response may worsen their children's feelings of loss of emotional support.
- Feelings of loss – Prior to incarceration, many women are poor and have very little, but the one thing they had was their children.
- Feelings of guilt and failure – Women may feel that they are inadequate as mothers.
- Fear of reunion – Mothers in prison may fear the difficulties of readjusting to family life after release.

The children of mothers who are incarcerated face numerous difficulties. A 1993 study involving children placed with caregivers during their mothers' terms in prison found that 40% of male teenagers had some involvement with the juvenile justice system; 60% of female teenagers were, or had been, pregnant; and a third of all children experienced severe school-related problems.<sup>8</sup> Researchers concluded that the mothers' incarceration interfered with the children's abilities to master developmental tasks, which adversely affected bonding and their sense of security.

After the mother's release, the family situation may be worse than ever. Often, they are released from prison with no job, no housing, and little money. For women, these stressors are compounded by the difficulties encountered in regaining custody and finding childcare. Clearly, without family and social support, these families are unlikely to succeed.

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<sup>7</sup> Aid to Inmate Mothers (AIM, Inc.), PO Box 986, Montgomery, AL 36101-0986, [www.inmatemoms.org](http://www.inmatemoms.org)

<sup>8</sup> Women's Prison Association and Home (WPA), 110 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, New York, NY 10003, [www.wpaonline.org](http://www.wpaonline.org)

- Amy: *“I wanted to work full time. I wanted to do every single little thing for her (daughter). I wanted to help my mother, you know. I wanted to have a boyfriend. I want to make a father for her. I wanted everything so fast and when you are in recovery, it just does not work like that.”*
- Monique (on her return to prison), *“For me all of this was very new. I was not familiar with, you know, taking care of my baby, paying for the babysitter, going to work everyday. This was something I had to adjust to, especially sober. I feel like I failed myself. I feel like I failed my little boy. I know he is suffering now, because he don’t know where his mommy is. He has my mother and the babysitter taking care of him.....I’m back here, yeah, ‘cause of lack of skills, but not for relapsing.”*

Mentoring programs are seen by prison officials as one of the best ways to begin to address the issue of family strengthening once a woman is released from prison. In order to be most effective, it is necessary for the mentoring to begin pre-release, with a contract being signed and adhered to by both the mentor and the mentee. For many imprisoned mothers, there is no understanding of what constitutes a strong family. The opportunity to have a strong mentor who sets guidelines, holds the mother accountable, and models acceptable parenting behavior can be invaluable in strengthening the bonds between these mothers and their children.

Support structures and resources can make a difference. Important, too, is the willingness of individuals who were formerly incarcerated to change – to take their lives in another direction. Turning their lives around and taking control helps to build self-esteem and strengthens the capacity for parenting.

- Anne Marie: *“The more you work your program, the better you feel about yourself, the more things start happening in your life, for me anyway. I mean, little things, like getting in touch with my parents. I wouldn’t even have attempted a letter like that when I was in [the prison] population. I would not have had enough courage. But, it took coming here, talking about it in group, which made me realize, it’s worth a try.”*

### **Food for Thought:**

- What does it take/mean to be a family?
- Why is it important for our congregation to participate in a reintegration program for mothers who have been released from prison?
- Does our congregation currently have a prison ministry focused on women inmates? To what extent do we actively become involved in their life issues?
- What are some of the ways a nurturing congregation can help strengthen the families of women while they are in prison and once they are released?
- Does our congregation find value in establishing/participating in a mentoring program?

- What support systems and resources are currently in place in our congregation to work with families in crisis?
- What support structures and resources will our congregation need in order to pursue this important ministry?

## EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

### ***God – Let Me Be Aware!***

God – let me be aware!  
Stab my soul fiercely with others' pain.  
Let me walk seeing horror and stain.  
Let my hands, groping, find other hands.  
Give me the heart that divines, understands,  
Give me the courage, wounded, to fight.  
Flood me with knowledge,  
Drench me with light.  
Please keep me eager to do my share.  
God – let me be aware!

As Monique so poignantly states in ***Prison Lullabies***, the majority of women in prison have never held a “legal” job. Low levels of literacy, substance abuse issues, and, quite often, a welfare culture, have created a toxic mix that makes successful employment all but impossible. Added to this is the reluctance of business owners and managers to hire individuals who were formerly incarcerated, as well as the challenges inherent in finding reasonable childcare.

- Monique: *“I’m going to be faced with a lot of challenges. It’s going to be really hard trying to find a job where people are not going to want to hire me. But, I’m not going to give up. I’m not going to give up.”*

The majority of the 90,000 women in prison in the U.S. are there for economic crimes. 80% report an income of less than \$2,000 in the year before their arrest.

Women who are most successful in finding and maintaining economic stability are those who have taken advantage of educational programs offered to them while in prison. Since a significant portion of mothers in prison have not advanced beyond sixth grade, it is critical that they work toward passing the GED and, whenever possible, engaging in higher education studies. Likewise, the ability to learn a trade increases the chance of finding viable employment.

- Anne Marie: *“I want to learn Excel (computer program) before I leave here. I only got like four weeks left.”*

Education and training are important keys to lower recidivism.

Many of the mothers, once released from prison, find themselves in a “Catch 22.” If their children have been placed in foster care, it is necessary for the mothers to become gainfully employed and secure adequate housing in order to seek custody. However, being released from prison with \$75.00 or less in their pockets, a bus ticket if there is no family support, inadequate or no housing, and no job leads, is a recipe for failure for many women.

Prison structure allows some women inmates to gain new skills. In *Prison Lullabies*, Amy is asked to be the captain of the nursery floor to help her give directions to others and understand how to have control. She holds the other mothers accountable and lectures them about responsibility. Yet, once released, she quickly relapses, and ends up driving herself back to prison.

Monique finds employment in a fast food restaurant, then loses it because she was “late a couple of times, and they acted like I did it on purpose.” She gets another job, but is fired, and returns to prison because she cannot honor the terms of her release.

The community (faith and secular) can be instrumental in reversing this bleak picture. Strong mentors are needed who can say “No”; who can provide the structure by setting limits, helping to set goals, and holding the mothers accountable. Programs are needed that provide support in navigating the myriad of paperwork necessary to live successfully on the “outside” – such as job applications, driver’s licenses, and medical appointments.

Safe and affordable childcare is critical to the success of mothers following release from prison. Data shows that it is necessary for former prisoners to find a job that pays a minimum of \$10.00 per hour in order to allow them the necessary resources to take care of basic needs. Without that level of financial support, the temptation is strong to return to those activities that caused her to be incarcerated.

- Amy (asking her daughter Carissa’s dad for money): *“I’m paying over a \$100/week for a babysitter. And I just can’t afford to do it by myself. And I have a \$7.50/hour job.”*

### **Food for Thought:**

What were some of the factors that affected Monique’s ability to remain employed?

What mind shift may be necessary for women who were formerly incarcerated to maintain employment successfully?

How can our faith community help to increase literacy levels, including economic literacy, as well as life skills for mothers and their children?

In what ways can the faith community increase the number of employment or job training opportunities for women ex-prisoners?

What conditions would need to be met by both the employer and the employee in order to achieve a successful outcome?

## HOUSING/TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

### *In This Place*

Find a sense of  
Church  
Community  
Communion

Hear a call to  
Loving Kindness  
Compassion  
Unity

Know a time for  
Believing  
Supporting  
Upholding

Recognize a feeling of  
Openness  
Integrity  
Truthfulness

Expect a movement to  
Encourage  
Include  
Forgive

Experience a house for  
Prayer  
People  
God

Inhabit a haven for  
The weak  
The Peacemakers  
The Spirit

Maureen Farrell, FCJ

One of the biggest challenges for women, especially mothers, who are released from prison is finding safe and adequate housing. Those who are released to transitional housing often find themselves in high-risk neighborhoods that threaten their ability to remain clean and sober. Whether living alone, with family or friends, or in transitional housing, ex-prisoners no longer have the security of prison walls and the structured environment that has informed and influenced their actions for a significant period of time.

Left rudderless and alone, many women return to the lifestyles, behaviors, and relationships that contributed to their incarceration. A woman whose children are in

foster care cannot seek custody unless she has housing, but cannot qualify for family shelter assistance without custody of her children.

Over 75% of women in New York State prisons are mothers, most with two or more children. At least a third are homeless upon their release<sup>9</sup>. Unique programs that provide safe, drug-free, supervised transitional housing exist in several communities. The Sarah Powell Huntington House in New York City, for example, provides apartments for families and women who are working toward family reunification. Through comprehensive case management and a wide range of on-site services, such as childcare and independent living skills training, this facility helps women achieve stability and self-sufficiency.

Both Anne Marie and Monique are placed in halfway houses when they leave prison.

- Monique: *“And I want to thank God for this house, for me to be able to be with my baby. Even though it’s been a struggle lately for me, but I’m going to make it.”*
- Anne Marie (walking into the halfway house): *“This is nice. This is not at all what I expected.”*

An alarming trend for the past several years is the systematic, and often sudden, reduction in funding for these programs. Communities of faith can provide invaluable support to programs such as this.

### **Food for Thought:**

What is the difference between providing housing and providing a home?

How does the lack of safe and adequate housing contribute to recidivism?

What can our congregation do to address the need for safe and adequate housing for mothers released from prison and their children?

What support structures and resources are needed beyond available housing/transitional housing?

How can our congregation offer light to the future?

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<sup>9</sup> The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents, PO Box 41-286, Eagle Rock, CA 90041 [www.e-ccip.org](http://www.e-ccip.org)

## SUMMARY

According to Janet Schadee, director of family services at the Indiana Women's Prison, the first 72 hours is a critical time for a woman who has been released from prison. The first 24 to 48 hours are prime for relapse if a woman leaving prison cannot find security and structure. Going from a contained, highly structured environment to an open, unstructured situation can cause high levels of anxiety. Without a strong support system, accompanied by clearly articulated expectations and guidelines, the likelihood that the woman will return to the life she knows, no matter how negative, is high.

Schadee says that the six most important areas that must be addressed before, or immediately upon release, are:

- **Housing/Transitional Housing** – This ideally needs to be in an area devoid of the temptations and the people that contributed to the woman's incarceration. Faith communities can be helpful in finding homes in safe locations.
- **Normal Social Expectations** – It is critical that part of the preparation for release, as well as ongoing instruction, involves discussion about societal norms. This is a rapidly changing world, and much that those on the outside take for granted is new and frightening for a woman who has been in prison for any length of time. Help may be needed to negotiate such day-to-day activities as securing a driver's license, filling out employment forms, making and keeping doctor's appointments, and talking with their child(ren)'s teacher(s).
- **Employment** – In order to be successful upon release, it is necessary for a woman former prisoner to become financially stable as soon as possible. This can present a challenge due to lack of skills and work history. For women such as Monique in *Prison Lullabies*, it is critical that they be introduced to the culture of work and employer expectations, including arriving on time for work. They also need economic literacy training to understand money management and following a budget.
- **Childcare** – For those mothers who are able to receive custody of their children, safe, affordable, and reachable childcare is critical to their ability to remain employed.
- **Maintaining Self Esteem** – As stated before, the majority of women prisoners do not know how to be kind to themselves. When released into society, they often suffer from feelings of guilt and shame. In work situations, they are often the ones accused of wrong-doing when anything goes wrong, even though there is no evidence to support the accusation. This further erodes their feeling of self worth.

- **Setting Limits** – It is important for women who were formerly incarcerated to have someone in their lives who says “No,” who holds them accountable for their actions, and defines the parameters of their behavior.

## **WHAT CAN A COMMUNITY OF FAITH DO TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?**

- Establish a mentoring program that matches mentors and mothers pre-release; and/or provides adult mentors for children of incarcerated parents.
- Help to find safe and affordable housing for mothers and their children.
- Work with employers to establish on-the-job training and work opportunities for women former inmates.
- Provide parenting classes, including classes for the fathers of children whose mothers are in prison.
- Establish literacy/GED and life skills programs for the mothers, and tutoring classes for the children.
- Provide training for mothers in economic literacy, including managing a budget, learning about Individual Development Accounts, and finding out whether or not they qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit.
- Provide a fund to assist with paying utility bills.
- Provide gas coupons or bus passes.
- Be willing to check value systems and attitudes at the door and meet the women where they are.

### ***My Soul's Healer***

Keep me at evening,  
Keep me at morning,  
Keep me at noon.  
I am tired,  
astray and stumbling,  
shield me from sin.

Celtic traditional

## **SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR WORKING WITH WOMEN PRISONERS AND EX-PRISONERS**

### **Books**

Enos, Sandra. *Mothering from the Inside: Parenting in a Women's Prison* (State University of New York Press, February 2001).

Gabel, Katherine and Johnston, Denise. *Children of Incarcerated Parents* (Lexington Books, May 1995).

O'Brien, Patricia. *Making It in the "Free World": Women in Transition from Prison* (State University of New York Press, March 2001).

Wright, Lois and Seymour, Cynthia B. *Working with Children and Families Separated by Incarceration* (Child Welfare League of America, September 2000).

### **Programs and Training**

Re-Entry Prison and Jail Ministry, PO Box 620, Chula Vista, CA 91902, [www.reentry.org](http://www.reentry.org)

U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/reentry](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/reentry)

Family Services, Indiana Women's Prison, Janet Schadee, Director, (317) 639-2671, ext. 306

The Association of Programs for Female Offenders, State Correctional Institution-Chester, 500 East Fourth Street, Chester, PA 19013

The faith-based portion of the ***Prison Lullabies*** Resource Guide was written by Maria Blake, Director of Communications and Promotions, Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library. Ms. Blake holds a master's degree in Pastoral Studies, with an emphasis on women and children. She has performed extensive work in the not-for-profit and volunteer arenas, and has conducted workshops and retreats on parenting, self-esteem, and women's spirituality.

The community-based segment of this guide was developed, in part, by a focus group of The Fortune Society conducted with Peggy Arroyo, JoAnne Page, David Nidus, Brian Robinson, Sherry Goldstein, and the Women of the *DAMAS* (gender-specific) *Alternative to Incarceration* program. The Fortune Society is a community-based organization in New York City with over 35 years experience serving and advocating for former prisoners. All the participants of the focus group have spent some time in jail and/or prison. Some of the participants are mothers. The other participants have younger siblings or nieces or nephews that they relate to daily.



***Prison Lullabies*** is one of the public television programs showcased in the Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign. All productions incorporate the theme of **reentry into family and community by individuals who were formerly incarcerated**. These and other programs are elements of the Making Connections Media Outreach Initiative (MCMOI), an outreach project supported by The Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF). Launched in February 2001, MCMOI links public television stations to local stakeholders as a means to promote the Foundation's Core Results for strong and connected neighborhoods for children and families.

MCMOI campaigns are managed by Outreach Extensions, a national consulting firm that specializes in comprehensive, high-profile educational and community outreach campaigns for media projects. Please visit the MCMOI Web site at

**[www.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/communications/mcmoi/](http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/mc/communications/mcmoi/)**

for more information and community-use materials for these exciting programs.

For more information on the Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign, please contact:



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