

# From strong women come strong families, strong Oregon

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**W**omen are the fastest growing inmate population in Oregon. Locking up women brings a unique set of issues to our families and our

communities. A system built on an assumption that a one-size-fits-all approach works for everyone has clearly failed, most notably women. With a better approach to addressing mental health, addiction

issues, and other health care needs; services to stabilize families; access to education; and employment opportunities (including childcare), we could stem the tide of incarceration for women across the state. To do that, we have to take a hard look at what we are doing now and why it is failing women, their children, and our communities.

## Who are the Women in Oregon's Prisons?

In the past 10 years, while the number of men in Oregon's prison system has increased by 28 percent, the number of female inmates grew by 86 percent. Why this increase? Because of mandatory minimum sentences passed by Oregon voters. Measure 57 created mandatory minimums for property and drug crimes and, for a number of reasons, women commit these nonviolent offenses more often than other crimes. The over-criminalization of nonviolent offenses by Measure 57 is a primary cause of this extreme and unnecessary spike in the number of women going to prison.

Women inmates are more expensive than men because they require more staff for programming and treatment than men. The majority of Oregon's women inmates are diagnosed as having mental health issues. According to the Oregon Department of

Corrections, 64 percent of women inmates have serious mental health diagnoses, such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and chronic depression. And 89 percent of this inmate population entered prison addicted to drugs or alcohol. Research indicates a correlation between victimization and substance abuse; a 2003 study found that victims of rape are 26 times more likely to have two or more serious drug abuse-related problems than non-crime victims. Researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago found that women who reported two or more victimization experiences had two to four times the prevalence of alcohol dependence, drug abuse, or drug dependence as women who reported no victimization.

More than 75 percent of Oregon's female inmates are mothers. When they are incarcerated, the state may have to take care of their children through the foster care system.

This system is failing everyone.

## Oregon's Justice Reinvestment: A Path to Better Outcomes for Women

In 2013, Oregon legislators passed a significant public safety reform package, House Bill 3194. The legislation's goal is to reduce the size and cost of the state prison system by making smart investments in local interventions that reduce crime and violence, saving the state more than \$300 million over the next five years. This recalibration of our system is working. The Oregonian newspaper reported that the plans to build an extremely expensive new prison at Junction City will now be put on hold for at least 10 years. A large part of this new prison bed need was to house women inmates.

Justice reinvestment is providing an opportunity for Oregon to choose a smarter public safety path — one that relies less on costly and often ineffective prison beds and more on local interventions that are proven

to work. This bill will impact women because counties will be focused on reducing prison bed use for nonviolent drug and property crimes — those crimes that women commit at a disproportionate rate.

The hope is to see increased investment in addiction treatment and recovery programs, victim services, re-entry programs, evidence-based law enforcement strategies, and prison programs that help women succeed when they return to the community and to their families.

## Partnership for Safety and Justice

For the past three years, PSJ has been the only statewide organization at the table advocating on behalf of everyone impacted by crime — survivors of crime, people convicted of crime, and their families and communities. Justice reinvestment in Oregon would not have happened without PSJ's work. Now, as counties move to invest savings from this bill (and from not building a prison!) into communities, PSJ will be there to monitor implementation. We will be watching to ensure that investments are made in services for people who are victims of crimes, people coming out of the system, and additional addiction and mental health treatment.

PSJ is the only organization in the state (and one of the first in the nation) to use this holistic approach to public safety policy advocacy. A significant part of the recent justice reinvestment work focused on victim services. PSJ worked with other victims' organizations to double state funding for domestic violence shelter beds and programs across the state. Additionally, 10 percent of the money reinvested through HB 3194 must go to direct victim services.

Oregon is on a smarter public safety path. Together, we can continue to build safe, healthy individuals, families, and communities.

## PARTNERSHIP FOR SAFETY and JUSTICE

State Representative Jennifer Williamson represents Oregon's 36th District and is Interim Executive Director for the Partnership for Safety and Justice. PSJ is a statewide non-profit advocacy organization dedicated to making Oregon's approach to crime and public safety more effective and just.



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## Darkness

by John Lawson

We take for granted our sight  
But once lost,  
Our mind makes amends,  
Our other senses  
Become more acute  
We're able to hear  
And smell  
Our way around  
Using touch  
Smell  
Hearing  
Our way  
Through the darkness within

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