Overview

The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide an overview of adult and juvenile females in the correctional population. Overall population trends across correctional settings, including basic race breakdowns and offense patterns, will be presented. We will also highlight some of the specific physical and mental health needs of this population while incarcerated, providing an overview of collateral consequences they face upon reentry, and briefly discuss gender responsive and trauma informed services needed to address these concerns. National data collections pertaining to incarcerated women and girls vary in terms of availability and recency of collection and publication, hindering certain levels of detail. This fact sheet presents the most current information available for each data type cited.

National Data Trends

Females are the fastest growing demographic across all incarceration settings, which include state and federal prison, as well as county jails, and state juvenile institutions and county detention facilities. Data collected by The Sentencing Project reveals that between 1980 and 2019, the number of incarcerated women in jails and prisons increased by more than 700%, rising from a total of 26,378 in 1980 to 222,455 in 2019. The rate of growth for female incarceration has been twice as high as that of men since 1980. During the period 2018-2019, a total of 1.2 million women were under criminal justice system supervision (The Sentencing Project, 2020).

State and federal prisons

The Bureau of Justice Statistics has recently published statistics from the National Prisoner Statistics (NPS) program in the U.S., which includes data on female inmates residing in state departments of corrections (DOCs) and the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Their most recent statistics are a year-end 2019 count showing a total of 107,955 adult females under state or federal prison custody across the U.S., comprising 8% of all prisoners. The imprisonment rate for adult females was 77 per 100,000 female U.S. residents age 18 or older. The imprisonment rate of males in 2019 (789 prisoners per 100,000 male U.S. residents) was 13 times the imprisonment rate of females (61 per 100,000 female U.S. residents) (Carson, 2020).

While racial disproportionality is not as high as among male inmates, the imprisonment rate of black females (83 per 100,000 black female U.S. residents) was 1.7 times the rate of white females (48 per 100,000 white female U.S. residents) in 2019, while the imprisonment rate of Hispanic females (63 per 100,000 Hispanic female U.S. residents) was 1.3 times the rate of white females. Between 2000 and 2017, however, the rate of imprisonment in state federal prisons declined by 55% for black women, while rising 44% for white women (Carson, 2020).

Among federal prisoners, 59% of all females were serving time for drug offenses, compared to 45% of all males (Carson, E. A., 2020). Offense type breakdowns for state prisoners are available for year-end 2018 and also indicate a larger percentage of females serving sentences for drug offenses (26%) than males (13%) (Carson, E. A., 2020). However, while a smaller percentage of sentenced females (38%) were serving time in state prison for a violent offense than sentenced...
males (58%), the opposite was true in federal prison (8% for females vs. 4% for males) (Carson, E. A., 2020).

**Jails**

In contrast to the overall incarcerated population, where the state prison systems hold twice as many people as are held in jail, more incarcerated women are held in jails than in state prisons (Kajstura, 2019). One possible explanation is that incarcerated women, who have lower incomes than incarcerated men, have an even harder time affording money bail (Kajstura, 2019).

At midyear 2018, males accounted for 84% of jail inmates and females accounted for 16% (Zeng, 2020). The female jail inmate population, however, grew by 15,400 inmates or 15% from 2008 to 2018, while the male inmate population decreased by 62,500 inmates or 9% (Zeng, 2020). Given the prevalence of jail use for pretrial detention combined with it being a more frequent setting for incarcerated women explains the fact that a quarter of all women who are behind bars have not been convicted of a crime and are awaiting trial.

While primarily used for adults, some juveniles are held in jails for various reasons, including the absence of juvenile detention facilities, although the number of juvenile jail inmates fell 56% during the 2008-2018 period, from 7,700 to 3,400 (Zeng, 2020).

**Girls**

In 2017, there were 7,293 girls incarcerated in the U.S., comprising 15% of all youth in residential placement (Bronson and Carson, 2019). As with women, minority girls were overrepresented in the United States correctional system. While white girls were incarcerated at a rate of 32 per 100,000, Black girls had a rate 3.5 times higher (at 110 per 100,000) and Hispanic girls a rate 1.4 times higher than white girls. Though girls only made up 15% of the incarcerated youth population, they comprised 38% of all youth incarcerated for status offenses such as truancy and curfew violations. Among those youth sentenced for running away from home (another status offense), more than half were girls (Sickmund, et al., 2016).

**Behavioral Health Needs of Women and Girls in the Justice System**

**Women**

Very little data on the behavioral health needs of women and girls has been collected during the past decade. The most recent statistics, however, indicated that 73% of incarcerated women exhibit behavioral health problems (Lynch et al., 2017). In prisons, 66% of females had a history of mental health diagnosis compared to 35% of males (Bronsky and Berzofsky, 2017). Similarly, in jails, 68% of females had a history of mental health diagnosis compared to 41% of males (Bronsky and Berzofsky, 2017). Looking more broadly across the criminal justice system, one in three of all justice-involved women have been shown to meet criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and 50% report PTSD over their lifetime (Lynch et al., 2017). In state prisons, 69% of females met criteria for drug dependence or abuse, using DSM-IV criteria (Bronson et al., 2017). Other current research shows that more than half of incarcerated women have a history of childhood sexual abuse, and between one-half and three-quarters experienced a sexual assault in their lifetime (Karlsson and Zielinski, 2018).

**Girls**

Studies show that girls in custody are four to five times more likely to be diagnosed with major depression than the general population (Anderson, 2014). Looking more broadly, there is evidence that prior to becoming involved in the juvenile justice system, girls experience higher rates of trauma and sexual abuse than systems-involved boys (Saada et al., 2015). Incarcerated girls have significant rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well. One study documented over 70% of incarcerated girls reporting being exposed to trauma, with 65% showing PTSD symptoms during their life (Dierkhising et al., 2013). A differential rate of and response to trauma exposure by gender has been identified as an explanation for the disproportionate entry of girls into the juvenile justice system. In this theory, behaviors that are coping mechanisms for trauma experienced by girls, such as alcohol and drug use, and status offenses such as running away from home or shoplifting, are criminalized, leading to their system involvement (Saada et al., 2015).
Link between prior victimization and offending among women and girls

High victimization rates among incarcerated women and girls have been reported in a number of studies (Belknap and Holsinger, 2006; DeHart, 2009; Green et al., 2005), and several others identified an association between victimization and offending (Grelle et al., 2005; Widom, 2000). One recent multi-site study examined how onset of different types of criminal activity and delinquency vary as a function of mental health status and trauma exposure. Notably, 43% of participants met criteria for a lifetime severe mental illness (SMI), and 32% met SMI criteria in the past 12 months (Lynch, et al., 2017).

Women with SMI reported greater rates of victimization and more extensive offending histories than women who did not meet criteria for lifetime SMI (Lynch, et al., 2017). Most importantly, however, was the finding that although more extensive victimization was directly associated with greater mental health problems, victimization experiences did not directly predict offending (Lynch, et al., 2017). Instead, women's mental health mediated the relationship between victimization and offending such that women with more victimization had poorer mental health, and poorer mental health predicted offending histories (Lynch, et al., 2017). Specifically, SMI significantly increased women's risk for onset of substance use, drug dealing/charges, property crime, fighting/assault, and running away. Experiences of victimization predicted risk of offending (Lynch, et al., 2017).

These findings also suggest that implementing interventions for at-risk girls and incarcerated women that address trauma-related distress and mental health problems may decrease entry or re-entry into the system.

Collateral Consequences

The term “collateral consequences” often is used to describe the impact of incarceration, as well as the corresponding conviction and criminal history records, on individuals after release (beyond the incarceration event itself). Importantly, it also includes the impact on family members and others both during and after incarceration. In the following discussion, we consider some of the collateral consequences that women's incarceration has on others.

Family

Approximately 1 in every 28 American children has a parent behind bars (Jackson, 2017). While existing prison pregnancy and parenthood data are scarce and outdated, the most recent have indicated that approximately two-thirds of incarcerated women are mothers and the primary caregivers to young children, and up to 84% have been pregnant in the past (Glaze and Maruschak, 2011). Four in ten of these mothers are the primary parent, with half of these women being the primary financial provider (Kajstura, 2019). Though research on the impact of parental incarceration on children is still growing, it is apparent that this group is negatively impacted. Children rarely have the opportunity to visit mothers in prison due to issues such as distance, transportation, and funds (Dierkhising et al., 2013). When children are able to visit their mothers, they are at risk of experiencing trauma or "secondary prisonation" by experiencing restrictive protocols and surveillance in effect at correctional facilities (CSR, Incorporated, 2008). Incarceration can also lead to the loss of child custody. An analysis from 2006 to 2016 showed that approximately 5,000 children have been permanently removed from their parents due to incarceration alone. Several thousand children in this time period were placed into foster care due to parental incarceration (Hanger and Kassie, 2018). A recent study also found that children of incarcerated mothers were more likely to experience insufficient sleep on a regular basis. Moreover, the diets of these children were characterized by less healthy foods, relative to children whose mothers had not experienced incarceration (Jackson and Vaughn, 2017).

Housing and Employment

Formerly incarcerated women are more likely to be homeless than their male counterparts, and women of color experience higher rates of homelessness than Whites, with Black women having the highest rates (Couloute, 2018). Within the broad category of homelessness, there are two distinct populations: people who are in a homeless shelter and those who are without a fixed residence. A recent study revealed differences by gender. Overall, formerly incarcerated women are more likely to be homeless than formerly incarcerated men. But among homeless formerly incarcerated people, men are less likely to be sheltered than women, whether for reasons of availability or personal choice. The data also suggests that women of color
experience unsheltered homelessness at higher rates than white women (Montgomery et al., 2016).

Recent studies showed that approximately one in four formerly incarcerated people are unemployed, and that past incarceration for women creates a larger risk for unemployment than men (Bandele, 2017). It has also been determined that women of color experience the highest rates of unemployment post-release (Shannon et al., 2017). Women's prisons often do not meet the need or demand for vocational and educational program opportunities (The Sentencing Project, 2020). Also, criminal records have shown to be a significant barrier when looking for employment after incarceration. This can be particularly problematic for women who seek to work within industries performing background checks, such as retail or in-home caregiving (LaVigne et al., 2009), thereby putting this group and their family at risk of homelessness and poverty.

**Gender Responsive and Trauma-Informed Services**

Advocates for incarcerated women have issued recommendations for gender-responsive services (Sawyer, 2018). Being “gender-responsive” refers to practitioners being knowledgeable and trained on the differential mental health needs, victimization experiences, and other trauma needs of male vs. female clients. The Prison Policy Initiative, for example, recommends that correctional agency programming and staff training should be trauma-informed, doing no harm at a minimum, and recognizing that most of the women in their care are victims as well as offenders. They also suggest that, considering the large number of women whose experiences with trauma, substance abuse disorders, and mental health problems have led to their incarceration, community-based alternatives that treat these underlying issues are likely more appropriate for many women than prisons, where these problems are exacerbated (Sawyer, 2018).

Research on gender responsive practices in the juvenile justice system, including corrections, identified several core areas in which such practices are being implemented across the U.S. In one study, state and county-level juvenile justice providers indicated that corrections officials and other juvenile justice professionals should place an emphasis on assessments that are individualized, screening for trauma, connecting assessments to treatment and aftercare planning, and utilizing validated risk assessment tools. In treatment approaches, respondents recommended skills-based and strengths-based approaches, and treatments that were trauma-informed, developing policies that emphasized helping girls in the juvenile justice system build and maintain healthy, supportive relationships. Finally, providers reported emphasizing planning for girls re-entry into the community throughout the time girls are in residential facilities. This could be through approaches in which girls work with the same social worker during and after staying in a residential facility or working with girls to identify and access supportive resources and individuals within their communities (Walker et al., 2012).

**Conclusion**

Females are the fastest growing demographic across all incarceration settings, with the imprisonment rate disproportionately impacting Black and Hispanic women and girls. Compared to their male counterparts, adult females are more often incarcerated for drug offenses, while juvenile females are more often incarcerated for status offenses. High victimization rates among incarcerated women and girls have been reported in a number of studies, and some have found correlations to mental health issues, which are, in turn associated with increased offending. Females also experience different collateral impact upon their release than males based on their commonplace status as primary caretakers for children, as well as their greater risks of homelessness and unemployment. For this reason, advocates for incarcerated women have recommended specific gender-responsive services such as trauma-informed treatments and policies that help girls in the juvenile justice system build and maintain healthy, supportive relationships.

As indicated, there is a significant need for additional research and more current data collection pertaining to women and girls in correctional settings. These efforts will inform a better understanding of how the personal histories, offending patterns, and trauma differ in important ways between incarcerated males and females, and the implications of those differences for gender-specific responses.
References


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