

Fact Sheet: Women, Prison, and the Drug War

February 2014



While men are more likely to be targeted by drug law enforcement, many of the drug war's victims are women. Largely as a result of draconian drug laws, women are one of the fast growing segments of the U.S. prison population. Most women behind bars are mothers, many of them sole caregivers. Women, and particularly women of color, are disproportionately affected by drug law enforcement, by social stigma, by laws that punish those unable or unwilling to inform on others, by regulations that bar people with a drug conviction from obtaining public assistance, and by a drug treatment system designed for men.

Drug use and drug selling occur at similar rates across racial and ethnic groups, yet black and Latina women are far more likely to be criminalized for drug law violations than white women.¹

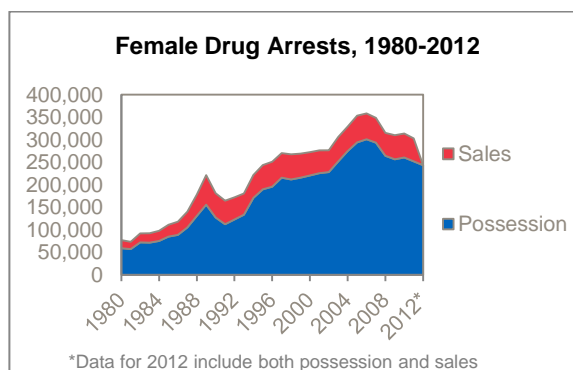
Black women are more than twice as likely – and Latinas are 1.25 times more likely – to be incarcerated than white women.²



Source: Carson and Golinelli, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013.³

Women are one of the fastest-growing segments of the prison population. Between 1977 and 2011, the number of women in state and federal prisons grew by

roughly 900 percent.⁴



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics.⁵

More than a quarter of women in state prison were incarcerated for drug offenses at the end of 2011, compared to 16 percent of men.⁶ At year-end 2012, more than 58 percent of women in federal prison were incarcerated for drug offenses, compared to 50 percent of men.⁷

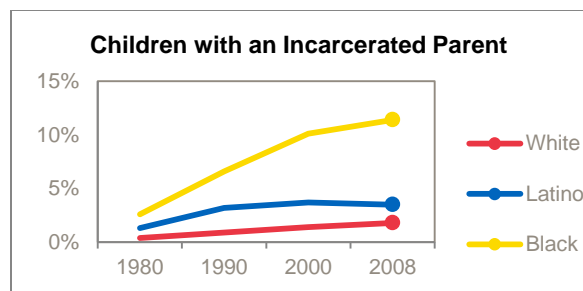
Even though black women are no more likely than white women to use illicit drugs during pregnancy, they are far more likely to be reported to child welfare services for drug use.⁸ In fact, a seminal study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that black women were 10 times more likely than white women to be reported to child welfare.⁹

More than half (54 percent) of incarcerated people are parents of minor children, including more than 120,000 mothers and 1.1 million fathers. An estimated 61 percent of women in state prison and 56 percent of women in federal prison are mothers of minor children.¹⁰ Two-thirds of these parents are incarcerated for non-violent offenses, most of which are drug law violations.¹¹

As many as 2.7 million children (one in every 28) are growing up in U.S. households in which one or more parents are incarcerated.¹² The racial disparities seen in the incarcerated population replicate themselves among the children left behind: by 2008, one in nine (11.4 percent of) black children, one in 28 (3.5 percent of) Latino children and one in 57 (1.8 percent of) white children had an incarcerated parent.¹³



Sources: Bureau of Justice Statistics.¹⁴



Source: Western and Pettit, Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010.¹⁵

An estimated 84 percent of parents in federal prison and 62 percent of parents in state prison are housed 100 miles or more from their children.¹⁶

Pregnant women who are incarcerated for drug law violations often do not receive prenatal care. Children are routinely separated from their imprisoned mothers, causing irreparable damage to the child.¹⁷

Prisons commonly use restraints (handcuffs and shackles) on women in labor and during delivery regardless of their histories. Only 13 state departments of corrections (California, Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, New Mexico, Nevada, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia) and Washington DC have banned this practice, which the American College of Obstetricians

and Gynecologists opposes because it puts "the health of the woman and fetus at risk."¹⁸

The lifelong penalties and exclusions that follow a drug conviction have created a permanent second-class status for millions of Americans, who are often banned from voting, getting a job, securing a student loan, and accessing housing or other forms of public assistance, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). A recent report found that more than 180,000 women have been affected in the twelve states that maintain a full lifetime ban for people drug convictions.¹⁹ Due to the extreme racial disparities in drug law enforcement and sentencing, these collateral consequences disproportionately affect people of color.²⁰

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Results from the 2012 National Survey on Drug Use and Health," (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013), Table 1.24B; Jamie Fellner, *Decades of Disparity: Drug Arrests and Race in the United States* (Human Rights Watch, 2009). National arrest data by ethnicity are not collected. State-level data, however, show that Latinos and Latinas are disproportionately arrested for drug offenses. See Bureau of Criminal Statistics California Department of Justice, "Crime in California 2012," (2013); Harry Levine, Loren Siegel, and Gabriel Sayegh, "One Million Police Hours: Making 440,000 Marijuana Possession Arrests in New York City, 2002-2012," (New York: Drug Policy Alliance, 2013).

² E. Ann Carson and Daniela Golinelli, "Prisoners in 2012: Trends in Admissions and Releases, 1991-2012," (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013). The incarceration rate of black women has declined in the past decade, while the incarceration rate for white and Latina women has increased. See Marc Mauer, Sentencing Project, and United States of America, *The Changing Racial Dynamics of Women's Incarceration* (Sentencing Project, 2013).

³ E. Ann Carson and Daniela Golinelli, "Prisoners in 2012: Trends in Admissions and Releases, 1991-2012," Table 18.

⁴ Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Female prisoners under State or Federal jurisdiction," Corrections Statistical Analysis Tool, www.bjs.gov.

⁵ Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Arrest Data Analysis Tool*, www.bjs.gov.

⁶ E. Ann Carson and Daniela Golinelli, "Prisoners in 2012: Trends in Admissions and Releases, 1991-2012."

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sarah C. M. Roberts and Amani Nuru-Jeter, "Universal Screening for Alcohol and Drug Use and Racial Disparities in Child Protective Services Reporting," *Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research* 39.1 (2012): 3-16.

⁹ Chasnoff IJ, et al., "The prevalence of illicit-drug or alcohol use during pregnancy and discrepancies in mandatory reporting in Pinellas County, Florida," *New England Journal of Medicine* 322, no. 17 (1990):1202-1206.

¹⁰ Lauren Glaze and Laura Maruschak, "Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children," (Washington: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010) 3; and The Sentencing Project, "Parents in State Prison," (2013).

¹¹ B. Western and B. Pettit, *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effect on Economic Mobility* (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010), 4.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Female prisoners under State or Federal jurisdiction," Generated using Corrections Statistical Analysis Tool at www.bjs.gov.

¹⁵ B. Western and B. Pettit, *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effect on Economic Mobility*.

¹⁶ The Sentencing Project, *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children: Trends 1991-2007* (2009).

¹⁷ Lynn M Paltrow and Jeanne Flavin, "Arrests of and Forced Interventions on Pregnant Women in the United States, 1973-2005: Implications for Women's Legal Status and Public Health," *Journal of health politics, policy and law* 38, no. 2 (2013).

¹⁸ American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, "Health Care for Pregnant and Postpartum Incarcerated Women and Adolescent Females," (2011); Institute on Women & Criminal Justice, "Laws Banning Shackling during Childbirth Gaining Momentum Nationwide," (Women's Prison Association, 2011).

¹⁹ The Sentencing Project, "A Lifetime of Punishment: The Impact of the Federal Drug Ban on Welfare Benefits," (2013).

²⁰ Ibid.; Meda Chesney-Lind and Marc Mauer, *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment* (The New Press, 2011).