The prison population has lowered in the United States, but it's only due to the decline of the male population. Women are still the fastest-growing group of incarcerated people in the US. The nation's state prisons, for example, has seen an increase of 834% in the women's population over the last forty years. The women's growth rate is twice as fast as the men's growth rate. The one thing that has decreased is the disparity between black and white women incarcerated. The racial disparity was once 6 to 1, now it's 2 to 1. Many of them come from poor backgrounds, are survivors of violence, and live with disabilities and addiction. It's often a woman's means of survival that will lead her to incarceration. Think petty theft in order to support yourself and your family, sex-work, self-defense from abusers, or soliciting drugs to avoid withdrawal symptoms. The term 'low-level offense' is almost always interchangeable with the term 'survival crime.'

Back in the 70s, the police force began making examples out of low-level offenders. Politicians and city officials campaigned, rallied, and wrote dissertations affirming the tactic would discourage others from committing bigger crimes. Years later, we now know this was simply an excuse for the overpolicing and brutality of minorities and the poor. The infamous war on drugs was introduced to the public in the 1970’s, too. It became another avenue for police to target minorities and poor people. The focus on villainizing minorities, low-level crimes, and illegal drugs birthed things like stop and frisk, the three-strike rule, zero-tolerance policy in schools, and the racialized archetype of the ‘welfare queen.’

The racist and patriarchal government's neglect of women and minorities also raised the likelihood of their involvement in the system. The scrutinization of black women on welfare, supposedly due to rampant cases of welfare fraud, is one example. It allowed the government to be strict when it came to providing aid to women and families in need. Funding was cut, fewer women qualified, and new policies behind welfare notoriously split up the black family household. The 'man in the house' rule meant a male presence was forbidden in the home of a woman on public assistance. The argument was two 'able-bodied' people in one home was enough to sustain, what wasn't considered is the fact that black people experience(d) employment discrimination regularly. A well paying job on the books, one that didn't exploit the vulnerability of black people, wasn't easy to come by.

Resources
Prison Policy Initiative, Vera Institute, Center for American Progress, Women's Prison Association, The Sentencing Project
Stress from a lack of financial stability is known to initiate and exacerbate mental health issues. When seeing a healthcare professional isn't an option, self-medication becomes the next best thing. Illegal drug use is an easy and relatively inexpensive way to disconnect from the struggles of daily life. More people acknowledge sex work as a reputable profession, but women sex workers are still villified by the government. And rarely can women forced into a life of prostitution by pimps and abusers look to the government for protection and aid. It's hard to escape the system once you're in it. After release, ex-prisoners are faced with heavy fines for both their crimes and time spent living in a facility. It's not unusual for people to leave prison with thousands of dollars in debt. Probation and parole requirements force ex-prisoners to find a job with taxable wages in order to keep up with payments. Employment and housing opportunities are scarce for ex-prisoners, but they will still be sent back to jail if they do not meet all requirements in a timely fashion as punishment.

These situations create a tough cycle thousands of black and brown women live through at any given moment— they are constantly vulnerable to abuse, homelessness, and addiction. The government expanded its reach on who and what was deemed illegal. They searched for crime and created criminals. The government’s answer to problems it helped create has been to hide people away in cages, not to provide resources for people's long term growth and sustainability within the country. Grassroots and community-run organizations offer support and counsel for women involved in the judicial system, but we still have a lot of work to do in order to protect them.

The government sees things like poverty and addiction as punishable personal failures, ignoring its role in contributing to the demise of its own people. It almost feels meaningless to run through all the ways people of color have been set up for failure because we already know. We know sexism, anti-blackness, and the marginalization of minority people are real things. We all know that. I’m convinced anyone arguing that our oppression doesn’t exist, doesn’t even believe that themselves. They’re only committed to the argument so they can continue to live in the safety of their privilege. And anyway, the judicial system targets the disenfranchised the same way it has since its formation. If it has changed at all, it’s only become more sophisticated in existing as a classist, racist institution. And private prisons are run with the intent to make a profit, we can safely refer to them as capitalist corporations.

Some Keys:  
There are 2.3 million people incarcerated in America today.  
The nation’s population of women in state prisons grew 834% over the last 40 years, over twice the growth rate of men.  
There are people held in jails indefinitely, many can not afford to post bail and/or have not been convicted of a crime and await trial.
The loss inmates and their families experience is rarely validated by society. The social norm has been to strip the humanity away from people who are (or have) served time. When their humanity is taken away, general empathy goes away, too. I want society to examine the human experience within the tyrannical, corporate machine that is the prison system. Women incarcerated are especially ignored so let's focus on them for now. Try to imagine what prison life is like for a woman of color, they're objectified even before adding prison to the equation. Black and brown women are vulnerable to dehumanization as soon as we're brought into the world. For us, objectification is an unwanted, lifelong deal with society. Combine our womanhood and skin color with anything else that others us and imagine a life in prison.

Think about the loss. Try to understand how families grieve the absence of loved ones due to incarceration. It's affecting thousands of people throughout the country. I dealt with the absence of a loved one in prison when I was a little girl and let me tell you, I had no idea I was grieving back then. Didn't have the language to voice the way I felt either. Quietly, I let the uneasy feeling rot in my stomach. I could feel it in my body. I cringe when I think of other little black girls and boys experiencing the same thing, struggling to voice their feelings or too embarrassed (there is another social norm that creates humorous tropes out of the hardships of black children) to speak up. Black kids often deal with heavy issues alone but too quickly are their signs of mental health issues co-opted as traits of a ‘bad kid.’

I feel for the families separated due to prison sentences, especially when I think of the racism, classism, and overall unfairness of how it's run. So, I want us all to stay interested in the mass incarceration of women since historically women are a silenced population. Society's interest in incarceration got us talking to each other about the abuse and disparity within prisons and jails. Society's interest created a shift from the collective habit of dehumanizing people involved in the judicial system. Reading the statistics of women's prison culture is overwhelming but when I look at the people involved I start to feel grounded again. It's important we continue to talk about this so that we can provide support and advocacy to women in need.

Some Keys: 62% Of women in prisons are mothers  
Black women are twice as likely to be incarcerated than white women  
Health care in prison is designed for men and do not meet basic needs for women in prison
Step one in staying interested is hearing the stories from the mouths of women who lived them. I’m grateful I got the chance to speak with Tamanika, she was released from prison about a year ago and has already been reunited with her children. When Tamanika isn’t bonding with her kids, she is busy preparing herself for the workforce through the Hour Working Women Reentry Program. There she is mentored, developed, educated on the skills needed for her future professional career. She’s committed to excelling and dedicates herself to the program every weekday. Tamanika and I share the love of writing as a form of personal therapy, it’s one of her favorite hobbies these days. Aside from crocheting and getting lost in music, of course. Tamanika speaks about her personal journey from the captivity of addiction and incarceration to a life of mental clarity in the free world below.

SJ: Can you tell me a little bit about your life growing up?
T: I started out living with my grandmother. I got to a little older and asked to see my mother, like on the weekends and for summer and whatnot. And eventually I asked to go live with her, that’s when I found out she was a drug addict. She had a new baby and I didn’t understand the whole drug addict thing until I went to go live with her. I got to see little of what she was doing and it was really hard. I was like, raising my sister. So I had to deal with that

SJ: So you definitely had to group up fast, huh?
T: I had to learn a lot of things fast, I had to be an adult when I was a child. Go pick her up, make sure her homework is done, her hair is done, you know, cook something to eat. So I learned a lot pretty young. My mom died young, she was only 35. My mother died from aids in 1992, so that was difficult. She used to give me the “no, I have this, I have that” but I knew what it was, I watched her friends die before she died, and I knew what they died from. These were the same friends she would shoot up with so I knew what it was.

SJ: So after she died, did you go back to your grandmother?
T: Well, actually I went back to stay with my grandmother before she died. Me and my sister wound up staying with my grandmother for a little while, but then my grandmother got sick and couldn’t walk anymore. So me and my sister got separated- my sister went to my aunts and I went to my father’s house. So there I am dealing with my father as a teenager wanting to do teenager things and run the streets, and you know when my mom died I started drinking and smoking weed a lot. He didn’t really know how to deal with me But I did actually go to Job Corps. I don’t know, I didn’t listen, I just thought I knew everything, I thought I was grown, but I was really hurting from missing my mother.

SJ: Do you still keep in touch with your dad?
T: My father actually passed away when I was 23 years old, but I was able to get my life together a little before he passed away.
SJ: I’m glad he got to see that.
T: Yeah, he got to see that I actually got a job for the state! I got the job when my son was one month old. I started working in the office of mental health in the children’s psych hospital. My father said, “I want to make sure you keep this job so I know you’re alright before I die,” and I guess I didn’t really take him seriously about dying. I didn’t think he was actually gonna die. I was on probation (for work at the children’s psych hospital) for a year and I took a vacation once that year was up. I didn’t actually go anywhere, just took a break from work but while I was on vacation he passed away- that was his way of making sure I was okay. I wound up keeping the state job for 14 years.

SJ: Tell me a little bit about your life right before incarceration.
T: Before incarceration... my downfall started in 2011 when my brother was murdered. He was the oldest. When my brother was murdered I started getting high. At the time, I might have been working 12 years at the state job. Not too long after that, the office wound up closing, I got transferred and I lost the family I had been working with. I got transferred on top of my brother being murdered. And that was kind of like my downfall. The sad part was I thought, yeah, I’m getting high but I still have food on the table, still getting the kids to school. But I eventually wound up losing my apartment.

When I got to judge he said, ‘I want to read about your life, I want to know your story.’ He did just that and when I came back he actually lowered my sentence to 1 ½ to 4 ½ years, said he wanted to give me a chance to get my kids back.

SJ: You got into harder drugs to cope with the loss of your brother?
T: Yeah, doing heroin is like the no pain, drug, you don’t feel anything. I kinda say I was like a robot.

SJ: So when you were in prison serving time, was it difficult to keep in touch with your kids?
T: It was very difficult, I stayed on Rikers Island and ACS (Administration for Children's Services) was supposed to bring them every two weeks but a lot of times that didn’t happen. Other people’s kids would come running into the visiting area. Someone would be like, ‘Oh they didn’t tell you? They’re not coming today.’ So that was difficult. I wrote them a lot of letters, I always wrote them, but they would tell me ‘No one gave us money for stamps and envelopes to write you back.’ You know, no one encouraged them to write me back. Once I went upstate, they had to fly the kids up once a month and a lot of times they wouldn’t do that and it hurt.

SJ: Tell us about the night of your arrest.
T: The night I was arrested, they [the cops] came to my job and asked for me. They said, “We just want to talk to you,” and they took me down to the precinct. The kids were already in another room, I knew I was going to jail when they let me talk to my kids. I just told them: this is your older sister, listen to her, y’all stay close. What you tell your kids- you make sure you put deodorant on every day and wash your underwear out every night. I just didn’t want them to be a burden on anybody. You know, I taught them a lot and I just wanted them to remember everything. I told them how much I love them and said, “I don’t know when I’m going to see you again, but I will.” Then the officer came in the room and said your mother will be right back and that was the last time I saw them before serving.
SJ: What emotions and thoughts were going through your head, from the night of your arrest to arraignment?
T: I was thinking, my kids are going to be in foster care and have never been away from me, all they know is me. And my parents were gone, my sister lived in a whole other state. I was more scared for them than I was myself.

SJ: During your sentences and arraignment did they consider that you were a mother?
T: During arraignment, no, no one cares about that. I took a certain sentence, between 4-6 years, but when I got to judge he said, 'I want to read about your life, I want to know your story.' He did just that and when I came back he actually lowered my sentence to 1 ½ to 4 ½ years, said he wanted to give me a chance to get my kids back.

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Once I went upstate, they had to fly the kids up once a month and a lot of times they wouldn’t do that and it hurt. When I was upstate they had to be flown in. But by the time I got the judge to order that, its like I’m coming home now.

SJ: When you were serving your time were there any special programs for you within the prison?
T: I met with my counselor and they have a lot of programs I didn’t qualify for because I had a career before. I took a parenting class that allowed me to see all four of my kids at one time so that felt good, and a class called Sistas Healing Old Wounds, they call it SHOW. and that was the domestic violence issue so that was very encouraging.

SJ: What were some of the hardest parts about being in prison?
T: Your freedom is gone, you’re away from your children, having nobody there for you, not having support is really hard. The food is horrible, you don’t make that much money. I would say I was one of the lucky ones because my job was $0.25 an hour, so after my surcharge was paid I was making like $16 every two weeks. So I tried to stretch that out and made sure I bought everything I needed.

I didn’t get in trouble with the officers because I followed all rules and did what I had to do to get home, I didn’t get into no trouble. You have officers who are disrespectful and sometimes you just gotta take it when you’re trying to go home.

SJ: Did you have a supportive community among the women there?
T: Yeah, I had friends I was with every day. We worked together and would cook together. I made my $16, one friend made her $12 and the other made $12, we’d go food shopping together, we’d make our list together so we could make a special meal. Like, “You get the
chicken this time, you get the rice, you get this and that. We just did everything together- write our kids letters, watched movies together. I made the honor dorm so it made things a little bit easier.

SJ: Did you see a lot of that sisterhood among the women?
T: Yeah, everybody had their own little crew, their own little family. You gotta work it like that, some of them stay way longer, some of them only there for a little while, but we still tried to work together. You know, stay with your crew, mind your business, you don't get in no trouble.

SJ: So now that you're out, do you have any goals you're trying to fulfill?
T: Well, I've been home about a year now. My first goal when I came home wasn't easy, but I did everything that I had to do. I used to be in the agency before the worker even got to work. They'd be like, ‘How may I help you today?’ And I'd be like, 'I want my kids, what do you need me to do so that I can get them back?' I was there every day, I said, ‘You might as well give me a cubicle because I’m going to be here every day until I get my kids back.’ So I came home and did all the programs that parole wanted me to do. My son came home and then on June 27th, both of my daughters came home. So I did it and I did it in record time!

SJ: Congratulations, that’s amazing!
T: Yep! With the WPA (Women’s Prison Association) I did the Women’s Leadership & Media Project program and graduated from that. I got an award for community parent. Just been doing what I can, my goal is to get my family back together, to find a job and an apartment for us. I’m working on that now. Right now we’re in community living, so me and my kids share a room. It’s a beautiful house, has a big living room, big kitchen and dining room, big backyard. It’s alright for now until I get myself together and find an apartment.

SJ: What was the most exciting part about getting to reunite with your kids again?
T: It has not been easy, you know, we have our days. My children have mental health issues so it’s been a rollercoaster ride, but we’re doing it and I’m just so happy they’re back with me. The best part is when they tell me they’re proud of me like, ‘Mom you said you was gonna come home and bring us back and you did!’ That’s a reward in itself.

SJ: What are you most proud of yourself for?
T: I’m proud I got them back, I’m so proud of that. When I go to court, the lawyer from the agency who used to tear me up in the courtroom, said ‘You know I used to get you, but I have to tell you I’m proud of you, I saw you do what you said you were going to do.’ And it’s like oh he’s not tearing me up today and praising me and that felt real good. I’m proud that I haven’t touched drugs again. I’m so proud of that, that right there is wonderful. I’m able to handle things, don’t need to get high to get rid of bad feelings. I’m like. ‘Okay, if something happens today, go to sleep and wake up tomorrow and start again that’s all you can do.’ So I’m proud of that.

SJ: Pretty amazing, it’s not easy.
T: It’s not, but I’m doing it and it’s just like yes, I’m proud of myself for that. We got a ways to go but we gonna get there, it’s not the end of the world, we gonna get back everything we lost and have it even better.
SJ: If you could offer a woman recently sent to prison any advice or tips, what would you say?
T: Why you in there, you have to learn to love yourself. Because ain’t nobody going to love you like you can. And before you can love anybody else, you gotta learn to love yourself. And when you learn to love yourself, things gonna start falling into place. While you in there, just mind your business, and know what you working toward.

You can’t change the past, leave the past where it’s at. As women, we gotta stop worrying about these men and you gotta put all your love on you. If you start loving a man more than you love you, you’re gonna lose yourself.

SJ: So before we wrap up, any last thing you’d like to say to people?
T: If one person could listen, and I could be an inspiration to one person, it’s all that matters to me.