

Overlooked: Women and Jails in an Era of Reform

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Report Summary

Despite recent calls to reform the criminal justice system in light of increasing numbers of incarcerated people, one trend has received little attention: the dramatic rise in the number of women being held in local jails. Since 1970, the number of

The growing number of women in U.S. jails

 = 1,000 women in jail

1970



2014



women in jail nationwide has increased 14-fold—from under 8,000 to nearly 110,000—and now accounts for approximately half of all women behind bars in the United States. Once a rarity, women are now held in jails in nearly every county—a stark contrast to 1970, when almost three-quarters of counties held *not a single woman* in jail.

Available research to help explain why women are increasingly incarcerated in U.S. jails is scarce, dated, and limited in scope. Nevertheless, general data about women in the criminal justice system provides clues about who these women are, and why they end up in jail. Like men in jail, they are disproportionately people of color, overwhelmingly poor and low-income, survivors of violence and trauma, and have high rates of physical and mental illness and substance use.

The majority are charged with lower-level offenses—mostly property and drug-related—and tend to have less extensive criminal histories than their male counterparts. Unlike incarcerated men, women in jails are often primary caregivers to their young children—nearly 80 percent of women in jails are mothers, and most are single parents.

Once incarcerated, women must grapple with systems, practices, and policies that are designed for the majority of the incarcerated population: men. With limited resources, jails are often ill-equipped to address the challenges women face when they enter the justice system. As a result, many women leave jail with diminished prospects for physical and behavioral health recovery, with greater parental stress and strain, and in even more financially precarious circumstances than before becoming caught up in the justice system.



Nearly 80 percent of women in jails are mothers.

As interest in rolling back the misuse and overuse of jail increases, women frequently remain an afterthought in discussions about reform; yet the roots and trajectory of their increasing rate of jail incarceration demand further study. This report documents the existing foundation for reform that can potentially set the stage for further, well-crafted programs and practices to stem the flow of women cycling through the nation's local jails.

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 SAFETY + JUSTICE CHALLENGE

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For more information

The Vera Institute of Justice is a justice reform change agent. Vera produces ideas, analysis, and research that inspire change in the systems people rely upon for safety and justice, and works in close partnership with government and civic leaders to implement it. Vera is currently pursuing core priorities of ending the misuse of jails, transforming conditions of confinement, and ensuring that justice systems more effectively serve America's increasingly diverse communities. For more information, visit www.vera.org.

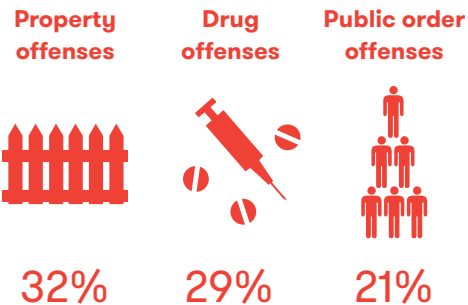
To read this report, visit www.vera.org/publications/overlooked-women-and-jails-report. For information about this or other publications on jail incarceration from Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections, contact Ram Subramanian, editorial director, at rsubramanian@vera.org.

This report was created with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, which seeks to reduce overincarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails. More information is available at www.SafetyandJusticeChallenge.org.

Profile of women in jails

Why are women in jails?

The vast majority (82 percent) of women are in jail for nonviolent offenses.



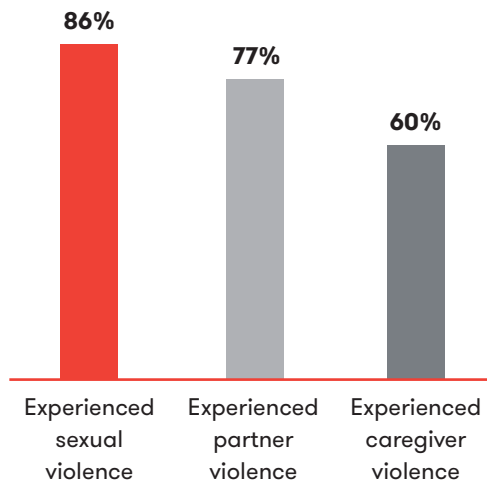
Racial and ethnic disparities

Nearly two-thirds of women in jail are women of color—44 percent are black, 15 percent are Hispanic, and 5 percent are of other racial/ethnic backgrounds—compared to 36 percent of women who identified as white.

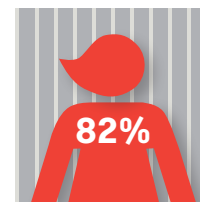
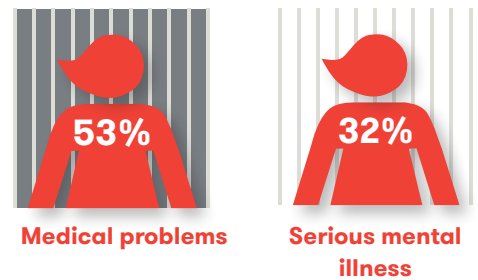
■ Women of color ▨ White women



Prevalence of victimization



Prevalence of health issues among women in jail



82%
Drug or alcohol
abuse/
dependence

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