

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/gender-and-justice-in-america/more-incarcerated-women-deserve-clemency>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Former President Obama commuted the sentences of more people in one year than any other president in our nations history.

The total number of clemencies including pardons and sentence commutations granted? 1,715. The number of women granted clemency? 106. Even in spite of the up-trend of womens incarceration rates over the past decade a [404 percent increase versus 209 percent for men](#) this sharp disparity in sentence commutations and pardons reveal that women continue to be overlooked in conversations about mass incarceration.

Nearly 50 years ago, it was a rarity to have so many women incarcerated 73 percent of U.S. counties had no women in their jails, according to [Overlooked: Women and Jails in an Era of Reform](#), a recent Vera report that is part of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur's Safety and Justice Challenge, an initiative to change the way America thinks about and uses jails. The number of women in prison has also increased dramatically, and today women comprise a larger proportion of the prison population than ever before nearly [eight times higher](#) than the population count in 1980. Although the United States only comprises 5 percent of the worlds female population, it holds 30 percent of the worlds incarcerated women. The fact that women make up a rising percentage of those incarcerated but only a small fraction of recent commutations and pardons is cause for public concern.

The consequences that face the children and loved ones left behind are also often left out of conversations regarding mass incarceration. Clemency recipient and founder of [CAN-DO Clemency](#), Amy Povah, highlighted the hardships that face incarcerated women when she told the [New York Times](#) she will never forget the screams of children when it was time to say goodbye at the end of prison visitations. Although she believes that all people serving lengthy sentences deserve a second chance through clemency, she advocated that mothers, who are more likely to have been primary or sole caregivers of children prior to their incarceration, should be prioritized in clemency hearings.

[The National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls](#) is also bringing womens clemency to the forefront by centering the voices of those closest to the problem: formerly incarcerated women. The councils [Real Women, Real Voices](#) symposium features women from [CAN-DO Clemencys Top 25 list](#), as well as other currently and formerly incarcerated women speakers and family members.

The efforts of the Obama Administration to release people from prison and send them home are important steps towards ending mass incarceration. Although these efforts have not gone unnoticed, it is imperative that we bring women to the forefront. Prioritizing clemency for women means granting second chances to those who will otherwise never be released from prison. The time for action is now, because in the words of Van Jones, co-founder of [#Cut50](#), nothing is more urgent than freedom.

Through the [Gender & Justice in America](#) blog series, Vera will explore issues facing justice-involved women and girls in the fields of adult corrections, youth justice, immigration, victimization, substance use, and mental health.

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