

FROM CELL TO HOME: Seeking Mercy for Women in the Abuse-to-Prison Pipeline

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As the United States focuses on criminal justice reform, incarcerated women remain an overlooked population. Most troubling is that women's incarceration grew by nearly 700% – twice the rate of men's – during the past four decades¹ and although incarceration rates are dropping, women's incarceration rate is dropping less than that of men's.² Nearly 60% of women inmates have children under the age of 18 and were their primary caretaker when they were incarcerated,³ a fact that has broad adverse implications for their children as well as the women themselves.

Most women are incarcerated for nonviolent crimes, but 12% of women in state prisons are incarcerated for murder.⁴ As many as 90% of the women incarcerated for killing a man had been battered by him.⁴



The great majority of incarcerated women have experienced years of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.⁵ Their most common pathway to crime depends on surviving abuse, poverty, and substance misuse. Such histories can complicate adjusting to incarceration and are associated with higher rates of in-prison misconduct, which directly impacts the likelihood of being released.

Pennsylvania is one of the few states where a life sentence means life without the possibility of parole; the only path to freedom is through clemency. This is the nexus point for *From Cell to Home*.

Led by Dr. Kathleen Brown, *From Cell to Home* advocates for the release of a select few women at Muncy State Correctional Institution, one of two women's prisons in the state. The project, started in 2017, pairs Penn students with inmates recognized by corrections staff, community leaders, and her incarcerated peers as an exemplary inmate who they would

support for clemency. Many of the participating inmates were involved in criminal cases heavily defined by or impacted by domestic violence and now-outdated policies and practices.

Students draft research and interview-based petitions that are refined by Dr. Brown. They call upon the scholarly literature, review the often decades-old case files, and conduct two video-link interviews with each inmate to gather information about her upbringing and post-release plans. These letters of support are submitted as part of the application for clemency. It is important to note that, as Dr. Brown said, "We don't relitigate these cases, we seek clemency. In other words, we appeal to the Board of Pardons for mercy."

In June 2019, Naomi Blount became the first woman supported by *From Cell to Home* to be granted clemency and freed. It was the second commutation in nearly three decades for a woman serving a life sentence in the state.⁶ Now, she works for Pennsylvania Lt. Governor John Fetterman's office, helping other incarcerated women navigate the clemency process.

Students also supported Henrietta Harris' and Mildred Strickland's applications for clemency. In September 2020, the Board of Pardons recommended their release.

"From Cell to Home is having a major impact on prisons. We're getting the prisons to believe in this...they're taking the time to learn about the steps and what it takes [to be granted clemency] and how prison staff can help women in their application process."

– Kathleen Brown, Ph.D.

The pandemic has acutely impacted those incarcerated. Video visitation can continue, but students currently are not allowed to visit the facility in person. The Board of Pardons continues their work by holding merit review and public hearing sessions electronically, with the hope of granting clemency to others in the future.

We are grateful to Penn Law's Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice for their continued support of *From Cell to Home*.

1. *Incarcerated Women and Girls*. The Sentencing Project, November 2020.

2. Carson EA. *Prisoners in 2018*. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCJ 253516, April 2020.

3. Glaze L & Maruschak L. *Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children* (Revised) Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010.

4. Bass A. "Women far less likely to kill than men; no one sure why," *The Boston Globe*, February 24, 1992, p. 27.

5. Leigey M & Reed KA. Woman's life before serving life: Examining the negative pre-incarceration life events of female life-sentenced inmates.

Women and Criminal Justice, 2014;20: 302-322.

6. Blount N. Pennsylvania's Board of Pardons should show mercy to more people like me. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 24, 2020.