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Trends in Women's
Incarceration Rates in
US Prisons and Jails:
A Tale of Inequalities

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Keywords

women's incarceration, trends, mass incarceration, punishment, inequality, consequences of incarceration

Abstract

Women's rates of imprisonment and incarceration in jails grew faster than men's rates during the prison boom in the United States. Even during the recent period of modest decline in incarceration, women's rates have decreased less than men's rates. The number of women in prisons and jails in the United States is now at a historic high. Yet research on mass incarceration most often ignores women's imprisonment and confinement in jails. This review examines trends in women's incarceration, highlighting important disparities for Black, Latina, and American Indian/Indigenous women. It contextualizes these trends in terms of the economic and social disadvantages of women prior to incarceration as well as inequalities that are created by women's incarceration for families, communities, and women themselves. The review concludes by calling for improved data on women's imprisonment and jail trends, particularly regarding race and ethnicity, as well as more research and theoretical development.

INTRODUCTION

Mass incarceration has changed the social landscape of the United States and has become a popular research topic in criminology and sociology. Studies have reported unprecedented increases in the numbers of people imprisoned, substantial race disparities, poor conditions of confinement, and troubling consequences for individuals, families, and communities (for reviews, see Kirk & Wakefield 2018, Travis et al. 2014, Wakefield & Uggen 2010). Documenting the dramatic increases in incarceration rates over time is central to understanding patterns of mass incarceration (Lynch & Verma 2018, Zimring 2010). Yet research on imprisonment trends has overwhelmingly focused on the increases in male rates and given scant attention to the equally important changes in female rates. Although men's rates of confinement in prisons and jails are clearly higher than women's, growth in women's incarceration rates consistently has outpaced growth in men's rates.

Analyses of trends in women's incarceration rates are restricted to a limited number of scholarly reviews (Kruttschnitt & Gartner 2003), government reports (GAO 1999, Greenfeld & Snell 1999, Snell & Morton 1994), and publications by nonprofit research organizations (e.g., Frost et al. 2006, Mauer 2013). Trends in women's incarceration in jails have received almost no attention (for an exception, see Swavola et al. 2016). Although there are studies of women's disadvantaged backgrounds before they come to prison (e.g., Bloom et al. 2004, Daly 1994) and the social organization of life in women's prisons (e.g., Kreager & Kruttschnitt 2018, Kruttschnitt et al. 2000), systematic analyses of women's incarceration rates over time and across subgroups are limited. Indeed, there has not been a recent thorough review of women's trends in incarceration and their implications. This is the mission of our article.

Why study trends over time in women's incarceration? One reason is that examining only intraindividual change or cross-sectional snapshots of rates can lead to misunderstandings of the broader historical context, insufficient theoretical development, and poorly informed criminal justice policies (Baumer et al. 2018; Rosenfeld 2006, 2011). Another reason is that studying trends across subgroups (e.g., sex, race, ethnicity, place) is essential for unpacking inequalities (Rosenfeld & Goldberger 2008). For these reasons, we must examine patterns over time, including differences across race and ethnicity, if we are to better understand the dynamic social, economic, and political contexts of growth in women's incarceration. In addition, studying trends in women's confinement is key to expanding our knowledge about the impacts of incarceration on women's lives, their families, and their communities.

We view women's patterns of incarceration as rooted in inequalities, and we organize this review accordingly. First, we present recent data on trends over time in women's imprisonment and confinement in jails in the United States and discuss the unprecedented growth in adult female incarceration. We do not delve into patterns of juvenile incarceration or cross-national differences because doing so would require deeper attention than is possible in this review. Second, we highlight inequalities across race and ethnicity in women's incarceration rates and discuss how these have changed over time. Third, we review research findings on the social and economic inequalities confronted by women before they enter prisons and jails. Fourth, we address the unequal consequences of women's increased incarceration for families and communities that are created by race and ethnic differences in patterns of incarceration. We conclude with a call for continued research, improved data, and theoretical advancement on women's incarceration.

TRENDS IN WOMEN'S INCARCERATION

To examine the most recent trends in women's incarceration, we created annual rates per 100,000 females in adult prisons and jails using data from the National Prisoner Statistics (NPS) program,

Annual Survey of Jails, and Census of Jails (Bur. Justice Stat. 2018, 2019a, 2021).¹ We also created rates of incarceration by race and ethnic groups for women in state prisons as well as in federal and state prisons combined for recent years. Comparable data are not available for creating trends by race and ethnicity for women in local jails.

Women's rates of incarceration have increased substantially over time, despite the fact that there have not been corresponding increases in women's violent offending over time (e.g., Lauritsen et al. 2009). Kruttschnitt & Gartner (2003) show that the boom in women's imprisonment that began in the 1970s followed decades of very low and stable rates of female incarceration, as was the case for men. **Figure 1** presents updated annual rates of women's imprisonment under state and federal jurisdictions from 1978 onward, and annual rates of women's confinement in jails beginning in 1990. Regarding state imprisonment, **Figure 1** shows that women's rates grew substantially and steadily between 1978 and 2007, when they peaked. Women's rates increased by 6.6 times or 560% during these years; by comparison, men's state imprisonment rates increased by 3.4 times or 240% during this same period. Without question, an important fact of US mass incarceration is that growth in female imprisonment rates has outpaced growth in male rates. Generally, the greatest growth in women's state imprisonment rates occurred in the decade of the 1980s (174%), followed by the 1990s (85%), and the magnitude of annual increases in women's prisons was larger than that in men's prisons (Frost et al. 2006, p. 10). Moreover, the unprecedented increases in women's imprisonment occurred in all fifty states, although there was substantial variability across states and increases were particularly great in the Mountain and Southern states (Frost et al. 2006).

This boom period in women's rates of state imprisonment was followed by a modest decline, beginning in 2008. This pattern reflects an overall decline in US imprisonment rates due to legal and policy changes as well as concerns about state budgets (Clear 2021, Petersilia & Cullen 2015). However, as **Figure 1** shows, the declines in women's rates of state imprisonment have been modest and are dwarfed by the increases of preceding decades. Indeed, women's state imprisonment rate in 2019 was almost as high as their rate in 1999 at the end of two decades of unparalleled growth. Female state imprisonment rates dropped by approximately 10% in the ten years following the 2007 peak, whereas they had increased by 27% in the ten years preceding the peak. Also, the recent decline in women's rates was less than the decline in male rates. The story of women's state imprisonment trends, therefore, is one of unparalleled increases followed by a recent modest decline that does not begin to counter the growth of previous decades and does not match the decline seen in male rates in recent years.

Rates of women's incarceration in local jails follow a similar trajectory to patterns of state imprisonment (see **Figure 1**). The trends depart somewhat after 2007, when women's rates of jail

¹National imprisonment data, disaggregated by sex and race, are available beginning in 1978 through the NPS. Adjusting counts of prisoners by population size is important, particularly for examining differences by race and ethnicity within sex/gender. Because race and ethnic groups vary in the proportion of the population who are under the age of 18, creating age-adjusted rates allows more accurate comparisons of adult incarceration across groups. We created rates of imprisonment using the annual US population for females aged 15+ in total and in each race and ethnic group (Cent. Dis. Control 2020, Nat. Cent. Health Stat. 1997). Because some prisoners under 18 are included in the NPS data, we chose age 15 as a reasonable lower age limit. Published imprisonment rates sometimes use total female population; however, age-specific adjustments produce more accurate rates that capture the exposure risk of women of eligible ages. This becomes even more important when comparing across race and ethnic groups. Jail counts are available for adults separately, and we created jail rates using the US population of females aged 18+. We note that the NPS data on the race and ethnicity of women prisoners have not been adjusted using supplemental survey data.

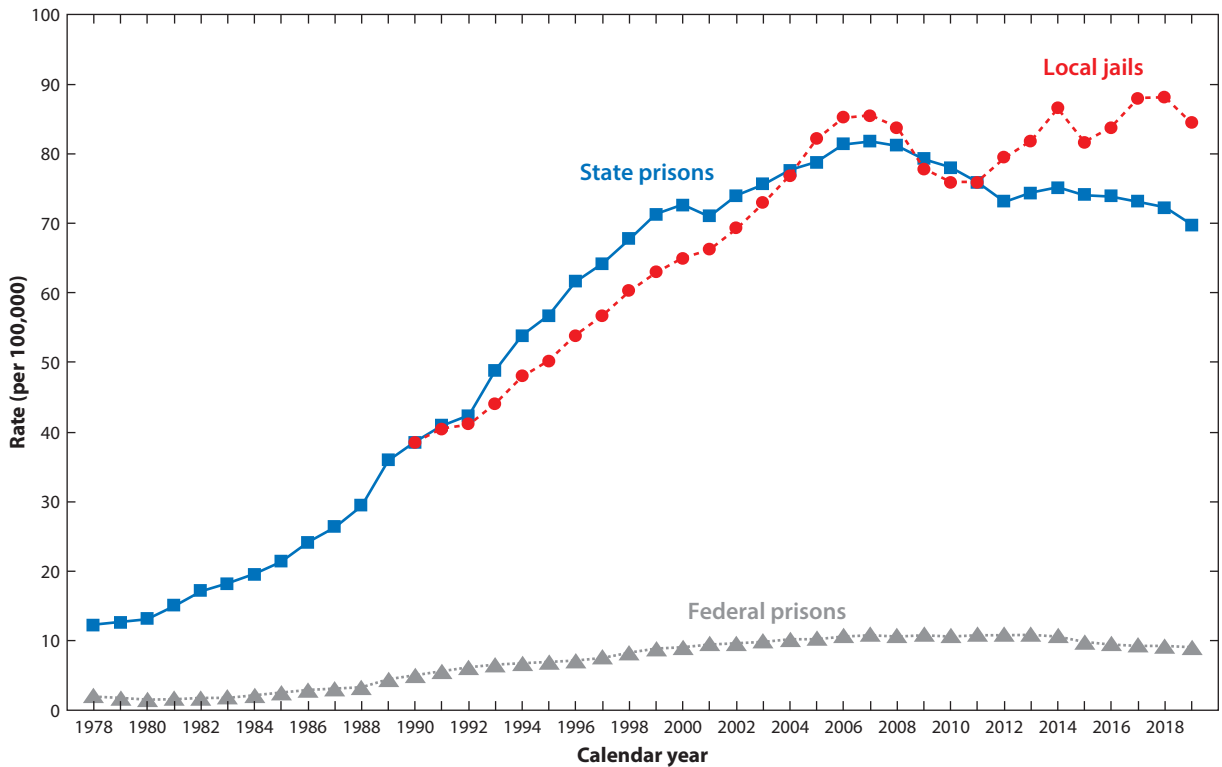


Figure 1

Female incarceration rates in prisons and jails, 1978–2019. Prisoner count data obtained from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Prisoner Statistics (various years), Annual Survey of Jails, and Census of Jails (various years). Prison rates created per 100,000 US women age 15+; jail rates created per 100,000 women age 18+ (Cent. Dis. Control 2020, Natl. Cent. Health Stat. 1997).

incarceration leveled off somewhat and became more variable. Overall, the rates of adult female incarceration in local jails more than doubled between 1990 and 2019, increasing by 119%. The growth in women’s confinement in jails continued after 2007, unlike women’s state imprisonment. Moreover, because jail incarceration rates are determined by surveys on a specified date each year and because jail stays are most often less than one year, the annual rates of women who experience any period of jail confinement are substantially higher than those shown in **Figure 1**; unfortunately, such rates are not available (Swavola et al. 2016, Wagner & Rabuy 2017). This means that substantial numbers of women are cycling in and out of jails each year, which has important consequences for individuals, families, and communities.

As with confinement rates in state prisons and local jails, women’s federal imprisonment rates increased greatly over time, by 5.2 times or 420% between 1978 and the peak years of women’s federal incarceration (2007–2014). This substantial increase is difficult to see in **Figure 1** because federal imprisonment rates are so much lower than state imprisonment rates. Indeed, according to NPS data, almost nine of every ten women in prison since 1978 were under state rather than federal jurisdiction.

Figure 2 illustrates that women’s incarceration rates in prisons and jails have grown more than men’s rates. Specifically, **Figure 2** shows that women comprise an increasingly large percentage of all people confined in state prisons and jails over time. For example, the percent of state

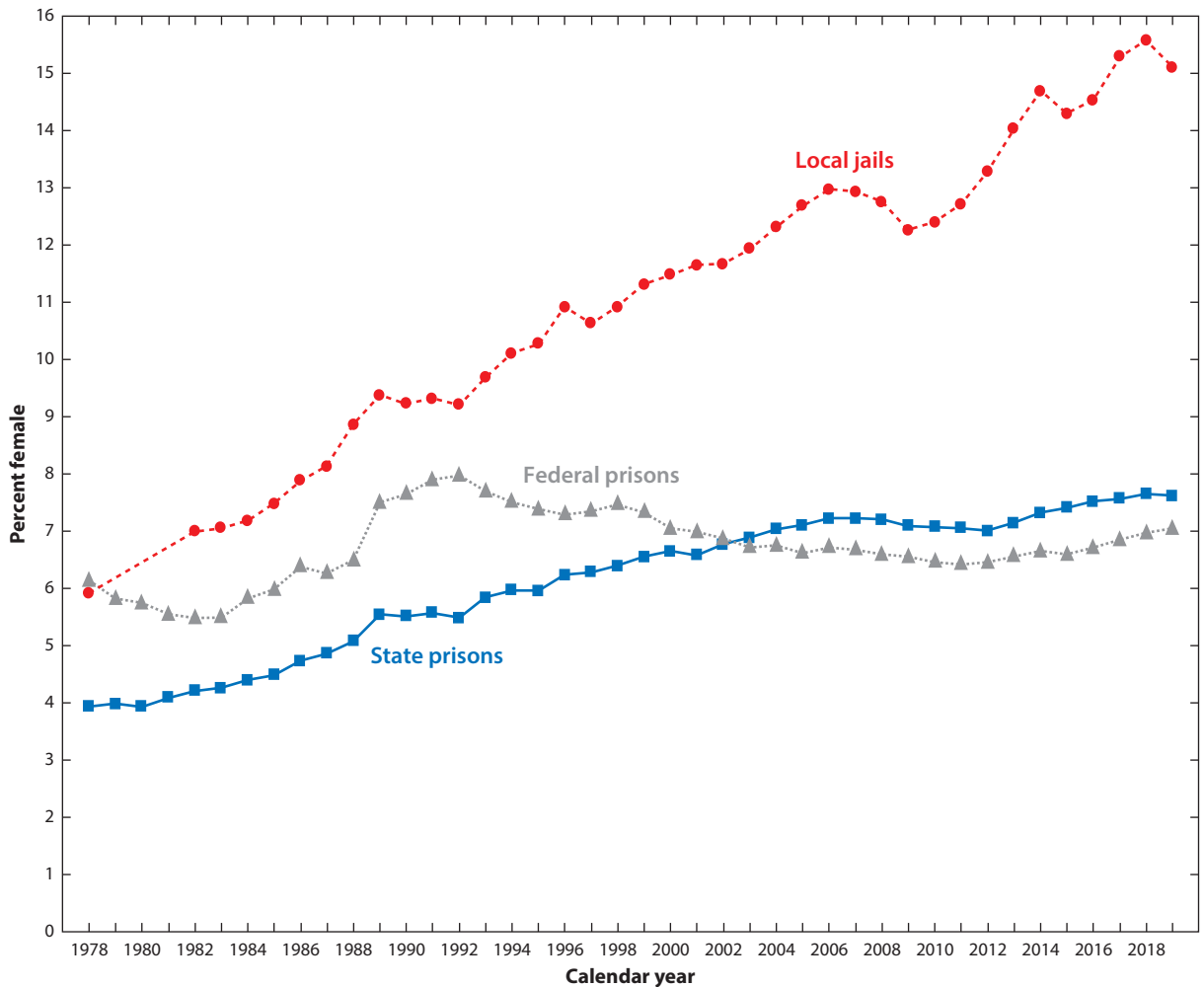


Figure 2

Percent of incarcerated adults who are female, 1978–2019. Percentages based on data taken from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Prisoner Statistics (various years), Annual Survey of Jails, and Census of Jails (various years).

prisoners who were female doubled between 1978 and 2019, growing from 4% to almost 8% of the total. This situation is even more pronounced in the case of jail incarceration. In 1978, women accounted for approximately 6% of jail populations, and by 2019, they accounted for 15% of all adults in local jails on the survey date. This is an important change in the carceral landscape, and it draws attention to the needs of incarcerated women, which some researchers argue are somewhat different from the needs of men (Bloom et al. 2004, Cobbina & Bender 2012, Holtfreter & Morash 2003, Van Voorhis et al. 2010, Wright & Cain 2018). **Figure 2** also shows, however, that the percentage of all federal prisoners who were female did not increase greatly between 1978 and 2019. Instead, the percent of federal prisoners who were women has been variable, hovering between 5.5% and a high point of 8% in 1992. Note, however, that the percentages of federal prisoners who were female exceeded the percentages of state prisoners who were female until 2002.

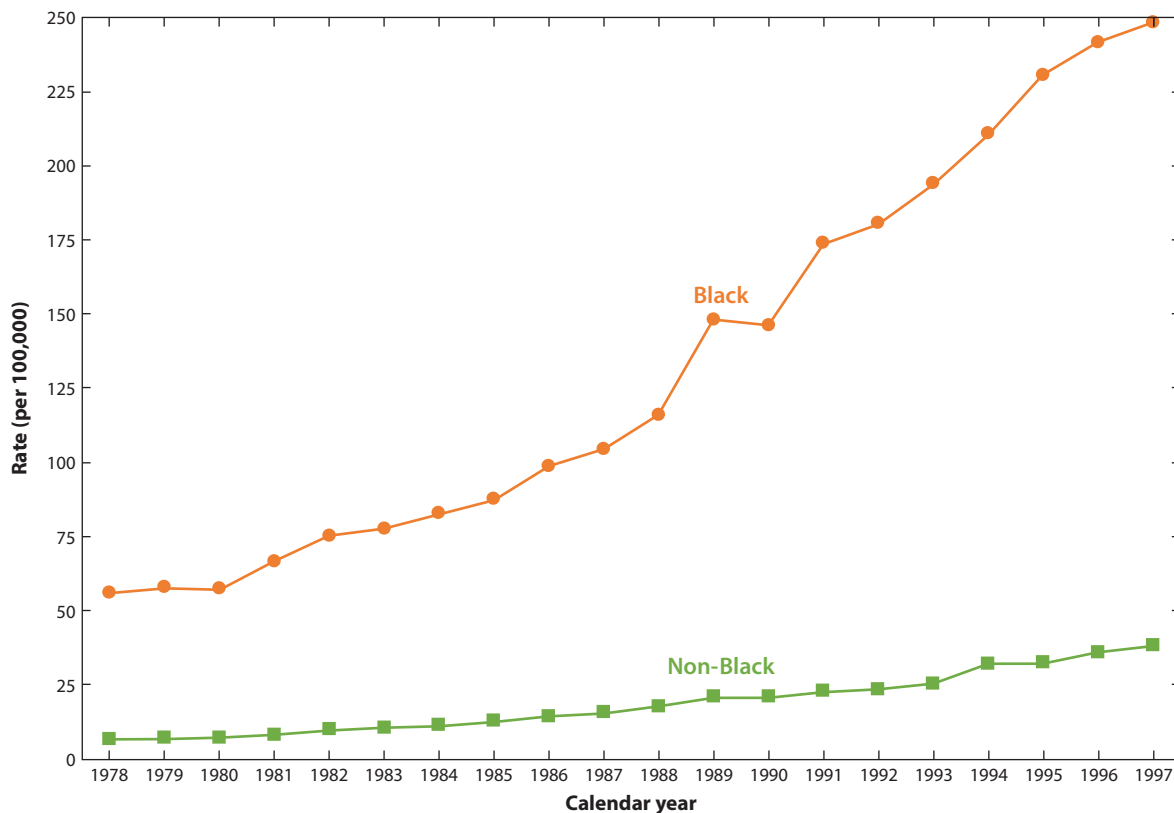


Figure 3

Black and non-Black female state imprisonment rates, 1978–1997. Prisoner count data obtained from the Bureau of Justice Statistics and National Prisoner Statistics (various years). Rates created per 100,000 US women age 15+ in each race group (Cent. Dis. Control 2020, Natl. Cent. Health Stat. 1997).

Race and Ethnic Differences

Race inequality is an essential part of the story of mass incarceration in the United States. A substantial body of research has recognized the devastating effects of America’s mass incarceration binge on Black men and Black communities (see Clear 2007, Travis et al. 2014, Wakefield & Uggen 2010), and recent statistical analyses have linked the great increases in Black men’s incarceration rates in the 1980s and 1990s to punitive criminal justice responses to the crack cocaine epidemic, among other factors (Enders et al. 2019, Evans et al. 2016). Yet, as Richie (2012) points out, research and policy have neglected Black women’s imprisonment during this same period and instead centered conversations about Black women on the impact of their partners’ incarceration. Furthermore, quantitative studies rarely have examined the social, economic, and political factors that likely have impacted Black women’s incarceration rates (for exceptions, see Heimer et al. 2012, Myers et al. 2022). This neglect is problematic. As **Figure 3** shows,² Black women were approximately 6.5 to 8 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Black women during the great

²Prior to 2000, the NPS series does not differentiate race and ethnicity simultaneously, which is problematic in the case of White women in prison (because Latinas were most likely to be grouped with Whites). Thus, a

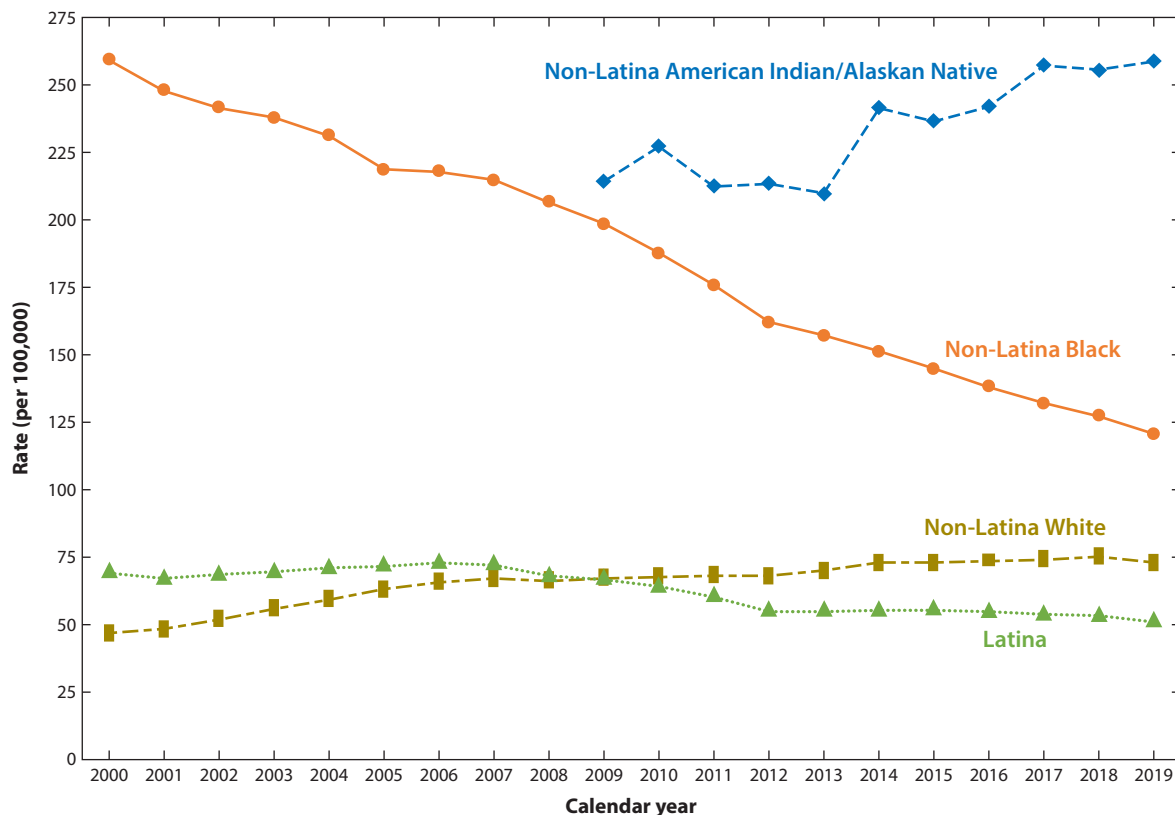


Figure 4

Female state imprisonment rates by race and ethnicity, 2000–2019. Prisoner count data obtained from the Bureau of Justice Statistics and National Prisoner Statistics (various years). Rates created per 100,000 US women age 15+ in each race/ethnic group (Cent. Dis. Control 2020, Natl. Cent. Health Stat. 1997).

imprisonment boom, which is close to the race difference in incarceration for men during this time.³ These very high imprisonment rates among Black women—during a period of increasing urban poverty and social dislocation in the 1980s and 1990s—surely had a profound impact on Black communities and families, above and beyond the effects of Black men’s increased incarceration.

After 2000, the NPS includes data from more refined race and ethnic groups, specifically for non-Latina Black, non-Latina White, Latina, and American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) women. **Figure 4** reveals several important patterns in women’s rates by race and ethnicity. First, non-Latina Black women’s rates of state imprisonment declined steadily after 2000 (see Myers et al. 2022). Indeed, Black women’s imprisonment rates declined more than Black men’s rates in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Mauer 2013). The most recent data, presented in **Figure 4**, show that the drop in non-Latina Black women’s imprisonment rates continued through 2019 to

comparison of Black and White women’s rates during this period would be misleading. We therefore compare the incarceration rates of Black women with those of non-Black women (all other races combined).

³ This calculation is based on comparable rate data for males (Bur. Justice Stat. 2021, Cent. Dis. Control 2020, Natl. Cent. Health Stat. 1997).

less than half of their 2000 rate (declining by approximately 54%). Indeed, between 2000 and 2019, Black women's rates of imprisonment dropped from approximately 6 times or 500% higher than White women's rates to 1.7 times or 70% higher. Although race disparities vary across states, with the highest rates of Black female imprisonment occurring in the Midwest and West, the decline in the gap occurred in all states (Myers et al. 2022). Although this decrease in Black women's imprisonment is welcome news, Black women still have a much higher risk of imprisonment than White women. Moreover, the legacy of decades of extremely high rates of imprisoning Black women has had consequences for Black families and communities that continue today; we discuss some of these consequences below.

Another striking pattern in **Figure 4** is the very high rate of state imprisonment of non-Latina AIAN women. Because the NPS data collected before 2009 did not systematically differentiate Latina and AIAN women, we examine the rates of imprisonment of non-Latina AIAN women after 2009 only. What is apparent in **Figure 4** is that non-Latina AIAN women have been imprisoned at very high rates. The most reasonable interpretation of the existing data is that the incarceration rates of AIAN women under state jurisdiction have been high for many years. It is important to point out that AIAN women's rate of state imprisonment in 2019 is close to the notably high rate of imprisonment of Black women in 2000. Indeed, AIAN women have had the highest rate of state imprisonment of all race and ethnic groups since 2009—their rate was 3.7 times higher than White women's rates, 5.5 times higher than Latina women's rates, and 2.2 times higher than Black women's rates by 2019. Yet these patterns for women have not appeared in the scholarly literature to date, although patterns for AIAN men and women together have been reported by nonprofit organizations over the past few years (Daniel 2020, Sentencing Proj. 2016). As Ross (1994, 1998) noted decades ago in her seminal work on American Indian/Native American women in the justice system, criminology and the social sciences largely have ignored the devastating impact of the criminal justice system on Indigenous women and how it continues a long history of colonization, oppression, and confinement (see also Cunneen & Tauri 2019; Ross 1996, 2016; Teran 2016; Tippeconnic Fox 2009).

Finally, the state imprisonment rates of non-Latina White women and Latina women have been consistently lower than those of Black and AIAN women. White women's rates, however, increased by 63% between 2000 and 2019. In addition, Latina women's state imprisonment rates have been reasonably close to the rates of White women since 2000, being somewhat higher than White women's rates in the early 2000s and then somewhat lower than White women's rates in recent years (see **Figure 4**). Because the NPS data have not been adjusted using survey data, it would be inappropriate to make much of the differences between non-Latina White and Latina rates. Indeed, a limitation of the NPS data is that they are gathered from institutions and states and are not based on prisoner self-reports.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics' *Prisoners* series presents adjusted counts of federal and state imprisonment combined for the years 2000–2019 (Bur. Justice Stat. 2019b). The counts have been adjusted using survey and other data to better represent prisoners' race and ethnicity. Unfortunately, the adjusted counts for state and federal jurisdictions are not published separately. **Figure 5** presents rates per 100,000 non-Latina Black, non-Latina White, and Latina women ages 15 and over. **Figure 5** shows decreasing rates of non-Latina Black women's combined state and federal incarceration rates since 2000 (a 63% decline) as well as increasing non-Latina White rates (a 32% increase). This roughly parallels patterns of state imprisonment shown in **Figure 4**. The rates of Latina imprisonment under state and federal jurisdiction combined, by contrast, are consistently higher than the rates of Latina women's state imprisonment (only) (**Figure 4**). By 2019, the Latina women's imprisonment rate was 50% higher than White women's rate and almost as high as Black women's rate. Clearly, the adjusted and combined state and federal imprisonment data show that

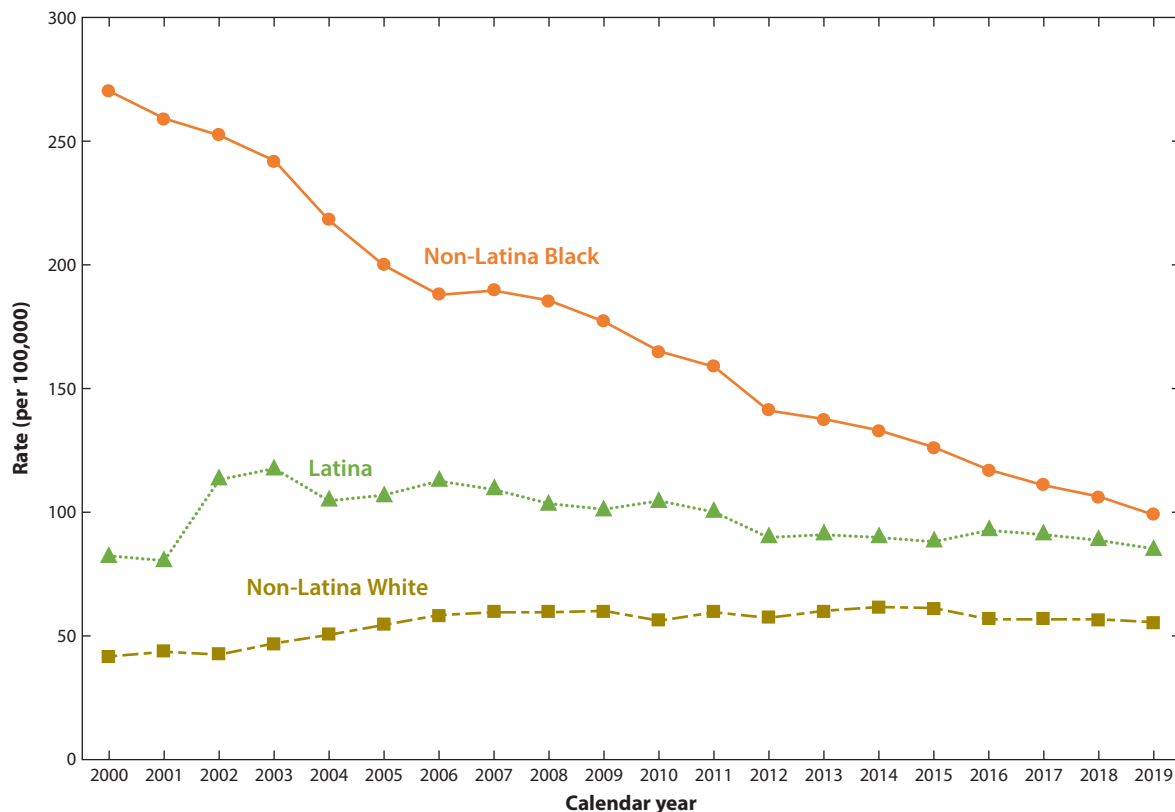


Figure 5

Female combined state and federal imprisonment rates by race and ethnicity, 2000–2019. Prisoner count data (combined federal and state prisoner counts) obtained from the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ *Prisoners* Publication Series (2000–2019). Rates created per 100,000 US women age 15+ in each race/ethnic group (Cent. Dis. Control 2020, Natl. Cent. Health Stat. 1997).

Latinas experience significant prison confinement (see also Sentencing Proj. 2020). The combined jurisdiction data in **Figure 5** cannot reveal, however, the very high rates of Latina imprisonment under federal jurisdiction alone. Using the NPS unadjusted data (not shown), we calculated rates of federal imprisonment (only) and found that Latina women’s rates were about three times White women’s and more than two times Black women’s rates in 2019—gaps that exceed those suggested by the combined rates in state and federal prisons. If Latina rates are underrepresented in the NPS data on federal prisoners, then these statistics may be conservative and the gap in federal imprisonment rates between Latinas and the other two groups may be even larger. Some Latina women are likely serving federal prison sentences for immigration offenses, although this information is not available for women. Yet if we consider that approximately 5% of federal prisoners (both sexes) are serving sentences for immigration offenses—which is similar to the percentages of federal prisoners who have been convicted of burglary/larceny or extortion/fraud (Fed. Bur. Prisons 2022)—then it seems very possible that confinement for immigration offenses is at least part of the story of the disproportionate confinement of Latinas under federal jurisdiction.

Notably, **Figure 5** does not present rates of combined state and federal imprisonment for AIAN women. This information is not available over time in the *Prisoners* series. Using the NPS unadjusted data, we calculated rates of AIAN women sentenced under federal (only) jurisdiction

and found that they had the highest rate of federal imprisonment of any race and ethnic group, paralleling the finding for state imprisonment. The AIAN women's rates of federal imprisonment were 5.5 times higher than White women's rates and 2.4 times higher than Black women's rates, using the NPS data. Clearly, much more research on the incarceration of AIAN women is needed, including a thorough examination of their federal incarceration over time.

We cannot examine trends in the race and ethnicity of women in our nation's jails over time due to a lack of data (Swavola et al. 2016). Data from the 1990s show that Black women account for 44% of women in local jails, Latinas account for 14%, and White women account for 36% (Greenfeld & Snell 1999). Small local studies report similar patterns (for a review, see Swavola et al. 2016). Although national information on AIAN women confined in local jails is not available, a Bureau of Justice Statistics report shows that the confinement of AIAN people (both sexes) in jails increased by more than 4% annually between 1999 and 2014, whereas the average annual increase for all other races combined was about 1.4% (Minton et al. 2017; see also Wang 2021). Overall, the paucity of national data over time on the race and ethnicity of women in jails is problematic.

In sum, to fully understand trends in women's incarceration, we need a much more complete understanding of race and ethnic disparities. Currently, research is hampered by inadequate and sometimes problematic data. Nevertheless, the available information and research indicate substantial race and ethnic inequality in women's confinement in prisons and jails.

Patterns in Offense Type Over Time

These trends in women's incarceration rates raise the question of whether the crimes for which women are confined have changed over time. Previous discussions emphasized that women were imprisoned mainly for violent and property crimes in the 1980s, but this pattern had changed by the end of the 1990s when more than a third of women in prison were incarcerated for drug offenses (Bloom et al. 2004, Kruttschnitt & Gartner 2003). Other more recent reviews have reported that women are mainly imprisoned for nonviolent and drug offenses, whereas men are mainly sent to prison for violence (Haney 2013, Wright & Cain 2018). Indeed, between 1986 and 1990, there was a qualitative shift in the offenses for which women were imprisoned under state jurisdiction. The percentage of women in prisons for drug offenses increased and the percentage sentenced for violence declined (see **Table 1**). These trends continued through the 1990s (Kruttschnitt & Gartner 2003). Interestingly, the increase in the fraction of women who were incarcerated for drug offenses corresponded with the period during which Black women's rates of imprisonment reached very high levels. These facts provide the basis for claims that increases in women's imprisonment rates during the 1980s and 1990s were in part due to highly punitive drug sentencing

Table 1 Most serious offense of sentenced state prisoners^a

Offense type	Percent of prisoners									
	Female					Male				
	1986	1990	1998	2008	2018	1986	1990	1998	2008	2018
Violent	40.7	30.2	28.6	33.9	38.0	55.2	46.7	49.0	53.8	57.9
Property	41.2	31.9	26.3	30.0	24.4	30.5	25.0	21.0	18.5	15.6
Drug	12.0	32.2	34.0	27.2	25.7	8.4	21.1	19.9	18.1	13.4
Public order	5.1	5.2	10.7	7.4	11.1	5.2	6.7	9.9	8.6	12.6

Data taken from Beck (2000), Carson (2020), Gilliard & Beck (1998), Guerino et al. (2011), Snell & Morton (1994).

^aColumns do not add up to 100% due to rounding and other offense types.

policies (e.g., Bloom et al. 2004, Bush-Baskette 2000, Díaz-Cotto 2006, Mauer et al. 1999, Ross 2004, Sokoloff 2005).

Table 1 shows a different pattern in more recent years, however. Specifically, in the 2000s, the fraction of women in prison for drug crimes declined, whereas the fraction of women in prison for violent crimes increased. By 2018, 38% of women in state prisons were sentenced for violent crimes and 26% were sentenced for drug offenses, representing a reversal of the pattern from twenty years prior. Indeed, the trend in the distribution of the offense types from 1998 onward reveals an uptick in the percent of women imprisoned for violence and a decrease in the proportion of women incarcerated for drug offenses. Although it is unknown how this shift has impacted women across race, it is interesting to note that the drop in incarceration for drug crimes occurs during the same period that Black women's imprisonment rates were declining. The decline in the percentage of women incarcerated for drug offenses also corresponds to the emergence of the opioid crisis; scholars have maintained that the responses to White Americans' opioid use and abuse have been less punitive than the responses to the crack cocaine epidemic that affected Black Americans more strongly (see Myers et al. 2022).

Beyond these shifts over time, it remains the case that the women in prison are more likely than men in prison to be serving sentences for drug crimes (see **Table 1**). Indeed, more than half of the women in prison were sentenced for drug or property offenses in 2018, compared to less than a third of men. This is an important distinction. Furthermore, the percentage of women who were in prison for drug offenses in 2018 was more than twice the comparable percentage in 1986.

This pattern seems to hold for jail incarceration as well. Data from 2002 show that women were most likely to be jailed for property and drug offenses—82% of women in jail were incarcerated for nonviolent offenses, including 32% for property offenses, 29% for drug offenses, and 21% for public order offenses. Only about one in six women in jails was incarcerated for a violent offense; by comparison, more than a quarter of men in jails were confined for violence. More recent smaller local studies also find that women are most often jailed for nonviolent and minor offenses, including for breaking the rules of their community supervision through failed drug tests or other violations (see Swavola et al. 2016).

UNEQUAL BACKGROUNDS

Studies consistently show that women confined in prisons and jails experienced economic and social challenges before they were incarcerated. The available evidence does not speak to how these challenges may have changed over time as women's imprisonment rates grew. What the research does show is that most women in prison and jail lived in economically fragile and socially marginalized circumstances before their incarceration.

Women in the criminal justice system historically have been likely to earn low wages, be under- or unemployed, and have restricted educational opportunities (Daly 1994, Heimer 2000, Holfreter et al. 2004). Between 44% and 60% of women in prisons and jails did not have a high school diploma prior to incarceration based on data from the 1990s (Greenfeld & Snell 1999, Snell & Morton 1994). More than half of women in prison were unemployed prior to arrest, whereas the comparable rate for imprisoned men was approximately 30% (Snell & Morton 1994). Also, women in prison had substantially lower preincarceration incomes than men in prison (30% less), nonincarcerated women (42% less), and nonincarcerated men (more than 75% less) (Rabuy & Kopf 2015). In short, women in prison are more disadvantaged economically than men in prison and are extremely disadvantaged compared to nonincarcerated women as well as men.

Black, Latina, and AIAN women in prison are even more disadvantaged than White women and men of color in prison. Nevertheless, as Richie (2012) emphasizes, mainstream discourse

on mass incarceration tends to portray Black women as less marginalized and oppressed than Black men. This critique is bolstered by national survey data showing that Latina women in state prisons earned less than any other group of women or men prior to admission, and Black women had the second lowest incomes of all race and ethnic groups (Rabuy & Kopf 2015). This study did not report on the earnings of AIAN women in prison, and we found no other data on their economic disadvantage. However, nationally, AIAN people experience very high rates of poverty (Fins 2020). Scholars have emphasized that more research is needed on how economic inequalities impact incarcerated women of color (Díaz-Cotto 2006; Lopez & Pasko 2021; Richie 1996, 2012; Ross 1998).

In addition to experiencing high levels of poverty, many women in prisons and jails are mothers of minor children (Bloom et al. 2004, Enos 2001, Haney 2013). National surveys show that between 58% and 65% of women in prison are mothers (Glaze & Maruschak 2008, Maruschak et al. 2021, Mumola 2000). Although most male prisoners also have children, women were more likely than men to have been the caregivers of their children prior to their admission (Bush-Baskette 2000, Haney 2013). Indeed, well over half of mothers in prison reported living with their children in the month prior to arrest, whereas just over a third of fathers reported living with their children (Glaze & Maruschak 2008, Mumola 2000). Moreover, 42% of mothers reported being single parents in the month before their arrest (Glaze & Maruschak 2008).

The economic and family hardships experienced by women in prisons and jails combine with histories of abuse, physical health problems, and high rates of mental illness (e.g., Belknap 2020, Bloom et al. 2004, Chesney-Lind & Pasko 2013, Díaz-Cotto 2006, Holtfreter et al. 2004, Owen & Bloom 1995, Richie 2001, Ross 1998, Sharp 2014). More than half of the women in jails in 2002 reported past physical and/or sexual abuse, whereas approximately one in eight men reported abuse (James 2004). A similar pattern emerges from surveys in state prisons (Harlow 1999). Surveys with more detailed questions find even higher rates of sexual abuse among incarcerated women (McDaniel-Wilson & Belknap 2008). Given that Black and Latina women report experiencing more physical and sexual violence than White women (Catalano et al. 2009), and American Indian and Indigenous women have the highest rates of assault of any group (Bachman et al. 2010, Tippeconnic Fox 2009), scholars have linked the incarceration of BIPOC women to histories of violent victimization (Jones et al. 2021, Richie 1996, Ross 1998).

Women's pathways to prison and jail also include histories of mental illness, physical illness, and drug involvement (Richie 1996, Ross 2004, Simpson et al. 2008, Visher & Bakken 2014). Both women and men in prisons and jails are more likely to have histories of mental illness than nonincarcerated people. Yet women in prison (66–73%) were much more likely than men in prison (35–55%) to report histories of mental health problems (Bonson & Berzofsky 2017). Rates of mental illness among people in jail are even higher and also reveal a strong gender difference (James & Glaze 2006). Women in prison were also more likely than men to report having a medical problem (Maruschak 2008) or cognitive disability and were equally likely to have sensory and ambulatory disabilities (Bronson et al. 2015). In addition, women in state prisons were somewhat more likely (around 60%) than men (around 56%) to report drug use in the month before their offense (Mumola & Karberg 2006).

Clearly, both women and men in prisons and jails face multiple disadvantages prior to their incarceration; however, women experience even greater economic, social, and psychological hardships than men. Consequently, scholars and activists have argued that the compounded and intersecting issues faced by women in prisons and jails create the need for gender-responsive programming to help women prepare to return to families and communities (Belknap 2020, Bloom et al. 2004, Cobbina & Bender 2012, Holtfreter & Morash 2003, Morash & Kashy 2022, Van Voorhis et al. 2010, Wright & Cain 2018). This programming has targeted needs that arise

from abuse by intimate partners and others (Van Voorhis et al. 2010, Wright & Cain 2018) and assistance in maintaining ties and reuniting with children (Bloom et al. 2004, Enos 2001, Holtfreter & Morash 2003). Yet, as some scholars point out, it is important to guard against the casting of such needs as reoffending risks that can hold women accountable and potentially justify further system intervention (Hannah-Moffat 1999, Kruttschnitt & Garner 2003).

UNEQUAL CONSEQUENCES OF INCARCERATION

The economic, social, racial, and ethnic inequalities that are associated with women's incarceration have combined with growth in the rates of women's confinement in prisons and jails to create important consequences for families, communities, and women's reentry experiences. There is a growing literature on the effects of maternal incarceration on families. The literature on the impact of women's incarceration on communities, however, is limited when compared to the large body of research on the consequences of men's incarceration. Research on women's reentry experiences is recently beginning to emerge. Although a thorough review of these literatures is beyond the scope of this article, we draw together select strands of research to contextualize the patterns of women's incarceration that we have noted above.

Because so many women in prisons and jails are mothers, sending record numbers of women to prison clearly has disrupted many families. Indeed, between 1991 and 2007, the percentage of US children with a mother in state prisons increased almost twice as fast as the percentage of children with a father in state prison (Glaze & Maruschak 2008). The confinement of mothers has a range of important deleterious consequences for children, including exposure to risk factors like poverty, residential instability, and school displacements (Dallaire 2007, Wildeman 2009). In addition, some research uncovers links between maternal incarceration and negative educational, mental health, and behavioral outcomes for children, although mixed evidence in this literature suggests that there are variations in the sensitivity of children's responses to maternal incarceration depending on a host of factors, including the circumstances of family life prior to maternal incarceration as well as the child's age, gender, race, and access to social, coping, and institutional resources (for reviews, see Foster & Hagan 2015, Wildeman et al. 2018). Research also shows that maternal incarceration negatively impacts families' economic well-being and relationships with fathers, even years after incarceration (Turney & Wildeman 2018). In short, the implication of this body of work is that the growth in women's imprisonment rates has likely had serious consequences for families. Moreover, some studies find that Black and Latina mothers were more likely than White mothers to live with their children before their incarceration (Foster & Lewis 2015). This finding, in combination with the fact that women of color have higher rates of incarceration, implies that increasing maternal incarceration has substantially impacted families of color (see Bloom et al. 2004, Díaz-Cotto 2006, Wildeman 2009).

These effects on families have reverberated through communities, and it is important to consider the effects on Black, Latino/a, and AIAN communities. Research has shown that sending record numbers of Black men to prison significantly damaged neighborhood ties and stability (Clear 2007, Rose & Clear 1998, Sampson 2012). Kruttschnitt (2010) has argued that the growth in female incarceration may have posed an even greater threat to communities because women are more likely than men to provide foundational connections between families and communities. The growth in women's incarceration in the 1980s and 1990s disrupted informal economic and social supports in disadvantaged communities and also corresponded with the retrenchment of welfare supports, which began in many states in the 1980s and led to federal welfare reform in the 1990s. Indeed, research shows that increases in poverty rates were linked to growth in Black women's state imprisonment rates, and reductions in welfare support were linked to growth in the imprisonment of women of all races (Heimer et al. 2012).

Maternal incarceration also affects families and communities when women return home. Importantly, the changed rules accompanying federal welfare reform in the late 1990s imposed public housing restrictions for persons with criminal records (Curtis et al. 2013), which created obstacles to women's reentry and reunification with families. The impact is compounded when we consider that women's imprisonment rates had been climbing for two decades. In part because of restrictions on public housing, and in part because of discrimination by landlords, research shows that Black women with carceral histories are 50% more likely to experience homelessness than White women with carceral histories, twice as likely as Black men with carceral histories, and four times as likely as White men with carceral histories (Couloute & Kopf 2018). Although statistics on AIAN women are not available, securing housing is the most challenging part of reentry among AIAN people (Wodahl & Freng 2017). In short, the groups of women who have experienced the highest rates of incarceration are the same women who are likely to confront the greatest barriers to finding housing when they return from prison and jail.

Successful reentry into communities also depends on supporting oneself financially and finding work. Criminal records make finding work more difficult for all women, but the situation is further compounded for Black, Latina, and AIAN women. Unemployment statistics reveal that Black women with criminal records face more labor market barriers than White women, Latina women, and Black men with criminal records (Couloute & Kopf 2018). Moreover, the unemployment rate for Black women who were formerly incarcerated is 6.8 times higher than the unemployment rate for other Black women, which far exceeds the (substantial) gap in other race and ethnic groups. Furthermore, studies show that White women with criminal records fare better on the job market than Black women without criminal records (Decker et al. 2015). Although statistics on unemployment for AIAN women with carceral histories are unavailable, AIAN women in the general population experience unemployment rates that are nearly two times higher than other women (Allard & Brundage 2019). AIAN women also report more discrimination in job-seeking than women in any other race or ethnic category (SteelFisher et al. 2019). Although there is no direct evidence on the job searches of AIAN women who reenter communities after imprisonment, a criminal record surely poses a substantial barrier to employment. In short, Black, Latina, and AIAN women not only have higher incarceration rates than White women, but they also confront greater barriers to work after periods of incarceration. These inequalities are further increased by the lack of reentry supports in marginalized communities (Berg & Cobbina 2017).

Welfare reform of the late 1990s exacerbated the difficulties faced by women who have been incarcerated, and these restrictions have persisted over time (Curtis et al. 2013, Mauer & McCalmont 2013). Beyond restrictions on public housing, welfare reform also banned access to TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits for women convicted of drug felonies (Allard 2002, Mauer & McCalmont 2013). Given that about one-third of women in prison were incarcerated for drug offenses by the late 1990s, the new rules surely posed obstacles to women's reentry and reunification with families. The impact is compounded when we consider that by this point, women's imprisonment rates had been climbing for two decades. Moreover, although the percentage of women serving sentences for drug offenses has since declined, it is still the case that one-quarter of all women in state prisons are being held for drug crimes and women continue to reenter communities with the stigma and penalties imposed by past drug records.

Beyond these challenges, reclaiming motherhood is central to women's successful reentry and desistance from offending (Richie 2001, Rumgay 2004). Reentering mothers are often deemed negligent and doubly deviant for defying not only the law but also cultural motherhood mandates that require "good" mothers to intensively devote their lives to nurturing and protecting their children (De Coster & Heimer 2022). Interestingly, the intensive mothering mandate became

prominent in the early 1990s (Hays 1996), in tandem with the retrenchment of social welfare supports and the rise in maternal incarceration. Justice-involved women are particularly vulnerable to tarnished images as mothers because their past lives preclude them from meeting the now ubiquitous intensive mothering ideals. This may well affect the levels of state control that these mothers experience, especially as they transition back into families and communities.

Research reports that reentering Black mothers experience comparatively high levels of scrutiny in postincarceration supervision (Brown & Bloom 2009, Gurusami 2019). Studies show that negative images of Black womanhood expressed in welfare queen and crack addict tropes (Collins 2009) combine with increases in state control to make navigating postincarceration criminal justice surveillance difficult for Black women (Gurusami 2019). This is likely to be the case for reentering Latina mothers as well. As Longazel (2013) argues, current and historic stereotypes pairing Latino/a immigration with criminality create a pervasive “subordinating myth” that pervades many social institutions. This myth can combine with demeaning and sexualized images of Latinas as drug-involved “low-lives” who are “always pregnant” to promote institutional racism, which shapes the views and practices of workers in the criminal justice system (López & Chesney-Lind 2014). Such views are the substrate for the growth of increasingly coercive justice practices targeting Latinas and immigrant women (see Gómez Cervantes et al. 2017). Similarly, Ross (1998, 2004) discusses how racism, colonialism, and sexism combine to create a cultural landscape in which AIAN women in prison are depicted as bad mothers in need of continued state intervention. López & Chesney-Lind (2014) point out that negative stereotypes like these can be expected to impact the ways that women see themselves. Moreover, research suggests that stereotypes and hypersurveillance combine to encourage reentering mothers to hide mental health and addiction struggles, rather than seek help, to avoid losing custody of children (Gurusami 2017). We can see these processes as continuing a long legacy of state control and oppression of women of color in the United States (Richie 2012, Ross 2016).

Surprisingly, we know comparatively little about the family and community impacts of jail incarceration. As Turney & Connor (2019) note, there is little research on the consequences of cycling in and out of jail; research on collateral consequences either does not differentiate between jail and prison stays or examines only incarceration in prisons. This is even more the case regarding women’s incarceration in jails, and we know very little about how jail stays impact mothering. One exception is a recent report by the Vera Institute, which notes that confinement in jails can trigger downward economic spirals, removal from work, difficulties finding parenting substitutes, and problems reuniting with children upon release (Swavola et al. 2016).

CONCLUSIONS

Women’s incarceration rates have increased significantly over the past four decades, yet they have been given short shrift in research on mass incarceration. This misses an important opportunity to push forward empirical knowledge and theory in this area. Because women’s rates of imprisonment grew more quickly and recently declined more slowly than men’s rates, there may well be differences in the social forces underlying women’s as compared to men’s imprisonment. Studying these differences can further illuminate the contours and causes of mass incarceration in the United States. Moreover, neglecting women’s confinement rates in scholarly dialogue on mass incarceration is problematic because it renders women’s experiences subordinate to those of men (see Richie 2012), constituting an important inequality in the focus of criminological research.

In this article, we review data and research that speak to the American experiment with mass incarceration as it impacts women’s incarceration. We show that women’s rates of confinement in state prisons increased almost fivefold between 1978 and 2019, even after taking account of recent

modest declines. Women's rates of state imprisonment grew more than men's rates, with the most substantial growth occurring in the 1980s and 1990s. By 2019, women comprised a larger portion of the incarcerated population than ever before; this is a significant and historic change. Furthermore, unpacking women's trends in imprisonment by race and ethnicity highlights key inequalities in justice. The period of greatest growth in women's state imprisonment corresponded with very high rates of Black women being sentenced to prison as well as increases in the number of women sentenced to prison for drug offenses. Although Black women's rates of imprisonment have declined in recent years, they remain substantially higher than White women's rates. Furthermore, Latina women's combined state and federal imprisonment rates are now similar to the imprisonment rates of Black women. Although largely ignored, the imprisonment rates of AIAN women are increasing and are very high. AIAN women are now imprisoned by states at rates that are similar to the highest rates experienced by Black women, which occurred near the start of the twenty-first century. Clearly, AIAN women have experienced extreme inequality in imprisonment rates, yet this fact has been almost completely ignored by researchers (for exceptions, see Ross 1998, 2004, 2016). It is imperative that this striking omission be addressed.

Women's incarceration in jails has also grown. By 2019, women accounted for almost one in every seven people held in local jails. Unfortunately, there is no consistent reporting over time of women's rates of incarceration in jail by race and ethnicity. This is problematic, especially given the very large numbers of women who cycle in and out of jail each year. These points call attention to Turney & Connor's (2019) conclusion that jails have been studied too infrequently yet are critical for comprehending the full impact of the criminal justice system on social inequality in our nation. Indeed, we require more data and research on women's confinement in local jails in the United States, including consistent data over time on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, we need more research on the impact of larger numbers of women cycling in and out of jails on families, housing, employment, and communities.

We also need much more research and data on women in prison. Existing national data sources allow for the study of women's rates over time and for examination of trends for some race and ethnic groups. Nevertheless, the existing data present challenges for understanding the full scope of race and ethnic differences. This is an important limitation of criminal justice data on mass incarceration in the United States and is one that should be addressed soon. Similarly, we currently have only snapshots of the preincarceration experiences of women, as provided by periodic surveys of people confined in prison and jails. More consistent and regular survey data would offer more insight into women's employment, health, mental health, abuse, and drug dependencies prior to their incarceration. We also need more research that specifically addresses the consequences of women's imprisonment on families, communities, and reentry processes.

Moreover, it is time to study the broader political, social, and economic forces that shape women's rates of confinement. Research has studied the link between trends in male imprisonment and partisan politics, labor markets, racism, and social welfare (e.g., Greenberg & West 2001, Jacobs & Helm 1996, Stucky et al. 2005, Western 2006). There has been little research, by contrast, on the societal forces associated with trends in female incarceration (for exceptions, see Heimer et al. 2012, McLaughlin & Shannon 2022).⁴ The empirical research that connects imprisonment rates to social and political changes has been informed by, and contributes to, broader theoretical understandings of criminal punishment (e.g., Garland 2001, Gottschalk 2013, Simon 2007). Research on female imprisonment and jail incarceration must contribute to this discussion

⁴McLaughlin & Shannon's (2022) paper on inequality and female-to-male prison admission rates appeared in online form after the current article had been completed and was in editorial production.

in the future. Given feminist attention to multiple interweaving layers of inequality, research that addresses the broad political, social, and economic forces shaping women's imprisonment has the potential to reframe theories of criminal punishment through an intersectional lens.

In closing, the story of women's incarceration over time constitutes a tale of inequalities. A first inequality is that research on mass incarceration has given inadequate attention to the growth in women's imprisonment rates and the consequences of this growth. Second, there are pervasive inequalities rooted in race and ethnic differences in women's trends and levels of incarceration. Third, the social and economic disadvantages experienced by women prior to imprisonment are reported to exceed the disadvantages of men in prison. Fourth, confinement in prisons and jails has had concentrated effects on Black, Latina, and American Indian/Indigenous women and therefore on their families and communities. These facts about America's mass incarceration project clearly deserve more attention.

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