

Hope Behind Bars

by Stephen Brown

Of the number of women in prisons today, a figure placed at 115,779 in 2008, a high percentage are mothers. In mid-2007 approximately 65,600 women in federal and state custody reported being the mothers of 147,400 minor children. According to the Women's Prison Association, 77% of incarcerated mothers said that they provided most of the daily care for their children before incarceration.

One of the most effective tools in combating prison recidivism, and giving female prisoners the best chance to care for their families upon their release, is allowing them to pursue General Educational Development (GED) degrees—the equivalents of high-school diplomas—and even college degrees while incarcerated. A September 2010 report by the New York State Department of Corrections finds that while male offenders have a 37% recidivism rate and females have a recidivism rate of 24%, earning degrees while in prison has a more pronounced effect on women, with males who earn degrees showing a 32% recidivism rate, compared with a 15% rate for females. Also of note is that those men and women who earn degrees while in prison are less likely to return than people who obtain degrees before being imprisoned.

Incarcerated Women

With help from two nonprofit organizations dedicated to assisting women during the reentry process—the New York–based Hour Children's Hour Working Women Program and A New Way of Life Reentry Project, whose offices are in South Central Los Angeles—Uncensored was able to interview five women who obtained their GEDs while incarcerated. (To honor their requests for anonymity, we have changed their names for this article.) Many different risk factors, including drug use and homelessness, placed them on the path to prison. “I was homeless, moving from hotel to hotel because of my drug use and not having a job,” one of the women, Robin, told Uncensored. Another, Linda, said, “My mom passed away, and I've been floating in and out of homelessness since I was 15, and now I am 51

years old. Drug usage and being irresponsible through my adult years left me homeless.”

For a woman, no matter what road leads her to prison, the consequences of even a short sentence and criminal record can be far greater than for a male offender. Often, when a father goes to prison the mother is still at home to care for the family, but the reverse is rarely the case. For female offenders, a prison sentence leads to separation from children, probation, and mandatory counseling sessions—which interfere with their search for work—as well as to the stigma of a criminal record, an additional obstacle to employment.

But obtaining a GED has a positive impact on these women's chances to obtain employment and increase their earning power upon release. A 2009 report from the Urban Institute



Sister Tesa Fitzgerald (right), executive director of Hour Children, with a participant at Hour Working Women Program.

Justice Policy Center, *Women on the Outside: Understanding the Experiences of Female Prisoners Returning to Houston, Texas*, identified a GED/high-school diploma as a key predictor of whether a female offender will be employed eight to ten months after reentry. GED programs are not a panacea guaranteeing an easy transition from prison to post-release self-sufficiency, as the situations of three of our participants illustrate. “I haven’t been able to obtain employment, but gaining my GED was something less I had to accomplish and focus on,” said 25-year-old Wilmarie, who added, “It is important to at least have a GED in order to obtain a minimum-wage job.” Robin and Linda have had similar post-release struggles, responding negatively when asked if they have been able to obtain employment and if their GEDs have been helpful in their job searches. But two other women Uncensored spoke with, Stephanie and Barbara, shared better news, with Stephanie saying, “I achieved my GED in 1991 and was paroled in 1996. Since then my GED has helped me achieve many of my goals.”

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The 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act prohibited federal and state prison inmates from receiving Pell Grants during their incarceration. Pell Grants assist low-income individuals in gaining access to post-secondary education; the 1994 act in effect killed hundreds of programs providing education to prison inmates. Today, half of women in prison participate in educational or vocational programming, but only one in five women takes high-school or GED classes, and only half of women’s correctional facilities offer post-secondary education.

The women we questioned all had different reasons for earning their GEDs while incarcerated, but they all mentioned hope for a better future as a factor. Wilmarie, who was convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to 3 1/3 to 10 years, said, “My motivation was to change the way I had lived in the past and to make a difference in my life. Achieving my GED gave me more hope, and I was able to believe in myself.” Two others mentioned their desire to help their children as an impetus. “With my GED I can now read to my children, which is something I love to do,” said Robin. Similarly, Barbara told us, “I was incarcerated doing a long term ... at the time I had a small son. My focus and goal is that I needed to do this in order to provide care for him.” Another motivator mentioned by the women was the positive reinforcement from family and fellow inmates they gained from studying for the GED. Stephanie told Uncensored, “I wanted to do something positive in my life and learn all that there was available to me during my incarceration.” Robin commented that pursuing a GED “kept me focused and determined

to get further in my education.” She added, “Having my GED, not only does it give me higher chances of finding a job, but I feel better about myself as a confident adult.”

Prison education programs need not end with GED obtainment. For example, the Ossining, New York–based organization Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison partners with nearby Nyack and Mercy Colleges to offer free degree programs for both male and female offenders. According to Hudson Link’s Web site, it costs an average of \$54,000 per year to keep one person incarcerated. Forty-six Hudson Link graduates have been released since 1998; none have returned to prison. For every year the 46 released graduates stay out of prison, New York State saves \$2.48 million.

When asked if they plan on pursuing any additional academic or technical training, all five of our respondents said they have continued or plan to continue their educational journeys. Wilmarie said, “I am currently attending community college majoring in computer technology,” while Robin told us, “I want to go back to school and get a bachelor’s degree in social work and help families and children.” Linda’s plan is “attending drug-counseling school such as the California Association of Addiction Recovery Institute program,” and Stephanie said, “I am thinking about going to school to become a certified dental assistant.”

Robin happily reported, “Now I am able to read to my children and help them learn. If I hadn’t received my GED, I wouldn’t be able to do that.” Stephanie said to Uncensored, “My daughter is very proud of me.”

Studies show that prison GED programs reduce recidivism, increase long-term wage-earning power, and can be cost effective while lessening the well-documented overpopulation of American correctional facilities. Women who earn their GEDs while incarcerated learn that a prison sentence does not mean the end of hope for a better life for them and their children. “The GED programs are helpful, especially for the youth that may not have goals or a positive path,” Wilmarie said. Robin happily reported, “Now I am able to read to my children and help them learn. If I hadn’t received my GED, I wouldn’t be able to do that.” Stephanie said to Uncensored, “My daughter is very proud of me.” The participants we interviewed recognize the powerful role GED programs can play in prisoners’ lives. “I think every place that is as dark as prison truly is should offer education for everyone doing time. There is nothing better than being able to compete and to become a productive, educated member of society,” explained Barbara. Robin asked, “If you don’t give people [in prison] a chance to learn, how will they ever be successful adults in society?” ■