

November 2018

A New Path to Justice:

Getting Women Off Rikers Island



Vera
INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

**THE
NEW YORK
WOMEN'S
FOUNDATION**
Radical generosity.

Director's Note

The number of women incarcerated in this country has ballooned a shocking 700 percent since 1980. Yet despite this growth, women remain largely absent from the increasing public discourse on criminal justice reform.

Academic experts, grassroots advocates, and formerly incarcerated women themselves are clear on the reasons why women end up involved in the system: the often-intertwined factors of economic instability, intimate partner violence, drug abuse, and mental illness that narrow their options for survival. They also agree that there is little public safety rationale to detaining many of these women, particularly considering the known costs to their children, families, and communities when their ability to be caregivers and contributing members of the community is compromised by incarceration.

We need a new paradigm to help stop the cycles of poverty and trauma and create new paths for opportunity and stability in the lives of women and the families that depend on them.

Each year, more than 5,500 women are admitted to the jail at Rikers Island. And while there has been much activity throughout New York City on criminal justice reform in recent years, including consensus among policymakers to close Rikers Island and cut the number of people involved in the system by half within a decade, gender-specific solutions remain elusive.

To address this, The New York Women's Foundation has partnered with the Vera Institute of Justice to identify

gender-informed strategies for getting New York City women disentangled from the criminal justice system. A culmination of dialogue among more than 20 nonprofit organizations and New York City agencies, this report reflects our commitment to ensure that those with expertise on systemic solutions for women have the opportunity to inform thought leadership in the field. Within the pages of this report, you will find policy and practical recommendations that could significantly reduce the population of women involved in the criminal justice system in New York City. Building on our partnership with the Prisoner Reentry Institute at John Jay College of Criminal Justice on the report *Women Injustice: Gender and the Pathway to Jail in New York City*, the recommendations in this report serve as a blueprint to ensure that women do not remain unseen in the fight to end mass incarceration in our city.

As philanthropists, it is not enough to support the creation of reports such as these, though they are one important piece of the puzzle. We must also invest and leverage our dollars and other resources to ensure that those who are the most underinvested, such as system-involved women, are at the center of solutions. That's why, for more than 30 years, we at The New York Women's Foundation have focused our efforts on investing in marginalized communities of women to create economic justice for all, particularly on complex, intersectional, and intractable issues such as criminal justice reform. We urge policymakers and other funders to join us in our commitment to ending mass incarceration for women in New York City. The moment is now.



Ana L. Oliveira
President & CEO
The New York Women's Foundation

About this project

The New York Women's Foundation's work is guided by the principle that the best solutions for the most pressing problems a community faces are present within that community. It is with this principle in mind that we strive to build inclusive tables where leaders in community, philanthropy, academia, and government come together to share knowledge and to advance change together. To that end, The Foundation commissioned the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) to write the report, *A New Path to Justice: Getting Women Off of Rikers Island*, using a participatory approach.

Vera formed an advisory group and began meeting over several months in 2017 to answer the question: What would it take to get women off of Rikers Island now? The goal of these advisory group discussions was to think broadly but practically about changing the experience of women in New York City's criminal justice system. Over six sessions, the advisory group identified the challenges women face in the New York City criminal justice system and developed strategies and solutions to change the trajectory of their involvement from arrest to case disposition.

Vera also met with dozens of other stakeholders, including staff from community-based organizations that serve justice-involved women, city officials and policymakers and, critically, women who have directly experienced the harms of Rikers Island. Vera conducted individual meetings and site visits, and led focus groups—including one with incarcerated women and girls at the Rose M. Singer Center, the women's facility at Rikers Island.

We are proud to present *A New Path to Justice: Getting Women Off of Rikers Island*. It is a blueprint of aspirational first principles, programmatic considerations, and practical solutions to keep women out of the criminal justice system and off Rikers Island. It is also one part of an evolving body of content and activity, which encompasses reports, convenings, and public education events and more.

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