

Why prison isn't working for women

Psychologist Stephanie Covington believes understanding trauma can help staff appreciate that women in jail can be victims too

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A cell at Bronzefield women's prison. Photograph: Tim Ockenden/PA Archive

It's a weekday morning, and in a packed lecture theatre in central London, author and consultant Stephanie Covington is telling about 100 people who work in Britain's jails why prisons fail to rehabilitate women. Along with other prison campaigners, Covington believes something must be done about the fact that eight in 10 women behind bars have been convicted of a non-violent offence and yet, once incarcerated, one in two will reoffend within a year. Locking up a mother or caregiver will also hugely increase the risk of her children having mental health problems or getting caught up in the criminal justice system themselves, she adds.

Covington believes that, in an ideal world, only a handful of women – those who are truly dangerous – would be incarcerated. If changing policy on imprisoning women who pose no threat to society is a long-term goal, however, Covington's UK workshops aim to reduce the damage done by prison by teaching frontline staff about the benefits of what she calls "a trauma-informed culture". "It's not

difficult and it's not expensive," she says. "But it does demand a real mindshift within prisons."

Covington is in Britain at the invitation of the Women at Risk coalition, a group of experts including academics, psychologists and criminologists intent on making society more aware of the needs of the women who get caught up in the criminal justice system. At present, she says, prisons are run on the basis that the women inside them are "bad" and that "kicking off" or disruptive behaviour is controllable on their part. The truth is that almost all female prisoners are trauma victims, says Covington, and if they were handled with that in mind, prisons would become far safer for everyone inside them.

Compared with women in the general population, says Covington – a Californian psychologist who works with the National Institute of Corrections in Washington DC, and who became aware of the issues around women in jail after a prison warden attended one of her trauma conferences – women in custody are five times more likely to have a mental health problem, and almost eight in 10 exhibit some level of psychological disturbance on admission. One in three have suffered sexual abuse, and more than one in two have suffered domestic violence; half have attempted suicide at some point in their lives. "And going into prison retraumatizes them – so basically, we are amplifying or compounding their problems," she says.

"Taking as the default that you're dealing with a woman who is suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome makes perfect sense, because the chances are very high that you are. What that means is working hard not to trigger trauma in a woman: understanding how she might feel when male officers are with her or go behind her, for example, because that might take her back to situations where she was abused."

One prison that has adopted Covington's trauma-centred approach is Framingham Institution for Women in Massachusetts, whose successes she

cites in her presentation to UK prison staff. The changes at Framingham over the past few years, says Covington, have been pivotal. "There's been a 46% drop in crisis situations, and the number of prisoners on days when they're having to be watched constantly because of fears over their mental health is down by a third. There's been a 20% drop in transfers to psychiatric hospitals, and a 15% drop in self-harm."

And Framingham is safer for everyone, she says: inmate-on-staff assaults are down by 62%, inmate-on-inmate assaults by 54%, and inmate-on-inmate fights by 46%.

Most of the women in the criminal justice system have suffered trauma almost unimaginable to the rest of us. Covington says: "Understanding that trauma, and changing the prison experience to reflect an understanding of it, could give these women the first break they've ever had – and that could really change them, and we'll all reap the rewards."