

Fact Sheet: Women, Prison, and the Drug War



1. Drug use and drug selling occur at the same rate across racial and ethnic groups.¹
2. The incarceration rate for white women is 94 per 100,000. For Latino women, it is 152 per 100,000, and for black women it is 358 per 100,000.²
3. Black women are 3.8 times more likely than white women to be sent to prison, and Latinas are 1.6 times more likely than white women to be incarcerated.³
4. Before mandatory minimums, the average federal drug sentence was 11 percent higher for blacks than for whites. After mandatory minimums were re-instituted in 1986, federal drug offense sentences were 49 percent higher for blacks.⁴
5. Even though they use illicit drugs at similar rates during pregnancy, black women are 10 times more likely than white women to be reported to child welfare services for prenatal drug use.⁵
6. A black woman is 4.8 times more likely than a white woman to be sent to prison for a drug violation.⁶
7. Women are the fastest growing segment of the prison population. Since 1977, the rate of female imprisonment has grown 757 percent. The drug war drives these numbers.⁷
8. A drug offense is the most common reason for maternal incarceration.
9. Pregnant women who are incarcerated for drug offenses are often not provided with prenatal care. Children are often separated from their imprisoned mothers, causing irreparable damage to the child.
10. Prisons use restraints (handcuffs and shackles) on

women in labor and during delivery regardless of the women's history. Only five state departments of corrections (CT, FL, RI, WA, and WY) and Washington DC have banned this practice. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists states that this puts "the lives of women and unborn children at risk."⁸

11. In state prisons, 65.3 percent of women are mothers to minors, while in federal prison, 58.8 percent of the women are mothers to minor children.⁹
12. Black children are nine times as likely as white children to have a parent in prison.¹⁰
13. Today, nearly 2.5 million minors have an incarcerated parent. 84 percent of parents in federal prison and 62 percent of those in state prison are housed 100 miles or more from their children.¹¹

¹ Mauer, Marc. "The Changing Racial Dynamics of the War on Drugs," The Sentencing Project, April 2009, pg. 8.

² Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2006," pg. 9.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Meierhoefer, B. S., "The General Effect of Mandatory Minimum Prison Terms: A Longitudinal Study of Federal Sentences Imposed" (Washington DC: Federal Judicial Center, 1992), p. 20.

⁵ "The Prevalence of illicit-drug or alcohol use during pregnancy and discrepancies in mandatory reporting in Pinellas County, Florida," *New England Journal of Medicine*, Volume 322:1202-1206, Number 17.

⁶ *Behind Bars II: Substance Abuse and America's Prison Population*, The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University.

⁷ Institute of Women and Criminal Justice, "Hard Hit: The Growth of Imprisonment and Women," May 2006.

⁸ The Rebecca Project, "Shackling Fact Sheet,"

⁹ The Rebecca Project, "Mothers Behind Bars Fact Sheet."

¹⁰ Brennan Center for Justice, "Rebuilding Families, Reclaiming Lives," 2006.

¹¹ Brennan Center for Justice, "Rebuilding Families, Reclaiming Lives," 2006.