

Women and Criminal Justice at a Glance

The United States incarcerates a higher percentage of its population than any other industrialized nation.

Women are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. prison population. There are over 97,000 women in American prisons today. The number of women incarcerated grows at a yearly rate 1.5 times that of men incarcerated.¹

As of 2001, more than 70,000 women are released from state and federal prisons annually.

■ **Race**

The majority of women in prison are non-white:

- 63% of women in state prison and 67% in federal prison are black or Hispanic.²

■ **Age**

Most women in prison are past their prime years for committing crimes:

- Almost half of all arrests of women involve individuals under the age of 25.³
- The median age of women in prison is 34.⁴

■ **Education**

The majority of incarcerated women have low levels of formal education:

- 64% of women in prison have not finished high school.⁵
- 16% receive a GED while incarcerated.⁶
- For the general population, 44% of women without a high school diploma are unemployed.⁷

■ **Livelihood**

Incarcerated women typically come from poor, inner-city neighborhoods where work opportunities are limited. Many women in prison report engaging in illegal activities to support themselves, their families, and their addictions. In the month before their arrest:

- Almost half of women in prison were unemployed.⁸
- 65% of unemployed women were not looking for work.⁹

■ **Health and Well-being**

Women in prison face health and well-being problems at a significantly higher rate than the general population. Women in prison are:

- 12 times more likely than the general population to be infected with HIV. (They are up to 3 times more likely than incarcerated men to be HIV-positive.)¹⁰
- 16 times more likely than the general population to have had a psychiatric disorder.¹¹



■ Drug Use

Addiction and criminality are closely related:

- 74% of women in prison used drugs regularly before their arrest.¹²
- 40% of women in state prison report being under the influence of drugs when they committed the crime for which they were last arrested.¹³

Women are more likely to commit their offense after starting drug use; they decrease their criminal involvement after overcoming their addictions:¹⁴

- Almost half of incarcerated women acutely in need of drug addiction treatment do not receive treatment in prison.¹⁵

■ History of Abuse

The majority of women in state prisons report a history of abuse:

- 57% of women report a history of physical or sexual abuse.¹⁶
- 28% report both physical and sexual abuse.¹⁷
- 25% report being abused both before and after age 18.¹⁸

They are up to 8 times more likely than men to have been sexually abused.¹⁹

■ Family and Children

Most incarcerated women come from families in which other members have some involvement in the criminal justice system. In fact, people with an incarcerated parent are more likely to be incarcerated themselves. This cycle puts at risk the 1.5 million children who currently have a parent in state or federal prison:

- 67% women in state prison have at least one family member who has been incarcerated.²⁰
- 65% have minor children at home.²¹
- Half of all women in prison are incarcerated more than 100 miles from their families.²²

■ Housing

Before entering prison, a significant number of women lacked stable housing:

- 15% of women were homeless at least once in the year before their arrest.²³

After leaving prison, obstacles to housing remain – and for some, increase:

- As much as 11% of released prisoners in New York State entered homeless shelters within two years of release. 32% of this population was reincarcerated.²⁴
- Access to Section 8 and other federally assisted housing programs may be denied on the basis of drug-related and violent crimes.²⁵

■ Criminal Justice Involvement

The majority of women in prison are there for non-violent crimes; most have drug addictions:

- Almost two-thirds of women in state prison have prior convictions.²⁶
- More than half of women released from state prisons are rearrested within three years; 40% are reconvicted.²⁷
- Women are 33% more likely than men to be in prison for drug-related crimes;²⁸ 50% of women in New York State prisons are serving time for drug-related offenses.
- Men are 36% more likely than women to be incarcerated for a violent crime.²⁹

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- ¹ "Prisoner and Jail Inmates at Midyear" and "Prisoners" series published annually by the Bureau of Justice Series.
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- ³ Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2002. "Crime in the United States." Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.
- ⁴ Greenfeld, "Women Offenders."
- ⁵ Harlow, Caroline Wolf, Ph.D. 2003. "Education and Correctional Populations." Washington D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ⁶ Harlow, "Education and Correctional Populations."
- ⁷ Travis, Jeremy, Amy L. Solomon, and Michelle Waul. 2001. "From Prison to Home: The Dimensions and Consequences of Prisoner Reentry." Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute.
- ⁸ U.S. Dept. of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, and U.S. Dept. of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons. 2000. *Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997* [Computer file].
- ⁹ U.S. Dept. of Justice, *Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997*.
- ¹⁰ Maruschak, Laura M. "HIV in Prisons, 2000." Washington D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ¹¹ The Correctional Association of New York. 2000. "Health care in New York State prisons: a report of the findings and recommendations by the prison visiting committee of the Correctional Association of New York."
- ¹² Mumola, Christopher J. 1999. "Substance Abuse and Treatment, State and Federal Prisoners, 1997," Washington D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ¹³ Mumola, "Substance Abuse and Treatment."
- ¹⁴ Anglin, Douglas and Yih-Ing Hser. 1987. "Addicted Women and Crime." *Criminology*. 25(2): 359-397.
- ¹⁵ U.S. Dept. of Justice, *Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997*.
- ¹⁶ Bureau of Justice Statistics. 1999. "Prior Abuse Reported by Inmates and Probationers." U.S. Department of Justice.
- ¹⁷ Greenfeld, "Women Offenders."
- ¹⁸ Bureau of Justice Statistics. 1999. "Prior Abuse Reported by Inmates and Probationers."
- ¹⁹ Ditton, Paula M. 1999. "Mental Health and Treatment of Inmates and Probationers." Washington D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ²⁰ U.S. Dept. of Justice, *Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997*.
- ²¹ Mumola, "Substance Abuse and Treatment."
- ²² Gilfus, Mary E. 1992. "From victims to survivors to offenders: Women's routes of entry and immersion into street crime." *Women and Criminal Justice*. 4(1): 63-89.
- ²³ U.S. Dept. of Justice, *Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997*.
- ²⁴ Metraux, Stephan and Dennis P. Culhane. 2003. "Homeless Shelter Use and Reincarceration Following Prison Release." Unpublished Manuscript.
- ²⁵ Legal Action Center. "Housing Laws Affecting Individuals with Criminal Convictions."
- ²⁶ Greenfeld, "Women Offenders."
- ²⁷ Kellman, Leslie. 2001. "1997 Releases: Three-Year Post Release Follow-Up." New York: State of New York Department of Correctional Services.
- ²⁸ Greenfeld, "Women Offenders."
- ²⁹ Greenfeld, "Women Offenders."