PLS’s Women’s Incarceration Conditions and Reentry Project (the Women’s Project) interviewed and surveyed several incarcerated women throughout Massachusetts and published a report, *A Different Way Forward*, based on their stories around violence and trauma, mental health, and identity-based discrimination.

The overwhelming majority of women interviewed and surveyed reported that they had either experienced or witnessed sexual misconduct or harassment by correctional or other staff. Some women interviewed reported experiencing or being threatened with physical violence by prison staff. Many women reported that they had experienced physical and sexual violence prior to incarceration. Women also reported experiences and conditions in Massachusetts correctional facilities, in addition to sexual violence and harassment, that have exacerbated mental illness, and that mental health care is woefully inadequate to virtually non-existent.

Transgender women incarcerated throughout Massachusetts reported a lack of access to gender-affirming health care and gender-affirming resources and programming. They also reported spending extended periods of time in solitary confinement and undergoing unclothed searches conducted by male officers. Transgender women reported experiencing harassment, including sexual harassment, from both officers and other incarcerated people based on their status as transgender women.

Incarcerated women also reported issues of racism. Some women reported that officers engaged in overtly racist behavior, including using racial slurs. The Women’s Project partnered with PLS’s Racial Equity in Corrections Initiative (REICI) to learn about the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) incarcerated women, specifically. BIPOC incarcerated women reported experiencing job discrimination, and worse medical and mental health care as compared with White incarcerated women. BIPOC incarcerated women with English as a second language reported struggling to be heard, understood and addressed due to inadequate translation services. Black incarcerated women reported that the canteen does not carry hair, skin, and hygiene products appropriate for their skin, hair, and health.

The harm that women face at the hands of correctional staff is in contravention of law and policy, and yet continually occurs with impunity.
Violence and trauma are intrinsic to incarceration. The very act of placing a person behind bars is violent, and the surveillance inherent to incarceration, particularly when exercised by men with state sanctioned authority over women in custody, is traumatic. There is no form of prison, jail, or system of incarceration that will be responsive to trauma women undergo in their lives. To adequately respond to and remedy the harm women face in these systems, we must reduce reliance on punishment, and shift resources to community-based systems of care that are equipped to support human dignity. PLS’s Women’s Project recommends the following actions to respond to trauma women face in criminal and carceral systems:

1) **Establish independent oversight.** The fact that incarcerated women face retaliation when they report sexual misconduct and other misconduct by officers is evidence that the prison system often operates with impunity and that DOC cannot effectively oversee itself and hold itself accountable. We must establish an independent oversight body that will increase accountability and transparency without increasing the footprint of our carceral system.

2) **Decarcerate.** Release women from prisons and jails using parole, medical parole, clemency, ending pre-trial confinement, ending cash bail, and ending life without parole sentencing.

3) **Facilitate women’s reentry.** Women released from prisons and jails will need resources to smoothly reintegrate into their communities and avoid becoming reincarcerated, so funding reentry resources created by formerly incarcerated women is critical. It is also important to facilitate reentry on a human level, meaning that communities must come together in solidarity to support women reentering and facilitate healing.

4) **Reduce reliance on incarceration.** Multiple legal mechanisms exist to divert women away from incarceration but are currently under-utilized. The Commonwealth could also adopt policies and change funding streams to reduce people’s contact with police, and to discourage needless arrest and prosecution.

5) **Fund communities and community responses to harm.** Underfunding communities is a root cause of harm and behaviors penalized through incarceration. However, responding with incarceration furthers that harm, rather than alleviating it. Instead, the Commonwealth should fund communities to prevent harm, and fund community responses to harm for when harm does happen.

More details regarding these issues and recommendations can be found in the full report, *A Different Way Forward: Stories from Incarcerated Women in Massachusetts and Recommendations.*