

Voices

The imprisonment of women in the U.S. has always been a different phenomenon than that for men; the proportion of women in prison has always differed from that of men;

women have traditionally been sent to prison for different reasons; and once in prison, they endure different conditions of incarceration. Women's 'crimes' have often had a sexual definition and been rooted in the patriarchal double standard. Furthermore, the nature of women's imprisonment reflects the position of women in society.

From Women and Imprisonment in the U.S. — History and Current Reality
by Nancy Kurshan (www.prisonactivist.org)

Creating a stronger voice
for women and girls.

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The
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Inside Story

Incarcerated Women . . .



At Nokomis we've long been interested in the issues of incarcerated women. Over the years we've awarded grants to organizations supporting the needs of women in jail — but we recently decided the issue needed more of our attention and focus. Last year we began the second phase of our [New Voices Initiative](#) — this time looking into the issues of women in prison. You can read a bit more about what's happening with that project in this edition of [Voices](#) — just check out the *Nurturing a New Start* article following the [loose change](#) insert.

Statistics about the nature of crimes committed by women in prison show that most are incarcerated for economic crimes — theft, forgery, illegal credit card use, etc. Of the women convicted of violent crimes, the vast majority are jailed because they were defending themselves or their children from abuse. There is a growing clemency movement here in the U.S. This largely grassroots effort works to win clemency for women who killed abusive husbands or partners in self-defense and who were wrongly convicted and sentenced to life or long terms in prison. The Michigan Women's Clemency Project is sponsored by the Wash-tenaw County ACLU. The Project identifies, arranges for, and supervises the preparation and filing of clemency petitions on behalf of women in Michigan prisons who were convicted of crimes after a trial or guilty plea when evidence of abuse was never raised, or if raised, was raised ineffectively or disallowed by the judge. All of the women identified and represented by the Michigan Women's Clemency Project are highly deserving of their freedom. They are women who have been model prisoners — earning Bachelors' degrees, tutoring other prisoners, attending the few programs available to women in Michigan prisons, and performing other productive work. We encourage you to learn more about the Michigan Women's Clemency Project at www.umich.edu/~clemency/.

Check out the [loose change](#) technical assistance insert included in this newsletter. This issue includes information about election year strategies for nonprofit organizations — including a checklist of allowable activities. Be sure to visit the [loose change](#) page on the Nokomis website where you'll find useful information on a variety of technical assistance topics, plus great links and resources.

Kym Mulhern, President / CEO

Understanding Women

Reflections on a visit

by DeDe Esque, Nokomis Foundation Program Officer

*There we were heading east to Ann Arbor
An afternoon in October filled with anticipation
Of the coming cold, the brilliant hues of leaves turning
Do we really know what we're getting into?*

*We talked about our expectations of this trip
An experience in a prison with full security pat downs
Of the things we had to bring — driver's license, \$1 for something to drink
Why is it mandatory for us to wear a bra?*

*As we drove, we wondered about our visit to Scott Prison
An opportunity to meet and observe women actually doing time
Of a Women's Studies curriculum called "Understanding Women"
How relevant is an academic curriculum for these women?*

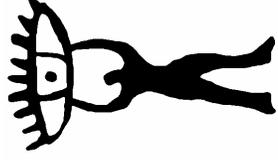
*We moved to the less serious, mused about what we might encounter
A myriad of stereotypes based on years of biases and too many bad movies
Of women smoking cigarettes with tattoos, bad hair and a lifetime of scars
Will we see women peering from the bars of jail cells?*

*We arrived and were processed, received our alarm devices and bought our drinks
A process navigated with the help of a welcoming warden, a woman unlike my odd ideas
Of wardens with tightly wound buns and black tied shoes like Joan Crawford or Nurse Ratched
Why wouldn't she be warm, welcoming and wearing shoes that weren't maternally?*

*As we walked to the classroom, I did see cold floors, steel bars and big stairs
A place of confinement, sterile but not at all like my fantasies
Of a lifetime home for some, and a temporary stopover for others
How would these women feel about outsiders 'peering in' on them?*

*There I was driving west to my home, my flannel-covered bed
An experience I'll never forget without remembering their beauty, their strength
Of talking with women whose stories were unthinkable, unimaginable
Why wouldn't they be smart, wear lipstick and do their hair, be gracious and inviting?
Why can't I stop crying and being angry for them? Why is my heart so heavy?
Because it was **my** lesson for *Understanding Women* . . .*

Last October, DeDe Esque, Dotti Clune and Jeannie Hosey visited the *Understanding Women* class (a college-level women's studies program) held at the Robert Scott Correctional Facility. Deeply touched by the experience, DeDe shares her story with us.



Herstory



Elizabeth Gurney Fry, British prison reformer (1780-1845)

Elizabeth Gurney Fry, an English Quaker minister, brought about radical changes in the prison system in the nineteenth century. In 1813 she visited the women's prison at Newgate for the first time. Despite warnings from the turnkey's that the women prisoners were "wild and savage" Elizabeth went where even the prison governor would not go because it was "unsafe." She was horrified by what she found, and began a long term campaign to improve conditions for prisoners. With the help of her friends, she not only satisfied more immediate needs by providing clothing and clean bedding, but also started a prison school for children and a prison factory for adults. In 1817 she started the *Association for the Improvement of the Female Prisoners in Newgate* which helped run the school and provided materials for the women to sew, knit and make goods for sale. In 1818 she was called to testify before the House of Commons on prison conditions, the first woman ever asked to give advisement. Elizabeth's work brought about change that included the separation of male and female prisoners, the separation of hardened criminals from first offenders and the governance of women prisoners by female wardens. She lobbied for reform, condemned the death penalty and asked for greater opportunities for women.

Find out more about Elizabeth Gurney Fry at www.quakerinfo.com/fry.html or www.geocities.com/exchiva/fry.html

Angela Davis, prison activist, professor, author (born 1944)

Angela Davis, professor, author and prison activist has long advocated for women's rights and the abolition of the US prison system. Davis refers to this system as the "Prison Industrial Complex" which preys on the most oppressed groups in our society. Crimes of poverty and social problems such as homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, and others are "solved" by imprisonment. Davis has first hand experience with incarceration after being held for 16 months on false charges of kidnapping, murder and conspiracy because of her connections to the Soledad Brothers. An all white jury acquitted her in 1972 after a global Free Angela Davis Campaign spread across the nation. Before and after her imprisonment Davis has worked to abolish the prison system. She has written several books, including her most recent -- *Are Prisons Obsolete?* In 1969 she was fired illegally by UCLA from her position as assistant philosophy professor because of her involvement with the communist party. In 1980 she ran for Vice President of the United States on the communist party ticket. At the time of her termination from UCLA, Governor Ronald Reagan said that Angela Davis would never again teach in California, but she is now a tenured professor in the History of Consciousness Dept. at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She also serves on the Advisory board of the Prison Activist Resource Center.

Find out more about Angela Davis at <http://search.eb.com/blackhistory/micro/161/4.html> or http://humwww.usc.edu/HistCon/faculty_davis.htm



Point to Ponder

"...women's offenses are rarely vicious, dangerous, or profitable. Their crimes arise from difficult circumstances within society at large. Most women are in prison for relatively minor offenses; property crimes, sometimes referred to as poverty crimes, are the most frequent."

From *Women and Imprisonment in the U.S.* — *History and Current Reality* by Nancy Kurshan (www.prisonactivist.org)

Did You Know... .

- The U.S. currently imprisons a higher percentage of its population than any other country in the world.
- Women make up the fastest growing subset of the entire prison population.
- As the number of women behind bars grows, the detrimental effects are felt by a whole generation of children. Eighty percent of women in prison are the mothers of children under 18.
- Because the most brutal methods of social control are directed at a society's most oppressed groups, the women most likely to be sent to jail (and prison) are poor and/or women of color.
- African American women are eight times more likely than white women to go to prison. Although a greater number of white women are arrested, small proportions are incarcerated.
- Those states with the highest degree of gender equality also have the lowest rate of homicide by females.
- Massive prison expansion is fueled not by an actual increase in crime rates, but by harsh drug laws and wholesale criminalization of people of color, poor people, and youth.

Information provided by the Prison Activist Resource Center (www.prisonactivist.org).

Women Behind Bars

By Dotti Clune and Jeannie Hosey, *New Voices project consultants*

Most women offenders are nonviolent and their crimes are typically less threatening to community safety than male offenders. Their most common pathways to crime are based on survival due to abuse, poverty and substance abuse.(1)

Women behind bars tend to be 30-35 years old, disproportionately women of color, low income, undereducated, and unskilled, with sporadic employment histories. Their lives tend to be dramatically different from imprisoned men's:

- Children play a more significant role in the lives of women than in the lives of men in prison.
- Women are three times more likely than male prisoners to have been physically or sexually abused at some time in their lives.
- Women are more likely to have significant substance abuse problems.
- Women experience more severe physical and mental health problems than men – often due to poverty, poor nutrition, inadequate health care, abuse, and substance abuse.
- Women are more likely to have experienced fragmented family histories, with family members involved with the criminal justice system.(2)

What places women behind bars? Different types of crime, resulting in lower levels of harm than men's offenses. Women tend to be less aggressive and less likely to use physical force or a weapon. They're less apt to have played a major role in planning or committing a crime; in fact, they're often in a coerced or submissive role to a male when committing a crime.

About 138,000 women are behind bars in the U.S. today – more than ten times the number just 30 years ago. That's about 7% of the nation's inmates. Only a very small number – about 16% of imprisoned women – have been convicted of violent offenses.(3)

Women arrive in jail with different issues than men. They are twice as likely as men to suffer depression, have higher rates of HIV infection, and are two times as likely to contract sexually transmitted diseases. They may be pregnant, and most are stressed about the well-being of the children they left behind. Consequently, an estimated 20-25 percent of imprisoned women go to sick call daily compared with 7-10% of men.



Take Action

Things YOU can do to improve conditions for incarcerated women

Prisons do not disappear problems, they disappear people.

—*Angela Davis in Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex (ColorLines, 1998)*

- **Learn** about the prison system in your state and county
- **Listen** to the stories of women involved in the Clemency Project
- **Connect** with state and local organizations working on justice issues in the prison system (for example, the MI-CURE program of the American Friends Service Committee in Michigan)
- **Encourage** the development of programs for children of incarcerated women
- **Visit** women in prison who want visitors
- **Organize** informational or skill-sharing workshops for women in your local jail or state prison
- **Write** to women prisoners who request letters of support or correspondence
- **Send money** to defense funds, prisoner support or action groups
- **Donate** books, musical instruments and art supplies to prisoners
- **Share** information by sending periodicals free to prisoners, soliciting articles from prisoners, and providing support to prisoner publications
- **Perform** in prisons — musicians can play gigs; writers can give readings
- **Participate** in education campaigns in your community
- **Speak up** and let your voice be heard

Suggestions gleaned, in part, from www.prisonactivist.org/women/prisons-and-social-control.html

Justice Reinvestment



By Elizabeth Sturruus, Nokomis Foundation Program Assistant

The idea that incarceration keeps neighborhoods safe is a myth. In their article “Justice Reinvestment” from *Ideas for an Open Society*, Susan B. Tucker and Eric Cadora explore the fiscal and social reasons that prisons actually contribute to neighborhood crime. They suggest a new allocation of funds might help improve communities and break the prison/crime cycle.

Keeping non-violent people out of prison improves the social and economic stability of a community. When neighborhoods have a high incarceration rate; families lose a parent and bread winner, the workforce suffers, prisoners lose civic rights, and distrust circulates among neighbors. With a large part of the population in and out of prison, the community becomes a temporary residence in-between prison times.

Financially, it doesn't make sense to invest all of the funds allocated for public safety into prisons. Most people from “crime communities” are in prison for property or drug related offenses, not violent crimes. To reduce crime, money should be invested in work placement programs, schools, health care, and rehabilitation. These services would help alleviate root problems of “poverty crimes” and decrease the number of incarcerated persons.

The prison population is increasing due, in part, to sentencing mandates for drug crimes and removal of judicial discretion. To accommodate more prisoners, additional prisons are necessary. In order to fund these institutions, money is cut from treatment and educational programs in existing prisons. Once released, without having gained any education or job skills while incarcerated, ex-cons often go back to prison for returning to old criminal patterns or parole violations. This cycle can be broken if prison programs are changed or used exclusively for dangerous criminals, not as “warehouses for the poor”.

“The women are seen as whinier, needier, more emotional,” one corrections officer reported to the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. A 2000 nationwide study confirmed this gender bias – or “male inmate preference”—among both female and male correctional officers.

Instead of blaming women, researchers have been taking a closer look at the situation for incarcerated women. From the bricks and mortar to the people and policies that govern them, prisons are clearly designed for men. “Too often,” journalist M.L. Lyke reports, “female offenders don't get the same degree of programs, treatment, education or attention as men, let alone services tailored to their specific needs.”

Even “equal” treatment isn't equal in prison. For example, researchers point out that standard (i.e., male-focused) practices in prisons – searches, restraints and isolation – “can have profound effects on women with histories of trauma and abuse, and they often act as triggers to retraumatize women who have post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).”

Research-based gender-responsive strategies hold great promise for more humanely and effectively intervening with women offenders in ways far more suitable to the needs of women and the well-being of their families and communities.

For more information, see the article *Connecting Behind Bars* in this issue of **Voices** and these websites:

- Center for Gender and Justice www.centerforgenderandjustice.org
 - Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjis
 - National Institute of Corrections Information Center www.nicic.org
 - National Criminal Justice Reference Service www.ncjrs.gov
- (1) Barbara E. Bloom, Barbara Owen, and Stephanie S. Covington, *Gender Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders*, National Institute of Corrections, Washington, D.C., June 2003, p. 8
 - (2) Bloom, Owen and Covington, p.6.
 - (3) U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Special report: Women offenders*, December 1999, revised October 2000, p. 1.

Connecting Behind Bars

By Dotti Clune and Jeannie Hosey, *New Voices* project consultants

“Current research confirms what women have known all along: that women learn, change, and grow within the context of a trusting and non-exploitive relationship. The primary motivation of women is connectedness with all the significant others in her life, not separateness.” (1)

The bleak, sterile environment that characterizes most prisons and jails seems an unlikely setting for empowering women by strengthening their connectedness with others—yet that is exactly what is happening in a variety of innovative, relationship-based programs around the country. Here’s a look at three approaches:

Girl Scouts Beyond Bars seeks to preserve and enhance relationships between young girls and their mothers who are incarcerated. Scout leaders accompany troop members to regular Scout meetings inside prisons and jails; between these meetings, the girls engage in other Scout activities in their home communities and their mothers participate in parenting skills training.

Since its establishment in 1992, the program has been implemented in 29 states, and program evaluations have shown impressive results. A Texas study documented benefits including improved self-worth and a 75 percent increase in letter writing between mothers and daughters. “I’m seeing one girl who used to fight in school every day and now is not fighting at all,” says Dr. Darlene Grant, leader of the study. “Other girls have stopped getting in negative relationships with boys.”(2)

Preserving the bond between women and their children is also a primary goal of the **Sheriff’s Female Furlough Program**, based at the Cook County Jail in Chicago. This day reporting program for women allows them to leave the jail and return to their homes each evening to care for their families. Program participants report to the jail each morning for activities including drug screening, job skills training, parenting, life skills and health education, and literacy classes. In the evening they are released on electronic tethering and must remain in their homes until returning to the jail the next morning.



There are over 90,000 women in prison in the US today. The majority are in prison for economic crimes. The most typical convictions resulting in imprisonment for women are property crimes, such as check forgery and illegal credit card use. 80% of women in prison report incomes of less than \$2,000 per year in the year before their arrest, and 92% report incomes under \$10,000.
—www.prisonactivist.org

What’s Happening

Check out the **Calendar** on the Nokomis website for up-to-date information on events of interest to women and girls in the Grand Rapids area. You can find the calendar online at www.nokomisfoundation.org/calendar.htm

If you’d like to recommend an upcoming event for inclusion on our calendar, send an email with event details to Libby Sturuss at the Nokomis Foundation. (esturuss@nokomisfoundation.org).

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New Voice taking flight intern



We’re thrilled to introduce you to Meghan Wieten, our 2004 Nokomis Foundation Taking Flight intern. Meghan joins us from Grand Valley State University where she is in her second year majoring in Public Administration. Meghan hopes to work with non-profit organizations after she graduates, and is particularly interested in foundations. She is involved with the Residence Housing Association at GVSU and is a member of Sigma Kappa sorority. Meghan works in the President’s Office at GVSU as a student assistant, and also serves on the Peer Listening Advisory Committee for the KISD. Meghan likes to camp and hike when she has time — and she loves to travel.

Meghan tells us she is “very interested in women’s issues because I believe strongly in breaking stereotypes and showing women the true potential they possess. Many times women don’t realize that they can do anything. There are no limits!” Meghan is pleased to be working with us at the Nokomis Foundation, where she can have an active role in creating a stronger voice for girls through the Taking Flight grant program. Welcome Meghan!

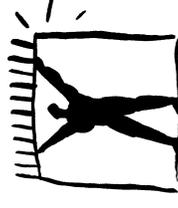
Web Wise



Browsing the Web with a Gender Lens

Check out these sites for more information about incarcerated women:

- www.prisonactivist.org
An incredibly comprehensive site for prison activists, it contains links to other sites, prison reform organizations by zip code, publications, and activism updates.
- www.prisonsocks.com
Excellent site for research statistics and up-to-date facts on the crime control industry. It also has links to books and documentaries and fact sheets.
- www.sentencingproject.org
This site offers alternative solutions to current prison sentencing practices. It contains links to research on criminal justice policy.
- www.prisonradio.org
This site contains links to books and interviews by prisoners and prisoner radio broadcasts. Organizing tool kits are accessible here.
- www.prisonerlife.com
This site includes links to prisoners looking for pen pals, an extremely large prison directory, prisoner web pages, and prison news and updates.
- www.womendoingtime.com/women.asp
A pen pal service for women in prison looking for a friend or romantic partner on the outside.
- www.booksnotbars.org
This program works to expose and end the over-incarceration of youth and build a “bottom-up” movement to transform the entire criminal justice system. It is a project of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights.
- www.juvenilejustice.com/links.html
This site includes an extensive listing of online juvenile justice resources.
- www.prisonerswithchildren.org
This site includes prisoner family support group information, fact sheets, news and publications, and action alerts.



The seed for the program was planted on Christmas Eve of 1991, when 23 female detainees in the jail were given an unusual option: leave the jail and go home to spend Christmas with your children, but return to the jail by 7 a.m. on December 26th. All the women left, and all returned—without great fanfare or incident. So began the first step in what would become a series of major changes, new programming initiatives, and a top-to-bottom shift in the ideology associated with the incarceration of women offenders in Cook County. (3)

Human-animal relationships are the basis for several programs involving incarcerated women (and men) in caring for and training dogs. **Puppies Behind Bars** and **IMPACT** (Inmates Providing Animal Care and Training) train inmates to serve as “puppy raisers” spending sixteen months socializing and teaching basic obedience skills to dogs being trained to become guide dogs. **Pen Pals** places hard to adopt dogs and homeless cats with carefully selected inmates who provide socialization and training that will enable the animals to be adopted.

Women involved in these programs say the dogs are teaching them patience, trust, commitment, teamwork, how to listen, even how to be a better parent. “It gives me hope,” said one incarcerated woman. “It allows me to still be human to still care, love, give. This program says there’s hope for everybody.” (4)

- (1) Richard, Dinny, “Project Reconnect: Responding to Women Offenders on a Personal Level,” *Topics in Community Corrections, Annual Issue 2000: Responding to Women Offenders in the Community*, p. 29
- (2) Riggio, Michele Landon, “Some Girl Scouts Spend Mother’s Day in Jail with Moms,” www.girlscouts.org/news/archive/2003/gsbb.html
- (3) McDermott, Terrie, “Cook County’s Gender-Responsive Treatment Model,” *Topics in Community Corrections, Annual Issue 2000: Responding to Women Offenders in the Community*, p. 42
- (4) www.puppiesbehindbars.com/articles/nyr82299.htm
www.guidedogs.org/700/750/750.html
www.sos-penpals.org/What_is_PenPals.htm
www.champdogs.org/WERDCC/PrisonAP.htm

Grants



The Nokomis Foundation has recently awarded the following grants:

General Grantmaking

- **Actors' Theatre**, Grand Rapids, \$6,000 for the production of *Boy Gets Girl*
- **Girl Scouts of Michigan Trails**, \$5,000 for the pilot program *My Life*, a national HIV program for youth/girls
- **GVSU Women's Center**, \$4,750 for the production of *Vagina Monologues*
- **Great Lakes Center for Sages**, \$1,500 for *Crowning Programs*, including a celebration, book review, and workshop celebrating women
- **Dwelling Place**, Grand Rapids, \$10,000 for the *Aftercare Program* for women
- **Grandville Avenue Arts & Humanities**, Grand Rapids, \$8,000 for the production of *Juana's Wishes/Las Esperanzas de Juana*
- **Planned Parenthood Centers of West Michigan**, Grand Rapids, \$90,000 over three years for *Project Safe and SASSY*
- **St. John's Home**, Grand Rapids, \$25,000 for the *Therapeutic Residential Treatment Program*

Technology Consortium Grants Awarded to the following organizations:

Center for Women in Transition, Holland
Girl Scouts of Michigan Trails, Grand Rapids
Grand Rapids Opportunities for Women (GROW), Grand Rapids
Michigan Women's Foundation, Livonia and Grand Rapids
Planned Parenthood Centers of West Michigan, Grand Rapids
Safe Haven Ministries, Grand Rapids
WITNESS, Holland and Grand Rapids
Women's Resource Center, Grand Rapids
Women's Resource Center of Northern Michigan, Petoskey
YWCA of Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids

For grant guidelines and application information, or to request a copy of our annual report, please call our office (616-451-0267). You can also find our grant guidelines online by visiting our website at www.nokomisfoundation.org.

New Voices: Nurturing a New Start



In 2003 the Nokomis Foundation initiated the second *New Voices Initiative* project, focusing on enhancing opportunities for women in the Kent County Correctional Facility (KCCF). A key premise of the project—called *Nurturing a New Start*—is that being arrested and coming to jail can be a turning point in a woman's life. For example, for women who are addicts, the time in jail may be the longest period in years in which they've been clean and sober. In fact, when women in the Cook County Jail were asked when would be a good time for them to get help, many responded "right now."⁽¹⁾

The initial research for *Nurturing a New Start* has been encouraging. For example,

- The KCCF is currently working on plans for an innovative re-entry center aimed at preparing inmates to successfully re-enter the community when they leave the jail.
- The Office of Community Corrections has recently released a report of its *Community Response to Women Offenders* project, advocating for more gender-responsive policies, practices and procedures in the local corrections system.
- Delta Strategy's *Ex-Offenders Dialogue Group* is involved in promising work aimed at connecting ex-offenders with community resources.

Nurturing a New Start is currently working to identify ways to build links between incarcerated women and the larger community, including identifying factors that help and hinder local agencies from offering services to women in the jail.

(1) *Unlocking Options for Women: A Survey of Women in Cook County Jail*, Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, April 2002, p. 20.