

BENEVOLENCE, A Journey From Prison to Home

A FILM BY JOANNE HERSHFIELD
STUDY GUIDE FOR CLASSROOM USE



PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Benevolence, A Journey From Prison to Home follows the journey of five women as they are released from prison and move onto Benevolence Farm in Alamance County, NC. This documentary film is an important educational tool for engaging with contemporary issues related to women and criminal justice reform. It promotes instructive discussions about how gender affects incarceration and reentry and reveals what women face as they move from prison back into society.

Prisoner reentry is the process of leaving prison or jail and returning to society. All prisoners experience reentry irrespective of their method of release or form of supervision. So, both prisoners who are released on parole and those who are released to no supervision in the community experience reentry.

When addressing women's reentry challenges, emerging research and practice indicate that areas of need commonly experienced by women, if left unaddressed, can contribute to their involvement in the criminal justice system. Areas of need include on-going trauma from histories of physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, mental and physical health issues, and parenting concerns.

NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage with the content presented in the film, *Benevolence, A Journey From Prison to Home*. Our goal is to help instructors structure provocative and productive discussions around women, incarceration, and reentry. The study guide provides a selection of significant statistics, key points, and discussion questions that encourage students to delve more deeply into the ideas raised in the film. At the end of the study guide you will find a number of assignment suggestions that will allow students to broaden their knowledge and understanding of the major issues raised by the film.

CONTEXT: WOMEN AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IN THE UNITED STATES

- 1) From 1977 to 2014, the number of women incarcerated in state and federal prisons rose by 908 percent in the United States. https://ssa.uchicago.edu/ssa_magazine/number-women-jails-and-prisons-soars
- 2) Approximately 219,000 women are in the criminal justice system in the United States. This includes local jails, state prisons, federal prisons, the juvenile justice system, and immigrant detention facilities. Over one million women are on probation and parole. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2018women.html>
- 3) Women have become the fastest-growing segment of the incarcerated population. In 35 states, women's population numbers have fared worse than men's, and in a few extraordinary states, women's prison populations have even grown enough to counteract reductions in the men's population. In North Carolina, where Benevolence Farm is located, women's prison population growth outpaced men's prison population growth. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/women_overtime.html
- 4) Most women entering the criminal justice system share a history of physical, emotional, and/or psychological abuse and are inadequately treated while incarcerated. 92% of all women in California prisons had been "battered and abused" in their lifetimes. <https://www.aclu.org/other/facts-about-over-incarceration-women-united-states>
- 5) A third of the incarcerated women population identify as lesbian or bi-sexual. Incarcerated women are 53% White, 29% Black, 14% Hispanic, 2.5% American Indian and Alaskan Native, 0.9% Asian, and 0.4% Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2018women.html>

6) In 2017, the imprisonment rate for African American women (92 per 100,000) was twice the rate of imprisonment for white women (49 per 100,000).

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>

7) The unemployment rate for formerly incarcerated people is nearly *five times higher* than the unemployment rate for the general United States population, and substantially higher than even the worst years of the Great Depression. People of color tend to face higher unemployment rates than whites, while men tend to have lower unemployment rates than women. Unemployment is highest within the first two years of release, suggesting that pre- and post-release employment services are critical in order to reduce recidivism and help incarcerated people quickly integrate back into society.

<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html>

8) More than 60% of women in state prisons have a child under the age of eighteen.

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>

9) In a study that followed 404,638 people released from state prisons in 30 states in 2005, 67.8 percent were arrested within 3 years of release, and 76.6 percent within 5 years of release.

<https://csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/facts-and-trends/>

10) Employment rates and earning histories of people in prison and jail are often low before incarceration as a result of limited education, low job skill levels, and the prevalence of physical and mental health problems; incarceration only exacerbates these challenges.

<https://csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/facts-and-trends/>

11) Once they are released from incarceration, under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), 13 states fully prohibit anyone with a drug-related conviction from receiving public assistance under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program; 23 other states maintain a partial ban. <https://csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/facts-and-trends/>

KEY POINTS

1) Women face gender-specific needs in relation to reintegration.

2) Race, class, gender and sexual identity, and life narrative shape an individual woman's experience of reentry.

3) Women reentering society have to problem-solve many of the following issues related to prisoner reentry: housing, employment, education, access to children, physical and mental health treatment, substance abuse recovery; community stigma and public opinion.

4) The importance of appropriate community support in the successful process of reentry.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) In what ways can we consider women and reentry through the lens of intersectionality?
- 2) In your analysis, what are the strengths of the Benevolence Farm model in helping women reintegrate? What strategies need to be revised? Are there other strategies that should be introduced?
- 3) Why did Missy and Keia decide to leave the farm after only six months? In your estimation, is there anything that could have been done on the part of the farm's staff that might have changed these women's decisions? Do you agree with their decisions?
- 4) Experts in the field call for holistic and culturally-sensitive plans to support women in the reentry process. What do you think these supports should look like in addressing the needs of different communities of women?
- 5) In your estimation, what is the right balance of self-reliance, self-determination, and organizational "rules" and structure for women in transitional settings?
- 6) Do you think that the skills the women learn on the farm are translatable to other work, housing, and inter-personal contexts?
- 7) The residents of Benevolence Farm expressed a number of concerns regarding their relationship with Benevolence Farm staff. What are some of these concerns and how do you think they can be addressed?

ASSIGNMENTS

1) Research existing reentry programs and analyze their strengths and weaknesses. Put together a model of a reentry support program for women and present your case to potential funders and supporters that explains why that program is needed and why it will be successful.

2) Policy Brief: A report aimed at educating a particular audience of law makers or decision makers (from voters to legislators or county commissioners) about problems associated with women's reentry and options for solving those problems.

3) Examine the construction of female criminality in popular culture, using examples from film and television and literature.

4) You are a journalist and your assignment is to interview a woman who is scheduled to leave prison in two weeks. Prepare a list of questions for her that address her life history and her expectations and objectives for a successful reentry process.

5) Compare and contrast the different solutions employed in other countries and prepare a tool kit of "best practices" that can be employed to address similar needs in the U.S.