



## Section 1: Overview: The Rationale for Revising Discipline and Sanctions for Women Inmates

This section makes the case that evidence-based, gender responsive, and trauma-informed discipline and sanctions policies and practices can successfully address and prevent problem inmate behaviors—and ultimately, enhance facility and community safety. As corrections leaders and staff implement the process and changes suggested in this Guide, they should expect the culture of discipline in their facility to shift. For example, behaviors among women inmates may be better understood and less criminalized; staff skills when intervening and responding to women inmates' behaviors may be enhanced; and, ultimately, fewer discipline reports may be written. Decreases in inmate violations, fewer incidents of self-harming and mental health referrals, and less use of punitive segregation will become measures of success.

### Discipline and sanctions is central to effective facility management.

Discipline and sanctions policies are essential to a facility's core function to maintain order, safety, and security. How these rules and expectations are communicated to staff and inmates and enforced by staff can contribute to the climate or culture of the facility.

Despite the importance of discipline and sanctions to effective facility management, most women's facilities have adopted policies and practices that were developed and implemented through a gender-neutral lens, without consideration of key gender differences. Such policies and practices can negatively impact a woman's ability to participate in programming, receive visits from family and children, heal and recover from past trauma, or receive a positive parole review. Understanding these far-reaching effects suggests an integrated approach that incorporates both gender responsive and trauma-informed principles to discipline and sanctions.

### Key Definitions

**Evidence-based:** Practices based on conclusions drawn from rigorous studies of gender-neutral correctional approaches ("what works"); and approaches that adhere to the risk, need, and responsivity principles, and include cognitive-behavioral and social learning approaches.

**Gender responsive:** Approaches guided by women-centered research; that are relational, strengths-based, trauma-informed, culturally competent, and holistic; and account for the different characteristics and life experiences of women and men, and respond to their unique needs, strengths, and challenges.

**Trauma-informed:** Approaches that incorporate the research on violence against women and girls and the impact of trauma; and changing or avoiding practices that can cause further trauma to women.

**Relational:** Approaches that recognize the importance of relationships as a target of intervention for women (e.g., building social capital, healthy connections, etc.).

*Adapted from: NIC's Gender-Informed Practices Assessment, 2011 and Benedict, 2014.*

## **Discipline and sanctions is an emerging area of interest among corrections leadership and staff.**

A survey of gender responsive policies in corrections conducted by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) identified discipline and sanctions as one of the facility policy areas that was least likely to have been adapted for women inmates.<sup>1</sup> In a recent national survey of local jails, administrators and staff identified discipline as one of the top three challenges when working with women in facility settings.<sup>2</sup> Studies of the experiences of justice-involved women, as well as anecdotal evidence, further suggest that correctional facilities across the United States struggle to maintain safe and productive environments for staff and women inmates alike.<sup>3</sup> Further, the use of traditional correctional sanctions such as segregation, strip searches, pat downs, and restraints, may re-traumatize women who are trauma survivors and may consequently have an adverse effect on facility safety by escalating problem behaviors exhibited by women.

## **Discipline and sanctions is relevant to Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) compliance.**

Revising discipline and sanctions policies and practices may be timely for those who are engaged in efforts to comply with PREA standards to increase the sexual safety of staff and inmates within correctional facilities. A review of these policies and practices can provide correctional agencies with a better understanding of the variables that influence safety in women's facilities, and revisions to discipline policies and practices can contribute to the creation of a safer facility on all levels (i.e., physical, psychological/emotional, and sexual).

## **Research and emerging practices support a gender responsive and trauma-informed approach to revising discipline and sanctions policies and practices.**

A growing body of research and practice, and the experiences of women's facilities that have begun to make changes in staff interactions with and responses to women inmate behaviors, is instructive. Consider the following:

- Research suggests that staff-inmate interactions can promote—or compromise—successful outcomes with women inmates.<sup>4</sup> That is, *how* staff intervene when problem behaviors occur matters. This includes how staff respond to both positive and challenging inmate behaviors. Research indicates that corrections professionals are more likely to impact women's behaviors when they provide encouragement and

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<sup>1</sup> King & Foley, Forthcoming. This exploratory study showed that only 8% of respondents had noted making changes to their disciplinary procedures.

<sup>2</sup> Fogg, 2014. This survey, conducted by the NRCJIW and American Jail Association, found that almost one third of the respondents noted disciplinary problems to be a critical concern of jail staff working with women.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g., Benedict, 2010; McNabb, 2008. This is also supported by women's facility staff and inmate surveys and focus group information collected under the NIC's Gender-Informed Practice Assessment (GIPA) initiative and the NIC-supported Gendered Violence and Safety Project, developed to support the implementation of PREA standards.

<sup>4</sup> See Carey, 2010 for a review of the literature on effective staff-offender interactions.



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feedback, utilize a strengths-based approach, and help women mobilize their social supports.<sup>5</sup>

- Findings from focus groups conducted with women and staff in jails and prisons support the importance of the quality of the interaction between staff and inmates. McNabb concluded that while violence is not a dominant feature of life in women’s facilities, the escalation of violent behaviors resulted from a number of factors, including the facility environment, interpersonal relationships among women and between women and staff, and staff actions (including responses to women’s behaviors).<sup>6</sup>
- Additional research reveals the key role of trauma (i.e., physical, sexual, and emotional abuse) in women’s criminal behavior, facility conduct, and responses to different types of treatment.<sup>7</sup> This body of knowledge offers corrections professionals guiding principles and examples of trauma-informed practices that can be adopted and tailored for use in their facilities.
- By incorporating trauma-informed practices, the Rhode Island Department of Corrections Women’s Facilities realized a significant reduction in women inmate-on-inmate and inmate-on-staff assaults, and as a consequence, the use of force.<sup>8</sup>
- Exhibit 1 demonstrates the benefits realized by the Massachusetts Correctional Institution for Women at Framingham after adopting a trauma-informed approach. A few of the benefits included a significant reduction in inmate-on-staff assaults (62%), inmate-on-inmate assaults (54%), and inmate-on-inmate fights (46%).<sup>9</sup>

**Exhibit 1: Benefits of Implementing Trauma-Informed Approaches at MCI Framingham**  
**Frequency of Incidents in 2011 and 2012**

Type	2011	2012	Frequency Change	% Change
Inmate-on-staff assaults	65	25	-40	-62%
Inmate-on-inmate assaults	112	51	-61	-54%
Inmate-on-inmate fights	129	70	-59	-46%
Segregation placements	966	748	-218	-23%
Disciplinary reports	5830	5470	-360	-6%
Suicide attempts	30	12	-18	-60%
One-on-one mental health watches	147	98	-49	-33%
Petitions for psychiatric evaluation	44	37	-7	-16%
Crisis contacts	1536	1316	-220	-14%
Self-injury incidents	114	99	-15	-13%

*Source: Bissonnette, 2013.*

<sup>5</sup> Deschenes, Owen & Crow, 2006; Millson et al., 2010; Salisbury, Van Voorhis, Wright, & Bauman, 2009; Wright et al., 2009. For more on the research findings that supports this approach, see the Appendix.

<sup>6</sup> McNabb, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> See Benedict, 2014 and the Appendix of this Guide for additional research on trauma.

<sup>8</sup> SAMHSA, National Center for Trauma-Informed Care, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Bissonnette, 2013.

### **Discipline and sanctions and facility culture are mutually influencing.**

The culture of a facility is multi-faceted, far-reaching, and often said to be “in the walls.” It includes the extent to which staff and inmates feel physically and psychologically safe and respected. There are many things that facility staff and leadership can—and do—implement to influence the facility culture. For example, implementing and improving consistent professional and respectful interactions—staff-inmate, staff-staff, and inmate-inmate—can contribute to a positive facility culture.<sup>10</sup>

Facility culture might be described as how safe, productive, professional, and respectful the facility environment is perceived to be by both staff and inmates.

Since discipline and sanctions practices are often rooted in, or mutually influenced by, the facility culture, it makes sense that a review and revision of these policies and practices would include a consideration of the larger facility culture. By focusing on culture as part of this review, facility leadership and staff may identify strategies that seem unrelated to discipline and sanctions, but which can impact women inmates' negative behaviors. For example, addressing safety issues and promoting productive, effective staff and inmate interactions can decrease or prevent the need for various disciplinary actions and sanctions.

### **The development and implementation of gender responsive and trauma-informed discipline and sanctions policies and practices is challenging work.**

While there are many benefits to revising discipline and sanctions policies and practices to be more gender responsive and trauma-informed, there are challenges to this work for corrections leadership and staff. Some of these challenges include:

- **Making changes within a larger corrections system.** Women's facilities are a small part of a much larger correctional system. Departments of Corrections' policies often are designed for all facilities (men and women) and consistency in policy and protocol across all facilities is often the norm.
- **Making improvements in a resource limited environment.** Undertaking any additional initiatives when staff, programs, and services already are stretched to the limits can be challenging; however, there are strategies that can be implemented at no or minimal cost. For example, at one facility the warden and executive staff began a series of conversations with unit staff about problem behaviors, how they were interacting with the women and the actual sanctions used for various behaviors. They noted a reduction in problem behaviors and misconduct reports just as a result of engaging staff about this issue.

<sup>10</sup> Modified from Gender-Informed Practices Assessment (GIPA) Domain Descriptions, National Institute of Corrections. <http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/nic/archive/2012/04/04/assistance-available-to-conduct-a-gender-informed-practice-assessment-gipa.aspx>

- **Expanding the definition of discipline and sanctions.** In many corrections facilities, discipline and sanctions consists of identifying problem behaviors and utilizing specific punishments in response to those behaviors. However, helping women to recognize and understand the roots of risky behaviors, and working with them to identify new skills and coping mechanisms, can reduce problem behaviors.
- **Translating research into practice.** Understanding and translating available research on evidence-based, gender responsive and trauma-informed approaches into concrete policies and operational practices requires a shift in philosophy and the creation of new norms. It may require additional staff training and coaching, as well as changes in operational practices, to support and sustain them.
- **Addressing discipline policies, practices, and culture simultaneously.** Because inmate discipline and facility culture are mutually influential, changing disciplinary policies without addressing necessary changes in the larger facility culture (especially from physical, psychological, and sexual safety perspectives) may hinder progress.

**Making improvements to discipline and sanctions can result in more successful outcomes with women inmates, and contributes to a positive facility culture and greater safety for staff and inmates.**

A gender responsive and trauma-informed approach to discipline and sanctions supports women's positive behavioral change, reduces reoffending, and enhances facility safety for both staff and inmates. Correctional leaders interested in making improvements in this area will find it worth the investment of resources, time, and effort. In addition to the many benefits for engaging in this work described in this section and elsewhere in the Guide, facilities may also experience:

- **Increased inmate engagement in treatment and services.** As women become less distracted by negative peer dynamics, they may become more focused on their personal growth and healing.
- **Improved effectiveness of programs, services and interventions.** When women are more engaged and focused on their personal growth and healing, and staff are more focused on reinforcing positive interactions among and with the women, treatment outcomes may also be enhanced.
- **Reduced inmate violations.** As demonstrated within facilities in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, a gender responsive and trauma-informed approach to managing women can result in reduced violations, discipline and sanctions, and assaults.

"Prevention, through staff training, and good operational policies...is a primary strategy for ensuring safety for women (and staff)."

*-Marianne McNabb (2008)*

- **More positive interactions between staff, staff and women inmates, and women inmates.** When interactions are respectful and trauma-informed, even when discipline and sanctions are being imposed, it can be a more positive experience for both staff and inmates.
- **Enhanced staff knowledge, attitudes, skills, and job satisfaction.** Through training, skill building, and coaching, staff may feel better prepared to fulfill their job duties and realize greater satisfaction on the job.
- **Reduced staff injuries and absenteeism.** If staff are more content with their jobs and misconducts and assaults are reduced, then staff injuries and absenteeism may also be reduced.

In summary, revising discipline and sanctions policies and practices to better address women's unique needs and risk factors can lead to a safer and more productive correctional environment for staff and inmates. It can also create fertile ground for inmate behavior change, successful reentry, and safer communities.

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