



WOMEN'S PRISON ASSOCIATION

News Release

Embargoed Until 4:30 PM, May 21, EST for Publication in Monday Morning Papers

Contact: Natalia Kennedy (212) 674-1163 x49 or (718) 930-7624 (cell)
Ann Jacobs (212) 674-1163 x17

New Report: Number of Female Prisoners Up 757 Percent From 1977 to 2004

As the Bureau of Justice Statistics finds Women's Imprisonment is on the Rise, Report Provides State-by-State Analysis, Highlights Impact on Women, Children and Communities

New York, NY- As the latest semi-annual survey from the Bureau of Justice Statistics shows that the female prison population continues to rise, a report released today by the Institute on Women & Criminal Justice finds that female imprisonment in the U.S. has skyrocketed 757 percent since 1977. Women are the fastest-growing segment of the prison population, surpassing male prison population growth in all 50 states. These trends have profound consequences for communities, families and the women themselves.

The prison population figures published today by the Bureau of Justice Statistics provide further support for the Institute's findings. The female prison population grew by 3.4 percent between June 30, 2004 and June 30, 2005 – more than twice the 1.3-percent increase in the male population. The number of women held in local jails also rose sharply over the period, climbing eight percent compared to 4.3-percent growth in the number of men. Montana leads the nation in female prison population growth since 1977, and BJS reports that the state also led the nation in overall prison population growth rate last year surveyed.

Ann Jacobs, Executive Director of the Women's Prison Association explained: "Our nation's prisons and jails are warehousing poor women, often mothers, who have histories of sexual, physical, mental and substance abuse—and who generally do *not* present a risk to public safety. Although there is no one-size-fits-all solution, if lawmakers focused on a combination of sentencing reform and investment in cost-effective community based treatment, the result would be better for the women, their children, our communities, as well as for the taxpayers footing the bill."

The majority of women in U.S. prison systems are incarcerated for nonviolent drug and property offenses. Many suffer from chemical dependency, mental illness or both. These women face the same barriers to success as men when they leave prison that confront men in the criminal justice system: lack of decent housing, limited employment opportunities, denial of public benefits, and social stigmatization. Women also find themselves caught in “Catch-22” situations as they try to reunify their families. For example, women may be denied custody of their children because they lack secure housing, and denied housing benefits because their children are not with them.

“The Punitiveness Report-HARD HIT: The Growth in Imprisonment of Women, 1977-2004” takes an in-depth look at female prison population growth patterns and regional trends, and it provides the first state-by-state analysis of female imprisonment from 1977 to 2004, with findings from all 50 states. The report was authored by Dr. Natasha Frost, Assistant Professor at Northeastern University along with Judith Greene and Kevin Pranis of Justice Strategies, and was commissioned by the Institute on Women & Criminal Justice.

“Since 1977, the female prison population has increased almost nine-fold,” says Dr. Natasha A. Frost, author of the state-by-state report. “Where some states have slowed their incarceration pace, others have sped up and are locking up more women at an alarming rate. Given that research demonstrates that this increasing reliance on incarceration can be counter-productive, more states should work actively to reduce their female populations.”

The report finds that the rise in the female prison population has been punctuated by growth spikes that reached higher, lasted longer and often began earlier than those affecting men. The pace of growth has fallen since 2000, but the rate at which women are added to prison each year remains high.

Women continue to lead the growth trend in states where prison populations are expanding rapidly. But states that experienced little or no prison population growth since 1999 saw growth rates for female prisoners fall *below* growth rates for males.

“The troubling news is that women prisoner growth appears to be particularly sensitive to the factors that fuel overall population growth,” says Kevin Pranis, co-author of the growth trends report. “The good news is that the trend seems to be changing in states that have managed to reign in population growth, with women leading the decline in prison populations.”

Northeastern states experienced especially rapid female prison population growth during the 1980s but saw growth rates fall during the 1990s. Since 2000, the total number of women housed in northeastern state prisons has *fallen* by 11 percent. . This regional trend was driven by population declines in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

Mountain states saw an explosion in female imprisonment over the past 27 years, with the total female population rising over *1,600 percent* – more than twice the growth for women recorded elsewhere. The pace of growth has recently picked up in the Mountain

states, with 38 percent of all population growth since 1979 taking place in the past five years. Mountain and Southern states imprison women at the highest rates in the nation.

The report also documents how the use of imprisonment for women varies enormously by state as well as by region. Among the state-specific findings:

- In **Oklahoma**, 129 out of every 100,000 women are serving a prison sentence while **Massachusetts** imprisons 11 for every 100,000 women.
- Women make up over *12 percent* of state prisoners in **Montana** but just 3.2 percent of prisoners in **Rhode Island**.
- **Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire and North Dakota** have all seen greater than *20-fold* increases in their female prison populations since 1977. **Michigan** and **North Carolina** experienced four-fold growth over the same period.
- In **North Dakota, West Virginia** and **Oregon** –where total prison population growth rates remain high – female prison populations have grown at twice the rate of male populations since 1999. But in **New York** and **New Jersey**, women are leading a downward trend in the states’ overall prison populations.

“The astonishing growth in Oregon's female prison population is a sad commentary on the state's failure to support women who are struggling with addiction,” says Brigette Sarabi, Executive Director of the Western Prison Project. “Over the past five years, as we have been locking up women at an unprecedented rate, our state has made deep cuts to substance abuse and mental health services. While other states are trying innovative approaches and seeing positive results with fewer women imprisoned, Oregon remains stuck in a “tough-on-crime” time-warp.”

###

Institute on Women & Criminal Justice, (IW CJ), an initiative of the Women’s Prison Association, is a new, national center for dialogue, research, and information about criminal justice-involved women, their families and communities. For more information or a copy of the report, please visit our website, www.wpaonline.org/institute