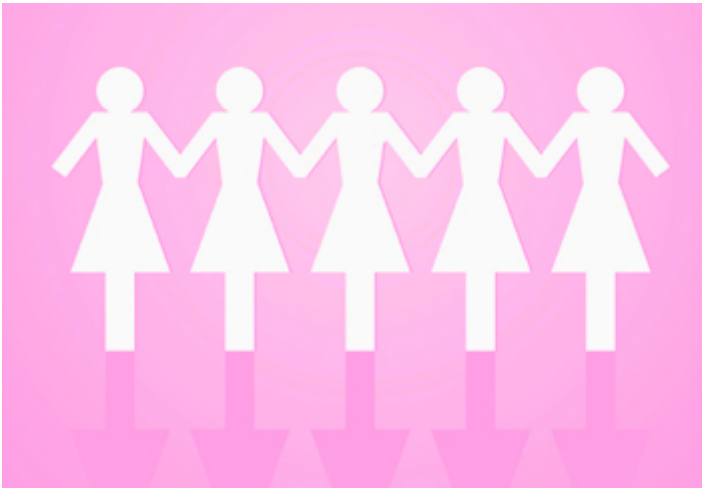


Gender bender

By [Sarah Etter](#), News Reporter

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There are many theories about the differences between men and women, and many generalizations about the sexes. Sitcoms and movies depict men usually leaving the toilet seat up and women nagging their husbands, while books claim that men are from completely different planets altogether.

The difference between the genders might offer comic relief and insight in the media but behind bars, data that focuses solely on females could offer a clearer picture of the criminal justice system.

“There is very little incarceration data broken out by gender,” says Sarah From, deputy director of the [Women Prison Associations’s Institute on Women and Criminal Justice](#). “When you do more research into gender-specific incarceration rates, you find out what’s happening for women in corrections is actually quite different from the national average.”

To get to the bottom of the digits debacle, the WPA opened the Institute on Women and Criminal Justice, a research-based think tank. The institute recently began work on The Punitiveness Reports, a series of reports focused on incarceration and sentencing trends for females.

The first installment, [Hard Hit: The Growth in the Imprisonment of Women, 1977-2004](#), shows that “the number of women serving sentences of more than a year grew by 757 percent between 1977 and 2004 – nearly twice the 388 percent increase in the male prison population.”

Hard Hit also found that “[This] trend has also been persistent, with median annual growth rates for women exceeding growth rates for men...in each of the past 11 years.”

Its research is based on imprisonment rates for the last 30 years on a state by state basis, with “imprisonment rate” defined as the number of women imprisoned per 100,000 women in the state.

From says researchers also were concerned when they found incarceration inconsistencies across state lines.

“There is such a tremendous variance among states in terms of their imprisonment rate,” she says. “Oklahoma incarcerated 129 women per 100,000 in 2004, while Massachusetts only incarcerated 11 per 100,000. That’s a rate that shows one state being punitive. Are women in Oklahoma ten times more criminal than those in Massachusetts? It really makes you stop and think.”

The rise in female imprisonment seems to have a devastating impact on families too. As a result of the Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act, which was passed in 1997, if a child is in foster care for 15 out of the last 22 months, states must initiate the termination of parental rights. Once terminated, mothers are permanently separated from their children and often cannot regain custody.

“One of the greatest ironies of the [criminal justice] system is that we are a society so oriented towards preserving families, but what is more counterproductive than removing the primary care taker from a family, placing them in a facility hundreds

of miles from their children, and then taking away custody? Just by nature, and just by incarceration, these women are at risk to lose their children permanently,” she says.

According to From, these numbers impact families, communities and work places.

“Without gender-specific tools to address women’s risk to public safety, we are over-incarcerating women, which impacts families and communities,” she adds. “We need to look at the kind of repercussions these numbers can have on society as a whole.”

The institute is preparing to release two more reports in 2007, one of which focuses on the reasons women end up incarcerated. For instance, initial research into crimes committed shows that women tend to commit crimes that are not violent.

“Part of the research we need to do is to look at exactly what offense categories are driving this growth [for the female population],” she says. “This is one place where it’s so important to take a closer look. When you look at total numbers in most statistics, it’s really the number for men. We want to figure out what the numbers are for women.”

As the research continues, From hopes WPA data will help make a difference.

“These women have families and children. We’d like to see more time and money spent on community support in place of constant incarceration for these females,” From adds. “That’s our goal.”

Corrections.com will follow up with other WPA reports as they are released in 2008.

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