

Prison push only aggravating women's public health crises

BY TALIA GAD
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

When the vast majority of incarcerated women battle addiction, are victims of assault or have mental health diagnoses, criminal justice can be squarely classified as a public health matter. And as Oregon lawmakers weigh whether to open another complex for more women to be imprisoned, we face a public health crisis.

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Talia Gad is the new communications director at Partnership for Safety and Justice, a statewide nonprofit advocacy organization advancing public safety solutions that ensure justice, equity, accountability and healing to achieve safe and strong communities.

Oregon's only prison for women is Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, and it is indeed overcrowded by about 20 people, but opening a second complex is not the solution. In fact, it's a move that completely misunderstands the problem: the over-criminalization of low-level offenses that disproportionately imprisons women of color and women with little or no income.

Our justice system needs repair. Elected officials have responded to reports on Oregon's rank as seventh highest in disproportionately incarcerating African Americans, and they've also begun to address poorer communities' over-representation in jails and prisons. Many elected officials have even spoken about the policies needed to reduce these disparities, and more square footage is not among the solutions.

As someone who has spent two decades in the public health field, I've worked with girls and women of color who were disproportionately incarcerated. Justice-impacted women often do need support, but they are also resilient, resourceful and strong. Expanded incarceration disregards people's potential. Instead, it magnifies disparities, and it effectively turns prisons into dystopic emergency rooms.

Mental health

For many women battling mental illness,

well-being relies on a shelf with the right meds. It's simple, yet sometimes people with diagnoses end up vulnerable, in trouble and unexpectedly swept into the justice system. According to the Oregon Department of Corrections in 2012, a significant majority of women at Coffee Creek (64 percent) have "serious and persistent mental health disorders" – an astronomical rate that exposes policy failures in both public health and criminal justice.

Mental illness is largely treatable, but Oregon has historically lagged in mental health care. Lawmakers have invested in mental health over the last two legislative cycles, and a second prison would undercut these investments. On the flipside, with more backing of programs like these, legislators would effectively deliver a shelf with the right meds.

Surviving sexual and domestic violence

I spent years supporting survivors of sexual and domestic violence, so the rates of trauma among women in prison don't surprise me: 86 percent have experienced sexual violence, 77 percent partner violence, and 60 percent caregiver violence. Tip: If you aren't good with data, and you want to quote these stats later today, just say, "Almost every single woman in prison has been assaulted," and that'll be fairly accurate.

For trauma survivors without shelter, girls and women must quickly become resourceful to make it on the street. Living outside the reach of their abusers, these survival skills keep them alive, but they can also sometimes get them into trouble. Some might rely on drugs, property crimes and other low-level offenses to get by or feed their kids. Perhaps those aren't the best choices. Or perhaps they aren't choices at all.

When I think about these numbers, a faint voice in my head wonders whether women's trauma is too much for society to bear – whether we lock them up because we don't

know how else to deal with the aftermath of women's victimization. Of course that's naïve. Trauma is complicated, and survival strategies are even more so. But at the same time, we can't know that "almost every single woman in prison has been assaulted" and think that the solution to an overcrowded prison is another prison.

Substance dependence and addiction

The vast majority of women at Coffee Creek enter prison with an alcohol or drug addiction (89 percent). Add to this Oregon's Measure 57, which mandates minimum sentences for drug-related crimes, and the question arises: is our state addressing chemical dependence by incarceration?

Addiction treatment programs exist, although their demand is greater than their reach. If prevention and diversion programs were better funded (with significantly less than \$10 million), the move would bank on women's strengths, resilience, and capacity to thrive. If these 9 in 10 women could access such resources, imagine the enrichment that they would bring to our families, our communities, and our state.

Curing what truly ails us

Many of the women at Coffee Creek have been shaped by violence, addiction, and mental health conditions, but they're also survivors. Of course we need to ensure accountability for crimes, but I know enough to know that it's not always the crime that gets people busted. Often it's the circumstances.

Many of us, if we were living outside, might do similar things in similar situations; indeed, many of us have, but we were protected by resources or zip codes or whiteness. Coffee Creek is overcrowded by about 20 beds, but this isn't a crisis of square footage. It's a public health crisis that requires treatment, recovery and healing to build on women's resilience, families' health and communities' strengths.

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