

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/i-cant-imagine-babies-being-kept-from-their-mom>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Editors note: Edited and abridged for clarity

Last month, the WNBA All-Star and Phoenix Mercury forward DeWanna Bonner accompanied Vera project director Margaret diZerega and digital strategy director Kindred Motes on a tour of the Estrella Jails women's-only facility in Phoenix. As part of a partnership with [NBA Voices](#), Vera has organized several tours for players interested in learning more about the U.S. criminal justice system and how they can be advocates for change. A [growing number](#) of professional [sports teams](#) and [players](#) are using their platforms to do so.

[Women in jail](#) are the fastest-growing population behind bars in the country, and 80 percent of women in jail are mothers. At Estrella, the tour group spoke with more than 20 women who are incarcerated to learn from their experiences and insights. In an interview afterward, Margaret and Kindred spoke with DeWanna about the visit and her thoughts about the road to reform.

Margaret: So, DeWanna, what did you think about the experience of visiting a women's jail?

DeWanna: Very humbling, I must say. There were a lot of women living together in one area.

Margaret: We were looking at some of the statistics, and in Maricopa County, Arizona, where we are, roughly 35,000 people are locked up on any given day. How does that influence why you wanted to come today?

DeWanna: For a long time now, I've wanted to visit a jail or a prison. You see a lot of stories on TV or in the news. When I first got to Phoenix, that was the first thing they said. Don't ever get in trouble for doing this or that, because the system here is terrible. It's really hard. It's one of the toughest in the country. So I've been aware for a while now. I felt like I have to see what's happening to these moms who are locked up. I want to know; I want to see it.

Margaret: Were there any conversations that stood out for you?

DeWanna: Definitely the conversations with moms. Being a mother with twins, I can't imagine being away from my babies. It's tough being away from them even when I have to go play basketball. But being in jail? You can't talk to them, you can't FaceTime them. It's really hard. I practically call my twins every five minutes when they aren't with me. So just knowing that you can't have in-person visitations and hearing from the mothers about that experience really stood out to me. I really can't imagine babies being kept from their mom.

Margaret: It seems like many more players are getting involved in social justice issues like criminal justice reform. Have you noticed that?

DeWanna: Yes. It felt like nearly everyone in the industry spoke up about [Cyntoia Brown](#) and her clemency. I think a lot of athletes are paying more attention to the justice system than they did before.

Kindred: What would you take from today to tell people who've never been inside a jail? What is something they don't understand?

DeWanna: When I walked in, I was nervous, like, Oh my God, what did I get myself into? You just never know when you walk into a room of 100 strangers. But then you sit down, have a conversation, and you realize it's just like day-to-day living, except these people aren't free. They might have just made a mistake and need a little bit of help to get out of it.

Kindred: The women were curious to hear about your day-to-day life, about things like how you're able to do your job and be a mom at the same time.

DeWanna: I felt like they were trying to get to know me a little better, so that was their way. And once they opened up, it was just questions, questions, questions! I was really mindful of trying not to say things like, Oh, I get to go home and do this cool thing later on today, because, unfortunately, they don't get to go home to their kids tonight.

Kindred: Is there anything you want to learn more about?

DeWanna: I want to go to a different facility to learn more and compare the conditions at each. I also want to visit a prison and see the

differences between prisons and jails.

Kindred: Something that particularly stood out was one woman talking about a class shes taking in jail. Her teacher asked, How many of you are a felon? Hands went up. And then she said, No, you are women whove had a felony charge.

DeWanna: And it stuck with that woman, that stuck with her and she still remembers it verbatim, which is pretty awesome. Were all just people, you know? Just people.

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