

# Seventy Percenters — An Innovative Domestic Violence Program at the Pima County Jail

By Martha L. Cramer and Shirley C. Scott

Women inmates at the Pima County Adult Detention Center in Tucson, Ariz., are benefitting from a new domestic violence education program that addresses issues common to at least 70 percent of incarcerated women.

Recent inmate evaluations of this program have included the following observations:

- “For the first 25 years I thought no one has gone through what I have.”
- “I was 16 years old when I got into a domestic violence relationship; I was 32 when I got out of the first one.”
- “Once they hit you, they always will.”
- “It has led me to drugs and incarceration.”
- “This class is a smack in the face about reality.”
- “I hope this class grows and grows for the future of our children.”
- “When I am abused, I come out fighting. I have several assault charges.”

Of the approximately 350 female inmates in the custody of Pima County, a few have been arrested on domestic violence charges. Most, however, remain in jail for crimes ranging from DUI, to serious drug and racketeering charges, prostitution, assault, armed robbery and homicide. About 70 percent of these women are pre-trial inmates, with the rest serving various sentences.<sup>1</sup> More than 70 percent of incarcerated women report having been repeatedly abused verbally, physically and/or sexually.<sup>2</sup> More than 70 percent of female victims of nonfatal violence were victimized by someone they knew, and of those nearly 70 percent report being abused by an intimate partner.<sup>3</sup> Also, around 70 percent of women in jail have minor children.<sup>4</sup> Child abuse occurs in up to 70 percent of families in which there is abuse of adults.<sup>5</sup> Domestic violence may be the single major precursor to child abuse and neglect fatalities in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

These estimates, gathered from Bureau of Justice Statistics special reports, research articles on family violence and from inmates themselves, are remarkably consistent. A very large number of women in jails, perhaps even higher than 70 percent, experience domestic violence as a major theme of their lives. In fact, it is not uncommon for abusers to have their women commit crimes for them. Traumatic relationships tend to negatively affect a person’s sense of self-esteem and cultivate a sense of powerlessness to affect or break away from a relationship. Indeed, some female inmates may actually choose jail sentences as a passive means of escaping an abusive partner.

Most incarcerated women have had little or no prior access to information about domestic violence, no insight about its effect on them and their children, and have given no previous attention to ways they can address alternatives for their lives. Many have been lifelong abuse victims. Their educational and job skills levels are low. They tend to be unemployed, involved

with illegal and addictive substances, and financially and often emotionally dependent on abusers. Typically, they feel trapped in a self-destructive lifestyle, without the resources to make and maintain positive change. They hope for spontaneous improvement in their partner’s behavior, but have little insight into any ability they may have to address that behavior or their own.

## Programs for Women

Programs in the Pima County Jail have traditionally addressed health, recovery and basic educational issues, as well as employability skills and religious needs. Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, along with several other substance-abuse recovery programs continue to draw high attendance figures. These, along with several of the health-related programs, offer segments that regularly touch on themes of self-esteem, responsibility, anger, domestic violence, stress and healthy relationships.

Recent additions to programs for women include an Arizona Governor’s Office grant funded program titled PHASE (Project for Homemakers in Arizona Seeking Employment). The program offers women a five-day series of employability skills workshops.

Another program is sponsored by the Women’s Re-entry Network (WREN), a group of women who have a history of incarceration themselves and of living successful lives since. WREN assists current inmates in developing a realistic release plan for themselves. Facilitators use their own personal experiences, including challenges and barriers they encountered on reentry to the community to lead discussion groups in productive directions. Classes are overseen by a group based at the University of Arizona.

Money Matters is another popular new class that addresses basic financial literacy, from how savings and checking accounts work, to understanding credit and how to use it responsibly. Inmates practice balancing a checkbook and create a personal financial plan that fits their needs and stage of life. Instruction also addresses what to do when one is in financial trouble, and how to minimize and repair the damage. A number of jail employees have expressed interest in a Money Matters class for themselves.

## Intensive Domestic Violence Program

Now at the Pima County Jail, a new and already highly popular six-week program focuses entirely on issues related to domestic violence. Classes are divided into six one-week units, so that short-term inmates can benefit from attending portions of the classes or can enter the program at any time and still be able to cycle through the entire series. The primary instructor is a psychiatric nurse specialist, with experience as a clinical

# "Domestic Violence Doesn't Just Hurt Us."



Martha L. Cramer



Left: During class, a female inmate shows a scar running down her arm from a domestic violence encounter.

Right: The female inmates actively participate during the domestic violence class.

therapist, a substance abuse specialist and a communications skills instructor.

Classes have been offered since August 2005, with initial funding provided by the jail's Inmate Welfare Fund. The program, now free of charge to the jail, is administered by a non-profit organization called The Administration of Resources and Choices.<sup>7</sup> This group also operates a crisis line and emergency shelter for elders and offers a program titled Late-Life Domestic Violence Support in the community outside the jail.

First in the series of classes, which combine instruction, guest speakers, video and interactive discussions, is an overview of domestic violence. Discussion centers on key issues of power and control, as well as the various reasons why women remain with abusive partners. The next unit focuses on what domestic violence does to its victims. Participants discuss the cycle of violence, the connection between abusive behavior and substance abuse, and predictable emotional and behavioral reactions of both adults and children.

The third and fourth units of the program address issues of self-esteem, assertive communications skills and understanding one's emotional needs. Planning for safety, assessing how dangerous a relationship is, and using community resources to break the violence cycle are topics for these last two weeks of classes.

Of 14 inmates who recently completed a "Danger Assessment" questionnaire for the class, six said their abuser had forced sex on them. Nine reported having had a weapon used against them or having been threatened with a deadly weapon. Of those, six said the weapon was a gun. Nine felt their abuser was capable of killing them.

Classes are generally upbeat and always supportive, with each inmate participant receiving a certificate of accomplishment for participation in each unit. The stated goal of the program is summed up in the word empowerment. Women provided with basic knowledge, who spend time looking at the patterns of their own lives, and who share insights with non-judgmental people who have similar experiences can begin the process of taking charge of their lives.

A recent participant wrote that she first postponed her wedding as a result of the classes, then ended the relationship entirely as it was "built on fear." Another said that for her, domestic violence led to her "self-medication" with drugs and then to repetitive violence. A 42-year-old inmate wrote she was surprised to learn that anyone else understood what she has been experiencing for 25 years. She considered these classes potentially life changing. Hopefulness for the future, for their

children and for future relationships is a common theme of inmate evaluations.

One of the central goals of the domestic violence classes, according to instructor Liz Kinsworthy, is to help women continue way beyond the program itself, to identify and upon release to access community resources that will assist them in recovery. Kinsworthy summed up a recent session by saying, "Excellent class. Many testimonials. One woman ended up in juvenile court at the age of 12 for trying to protect her mother. Another attempted suicide trying to get away from her husband. Another had her back broken. The majority of the women want help to be able to have a life free from abuse."

At the Pima County Jail, tools are now available to help women begin to take charge of their lives, to move beyond the cycle of abuse, for themselves and for their children.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Pima County Adult Detention Center statistics (actual current percentage 72 percent).

<sup>2</sup> Browne, A. 1999. Prevalence and severity of lifetime physical and sexual victimization among incarcerated women. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 22(3-4):301-322.

<sup>3</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics. July 2004. Special Report, *Profile of Jail Inmates*, 2002. NCJ 201932, pp. 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics. December 1999. Special Report, *Women Offenders*. NCJ 175688, pp. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Garbarino, J., K. Kostelny and N. Dubrow. 1991. What children tell us about living in danger. *American Psychologist*, 46:376-383.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. 1996. Child maltreatment: Reports from the states to the national center on child abuse and neglect. Washington, D.C.

<sup>7</sup> Administration of Resources, (520) 882-9135, director Kay White.

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