

Justice Reinvestment and Reducing the Size of the Rhode Island Women's Prison



 **OPEN DOORS**

A proposal for a framework piloting a medium scale, comprehensive criminal justice reform redesign that could achieve real correctional savings through reducing the number of women in prison.

A Justice Reinvestment Approach

Replacing prisons with alternatives to incarceration that are more humane, supportive, and rehabilitative.

Funding these alternatives sustainably with savings from prison population reductions

Reinvesting additional savings and advocating for additional spending on community investments into housing, education, healthcare and other supports that can reduce the conditions that create crime

Why here, why this?

- This system is a manageable scale in a small state: Rhode Island has one of the smallest correctional departments in the country and is one of the only integrated jail and prison systems run at a single location.
- Isolating just the women system allows us to identify one of the smallest yet largely fully inclusive correctional systems in the country—just 110 beds.
- Public opinion is generally more sympathetic to woman.
- Their role as mothers and caregivers focuses this project on children just as much as adults.
- Women are likelier to be incarcerated for nonviolent crimes.
- Most women in prison have been victims themselves, including very high rates of sexual assault

Legislative Commission on Reducing Women's Recidivism

- This 15 member commission brought together all major stakeholders including OpenDoors
- Commission met for two years and is still producing final report.
- Recommended increased transitional housing.



Justice Reinvestment and the RI Women's Prison

The Women's Prison at the ACI has an average population of a little over one hundred people as of 2024.

- The population was as low as 70 people in 2020 during the pandemic
- During this population low in January 2021, there were 4 people serving sentences 1 year or less for nonviolent crimes. Eight months later, there were 22.

As a building originally designed as a Men's Maximum Security Facility, it lacks necessary programming and rec space. Most of the people inside should at most be in a minimum security facility.

As a result, the building is extremely expensive--almost \$200,000 per bed, or \$17 million dollars a year.

\$17 million dollars can be better spent to reduce recidivism and maintain public safety

What types criminal charges put women in prison?

Of the around 110 beds filled on any given day--

- Around 38% (42) are awaiting trial
- Around 40% (44) are serving sentences of two years or less
- Around 22% (24) are serving sentences of more than 2 years



Types of Awaiting Trial Situations

Of the 42 or so beds filled with people awaiting trial:

Almost all are held without bail on probation violations

About 20 beds are filled with people never given prison sentences, most of them being released in a month or less

With many people cycling in and out very quickly, over 700 women a year are inside for 1-7 days.

The vast majority of these people and these beds are filled with people charged with nonviolent offenses

Currently, four are awaiting trial on murder charges with two or three more facing charges with sentences over 5 years

Types of Awaiting Trial Situations

For example:

A sixty year old woman arrested on felony charges of credit card fraud over \$100 was held for 2 days, her first ever RI criminal charge. The charges were ultimately dismissed.

A forty four year old woman arrested on domestic assault charges, on probation for five other recent assault and drug related crimes. She was held for a month and then released on bail, and then six months later was reincarcerated for a new felony assault and a violation of a no contact order.

A forty five year old woman arrested for felony shoplifting on probation for three recent felonies--shoplifting and conspiracy--ultimately sentenced to four months in prison, and then arrested for shoplifting again four months later.

Types of Prison Sentences

Of the 68 or so beds filled with people sentenced to prison:

52% are sentenced for nonviolent charges, most of which are serving sentences of six months or less

45% are sentenced for violent charges, most of which are for over 2 years

41% are serving more than two year long sentences

26% are serving sentences of 10 years or more

3 are serving life sentences

Types of Prison Sentences

For example:

A forty nine year old woman sentenced to three months on drug possession charges, on probation for two other drug possession charges. Over the last ten years, she had been in and out of prison 21 times, almost entirely for drug possession and stealing.

A thirty five year old women sentenced to prison for two years for robbery, on probation for a two year old larceny charge.

A twenty two year old woman serving six years for a DUI, death resulting that had had one previous DUI and no other record.

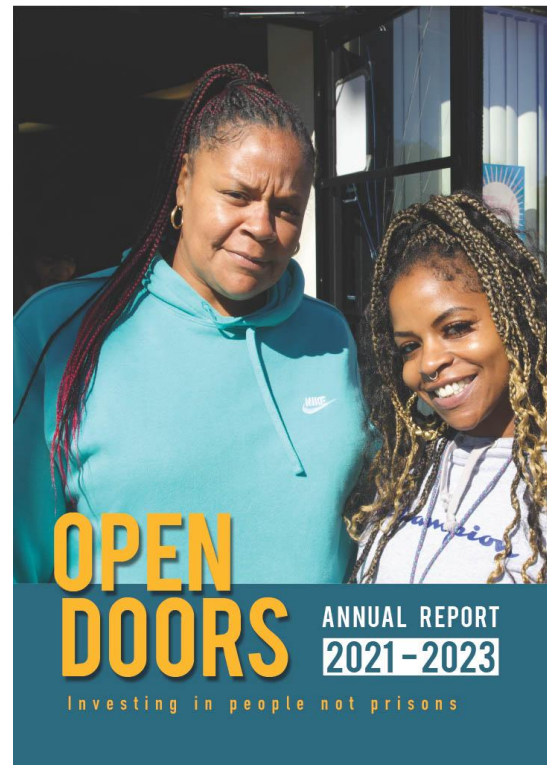
Keeping Families Together and preventing generational incarceration

Around 75% of women in prison are mothers, and their incarceration affects their children profoundly. [Studies found](#) that 18% of incarcerated mothers reported that their children were living in non-kinship foster care, 41% of teenage children of incarcerated parents had been suspended from school, and 31% had run-ins with the police. After a mother goes to prison, sometimes families never recover and children end up trapped in the foster system.



Groundwork Completed

- Key leadership at OpenDoors is from women that have themselves overcome histories of incarceration.
- Women's Transitional Housing Program opened in December of 2022 and has helped over 60 women so far.
- Women & Children's House Transitional House opened December 2023
- Intensive 4 year supportive programming 'Pay for Success' pilot program underway
- Legislative Commission on Reducing the Incarceration of Women finishing two years of work
- OpenDoors received a three year DOJ Second Chance Act Grant to expand our [She Thrives Program](#) as part of a randomized controlled trial



Experience with Rigorous Program Evaluations

- From 2014 to 2018 OpenDoors conducted a randomized controlled trial on the transitional housing program for men.
- Collaborated with researchers from University of Rhode Island and Harvard.
- Final report found a statistically significant increase in parole rates and a trend towards reduced recidivism.



Go to <https://opendoorsri.org/9-yards-program> for more information, including documentary video and Ted Talk

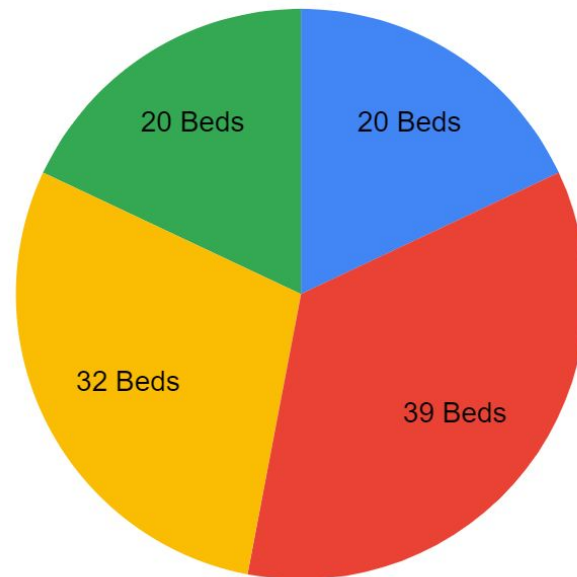
Shrinking the Women's Prison By the Numbers

The number of women in prison could be reduced substantially by a mix of diverting people into transitional housing and non-residential supportive programs. For women serving very long sentences that are unable to be paroled, they would be transferred out of state. Some pretrial jail beds would be created within other existing facilities.

This estimate would be refined during the planning period and is based on the initial research and data analysis that OpenDoors has conducted but has not yet been validated with the Department of Corrections.

Estimated Alternatives to Current Women Prison Bed Allocation

- Transfer to Prison Out of State
- Diversion to Transitional Housing
- Diversion Programming
- Transfer to Jail Facility



Phase I: Planning and Coalition Building

- OpenDoors will use the momentum of the legislative commission to deepen the commission's consideration and commitment to major reform
 - What would the Parole Board need to parole all parole eligible women?
 - What would judges need release non-violent offenders to probation?
- Create a coalition around overall framework and refine implementation plan



Phase II: Scaled Up Randomized Controlled Trial

- OpenDoors would double the size of its women's program from two houses to four houses over a period of two years and expand diversionary supportive programming.
- Implementation of a randomized controlled trial based on the design of our 2014-2018 trial which found positive results in reductions in incarceration
- Estimated cost: \$10 million
- Estimated time: 5 years