

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/womens-voices/womens-incarceration-rates-are-skyrocketing>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

As incarceration rates for men drop in some states, efforts to decarcerate jails and prisons have largely left women behind and its women who are leading the charge to right these wrongs.

On a Monday afternoon in April, people gathered in front of the New York Stock Exchange and virtually on Zoom to rally for the release of the hundreds of women jailed on Rikers Island, where [already abusive, decrepit, and unsanitary conditions](#) have been made even more dire by the COVID-19 pandemic. Ladies First, Close Rosie, read a sign held by one woman. Rosie is the nickname for the womens jail on Rikers.

The number of women incarcerated in the United States has skyrocketed in the last four decades, increasing [700 percent in 40 years](#). In 2019, there were [more than 231,000 women and girls](#) held in prisons and jails across the country. Its hard to believe that 50 years ago, almost [75 percent of counties held not a single woman in jail](#).

Women have become the fastest-growing segment of the incarcerated population. Although mens jail populations actually fell 9 percent from 2008 to 2018, [womens jail populations grew 15 percent](#). Women's incarceration rates [are also climbing at double the rate](#) of mens in state prisons across the country. Its clear that decarceration efforts are leaving women behind.

Research to explain this phenomenon is [limited](#), but what we do know is that jails and prisons which have historically been designed exclusively for men fail women in distinct ways. Women are more likely to enter incarceration with a history of abuse, trauma, and mental health conditions [86 percent of women in jail](#) have experienced sexual violence and [77 percent](#) have experienced intimate partner violence but jails and prisons do little to address their needs. Incarcerated women also have [high rates of chronic health issues](#), including physical and mental health conditions as well as substance use. And although [research](#) is lacking, we also know that prisons and jails, which presume a binary system of gender, largely [overlook the needs of transgender and gender nonconforming \(TGNC\) people](#) who are incarcerated. [LGBTQ women](#) are overrepresented at every stage of the criminal legal system, and [21 percent of transgender women](#) have been incarcerated during their lifetime (this number [only increases](#) for Black and brown transgender women).

Although women are more likely to experience [serious psychological distress](#) while incarcerated, they are less likely to have access to treatment, programs, and other services. Health systems in jails and prisons also designed for cisgender men [frequently fail to meet basic needs](#) of women and transgender people. Services like reproductive health care and prenatal care are woefully inadequate, and facilities [rarely provide appropriate gender-affirming care to incarcerated transgender people](#). Jails are often dependent on county-level funding, so resources are even more limited. This lack of care has also been exacerbated by [pandemic-related restrictions](#), leading to increased [isolation](#), heightened fear, and even more dangerous conditions in overcrowded facilities. Even basic necessities like menstrual hygiene products, [already in short supply before COVID-19, are harder to find now](#).

Not only are more women being incarcerated, but many women also leave incarceration with fewer resources and greater stress and financial strain [80 percent of women in jail are mothers](#), and most of them are single parents. With [fewer support services available to them](#), women who have been released face greater challenges finding work and housing.

Over the next week, we will highlight the stories of advocates who are working to change this. Lashonia Thompson-El, Kelly Savage-Rodriguez, Tiheba Bain, and Kimberly Haven are all formerly incarcerated women who are working tirelessly to support people including women and girls who have been impacted by the criminal legal system. Thompson-El, Savage-Rodriguez, Bain, and Haven shed light on the compounding harms of incarceration, advocate for policy changes to create justice for all, and empower others to do the same.

[Read more from our Womens Voices series.](#)

This blog series was made possible by generous support from the J.C. Flowers Foundation's Circles of Support. The J.C. Flowers Foundation's Circles of Support initiative supports people returning home. Its Raising My Voice program offers training in leadership through personal storytelling and is designed for people who have experienced firsthand the impacts of incarceration and reentry and want to share their story.

NEWS

NEWS

NEWS

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.

