

Kristine Riley



California's Prison Realignment and Its Effects on Female Probationers

CSWS-funded research looks at criminal justice reform in Santa Cruz.

by Kristine Riley, master's graduate, Conflict and Dispute Resolution Program

Turn on the TV, scroll through your Facebook feed, or pick up the morning's paper and you are likely to see a feature about America's criminal justice system. The shift from a fringe movement of radicals to mainstream American political and popular culture is significant, and speaks to the decades of arduous work by the people I consider social and intellectual role models: Angela Davis, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Sister Helen Prejean, Bryan Stevenson, Philip Zimbardo, Beth Richie, and Rosemary Goodnough. Reforming the criminal justice system is now seen as a non-partisan issue that brings Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, Independents, radicals, and everyone in between to the table to discuss reform. Though the movement still faces hefty hurdles and staunch prejudices left over from the tough-on-crime era, the smart-on-crime movement has gained noticeable momentum, and substantive change is happening now.

My CSWS research, "California's Prison Realignment and Its Effects on Female Probationers," was made possible not only by the center's desire to fund graduate research, but by the progressive initiative of the county where I completed my undergraduate degree: Santa Cruz, California. Besides hosting one of the most beautiful campuses in the U.S.—the University of California, Santa Cruz—the city is also home to law enforcement agencies dedicated to progressive reforms through evidence-based solutions and strategic partnerships with community organizations.

The relationships I developed working on criminal justice reform in Santa Cruz presented a unique opportunity to expand on my graduate education in restorative justice. I wanted to examine how the implementation of California's Prison Realignment Act had affected the services women in Santa Cruz received while in custody and during their reentry. Though much of criminology's attention focuses on incarcerated men, whose population has grown over 300 percent since the 1970s, the incarcerated women's population has exploded by over 800 percent, as women continue to receive harsher sentences for their crimes. In addition, women are likely to be the sole providers for young children upon their incarceration.¹

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The Gemma Program has been a long-time partner of law enforcement and provides in-reach services, a Day Program, Aftercare, and transitional housing to women with co-occurring mental health needs and substance-use disorders. The majority of my work analyzed Gemma's service delivery model (mindfulness) and involved developing a data collection system that was easy to use, dynamic, and able to accurately assess the program's effectiveness and client progress. I am grateful for the unlimited access the Gemma Program, Santa Cruz Probation, and the Santa Cruz Jails provided to the population and their data. This type of access and trust speaks to law enforcement's commitment to social justice reform, with the understanding that community safety includes those incarcerated as part of the community.

The intersection of feminist research methodologies and criminology is still a fringe form of analysis, but one whose mainstreaming is very much needed. I do not believe in neutrality, and I feel a strong connection to holistic feminist research methodologies, which encourage a deep relationship not only to the people and communities one works with, but the actual work itself. Criminal justice reform is notorious for quick burnout, and I believe passion, compassion, and commitment are the most important components of my research. I argue that these qualities, not objectivity, drive my fidelity to best practices, and I firmly believe no one comes into this work because they feel *neutral* about the criminal justice system.

All the evidence points to strong relationships—with one's families, community, and self—to create safe communities and reduce community costs on incarceration. Communities are able to focus on breaking the intergenerational cycle of incarceration, create access

to education and employment, address mental health and substance use disorder issues, and ultimately restore dignity through strong relationships by offering second—and sometimes third and fourth—chances.

The women report improved problem solving skills; feeling safer and more in control; and developing compassion, faith, respect, awareness, and a belief in themselves. Here are some of their comments:

I didn't want to come at first. I had done so many programs. I was skeptical, cynical and closed-minded. I am leaving the Day Program impressed and open-minded... [T]he most important coping skill I use is to remember to take a space, a moment to pause, breathe through my heart and remind myself what I am fighting for. I am able to ground myself... I feel responsible for my own recovery—no judgment. I can honestly express myself... [T]oday I believe that I can achieve the dreams and goals I once thought were impossible. ■

FOOTNOTE

1. Belknap, J. (1996). *The Invisible Woman: Gender, Crime, and Justice*.

—Kristine Riley holds undergraduate degrees in community studies (with an emphasis in the incarcerated community) and psychology from the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she graduated with social justice distinction. She holds a master's degree from the University of Oregon's Conflict and Dispute Resolution Program, where she focused on restorative justice and wrote a thesis titled: "A Reinterpretation of Restorative Justice through Black and Native Feminisms." She currently works for the Vera Institute of Justice in New York.