

Resolution on the Rise of Female Incarceration in the U.S.

An official statement from the Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice (formerly the American Orthopsychiatric Association)

As a global behavioral health organization committed to upholding principles of human rights and social justice through policy, advocacy, community action, and systemic change, we are concerned with the rising rate of incarcerated women in the United States.

We know that:

- In the last three decades, the U.S. has seen a 750% increase in the number of women who are incarcerated, growing from approximately 26,000 in 1980 to 219,000 in 2018 (twice the rate of growth of incarcerated men).
- Almost two-thirds of women who are incarcerated are women of color.
- Most women who are incarcerated are living in poverty.
- The majority of women who are incarcerated are survivors of violence: sexual (86%), intimate partner (77%), or caregiver (60%).
- Many women who are incarcerated suffer from behavioral health issues such as substance abuse (82%) and serious mental illness (32%).
- About 50% of women were abusing alcohol or drugs at the time of their crime.
- More than half (56%) of females who are incarcerated are imprisoned or awaiting trial for low-level offenses, such as drug or property crimes.



In light of the rapid growth in female incarceration and the demographics of the female jail and prison populations, several key behavioral health and social justice themes emerge. We understand that:

- (1) Women often commit crimes of survival and/or become associated with criminal activity through their partners, and alternatives to incarceration such as community-based services, supportive housing, and drug or mental health courts can help divert more women from incarceration.
- (2) Policies should be put in place to avoid revictimizing prisoners, many of whom have already experienced trauma and violence.
- (3) Without adequate health services and behavioral health treatment, women's behavioral health rarely improves (and often, in fact, declines) during imprisonment, and upon release, untreated issues increase the likelihood of recidivism.
- (4) Many incarcerated women are awaiting trial but are unable to afford the cash bail that would release them in the interim.

In keeping with our values, the Global Alliance strongly advocates for prevention (such as community-based programs for trauma-informed care and counseling, education, and work skills training for women) and diversion (such as mental health and substance use treatment); gender-specific care designed to reduce revictimization; the implementation of empirically-grounded programs that focus on rehabilitation; comprehensive physical and behavioral health care within correctional facilities; and changes to the bail system in order to address the rising rate of female incarceration in the U.S.

Additional Resources

Global Alliance for Behavioral Health & Social Justice. <https://www.bhjustice.org/mass-incarceration>

Vera Institute of Justice. <https://www.vera.org/publications/overlooked-women-and-jails-report>

Prison Policy Initiative. www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2018women.html

The Urban Institute. <https://apps.urban.org/features/long-prison-terms/intro.html>

The Sentencing Project. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>

National Resource Center on Justice-Involved Women. <https://cjincludedwomen.org/>

Cowan, B. A. Incarcerated women: Poverty, trauma and unmet need.
<https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/indicator/2019/04/incarcerated-women>

Related Article from *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*

Flemin, C. M., & Nurius, P. S. (2019). Incarceration and adversity histories: Modeling life course pathways affecting behavioral health. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000436>

How You Can Help

- Join our Justice Reform Task Force. Learn more at <https://www.bhjustice.org/task-forces-and-committees>
- Learn more about the current policies and issues related to incarceration in your city and state, and advocate for needed reform.
- Join our policy committee. Contact office@bhjustice.org to learn more.
- Promote behavioral health services in your community as a strategy for preventing the incarceration of individuals with behavioral health concerns.

Contributors: Resolution drafted principally by Melissa Putney with contributions from Gita Jaffe and the Global Alliance Justice Reform Task Force.