



## **WOMEN IN PRISONS IN A NUTSHELL**

### **Women are the fastest growing segment of America's prison population.**

- In 2009, there were 115,000 women incarcerated in state and federal prisons.
- Over the last 30 years, the female prison population has grown by over 800%. The male prison population grew 416% during the same time period.
- Women represent 23% of the probation population, and 12% of the parole population.
- Women make up 7.7% of the total state and federal prison population.

### **Most women in prison committed drug or property offenses.**

- Nearly two-thirds of incarcerated women are in prison for nonviolent offenses.
- 56% of women in prison committed drug or property crimes, many of which carry mandatory minimum sentences.
- Studies of prison drug abuse programs have found that women prisoners are more likely to have serious drug dependency problems than males.
- 40% of women leaving prison will return there within three years of their release.

### **The majority of women in prison are mothers.**

- Over 60% of women prisoners are parents to children under age 18.
- 55% of mothers in prison reported living with their minor children in the month before their arrest.
- Since 1991, the number of children with a mother in prison has more than doubled, up by 131%.
- More than half of mothers in prison were the primary financial supporters of their children prior to incarceration.
- 1.5 million children have a parent in prison.

### **There are stark racial disparities among women in prison.**

- 93 out of every 100,000 white women are incarcerated.
- The incarceration rate is four times higher for black women (380 of 100,000) and 1.6 times higher for Hispanic women (147 of 100,000).
- Whites only comprise 45.5% of female prisoners, even though whites are 79.8% of the United States population.
- By contrast, black women represent 32.6% of female prisoners, but only 12.8% of the general population.
- Black children are nearly 7.5 times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison.

### **Women in prison are more likely to have been unemployed or to have health problems.**

- Nearly two-thirds of incarcerated women did not have jobs at the time they went to prison.
- 73% of female state prisoners have mental health problems, compared with 55% of male prisoners.
- Women in prison are more likely to have HIV/AIDS than male prisoners.



**Female prisoners are more likely to experience abuse before and during incarceration.**

- A study of New Jersey prisons found that women in prison are six times more likely to be sexually abused by other inmates than incarcerated men, and twice as likely to be raped.
- Nearly 6 in 10 women in state prisons have experienced physical or sexual abuse in the past.

**Conclusion:** Putting women in prison for nonviolent drug and property crimes carries a heavy price for their children, partners, and society. In addition to the cost of incarcerating these women (on average, about \$30,000 per person, per year in prison), society pays the social costs of children losing mothers, spouses losing partners, and communities losing citizens. Mandatory minimum sentences do not permit judges to take into account a woman's criminal history, history of abuse, the nature of her offense, her family's needs, or her need for drug or mental health treatment. Giving judges more discretion to consider these factors and tailor sentences to fit individual women will result in better justice and get to the root of the problems that led to their criminal behavior.

**Learn more:** You can learn more about women in prison by visiting the Women's Prison Association at <http://www.wpaonline.org/>, and by reading reports and statistics about these issues at the Bureau of Justice Statistics' website, <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov>.