



Foreword

Over the past three decades, as the United States has experienced explosive prison growth, women have been hard hit. Although women have the dubious distinction of being the fastest growing segment of the prison population, scant attention has been paid to their involvement in the criminal justice system. Indeed, even most official sources of criminal justice data do not distinguish between men and women in their analyses, leaving it only to speculation on whether there are any distinctions between the two groups that make a difference.

HARD HIT: The Growth in the Imprisonment of Women, 1977–2004 is the first study of its kind, analyzing the striking growth in the numbers of women in prison, state-by-state over nearly three decades. The report provides context to the alarming growth trends and reviews what is understood about the phenomena by researchers who study women in the criminal justice system.

Anchored by the research of Dr. Natasha A. Frost and accompanied by the analysis of Justice Strategies, *HARD HIT* is the first in a series of reports to be put out by the Institute on Women & Criminal Justice that will examine the states' treatment of women in the criminal justice system. The aim of these reports is to shed light on the phenomenon of punitiveness – its pervasiveness, its roots, its consequences, and possible responses.

The Women's Prison Association is the nation's oldest and largest service organization working with women in the criminal justice system. WPA's work has a dual focus on direct services and systems change. WPA operates a full range of program services to address women's need for livelihood, housing, family, health and well-being, and criminal justice compliance. WPA's newest division, the Institute on Women & Criminal Justice, is a national center for dialogue, research, and information about criminal justice-involved women, their families and communities. By fostering a national conversation on women and criminal justice, the Institute seeks to create breakthroughs in the ways in which our public systems address the issue of women and crime, and to promote innovative solutions and highlight what works.

KEY FINDINGS

Hard Hit: The Growth in the Imprisonment of Women, 1977–2004 points to some alarming trends

in our nation's incarceration of women. These findings raise crucial questions for further study.

Across the board, the growth has been dramatic.

In 1977, the U.S. imprisoned 11,212 women; by 2004, that number had ballooned to 96,125, a 757% increase. In 1977, the United States imprisoned 10 women per 100,000 female residents; in 2004, the rate had grown to 64 per 100,000.

Tremendous state and regional variances exist.

While imprisonment rates have soared from coast to coast, there is a remarkable level of variation among states and regions. For example, in 2004, Oklahoma imprisoned 129 of every 100,000 female residents. In contrast, that same year, Massachusetts and Rhode Island imprisoned 11 women per 100,000 female residents. Unless we are to believe that Oklahoma women are more than 10 times more "criminal" than their Massachusetts and Rhode Island counterparts, we have to assume that criminal justice policy and practice are pivotal. From a regional perspective, the Mountain and Southern states stand out as particularly punitive in the imprisonment of women. In fact, the South has historically incarcerated women and men at relatively high rates. In contrast, the Mountain states are showing a growth rate for women that is startling both in its size and in comparison to men.

At the beginning of this century, interesting shifts occur. The last five years covered by this report (1999 – 2004) reflect a period in which our reliance on incarceration was being reconsidered. Many states engaged in sentencing reform and in creating treatment and other alternatives to imprisonment. During this time, some states continued to increase the numbers of women they imprisoned (Florida's prison population, for instance, increased by 1,840 women or 48%), and other states made modest increases (like Alabama's growth of 3%). Significantly, nine states actually experienced a decrease in their female population during this five-year period. Among them are some of the states with the largest prison populations: New York was down by 831 or 23% and New Jersey was down by 392 women or 21%.

Women, families, and communities are devastated by imprisonment. As discussed in Justice Strategies' review of the recent research, millions of women

and families in this country have been affected by our nation's heavy reliance on incarceration. The U.S. disproportionately imprisons women of color with few economic resources and many familial responsibilities. This has compounded the hardship experienced in already impoverished communities.

THE NEED FOR MORE RESEARCH – AND ACTION

Women are a small portion of the prison population – roughly 7% nationally, in 2004. So, why should we care? Of course, imprisonment is not “worse” for women than it is for men. However, the incarceration of women creates some different effects that have historically been largely unaddressed in conversations focusing primarily on men.

The cycling of women through the criminal justice system has a destabilizing effect not only on the women's immediate families, but on the social networks of their communities. They are, more often than not, primary caretakers of young children and other family members.

From the taxpayer's perspective, the price of incarcerating women is not limited to the cost of the prison cell and three meals a day. Locking up women also means paying the tab for putting their children in foster care, treating health and mental health conditions that have worsened during incarceration, and provid-

ing public assistance and shelter for those who are homeless and destitute upon release. For most women who are sent to prison, the more economical and humane response of providing community-based substance abuse and mental health treatment, coupled with increased economic and social supports, would produce a better result. WPA has long maintained that criminal justice and social policy that better served women would also produce better outcomes for men.

If, as *HARD HIT* suggests, women are especially sensitive to shifting trends in imprisonment, we should be looking to the patterns of their involvement in the criminal justice system for clues to improving the system overall. The causes of the trends revealed in this report are not self-evident and warrant additional inquiry. In our next report in the *Punitiveness* series, the Institute on Women & Criminal Justice will go deeper in to the reasons for the growth in female imprisonment, again state-by-state, examining how offense type, risk of imprisonment, and length of stay in prison contribute to the increase.

We hope that this report will contribute to an evolving national conversation about women, communities, and justice.

Ann Jacobs, Institute Director
Sarah From, Deputy Director
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