

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/overlooked-women-and-jails-report>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Since 1970, there has been a nearly five-fold increase in the number of people in U.S. jails—the approximately 3,000 county or municipality-run detention facilities that primarily hold people arrested but not yet convicted of a crime. Despite recent scrutiny from policymakers and the public, one aspect of this growth has received little attention: the shocking rise in the number of women in jail.

Women in jail are the fastest growing correctional population in the country—increasing 14-fold between 1970 and 2014. Yet there is surprisingly little research on why so many more women wind up in jail today. This report examines what research does exist on women in jail in order to begin to reframe the conversation to include them. It offers a portrait of women in jail, explores how jail can deepen the societal disadvantages they face, and provides insight into what drives women's incarceration and ways to reverse the trend.

A foundation for reform exists and 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. First, however, justice systems—both small and large—and community stakeholders must commit to bringing women into the discussion.

Small counties are driving the growth of the number of women in jail—with numbers increasing 31-fold between 1970 and 2014.

Women often become involved with the justice system as a result of efforts to cope with life challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and significant physical or behavioral health struggles. Most are jailed for low-level, nonviolent offenses.

Once incarcerated, women must grapple with systems designed primarily for men. As a result, many leave jail with diminished prospects for physical and behavioral health recovery, as well as greater parental stress and financial instability.

VIDEO

NEWS

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.