

# 8 Facts About Incarcerated and Wrongfully Convicted Women You Should Know

Over the past three decades, nearly 300 women have been exonerated.

03.01.22 By Daniele Selby



Kristine Bunch was wrongfully convicted in 1996 and spent 17 years in prison before being exonerated with the help of the Cen... [Read more](#)

*Updated on March. 12, 2024:* This piece was originally published on March 1, 2020, and has been updated to reflect the latest statistics.

---

Women's History Month is an occasion to recognize advancements in gender equality and the achievements of women around the world in everything from media to science to criminal justice reform. But it's also an occasion to acknowledge the work that needs to be done to truly establish gender equality in all aspects of life.

When it comes to incarceration and wrongful conviction, women face unique challenges both as directly impacted individuals and as the people who shoulder much of the financial and caretaking burden when loved ones are incarcerated.

Yet conversations about mass incarceration have often overlooked women, even though they are the fastest-growing group of incarcerated people, [according to the Prison Policy Initiative](#).

Here are eight important facts about women and incarceration in the U.S. that you should know.

**1. The population of women in state prisons has grown at more than twice the rate of the population of men in state prisons.**

Women account for approximately [10% of the 2 million incarcerated](#) people in the U.S., but despite making up a relatively small percentage of the overall incarcerated population, the number of women in state prisons is growing at a much faster rate than men. Between 1978 and 2015, the female state prison population grew by [834%](#).

With growing public attention to the problem of mass incarceration, people want to know about women's experiences with incarceration. How many women are held in prisons, jails, and other correctional facilities in the United States? Why are they there? How are their experiences different from men's? These are important questions, but finding the answers requires not only disentangling the country's decentralized and overlapping criminal legal systems, but also unearthing the frustratingly limited data that's broken down by gender.

This report provides a detailed view of the 190,600 women and girls incarcerated in the United States and how they fit into the even broader picture of correctional control. We pull together data from a number of government agencies and break down the number of women and girls held by each correctional system, by specific offense, in 446 state prisons, 27 federal prisons, 3,116 local jails, 1,323 juvenile correctional facilities, 80 Indian country jails, and 80 immigration detention facilities, as well as in military prisons, civil commitment centers, and prisons in the U.S. territories. We also go beyond the numbers, including rare self-reported data from a national survey of people in prison to offer new insights about incarcerated women's backgrounds, families, health, and experiences in prison.

Women's incarceration has grown at twice the pace of men's incarceration in recent decades, and has disproportionately been located in local jails. The data needed to explain exactly what happened, when, and why do not yet exist, not least because the data on women has long been obscured by the larger scale of men's incarceration.

## **2. Women are disproportionately incarcerated in jails where more than half of them have not yet been convicted of a crime and are still presumed innocent.**

About [191,000 women](#) were detained in jails and prisons across the U.S. in 2023, with approximately 84,000 being held in local jails. Among the women in these local jails, [61%](#) had not yet been found guilty of a crime and were awaiting trial. One contributing factor to the high rate of women in jails pre-trial is that women are less likely to be able to afford to make bail or to pay other fees and fines that may prevent them from returning home to await their trials, [according to the Vera Institute of Justice](#).

### **Jails loom large in women's incarceration**

A staggering number of women who are incarcerated are not even convicted: more than a quarter of women who are behind bars have not yet had a trial. Moreover, 60% of women in jails under local control have not been convicted of a crime and are awaiting trial.

Even once convicted, the system funnels women into jails: About one-third (32%) of convicted incarcerated women are held in jails, compared to about 13% of all people incarcerated with a conviction. This reflects the different distribution of offense types and criminal histories between convicted men and women. Women are proportionally more likely to be serving a sentence of incarceration for a property or drug offense and less likely to be incarcerated for a violent offense when compared to men. These differences mean that women are more likely to be sentenced to a term in jail, where people typically serve shorter sentences of up to one year.

So, what does it mean that large numbers of women are held in jail — for them, and for their families? First, while stays in jail are generally shorter than in stays in prison, jails can be especially deadly for women. Women have a higher mortality rate than men in jails, dying of drug and alcohol intoxication at twice the rate of men. And the number of deaths by suicide among women in jails increased by almost 65% between the periods of 2000-2004 and 2015-2019. Women are more likely than men to enter jail with a medical problem or a serious mental illness and while incarcerated, women are more likely to suffer from mental health problems and experience serious psychological distress. Being locked up doesn't help: Research shows that incarceration can cause lasting damage to mental health.

### **3. Most incarcerated women are mothers.**

More than [60%](#) of women in prison have children under the age of 18 and nearly [80%](#) of women in jail are mothers, the Prison Policy Initiative reports. Incarcerated women tend to be single parents or primary caretakers more often than incarcerated men, [according to the Vera Institute](#). This means that their incarceration is likely to have a major impact on their children and family members. Many children of incarcerated mothers are placed in foster care.

Women are more likely to be incarcerated far away from their children because there are fewer women's prisons than men's making it difficult and costly for their children and family members to see them in person. After their incarceration, it can be extremely challenging for mothers to reunite with children placed in foster care.

## Most incarcerated women are mothers



62% of women in prison are mothers.



80% of women in jail are mothers.

Source: Prison Policy Initiative

### **4. Nearly 300 women have been exonerated since 1989.**

Of the 3,478 people who have been exonerated in the last three decades, about 9% were women, according to data from the [National Registry of Exonerations](#).

### **5. Most female exonerees were convicted of crimes that never occurred.**

About 73% of women exonerated in the last three decades were wrongfully convicted of crimes that never took place at all, according to data from the [National Registry of Exonerations](#). These “crimes” included events later determined to be accidents, deaths by suicide, and crimes that were fabricated.

## **6. More than a quarter of female exonerees were wrongly convicted of harming a child in their care.**

About 28% of female exonerees were convicted of crimes in which the victim was a child, according to data from the [National Registry of Exonerations](#).

These include nine women who were convicted of shaking a baby to death. [Thousands of people](#) have been accused, and many convicted, of harming children by violently shaking them and causing a condition known as Abusive Head Trauma (previously referred to as “shaken baby syndrome”). However, scientists and medical experts [have said](#) the three symptoms used to diagnose Abusive Head Trauma — diffuse brain swelling, subdural hemorrhage and retinal hemorrhages — can all result from many other causes, including diseases, falling at home, and even the birthing process, and that the concept of “shaken baby syndrome” has never been validated.

## **7. Only 15 women have been exonerated with the help of DNA evidence.**

DNA evidence was central to proving the innocence of five of these women, and helped to prove the innocence of the eight other women together with other essential factors, according to data from the [National Registry of Exonerations](#).

The number of women exonerated with the help of DNA evidence is significantly lower than the number of men exonerated by DNA evidence — more than 300 — in large part [because of the types of crimes](#) of which women tend to be convicted. More men are convicted of crimes like rape and

murder, in which more DNA evidence is likely to be left behind, than women.

**8. False or misleading forensic evidence contributed to the wrongful convictions of 110 women who have since been exonerated.**

Errors in forensic testing, information based on unreliable or unproven forensic methods, fraudulent information or evidence, and forensic information presented with exaggerated and misleading confidence can all contribute to wrongful convictions. Such factors contributed to the wrongful convictions of at least [110 women](#), whose convictions have been overturned over the last three decades.