

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/gender-and-justice-in-america/a-new-blog-series>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

No country incarcerates more women than the United States. Although American women comprise just five percent of the total global female population, we represent nearly a third of the [world's female prisoners](#) at a rate that outstrips even America's unprecedented incarceration of men.

Shocking as that may be, our drive to incarcerate doesn't begin or end with adult jails and prisons. The rates of [girls](#) in youth detention facilities shoot up even as male populations shrink. Yet the [crime](#) that is [driving](#) much of this unprecedented rate of incarceration is mostly low level or drug related. Meanwhile, driven by other factors such as border apprehensions and workplace raids, increasing numbers of [girls](#) and [women](#) with children enter the civil immigration detention system. Across our multiple justice systems, the number of women and girls continue to rise.

The sheer size and scope of the male justice population, however, there is one woman under the control of the justice system for every [six men](#) has shaped policies and procedures that often overlook the unique challenges [women](#) and [girls](#) present to these justice systems. For example, justice-involved women and girls report histories of victimization and abuse, and substance use and mental health issues at much higher rates than their male counterparts. Not only do justice systems struggle to address these complex needs, [incarceration](#) may also exacerbate symptoms of trauma.

Once incarcerated, girls and women become increasingly vulnerable to sexual violence and substandard reproductive care. Women, girls, and transgender people are at great risk of sexual assault in institutional settings. Among adult correctional populations, women in jails report the highest rates of [sexual assault](#), followed by women in state and federal facilities. Transgender people, too, are at high risk of sexual assault, especially when they are placed in facilities that do not match their [gender identity](#). Those who enter detention pregnant may receive inadequate [prenatal care](#) and face separation from their newborns within a few days of giving birth, while institutional policies may limit access to [sanitary products](#).

The incarceration or detention of women and girls also has unique rippling effects on the lives of others. [Women](#) and [girls](#) more often report living with their minor children immediately prior to arrest. Once incarcerated in [immigration](#), [juvenile](#), or [criminal](#) systems, mothers are much more likely than fathers to see their parental rights terminated and their children enter the [foster care system](#).

For all these reasons and more, we can no longer afford to overlook this fast growing sector of our justice populations.

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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