



Stephanie S. Covington's

Hidden Healers: The Unexpected Ways Women in Prison Help Each Other Survive

Wiley & Sons

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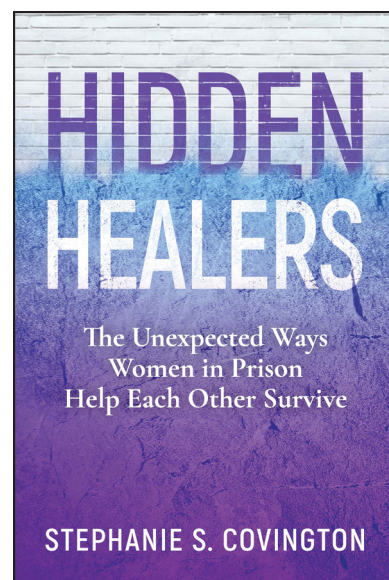
Review by Merry Morash, Ph.D.

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This book takes the reader from the first moments that women in the United States discover they will be held in jails; to the experience of jail, transfer to prison, what can be decades-long incarceration in prison; to leaving prison and struggling to manage on the outside or, for some women, dying in prison. As the title indicates, across this progression, the reader sees how women help each other in practical ways, for example by sharing commissary items, schooling each other in how to survive in carceral settings, and by providing emotional support when they grieve losses of people inside and outside of prison. Besides revealing women's reality of being locked up, the book highlights other important themes. It provides detailed descriptions of damaging policies and practices perpetrated by jails and prison that dehumanize and traumatize incarcerated women. It documents Dr. Covington's successful life-long efforts to develop and deliver programming and, in some cases, change carceral systems to improve women's lives. It also documents how leadership and line staff in jails and prisons, community leaders, and advocates on the outside have made improvement through respectful and thoughtful interactions with incarcerated women, programs tailored to meet the needs incarcerated women identify, and changes in policies that cause trauma and have no empirical evidence of any helpful or desired effects. The book repeatedly

highlights how race, ethnic, class, and LGBTQ+ statuses put women at high risk for traumas that lead to addiction and illegal behavior and limit their chances to avoid incarceration. These multiple themes show incarcerated women at their best, the system at its worst, and a hopeful road map and examples for feasible change. In the end, the book leaves one deeply concerned about incarcerated women, but with some hope for change and specific examples of successful change.

Although the book explicitly states that it is not an "academic" piece, it is based on multiple sources of information that support the validity of its content. Foremost, Dr. Covington draws on years of experience working inside prisons and jails in a variety of U.S. correctional institutions and institutions in several other countries over several decades. She describes in detail her early-career visit as a "guest" incarcerated woman that solidified her dedication to developing and delivering programming and changing policy for women in prison. Dr. Covington also conducted interviews with individuals who have worked as peer leaders in sessions she designed to promote women's and men's recovery from trauma, and she drew on the work of several researchers who have studied women in prison and who she knows well. Her close connection to these individual, ranging from



incarcerated women to their keepers to colleagues who study women in prisons, enabled her to build a credible picture of what goes on in jails and prisons and what needs to change. Finally, the book links the picture of incarcerated women and of the jails and prisons where they live to statistical documentation and research evidence.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part, *Entering the System*, begins by recreating the stark and uncertain reality that women face in transit from jail to prison. Typical practices include the use of multiple shackles and rides in uncomfortable, crowded vehicles. This introduction also contains Dr. Covington’s introduction of herself and the extensive professional experience that informed conclusions about the system and the women confined in it. The remainder of *Entering the System* presents upsetting realities and debunks common stereotypes about women in prison and what it is like to be in prison. For example, it contrasts the common belief that women in prison are motivated by sexual jealousy and act against each other with violence with observations of women comforting and advocating for each other. The book documents the high level of use of plea bargains and how they disadvantage women who try to make impossible decisions, like whether to plea even when they are not guilty or risk a sentence that could take them away from their children for decades. In a final example of challenges to stereotypes, the book criticizes simplistic thinking that programming focused on cooking and sewing is somehow gender-responsive – a belief that leadership and staff in some carceral institutions continue to hold.

Part Two: *Living Inside* opens with the questions, “How would I do living here? How would I fare as a long-term prisoner?” This section, which constitutes nearly half of the text, presents vivid descriptions of the physical environment and culture of jails and prisons. Topics include confined women’s, previously confined women’s, academic colleagues’, and Dr.

Covington’s perception of environment and culture as manifested in visitation experiences, patterns of sexual harassment and assault perpetrated by staff, the use of traumatizing restrictive housing, and programming. We see how women struggle with low-quality food, separation from children, grief and loss when loved ones outside and women inside die, and physical and mental illness. This section also provides numerous examples of how incarcerated women help each other and some examples of how staff and policies – often outside of the United States – effectively prepare women to leave prison or manage and recover while they are there. As a poignant reminder of the seriousness of women’s incarceration, a two-page insert presents a list of women who did not survive incarceration but who died in prison, and it notes their circumstances. A key takeaway from this chapter is that environment and culture can be changed to avoid traumatizing women, but physical changes alone can be undermined by damaging culture.

Part Three: *The Journey Home* continues to illustrate how incarcerated women help each other and how prison systems do not always, but can, promote success after incarceration. For instance, women coach each other to go up for parole. Women who leave prison and jail may face arcane practices, such as being released just after midnight so the institution can claim extra money to cover a day’s worth of food, and they may find little or no supportive services. This section of the book provides a necessary ending to incarcerated women’s experiences, but given the book’s focus on incarceration, it is understandably not expansive coverage.

The final section of the book, *What We Can Do*, is a call to action that could be implemented by different types of readers of this book. It grapples with the question, “Why start with women?” and it suggests

practical actions ranging from further learning about incarcerated women to making donations to advocacy groups and organizations. Sections on further material to read, audio visual resources, and supportive organizations enable the reader to take these actions. For classrooms and book groups, there are discussion questions.

Multiple audiences will find this book useful. For college and university students at all levels and the general public, it sheds light on often invisible traumatic experiences, characteristics, and emotions of incarcerated women and their lives in jails and prisons. For policy makers and practitioners, the book provides rare insight into what actually happens to incarcerated women. For all readers, the book can motivate action to make change by taking a small step or by implementing an ambitious vision for change.



Merry Morash is a professor at the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. With funding from the National Science Foundation, she recently completed a 6-year interdisciplinary mixed-methods study of the effects of probation and parole services on women. The study integrated theories of communication and psychology with criminal justice theories of effective supervision and reentry from prison. In the second phase, it examined women's identity change in relation to recidivism and other life outcomes. She is currently a research partner with the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries' re-entry program for women

and men leaving prison and planning on residing in Detroit. More broadly, Dr. Morash's research focuses on gender, crime, and justice. She has published books and articles on women and girls in the juvenile justice system, on the experiences of battered women who have immigrated to the United States, and on women who work as police. She has also done extensive research on juvenile delinquency and the juvenile justice system. She also has collaborated with Sociologist Dr. Soma Chaudhuri in a study of the effect of economic and social change oriented NGO's in India on wife abuse. Her articles appear in journals that include *Justice Quarterly*, *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *Feminist Criminology*, and *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*. She is author of the books, *Gender, Crime and Justice* (Sage) and *Women on Probation and Parole: A Feminist Critique of Community Programs and Services* (Northeastern U. Press). She is co-editor (with Chesney-Lind) of *Feminist Theories of Crime*, a volume in Ashgate's Library of Essays in Theoretical Criminology.

In addition to funding from the National Science Foundation, Dr. Morash's research has been funded by the National Institute of Justice, the American Sociological Association/Bureau of Justice Statistics, the Michigan Department of Corrections, the Michigan State Police, and the Michigan State University Foundation. In 2007, Dr. Morash received the Distinguished Scholar Award from the Division on Women and Crime, American Society of Criminology. In 2008, she was named a Fellow by the American Society of Criminology. Most recently she was named an Outstanding Mentor by the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences; this award recognized her extensive work with graduate students, including her acting as chair of over 20 completed dissertations. She also received the mentorship award from the American Society of Criminology. In 2018, Dr. Morash received the Lifelong Achievement Award from the Division on People of Color and Crime; that award recognized her scholarship and her mentorship. Her graduate students have received dissertation fellowships from the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Justice, and the Ford Foundation.