

Women with justice involvement: The three T's are the keys

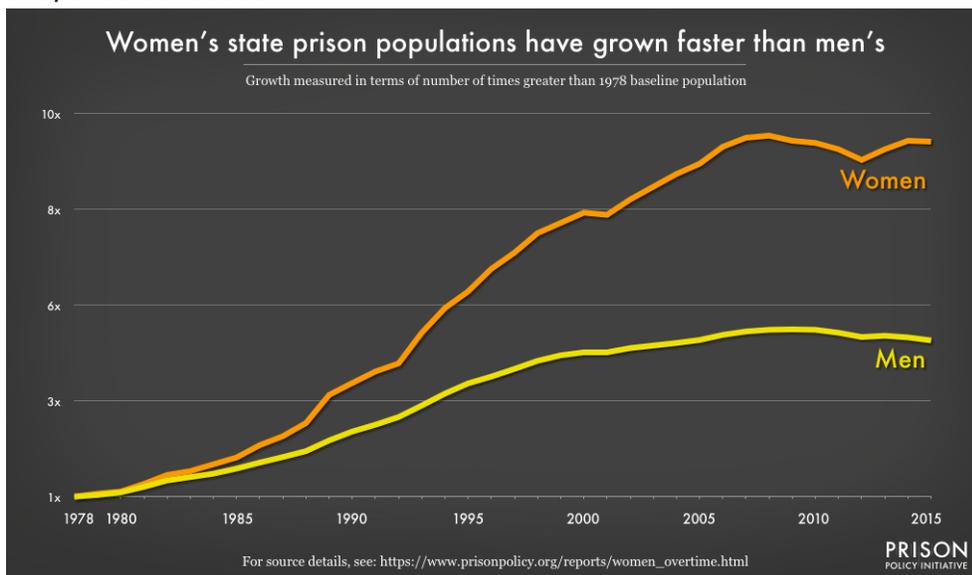
By Denise M. Robinson, Linda Janes, and Gloria Iannucci

Women are not men.

While this is an obvious statement, when looking back at the history of women involved in the criminal justice system, one would be hard-pressed to find the differences in programming. Fortunately, in recent years this has changed and significantly improved. Unfortunately, the primary reason for the impressive strides made in women's programming has been the dramatic rise in the number of women with justice involvement in the United States (US).

Let's start with a few facts about women in the justice system in the US:

- Their incarceration has grown at twice the pace of men's in recent decades.
- In Ohio, where Alvis operates programs, there was a tenfold increase in the number of women entering prison from 1974-2014, compared to a fourfold increase for men. Ohio currently has one of the largest female prison populations in the US.
- Women are most likely to be nonviolent drug offenders. Approximately 80% have substance abuse issues and 80-90% of women who abuse alcohol and drugs have a history of physical and/or sexual abuse.



Prison Policy Initiative, The Gender Divide: Tracking Women's State Prison Growth, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/women_overtime.html

- An estimated 70% of female offenders have young children. At the time they were arrested, the majority were single mothers and prior to their justice involvement, they were the custodial parent.

As more women have entered the justice system, we have progressed to better meet their needs. Our programs for women prioritize differently and they are multidimensional. This is where the **three Ts** come in: Women's programs must be 1) **Trauma-informed**, 2) **Treatment-oriented**, and 3) **Triaging** (incorporating a multidimensional and interdisciplinary approach).

All of the programming and treatment we do for women at Alvis is **trauma-informed** because the data shows us that a high percentage of justice-involved women have suffered years of physical, sexual and/or psychological abuse as well as experiencing traumatic events both as children and as adults. All Alvis staff who work with women are trained in trauma-informed care.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of **behavioral health treatment** in programs for women. A Bureau of Justice Assistance study found that 82% of incarcerated women met lifetime criteria for drug or alcohol abuse or dependence; 53% met criteria for lifetime Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); and 25% reported severe physical functional impairment in the past year. Alvis conducts assessments to clearly and specifically identify treatment needs and develops individualized treatment plans to meet these needs.

Women's lives are rich and complex, therefore requiring a coordinated, or **triaged, approach**. Women's treatment plans include education, employment, parenting, financial empowerment, healthy relationships, housing, communications skills, physical health and well-being, and more, depending upon each woman's needs.

In our programs for mothers and their children, Alvis takes a three-pronged approach. This is consistent both when working with women who are preparing to reunify with their children and when working with mothers and children who are already living together.

It consists of:

- Parenting education and skills practice for mothers;
- Clinical assessment and treatment services for mothers and children; and
- Prevention services for children, such as substance abuse education, educational supports, after school supervision and activities, and a specialized summer camp program for at risk children.



A mother and her child who are in the Alvis Family and Children's Program

All programming at Alvis is supported by carefully selected, evidence supported curricula, including curricula based upon the following books by Stephanie Covington: **Beyond Trauma, a healing journey for women; Beyond anger and violence; and Helping women recover: a program for treating addiction.** In treatment, we are able to capitalize on women's strengths, which include their capacity for connection as well as how they build on and develop in a context of attachment to and relationships with others.

At Alvis and especially in our women's programs, the agency has evolved over the years to better serve our clients, their families and the community as a whole. Initially we treated only the woman who was in our program. One can see the progression in our services as Alvis:

Added family services and began working to help mothers and children reconnect and build a healthy family.

- Created step down recovery housing for women and for mothers and their children, which provides an additional layer of support for newly sober and/or newly re-entering women.
- Incorporated programming that addresses the challenges and stresses between a mother and the caregiver who has taken care of her children while she was incarcerated to ensure a positive reunification process for all.

- Brought a woman's partner/significant other into the therapeutic process, which is part of creating a safe and healthy environment for a woman who is returning to a relationship. It is tremendously rewarding to be part of a woman's recovery, re-entry and reunification with her family. Seeing the positive impact Alvis has on women and their families ensures we can never be satisfied with the status quo. Alvis will always continue striving to enhance our programs and gender specific and family therapeutic services.

Resource Links:

Alvis: <https://www.alvis180.org>

Bureau of Justice Statistics: Women's Pathways to Jail: Examining Mental Health, Trauma, and Substance Use. It is available at:

<https://bja.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh186/files/Publications/WomensPathwaysToJail.pdf>

Stephanie Covington's materials are available on her website:

<https://www.stephaniecovington.com/>

National Institute of Corrections, in partnership with the Women's Prison Association, has developed The National Directory of Programs for Women with Criminal Justice Involvement. It is available at <https://nicic.gov/justice-involved-women>

Prison Policy Initiative, The Gender Divide: Tracking Women's State Prison Growth. It is available at https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/women_overtime.html

TIP 51: Substance Abuse Treatment: Addressing the Specific Needs of Women, by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is available at: <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/TIP-51-Substance-Abuse-Treatment-Addressing-the-Specific-Needs-of-Women/SMA15-442>