

# Stigma increases likelihood that drug users reoffend

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Punitive policies intended to reduce drug use by making life difficult for convicted users are counterproductive and actually lead to a vicious spiral of drug use and reincarceration. Research published in BioMed Central's open access journal *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy* reveals how legal punishment, withdrawal of services and social stigmatization encourage a return to drug use, increased criminal activity and ultimately re-incarceration.

Juliana van Olphen from San Francisco State University led a team of researchers who held focus groups and conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 women who had recently left jail. She said, "After carrying out this research, our conclusion was that punitive drug and social policies related to employment, housing, education, welfare, and mental health and [substance abuse](#) treatment make it extremely difficult for users and former users to live a normal life and reintegrate into society".

The kind of policies the authors refer to include the federal ban on food stamps for people convicted of a drug offense and the "one strike, you're out" policy by which first-time drug offenders are evicted from public housing. According to van Olphen, "These policies have adversely and disproportionately affected women, especially poor women, ruining their chances of finding employment, housing or education upon release". In the words of one of the participants:

"I'm a convicted felon, I'm not eligible for other things... Well, to me,

prostituting was too demeaning and I was raped too many times, so I stopped doing it. Right? So I started selling drugs. I'm still a drug addict. It's not like I sold drugs to become a rich person or anything. I sold drugs to pay my rent. I paid it. I lived in a room that was \$50 a day, which was \$1,500 a month."

The researchers found that a central theme throughout women's narratives revolved around the double stigma of being a drug user and having a history of incarceration. While the stigmas are created to act as a deterrent to drug use, they often actually promote it by limiting the options of the victims of the 'War on Drugs'. The authors conclude, "In the future, launching campaigns to reduce the intersecting stigmas of drug use and incarceration may enhance the effectiveness of reintegration services while also assisting women leaving jail to find the support they need for successful reintegration into their families and communities".

More information: Nowhere to go: How stigma limits the options of female drug users after release from jail  
Juliana E van Olphen, Michele J Eliason, Nicholas Freudenberg and Marilyn Barnes, *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy* (in press), [www.substanceabusepolicy.com/](http://www.substanceabusepolicy.com/)

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