



Women & Incarceration Project
Center for Women's Health & Human Rights
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The Women and Incarceration Project, providing expertise to Massachusetts policymakers

THE WOMEN AND INCARCERATION PROJECT (WIP) is a group of academics, attorneys, social workers, and students who study the costs and harms of incarcerating women. WIP produces research reports, analyses of state and federal data, policy briefs, op-eds, and policy recommendations. Members of WIP are available to testify at hearings and at other forums and to assist legislators and advocacy organizations with research.

WIP formed in 2021 in response to then-Governor Baker's proposal to build a new "trauma-informed" women's prison in Massachusetts. Our members were troubled by the lack of community input, disregard of alternatives to incarceration and mechanisms to release women from prison, and dismissal of the abundant research showing that prison is intrinsically traumatizing. Since that time we have worked with legislators and activist organizations, convened a symposium, and published factsheets and research papers on issues related to women and incarceration in Massachusetts. We summarize our key publications below.

The case against a new women's prison in Massachusetts: Wasteful spending, human rights violations, and putting politics above public safety

[Why We Don't Need a New Women's Prison](#)

Massachusetts currently has the lowest rate of female incarceration in the United States. As of September 1, 2022, there were 217 women at MCI-Framingham: 174 criminally sentenced, 35 detained before trial, and 8 civilly committed. Incarceration at MCI-Framingham costs over \$235,000 per person, per year, and the government estimates it will cost at least \$50 million to design and build (or renovate) a new prison for women. For significantly less cost, the Commonwealth could fund high-impact programs to help women secure safe housing, receive ongoing medical treatment, and rise out of poverty, thereby addressing the root causes of incarceration.

[Decarcerating Women from MCI-Framingham: A Realistic Prospect Today](#)

The majority of incarcerated women could be released under existing statutes such as bail reform as enacted in the Criminal Justice Reform Act of 2018; the Primary Caretakers Act; the law prohibiting civil commitment of women to prison; release due to COVID-19; clemency, commutations, and pardons; and parole and medical parole.

[Women Aging Behind Bars: A Massachusetts Fact Sheet](#)

Older women constitute a disproportionately high share of women serving life sentences: 80% of women at MCI-Framingham who are over age 60 are sentenced to life. Older women face barriers to daily functioning in prison, which exacerbates their physical and mental health problems and contributes to extremely high per person costs at women's prisons. Research indicates that releasing older women does not constitute a threat to public safety.

[Women and Violent Crime: Do the Facts Justify Building a New Women's Prison in Massachusetts?](#)

Fear of releasing "violent criminals" often is invoked as an argument in favor of "law and order," including prison expansion. Women, however, have very low rates of arrest and conviction for violent crimes, most have been victims of violence themselves, and are unlikely to be arrested or convicted again after being released from prison.

[Ineffectiveness of Prison-based Therapy: The Case for Community-based Alternatives](#)

Our review of over 200 studies shows little lasting benefit to in-prison mental health services once women leave prison – as the vast majority of incarcerated women eventually do. To the contrary, incarceration is likely to re-traumatize women and damage their health. Community-based treatment programs show far more promise for creating sustainable, positive mental health outcomes for women.

[A Flawed Plan to Spend Even More Taxpayer Funds to Incarcerate Women](#) and [There is No Such Thing as a Trauma-Informed Prison: The State’s Own Sources Agree](#)

The Ripples Group delivered a “Strategic Plan for Women Who Are Incarcerated in Massachusetts,” which claims their proposed prison would be “trauma informed,” to the state Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance (DCAMM) on June 21, 2022. The Plan suffers from methodological shortcomings, a superficial understanding of trauma, failure to consider the impact of racism in the criminal legal system, an absence of strategies to overcome institutional obstacles to change, and a lack of alternatives to incarceration. In addition, neither the government (DCAAM) nor the architectural firm (HDR) selected to design a new women’s prison offers evidence that prison can be an effective setting to resolve trauma.

Facts and analysis about women incarcerated in Massachusetts

[Women Who Cycle Through Jails and Prisons in Massachusetts: An Overview](#)

The majority of women in Massachusetts jails and prisons struggle with physical and mental health challenges, experience housing insecurity, have been targets of assault and abuse as children and as adults, and cycle through treatment programs, shelters and therapeutic institutions as well as correctional institutions and programs.

[Women, Substance Use, and Incarceration in Massachusetts: A Fact Sheet](#)

The large majority of women incarcerated in Massachusetts use or have used licit and illicit substances to manage emotional and physical pain, and serve sentences on charges related to their substance use. Review of the literature reveals no evidence that prison-based or coerced drug treatment is effective for women. Drug overdose is the leading cause of death after release from prison - particularly for women.

[How Incarceration Harms Women](#)

Incarceration harms women’s reproductive health, mental health and physical health. Incarceration also harms women’s ability to secure housing and employment after they leave prison or jail, and disrupts relationships with children and families, including permanent termination of parental rights.

[Incarcerating Men Harms Women Too: A Massachusetts Briefing](#)

Women support men held in jails and prisons, share their homes and resources with men after they get out, and live in households and communities harmed by the scars that incarceration leaves on men.

There are better options: Alternatives to incarceration for women in Massachusetts

[What is a Prison? Understanding the Legal Definition of a Prison](#)

Massachusetts law loosely defines a prison as “any building, enclosure, space or structure used for the custody, control and rehabilitation of committed offenders.” Nothing in the statute requires a particular type of building. The law permits sentences to be served in community-based residences of various types.

[Alternatives to Incarceration for Women in Massachusetts: An Opportunity and a Challenge](#)

Alternatives to incarceration include a broad array of practices, policies and programs including diversion, home supervision, restorative justice, treatment programs, specialty courts, supportive housing, and justice reinvestment in communities.

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