

Women Prisoners Facts and Figures at a Glance

- ☞ Women represent the fastest growing segment of prison and jail populations. Eighty-five percent of incarcerated women serve time for nonviolent crimes. In 1970, there were 5,600 women incarcerated in federal and state prisons. At year-end 2000, 91,612 women were in state or federal prisons -- 6.6% of the total prison population. *John Irwin, Ph. D., Vincent Schiraldi, and Jason Ziedenberg, America's One Million Nonviolent Prisoners (Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, March 1999) and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prisoners in 2000 (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, August 2001).*
- ☞ The prison industrial complex disproportionately impacts women of color. African American women (with an incarceration rate of 205 per 100,000) are more than three times as likely as Latino women (60 per 100,000) and six times more likely than white women (34 per 100,000) to face imprisonment. *Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prisoners in 2000 (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, August 2001).*
- ☞ The Drug War targets women and, in part, explains the huge increase in women's imprisonment. From 1985 to 1996, female drug arrests increased by 95% while male drug arrests increased by 55%. During this same period, the number of women sentenced to state prison for drug-related crimes increased ten fold (from 2,370 to 23,700). *Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reports 1985 (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1986) and Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997 Uniform Crime Report (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1998).*
- ☞ Women prisoners are often survivors of abuse and, once incarcerated, routinely experience sexual harassment. Forty-four percent of women under correctional authority, including 57% of the women in state prisons, report that they were physically or sexually abused at some point in their lives. Sixty-nine percent of women report that this abuse occurred before age 18. Many women in prisons and jails in the United States are victims of sexual abuse by staff, including male guards touching prisoner's breasts and genitals when conducting searches, watching prisoners while they are naked, and rape. *Bureau of Justice Statistics, Women Offenders (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, December 1999) and Amnesty International, "Not Part of My Sentence: Violations of the Human Rights of Women in Custody" (Washington, DC: Amnesty International, March 1999) and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Incarcerated Parents and Their Children (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, August 2000).*
- ☞ The majority of women prisoners are mothers. An estimated 80,000 incarcerated mothers are parents to approximately 200,000 children under 18. African American children (7.0%) were nearly nine times more likely to have an incarcerated parent in prison than white children (0.8%). Similarly, Latino children (2.6%) were three times as likely as white children to have a parent in prison. *Amnesty International, "Not Part of My Sentence: Violations of the Human Rights of Women in Custody" (Washington, DC: Amnesty International, March 1999) and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Incarcerated Parents and Their Children (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, August 2000).*
- ☞ Evidence strongly suggests that the majority of women who kill their abusers do so as a last resort in defense of their own lives and/or the lives of their children. These women often receive longer prison sentences than men who commit similar crimes against an intimate partner. *National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women.*
- ☞ Adequate provision of medical care is one of the most pressing problems facing women prisoners. Women in custody have an increased incidence of chronic health problems and unique medical concerns not properly addressed by a system designed primarily for men. Barriers to care include the use of non-medical personnel to provide healthcare, a co-payment system that requires prisoners to pay for medical services, frequent delays in medication refills, diagnostic testing and follow-up treatment, failure to provide preventative care and a shortage of qualified medical professionals. *Amnesty International, "Not Part of My Sentence: Violations of the Human Rights of Women in Custody" (Washington, DC: Amnesty International, March 1999).*