

5 seconds of music (“Run”)

I’m Stacy Torian. Welcome to “Minds Unbarred: Information Literacy Strategies of Incarcerated Women.” (*music continues*)

10 seconds of music (“Run”)

INTRODUCTION

2, 162, 400. According to the latest data available from the [Pew Research Center](#), that is the approximate number of people incarcerated in U.S. prisons and jails (“America’s incarceration rate, 2018). The [Prison Policy Initiative](#), a think tank based in Northampton, Massachusetts, estimates that roughly 10% of that population, or 219,000 people, are women (“Women’s mass incarceration,” 2018). The female incarcerated population has much in common with the male one. As reported by both [Mother Jones](#) and the [Prison Policy Initiative](#), incarcerated women are disproportionately African American, overwhelmingly poor, with lower levels of literacy and education than the general U.S. population (“Women’s mass incarceration,” 2018; Day, 2018; “Uncovering mass incarceration’s”, 2016; Alfred and Chlup, 2009). But while the male incarceration rate has declined in recent years, the rate of female incarceration – specifically white and Latina female incarceration – has continued to rise (“The gender divide,” 2018; “The changing racial dynamics,” 2015). A look at the statistics on female incarceration over the past four decades reveals some startling numbers. The criminal justice reform advocacy group, The Sentencing Project, notes the number of incarcerated females **increased drastically** between 1980 and 2016, from 26, 378 to 213,722, an increase of more than 700 per cent (“Incarcerated women and girls,” 2018).

Incarcerated women’s experiences differ from those of incarcerated men in significant ways. According to an article in the [2011 bulletin of the World Health Organization](#), women are more likely than men to have been sexually abused prior to incarceration (Van den Bergh, Gatherer, Fraser, & Moller, 2011). Their pre-incarceration earnings are lower than those of men (“Women’s mass incarceration, 2018). Furthermore, 60% of incarcerated women have children under the age of 18. And, as noted in the 2009 World Health Organization publication, *Declaration on Women’s Health in Prison: Correcting Gender Inequity in Prison Health*, female incarcerated parents are likely to be their children’s primary caretakers (as cited in Van den Bergh et al., 2011).

Over the past few months, I have been studying the concept of information literacy, paying special attention to how information literacy is practiced by marginalized people. Information literacy as currently defined by the Association of College and Research Libraries, is not just the ability to locate, assess, and make effective use of information, but also a set of **quote unquote** “conceptual understandings” summarized by six phrases: “Authority Is Constructed and Contextual,” “Information Creation as a Process,” “Information Has Value,” “Research as Inquiry,” “Scholarship as Conversation,” and “Searching as Strategic Exploration” (Framework for Information Literacy, 2015). But what does all of this mean to women behind bars? In an environment characterized by constant surveillance, restricted access to information, and, frequently, censorship, how can incarcerated women use their information literacy skills to improve their situations and further their goals?

To get help answering these questions, I spoke with three people who are deeply familiar with women’s experiences in jails and prisons. One runs writing workshops for incarcerated women

and other community members in Colorado. Another spent two years incarcerated in the South Carolina prison system, where she helped other incarcerated women cultivate their reading and writing skills. A third served time in a federal prison in California and now directs a program for women recovering from substance abuse. All three women made it clear that while incarcerated women may be physically constrained, their minds are constantly exploring, engaging, assessing, and creating meaning in the world around them.

Up next, Part One of Minds Unbarred.

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