

Episode 232 - Dr. Elizabeth Allen: Women and Mass Incarceration: Unique Needs and Challenges

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:35] Hi from Buffalo. The paper of record has weighed in and the New York Times recently published its recommended 52 Places to go in 2018 and that's in the world by the way and sitting pretty at number 37 is our fair city Buffalo New York. We're glad to see the Times sees things our way. I'm Peter Sobota. Many folks understand that the United States is unique in our willingness to incarcerate our legally involves citizens. What most people might not realize is that women are the fastest growing part of this population with more than 1 million women involved in some form of the corrections system. In this episode our guest Dr. Elizabeth Thallon discusses her experiences as a practitioner and researcher exploring the unique needs of women involved in the correctional system and how to promote their successful reintegration into their families and their communities. Dr. Allen describes the importance of focusing not only on the women's individual resources but also account for the social political structural factors that must be addressed if women are to reconnect with their families and their communities of support. Our guest describes the role of Hope self efficacy and empowerment which are crucial in addressing the structural forces organized against them. These include economic inequality for women a strong and resilient patriarchy a lack of decent childcare and affordable housing systematic disempowerment and incarcerated women's isolation from each other that prevents them from connecting and establishing a new narrative for their post incarcerated identity. Dr. Elizabeth Allen Ph.D. is a clinician at the Connection Inc. one of Connecticut's leading private not for profit human service and community development agencies and is an adjunct professor in the Department of Social Work University of Connecticut. Dr. Allen was interviewed in December of 2017 by our own Caitlin Beck a social work JD graduate student here at UB. And of course our fantastic graduate assistant and colleague in the production of the social work podcast.

[00:02:54] Hello from inSocialWork. I'm Caitlin Beck graduate student here at the University at Buffalo. I am with Dr. Elizabeth Allen whose doctoral research was on justice involved women and redemptive narratives and who has practiced with justice and justice involved women for more than 20 years. Thank you so much for joining us Liz!

[00:03:14] Thanks for having me Caitlin, I'm excited.

[00:03:16] So to start you worked as an LCSW up at correctional managed. Janet S. York correctional institution providing clinical services in both inpatient and outpatient settings to Justice should involve women at a maximum security prison setting. Can you discuss what you did there and the particular needs of the population you worked with.

[00:03:43] Well yeah sure. So I work in the state of Connecticut and in Connecticut there is only one facility that houses the women. So regardless of what you are arrested for or are incarcerated for you end up at this one facility. So this facility houses everybody from youthful offenders although we raise the age and we don't any longer. But when I first started we did so we had youthful offenders people who were sentenced to 30 days or 45 days who were sentenced to life without parole. Anybody who had mental health needs medical needs. You name it. So people who are on sentence or sentenced so operated as a jail and a prison. And so the social workers that were there myself included we worked in I started off on the inpatient mental health unit providing inpatient psychiatric services and assessments to the women running groups for the chronically mentally ill that were arrested mostly maybe waiting to be found competent or incompetent to stand

trial and then they would go to the psychiatric hospital the hospital if they were found incompetent. And so we did crisis services. And as the years went on the services increased and progressed slowly. When I first started I was one of three I believe. And when I retired in 2014 after 21 years almost 21 years there was I believe 14 of us on first shift and second shift and weekends as well. And so we worked at multidisciplinary teams providing intake assessments crisis management. And then there was a number of programs that we offer. There was a trauma informed residential program. There was a like I said the Mental Health Program as well inpatient and then all outpatient and running groups. And I also created a very unique program we named it called Sisters Standing Strong. The women actually need it. And it was a peer mentoring program because the last I don't know probably eight or 10 years my housing assignment was on the assessment unit which when the women first come in is one of the highest stress you know times of their of their incarceration. And so I created this program. I said to my boss one day you know it's one thing I can sit there and tell them you know it's going to get better it's not always this difficult but it would be so much more powerful if it came from the women themselves. And he said right it up. So that's why I always tell my students you know if you have an idea you know don't be afraid to sit on it you know and to stand up and say something. And so I just wrote up a very simple proposal and because it was corrections it did take a lot of selling in the cost of the environment. People are very hesitant to change and we were always reminded that safety and security was first. And so I created this program that we trained women to be group providers and mentors and so eventually we were spread out more across the prison. It is predominantly on the assessment unit. So when the women first came in and if you think about when you first would get arrested just on a random Tuesday perhaps and there was very stressful who's going to pay my rent is going to feed my dogs who's going to get my kids off the bus. Am I going to be here for a long time. Am I not going to be here for a long time. So it was extremely stressful time and so we used to do just these very basic support groups and the women would run them not the social workers and they would provide support and inspiration and share with the women. Not too long ago they were in that position and how they were thriving and doing well and and that program I'm proud to say is still running strong even after my departure. So I think that's you know pretty basically what we did there at the prison.

[00:07:21] That's amazing. You did a lot of incredible things that was there overlap in some of maybe the women who were participating in trauma mental health group going into the Sister Standing Strong group? Did they take what they were learning and apply it? or could you speak to that at all.

[00:07:41] Yes. So I mean I definitely started to think that originally the program was about the services offered right to the women that were there. But I think after a while it became very clear that it was not only about the services but it was also you know I was calling it like reciprocal rehabilitation because it was both. It was good for both people. So the women who were the mentors. But we have a lot of people who suffer from trauma and substance abuse and all these other things and you know and especially in such an oppressive environment like a prison where they would feel like nothing I'm nobody why would anybody want to listen to me. You know and so being put in a position where they felt like they had something to offer and they could support other people I think is very powerful and very healing. And so the women who were part of the mentoring program and became mentors right it was really good for them as well. You know as well as the services that were needed and offered to the women in the assessment units and throughout the other housing units that's really really incredible.

[00:08:40] And I I'm just wondering too. What were the consequences of having this place be a jail and a prison where there are complications that were added because of that unique feature.

[00:08:50] Yes I think it definitely adds an added layer to some of those. The thing and I think even in terms of any programming that is offered there can be no definitely some barriers to that. So

some of the things that are offered inside the prison are really good. We have college courses they might have a GED prep class. So there's a lot of things that go really good thing that go on within the school system. And then there is because we know that we incarcerate high rates of substance abusers in this country. Right. They might have a AA or NA. There's parenting groups or sometimes they'll do like an anger management or race or they offer a lot of programs but if unfortunately if you're not sentenced that's one of the limitations. Think about it if you're going to be there and you say oh yes I'm going to be here for six months I know. But then you go to court next week and they say oh you're going to get probation instead then you're out. And so they would try to limit that. But unfortunately because of the system sometimes people could stay unsentenced for weeks months even years depending on their charges. And so then they would be prohibited to even start any of those programs because they were technically. And then on the other end we'd have women who were sentenced to 10 years in trying to wrap their mind around that and figure out how to live with that and adjust to that. And then the person next to you is whining and complaining as the women would say right there. You know there they have to be here for 45 days or they or they need to get home or you know one of the complaints that I would hear from the long termers. I have to be here for 10 or 15 years and then I have to be around people who are saying they can't wait to go home next week and get high or get drunk or they would be saying I would give anything to have the opportunity to go home to my children. And then there are those women who are just looking to get out and repeat some of their same patterns. Ten days from now though the mixing of those can bring a whole host of different issues either structural or programmatic but also among the women.

[00:10:56] Yeah. Those are issues I wouldn't even imagine because I often think of jails and prisons being mixed. Thank you for speaking to that could you you've already mentioned some aspects of this. Maybe we can talk more about the unintended consequences of mass incarceration for women and maybe the implications for social work.

[00:11:15] So I think this is you know a very significant issue. There are lots of unintended consequences. And I think it's easy in a society that is on a paradigm sort of punishments with the criminal justice system. And so it's about who deserves to be punished or have to do their time. But we know that putting people separating people isolating people for long periods of time doesn't work. But yet we haven't quite figured out another way and so we just kind of keep doing it over and over again and so unfortunate as lots of these unintended consequences. So you know what the research shows is that people who have connections community connections family connections connections with their children that they all tend to do better. They all tend to reintegrate back into community more successfully integrated into their communities in terms of maybe employment or housing or things like that. Mean when we just lock people up we sort of sever all of those ties and just make it more difficult for them. And so with women we know that the majority of women at the time of their arrest usually have partial custody and mostly full time custody. A lot of time. And so then we have the unintended consequences of their children. So either the children witnessing them being arrested or their house being raided which can be very traumatic to the children but then also being separated from their parents and not understanding those consequences so then that trickles down right into schools and it trickles down into your DCF or you know Department of Children and Families or whatever your state calls it. So most of the children are in DCF because their parents have addiction and that they have addiction and they end up in criminal justice system. Poverty is a really difficult aspect in a lot of these things. So we have people who are underemployed or unemployed and undereducated or uneducated. And then the more we isolate. We've now increased their difficulties in reintegrating back finding employment. These are marginalized groups for the most part. And then it's very difficult for them to just tell them to get out of jail find a job do the right thing and you know and don't come back. And unfortunately not that easy. Obviously if it was that easy we wouldn't have the problems that we have. And we see all of these unintended constructs that go into communities into schools. DCF and not to mention the

pathways to prisons the most women include the history of trauma either sexual trauma physical violence and definitely Substance Abuse and Mental Health. And so some of these oppressive systems as well as the policies and procedures that are in place will often traumatize many of these women. So we take their symptoms that they're already struggling with and we sort of compound them. And I think one of the things that I was extremely interested in as well is the effect on communities. And so again we don't know that there's overpolicing in marginalized communities in poor communities for most of the arrest and incarceration will come from one zip code or or one area in a city or a city. So we know that those people kind of get recycled through back and forth in those same communities. And so then it really just further denigrates these already marginalized communities. There are some studies that show that sometimes up to half of the male population between the ages of 20 and 35 and one marginalized community will be away from the community at any given time and then they just get recycled through. So it's already a disorganized community and then you might dump other these people back from the criminal justice system back into this already marginalized community and which then further destabilize it. So then we have increased crime increase vandalism just sort of over and over again. And so it really impacts not only the individuals and families but also the communities in which we have these issues.

[00:15:08] How do we remedy this? Like how do social workers and Criminal Justice the criminal justice system come together. You know to create a different system like what do you see that would help us do that?

[00:15:20] Yeah I think this work can be very I find myself very overwhelmed many times. I think the social work profession has recently made a concerted effort to insert ourselves into the criminal justice system because I think our voice has been fairly silent in this field for way too long. So one of the grand challenges of the social work profession is smart incarceration which is how do we sort of work on this system to dismantle this system. And so they've tried to break it up because it's like where do you begin. Do we start in schools and in child welfare and try not to feed the criminal justice system right so stop them from entering. Or do we work with the individuals who are there once they're there. So like during incarceration or do we put our effort after incarceration and helping people to reintegrate successfully and create successful lives after incarceration. So I think that the her profession and academics across the country have been trying to work on each area either pre during her post. But I think it is very overwhelming because you can't fix one without the other because the criminal justice system if we don't properly fund our educational systems and give the resources to the communities or our mental health and addiction differently if we don't think we have to ask ourselves what if what if we lived in a society where we didn't criminalize substance abuse or addiction. Right. Our criminal justice system might look very differently.

[00:16:57] So it is very overwhelming and I think when I was doing my dissertation research it took me a really long time probably a year to really sort of structured the study because I didn't want to continue to feed the system that I have such a hard time with and sort of understanding it and I provided treatment with the incarcerated population and it was the most rewarding work I have ever done. And I actually just recently went back into practice with the same population. But in the community because I did miss my clinical work with this population. But I also then wonder how as a social worker Am I sort of condoning this system and saying that I'm OK with that because I'm not I don't there's many people. Most people I think that should not be in prison. You know I am an abolitionist. I would teach the women that I worked with that I was an abolitionist. But I've been told many times that I'm sort of an oxymoron. And how can I work in a system that I don't believe should exist. I think it's very overwhelming. I think there are so many pieces to it. And I think it's very difficult. I don't think we can fix the system with the same mind and the same oppressive paradigm that created the system. So I do feel like sometimes we just need to blow up the system from the ground up and start again because too little to do some social change little pieces at a time I think is what we're all trying to do. But I think it's going to take a long time.

[00:18:26] Yeah that was really helpful to map out the before the during the after. And it sounds like you're kind of working. You were working before and during like while they were in the system and now you're right more so in the city.

[00:18:39] Well yeah. So my research was how do women successfully create lives for themselves right after incarceration. What are the factors that will help them to do that. So I am very interested in this job that I just started as a clinical social worker in the community. Is that it is after so working with people who maybe had done time and then are now out and on probation or parole and probation officer pro officer feels that they need mental health or substance use. So they will come in for treatment but also it is also Prii because in Connecticut and I think most states are slowly getting there trying to they have jail diversion programs and so trying to divert people they will for before. So if you get arrested perhaps for domestic violence or something and then they feel that you have a mental illness or substance abuse problem and if you don't have a long record then the judge will say OK as long as you go to treatment or you know you are put on probation or they'll be part of this pre sentencing as long as they complete the requirements of the court or through this agency and abstain from using drugs or follow the regulations of the core probation then the case after six months they don't get arrested. Their case will be dropped. So I do work with that population as well here with all of them before during and the after.

[00:20:03] That's amazing. This seems like a good time to talk about the difference between recidivism and disistance.

[00:20:12] Most people are familiar with recidivism and that's sort of what we it's a standard measure that the person recidivism or not. I personally have many issues and try not to use that word because I think it's very limiting and I do think this came out of my many years in clinical practice with the women because the women would come in and like I mentioned earlier we do their assessments on intake. And so the women would come in and they would say I know what hear all these stories they would say I can't believe I'm back here. I left here five years ago. It was the first time ever in my life I had a job. I bought a house. I got married my kids were you know got back with me. I have been living you know in recovery and I'm clean and now I'm back here and I can't believe I'm back here. And so I used to always say to the women because you're here right there's no equal sign. It doesn't mean that all of that work that you have done is all undone but that's what a recidivism study sort of does or if we just look at did you go back to jail yes or no. So it's a dichotomous variable. It's just yes or no. And so I think there's so many variables that get lost if you just put in a yes and no. So some people say yes they came back to jail. But like that story that I just share right they had accomplished all of those other things and so we don't really look at that. And maybe they came back in a lot of times. This was the case they came back because an old warrant popped up like literally they did not even do anything to get a new arrest. It's just some old warrant that from years ago that never got caught in the system whatever. And so then they got arrested or. Yes they used to get arrested for burglary and drug possession. Right. And now this time they got arrested because they had a fight or a lot of times people will be given three strikes from their probation officer a parole officer and if they give three dirty urine then they'll come back. So yeah they were out there and doing really well for them. But they were still struggling with addiction or relapse. And so then they came back to jail. And so I think the difference between that and the system is like any other change process. You know desistance is looking at a process of changing how people change it's not just a yes or no. There's no quick end. Most people when they start smoking. Most people don't just wake up one day and say that say I'm not going to ever have another cigarette and then they never do. There are some people who are able to do that. But the majority of people will sort of quit for six weeks then smoke again then quit maybe for eight weeks then you know quit again. And so that's sort of the same distance really looks at the process of how people move out of a criminal lifestyle. And so we understand that there's a lot of variables at play

right. So it may be employment or it might be family. It's definitely you know a majority of the time addiction so they might have a lot of the other pieces at play and they're just working on one issue. So maybe it's the first time they have a job and they're connected to their family and right so there's a lot of things that are really going well you know but they're still struggling with addiction. Again it also is I feel like sometimes it is also a measure of what level of policing in their community. So people you know who live in marginalized communities where there's overpolicing there they're more likely to be or just go back to jail as opposed to people who live in no less policed communities. And so the system is really looking at that larger process and how people change. There's two levels to this distance. So it is much more nuanced and look at some of the socio political context that people exist and which I think is a more natural measure. The problem is it's really understudied and we don't really exactly understand it. And so people have been trying to sort of define it but you know there is a definition that there's two levels to this system. So there's two phases and the first one is that people are not engaging in criminal activity. And so we know that people may not engage in criminal activity for lots of different reasons. Right. So many times that they get out and they're on probation or parole. They may not engage in criminal activity because they're being monitored or maybe they have an ankle bracelet like that sort of monitoring. So they're not engaging in criminal activity. So that's the first step and that's an there was tell the clients that that's really good that you're not engaging in criminal activity. But the second phase of assistance is really is like the next level and it's a deeper level and it's that they're actually creating change at an internal level. So they're changing their identity. They no longer see themselves as an inmate or a felon. And so it's just it's not that they're not engaging in criminal activity it's that they have sort of shifted and created a new story for themselves. They are mother or a hairdresser or. Right. So it's kind of like the same thing as as recovery like we have people who just stopped using drugs or alcohol and that's great. That's one part. But then the other part is are they actually living in recovery and doing all of the steps and things that go with it. So the system is you know sort of like that.

[00:25:35] Interesting. Thank you for making that difference it seems like talking about recidivism really perpetuates some of the problems we've been talking about. Whereas talking about assistance could solve a lot of problems. It's not just good or bad. It's about small steps instead. And you make one small step closer to a healthy life versus a bad life or a good life right.

[00:26:00] Yes. Yes.

[00:26:01] So speaking of these two terms what are the individual and structural factors that assist or hinder women make creating successful lives after incarceration. Maybe this is one of them. The language we use but what are some others.

[00:26:17] So many people are again trying to study more and better understand the desistance process. So there's different schools of thought out there. So some people look at other measures like the variables that I looked were the internal structural factors about themselves who they are. You know many of the theories guiding recidivism or criminal justice reform tend to be very deficit based. And as social workers I think right we like to focus on strength. You know I think some of the structural pieces are the ones that I alluded to. So poverty unemployment or underemployment lack of education. Right. Any lack of programming that are going to assist the women in being able to take advantage of some of the programs. I know. After I left the prison I joined a re-entry a community re-entry roundtable which had brought together these amazing people from the community who were doing work in the community. And so there were nonprofits or churches or even state agencies. So we had started our city had started the second chance initiative and had made some great strides in bringing together vocational training at local community center or community colleges. But they also then had the connections to employers because a lot of times people will have the training. Individuals will get trained but then no one will hire them and so the

state of Connecticut tried to create one less barrier so that the vocational the employers were already connected and willing to part through this training and then hire them at the end of it and it was great. All this was going on and so I raised my hand and I said "well is childcare offered?" and everybody was like "Oh no." Great right. That's a great program. They would take part of this training program. It was intensive like eight weeks 8 to 430. They also got a very small stipend. So you know a hundred dollars for the week to attend. So all of those things are really good. There are barriers to that like not everybody can live on 100 dollars a week. So it really is only for people who maybe had a place to live or stay right so they had family supports already in place but then they could go to this training. And for women like I mentioned earlier most women have full custody of their child. Most women would not be able to attend 8 for 30 for six weeks Monday through Friday if childcare was not included. And so I think because criminal justice is thought to be mostly about men and employment those are the programs that we put into place and we know that for women vocation and employment and individual stability is very important. But it's not one of the key factors that will help people to create successful lives for themselves. Programs that are not gender informed can leave a segment of the population poverty overpolicing in marginalized communities all of those things are structural issues and then individual factors. One of the things that I wanted to look at in my study especially was you know because we just tell everybody you can do you know just get out. Do the right thing. And so the individual factors that I looked were like their level of hope or their level of self efficacy or their level of empowerment and I think all of those are key factors that we all you know take those things for granted. We're able to come across a barrier and keep at it keep going that persistence that is very important for us to create successful lives for ourselves. We have individuals who've been part of this oppressive system and there in a system that tells them not to be self sufficient and not to be empowered. I always say that the most empowered individuals in the prison system are the ones who end up getting into trouble very frequently because they can stand up for themselves and they'll say this is not right. And then they end up being placed in restrictive housing or segregation and get themselves in trouble because they are empowered. That was my goal to sort of help them to channel that empowerment because empowerment is what's going to help people to succeed when they get out. But yet the system doesn't appreciate that in this system that just tells them they just need to shut up put your head down do your time do what you're told. That makes a good inmate but it doesn't make a good re-entering returning citizen because you're you're not going to get anywhere if you just put your head down and follow along for my study. I looked at their level of hope their level of self efficacy and their level of empowerment. And I wanted to know if those individual factors would also be impacted by the structural barriers so I looked at things like childhood poverty. So the women who grew up in childhood poverty and if they grew up in disadvantaged marginalized communities. And so one of the measures I looked at was their community that they spent their childhood in and if there was graffiti and trust among neighbors or not or they felt safe in those kinds of things and if that impacted their individual factors. But I think perhaps in research now and one of the measures that I looked at was identity and so that's where some of the research is showing now that if we as social workers can help people to create a prosocial identity and helping them to. As you mentioned earlier Caitlin no shifting the language is important right. And so what do we call people when they've left prison. It's like inmate failing drug addict. He would say you know we have lots of names for this population labeling and language is really really important and identity cell that only takes one act to become labeled an enemy a felon. How many acts does it take to earn that label. So we could do one act to get labeled a felon or an inmate and then you could do five hundred thousand positive actions but you never undo that that label a lot of the research is showing that identity is really important and that's one of the things that helps people to move out of criminal lifestyle or desist from crime is that they're able to shift their internal narrative in their internal identity and say I am a good person a good woman a mother. I am a good worker and have all of those identities and separate their identity out from their actions. If you engage in criminal activity that's your behavior but it's not who you are at your core. The two identity measures that my study looked was if they identified as persistent offender and if they identified at their core who they were

as a career criminal. And you know even just some of the findings that were very interesting in that a great majority of the women said yes I'm a persistent offender. However even though all of those people said I'm a persistent offender when asked if at their core who they were meant to be they were a career criminal and the majority of them said no . And a few said I'm not sure I think I had like 12 who said I'm not sure. And only 4 women. I had 141 out of the 141 I only had four women who said yes. Like at my core I am a career criminal. And so I think in trying to understand what that tells us is that the women who are able to separate out their behavior so persistent offender is kind of like a core label like they'll say I'm a persistent offender. I know a shoplifting or larceny over and over again. So it's kind of like a label again about their behavior but a career criminal and at their core more like their identity of how they see themselves even if they said yes I'm a persistent offender than they said no. But I'm not a career criminal. No no there are good signs though. We know that people who are able to separate out their behavior so people who are able to say yes I'm a really good person at my core but I have engaged in behavior that's not lawful and behavior that I'm not proud of that they tend to do much better in terms of creating successful lives for themselves.

[00:34:44] So as social workers what are our tasks to help people channel on what they already know? Like channel what they already know about themselves? Is that something that we can help with? Because I'm just thinking that when we do that the criminal justice system as we've rarely talked about does the exact opposite. I'm just thinking how do we help remind them of what they know about themselves that they are not a criminal that they are a mother that they're a daughter that you know whatever they are. When you have a different system telling them they're just criminal.

[00:35:17] Yeah it's very complicated. Very nice to tell my supervisor you know I can do my I can go into a group room and shut the door and do all of this great empowering and I tried to do all of my groups and individual work from strength based perspective and empowerment. And I said well when they opened the door and they go out into the system in the system tell them you know shut up you're nothing but a number you know nobody loves you. You know we we have this philosophy really the light on for ya meaning that there's no hope that you're ever going to get better you're just going to come back here and then we're surprised or we act surprised when that happens that gets really super complicated. I think on a micro level yeah I mean I think working with individuals working with families working with children on an individual level on a micro level is super super important. But and with that I would never ever retire from my job because I loved it. And I think it was years when I realized at the micro level and working an individual level it wasn't enough that there are also these structural issues and barriers that we really need to work on. But I think one of the things that we know from the literature and from studies is that peer support and family support is really really important. And so I think on a micro level you know we need to change things on a macro level. But I think for social workers working in addiction especially DCF or you know child welfare keeping those connections is what's going to help your family to heal and I think again that system is also set up and well you know the mothers in jail. I'm not going to you know this kid I'm not going to bring this kid to the prison. You know I think every situation is different and I think every family needs to be assessed. But I think if we understand that by keeping that contact phone contacts mail contact and visit is all very very helpful it's helpful for the incarcerated person and it's helpful for their re-entry. We know that people who have those connections do better. And so I think those things are really important then the sort of mezo level is about visitations and because I mentioned that it's the only prison in the state for women. So if you are close then that's helpful. But if you're on the other and our city is small compared to many other states but even if you're on the other end you could be easily two or three hours away from your mother or your family and so that those transportation can be there again for incarcerating marginalized people. Right. Then we know that they don't have transportation or they don't have cars and that was one of the measures that I had and a social support social capital measurement

was if they felt supported while they were there and if they received visitation and so some of those variables were correlated with some of the other measures. When I asked them about how they felt their chances were when they left here. And that was correlated to whether they had visits or not. And I think those are things that we need to remember right so that visitation and phone calls are really important. Again the policy so for the longest time the prison system was set up so that you could not call cell phones you could only call landlines and 15 years ago that was OK. But as we move forward who has a landline. I mean I do write but not very many people do and especially people who are living in poverty are struggling to make ends meet. They don't have a cell phone and a landline because they can't afford it. So the system needed to change that and to address that. So then it finally did a few years ago it switched so that you could call cell phone. Then there were these organizations and companies that are getting rich off of our high incarceration rate 15 minute phone call to the other end of the state is you know could run a family 40 50 dollars. And again when you're trying to make ends meet that's not feasible for many many families and most of the people that we incarcerate. And so we need to have them prove that less expensive phone calls and less restrictions on family visitation because if your family has a history of incarceration it might be your father or your mother. And they're the biggest support for you that's going to help you when you get out. And they can't come and visit you because they had arrest you know five or 10 years ago and they're not going to be allowed into the system until some of those policies really need to be examined because if there if we truly want to help people when they get out we have to understand that those people that have those connections are the ones that are that are going to be able to successful lives for themselves when they when they leave.

[00:39:45] There's just so many different aspects to it. There are so many different pieces to think about. Wrapping up our conversation, I wanted to know if there was anything else that you want to add today.

[00:39:55] No when I talk to social workers I think everyone who maybe thinks that criminal justice is not in your realm. I think really to ask yourself because I think that the social or profession because we are so diverse and our job descriptions and fields of practice are so vast that I think you can't operate in a social work perspective and not be involved in the criminal justice system. And I think when we operate in this paradigm of punishment it's really easy to sort of cast aside this Ostende or this other you know only those bad people you know go to prison you know. And so I think to really ask yourself you know how is your job impacted by the criminal justice system. Is there anything that you can do to sort of help to shift our societal view of the role of punishment and incarceration. We tend to it's easy to cast people in a dark light and say well you know those people they don't deserve you. Many times you hear people say oh you know you work in a prison. You know oh they do yoga in a prison. I want to go and be in prison and get free yoga. I have to pay for my yoga right. But we have to really ask ourselves you know do we want to people most ninety eight percent of anybody who gets arrested or incarcerated is going to be back out into the community. We do know that most of them leave. And so you know you ask yourself Who do you want. You know living next to you or working with you. Somebody who is healthy and rehabilitated and getting support and services or somebody who was system has decided to decide it is unworthy and has thrown away because there eventually they are going to be out in our communities.

[00:41:46] These are really great points. Thank you so much for everything today. Thank you for the work you're doing and the research you're doing. There is a lot for us to chew on.

[00:41:56] Thanks for having me. I love to talk about the stuff I could talk about it all day.

[00:42:00] You've been listening to Dr. Elizabeth Allen discuss women and mass incarceration on inSocialWork.

[00:42:14] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and Dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history or online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at www.SocialWork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find that under the Community Resources menu.