The majority are charged with lower-level offenses—mostly property and drug-related—and tend to have less extensive criminal histories than their male counterparts. Unlike incarcerated men, women in jails are often primary caregivers to their young children—nearly 80 percent of women in jails are mothers, and most are single parents.

Once incarcerated, women must grapple with systems, practices, and policies that are designed for the majority of the incarcerated population: men. With limited resources, jails are often ill-equipped to address the challenges women face when they enter the justice system. As a result, many women leave jail with diminished prospects for physical and behavioral health recovery, with greater parental stress and strain, and in even more financially precarious circumstances than before becoming caught up in the justice system.

As interest in rolling back the misuse and overuse of jail increases, women frequently remain an afterthought in discussions about reform; yet the roots and trajectory of their increasing rate of jail incarceration demand further study. This report documents the existing foundation for reform that can potentially set the stage for further, well-crafted programs and practices to stem the flow of women cycling through the nation’s local jails.

The growing number of women in U.S. jails

1970 = 1,000 women in jail

2014

Nearly 80 percent of women in jails are mothers.

Available research to help explain why women are increasingly incarcerated in U.S. jails is scarce, dated, and limited in scope. Nevertheless, general data about women in the criminal justice system provides clues about who these women are, and why they end up in jail. Like men in jail, they are disproportionately people of color, overwhelmingly poor and low-income, survivors of violence and trauma, and have high rates of physical and mental illness and substance use.

The majorit
Why are women in jails?

The vast majority (82 percent) of women are in jail for nonviolent offenses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property offenses</th>
<th>Drug offenses</th>
<th>Public order offenses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prevalence of victimization

- Experienced sexual violence: 86%
- Experienced partner violence: 77%
- Experienced caregiver violence: 60%

Racial and ethnic disparities

Nearly two-thirds of women in jail are women of color—44 percent are black, 15 percent are Hispanic, and 5 percent are of other racial/ethnic backgrounds—compared to 36 percent of women who identified as white.

Women of color
White women

Prevalence of health issues among women in jail

- Medical problems: 53%
- Serious mental illness: 32%
- Drug or alcohol abuse/dependence: 82%

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