

Make Every Interaction Count

Successful Community Supervision with Women

May 2025

Almost one million women are supervised by pretrial, probation, and parole professionals daily in the United States.¹ As women's pathways to criminal justice involvement differ from men's, so too should the strategies you use to meet their needs and challenges. As a community supervision professional, how you use your influence and authority matters to community safety and success.

This guide describes strategies that will help you establish effective professional rapport with women as you interact during community supervision. You may find the guide most helpful during your assessments, case planning, and 1:1 interactions. Use the questions suggested with each strategy to help steer conversations.

While the strategies described in this guide can benefit everyone on your caseload, research demonstrates that they are especially important in helping women succeed in community supervision.



Center for Effective Public Policy

For quick
reference, print
and laminate
pages 3–4

Notes

¹ Kajstura, A., & Sawyer, W. (2024). *Women's mass incarceration: The whole pie 2024*. Prison Policy Institute. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2024women.html>

² Clark, M. D. (2021). Finding the balance: The case for motivational interviewing to improve probation and parole. *Journal for Advancing Justice*, 3, 85–99. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354661997_Emerging_Best_Practices_in_Law_Enforcement_Deflection_and_Community_Supervision_Programs_Finding_the_Balance_The_Case_for_Motivational_Interviewing_to_Improve_Probation_and_Parole; Walters, S. T., Clark, M. D., Gingerich, R., & Meltzer, M. L. (2007). *Motivating offenders to change: A guide for probation and parole*. National Institute of Corrections. <https://nicic.gov/motivatingoffenders-change-guide-probation-and-parole>

³ Glaze, L. E., & Maruschak, L. M. (2010). *Parents in prison and their minor children*. Bureau of Justice Statistics. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>

⁴ Wright, E. M., Van Voorhis, P., Salisbury, E. J., & Bauman, A. (2012). Gender-responsive lessons learned and policy implications for women in prison: A review. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 39(12), 1612–1632. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0093854812451088>

⁵ Bowles, M. A., DeHart, D., & Webb, J. R. (2012). Family influences on female offenders' substance use: The role of adverse childhood events among incarcerated women. *Journal of Family Violence*, 27, 681–686. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10896-012-9450-4>

⁶ Fleming, E., Upton, A., Lopez Wright, F., Wurzburg, S., & Ney, B. (2021). *Adopting a gender-responsive approach for women in the justice system: A resource guide*. The Council of State Governments Justice Center. <https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Adopting-Gender-Responsive-Approach-for-Women-in-Justice-System.pdf>

⁷ Gender and Women's Mental Health, World Health Organization, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-MSD-MDP-00.1>

⁸ The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. (2010). *Behind bars II: Substance abuse and America's prison population*. <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/behind-bars-ii-substance-abuse-and-americas-prison-population>

⁹ Couloute, L. (2018). *Nowhere to go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people*. Prison Policy Institute. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>

¹⁰ Riley, K., Swavola, E., & Subramanian, R. (2016). *Overlooked: Women and jails in an era of reform*. Vera Institute of Justice. <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/overlooked-women-and-jails-report-updated.pdf>

¹¹ Kajstura, A., & Sawyer, W. (2024). *Women's mass incarceration: The whole pie 2024*. Prison Policy Institute. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2024women.html>

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Use the questions suggested with each strategy to help steer conversations.



Strengthen Parenting and Unify Families

- Tell me about your **family**.
- What kind of **support** have you received as a mother? What do you still need?
- Do you need assistance with **childcare** or other things regarding your children?
- Would you like assistance in finding **support groups** for parents dealing with similar stressors?
- How can I make our appointments and interactions more **family-friendly** for you?

Women are more likely to be primary caretakers of children.³ When separated from their children, plans to reconnect with them often fuel their motivation to improve and desist from crime.⁴



Encourage Healthy Relationships

- Who are the people you trust who have **positively influenced** you?
- Tell me more about the people in your life **who will help you** get through hard times.
- Are there **boundaries** you want to set in your relationships to help you be successful while under supervision and afterward?
- How would you like things to be different with your **friends**?
- Are there any **relationships** you want to focus on repairing and rebuilding to support your success?

More than 90 percent of women with system involvement have experienced some form of childhood trauma, such as physical or sexual abuse and violence,⁵ too often at the hands of family.⁶ Unfortunately, abuse or violence often continues well into adulthood within intimate relationships. Strong positive relationships, both personal and professional, are critical in building healthy social networks.



During your interactions, avoid the following practices that have been demonstrated to be ineffective² and that may contribute to retraumatization: **confrontation, lecturing, judging, becoming too personal, and/or giving unsolicited advice**. The goal is to have healthy interactions with women to promote the successful completion of community supervision and increase their well-being.

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Promote Recovery and Mental Health

- Who in your life **supports** your recovery and mental health? How do they support you?
- How have you **successfully managed** cravings or mental health symptoms in the past?
- What **resources** would you be willing to try?
- What **motivates** you to make changes?
- What makes you think you could be **successful** if you decide to stay sober?

Mental health, especially depression, anxiety disorders, PTSD, and eating disorders, are more prevalent in women than in men.⁷ Women are twice as likely as men to suffer from co-occurring mental illnesses and substance use disorders.⁸



Support Housing Stability

- Tell me about your current **housing situation**. Who lives with you? Does it work for your needs?
- How can I help you secure **safe and stable** housing?
- What kind of **environment** do you want to live in? Describe it.
- When you secure stable housing, do you need assistance with furnishings or household items? What's on your **wish list**?

The lack of safe and stable housing is a major problem facing women returning home from prison or jail, and a barrier to probation success. Formerly incarcerated women are more likely to experience homelessness than formerly incarcerated men.⁹ Without access to suitable housing, some women may return to abusive partners, violent communities, or unsafe conditions.



Build Education, Employment, and Economic Support

- What **success** have you experienced at school or work?
- If you decided to continue your education, what **resources** would you need to support you?
- Tell me about some of your **strengths**. What are you good at?
- What are some **careers or trades** you might enjoy?
- What **challenges or obstacles** have you encountered in your education or employment?

Women often earn less, have fewer opportunities, and need to stretch their incomes further to support any children they are raising.¹⁰ While women are more likely than men to enter prison with a high school diploma or equivalent, more than 53 percent did not complete high school.¹¹