

# Women & Incarceration in America

Our mentorship model reinforces Better Decisions' five-step decision-making curriculum, and the recidivism data reflects it.

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## THE SCALE OF WOMEN'S INCARCERATION

**190,600**

women and girls incarcerated in the U.S. today

**+600%**

increase in incarcerated women since 1980

**1M+**

women under criminal legal supervision in 2023

**25%**

of the world's incarcerated women are held in the U.S.

Since 2020, women's jail incarceration has climbed **33%**, nearly double the 17% rate for men.

Women's share of total arrests nearly doubled since 1980, **from 14% to 27%**, while men's arrest rate fell 41%.

**82% of women** under correctional control are on probation or parole, not incarcerated.

More than **a quarter of incarcerated women** have not yet had a trial. 60% in local jails are awaiting trial unconvicted.

## WHO THESE WOMEN ARE

**80% of women in jails are mothers**, most of them primary caretakers of their children. Nearly **60% of women** in state prisons are parents of minor children.

**98%** of women in jails have experienced trauma in their lifetimes.

**76%** of women in state prisons show indicators of mental health problems, significantly higher than men.

**68%** of incarcerated women with mental health problems have a history of physical or sexual abuse.

**26%** experienced homelessness in the year before their arrest, vs. 16% of men.

**53%** were jobless in the month before arrest and **53%** did not complete high school.

## RECIDIVISM

Women recidivate at lower rates: **63%** of women released from state prison were rearrested within 5 years, vs. **72% of men**.

Women released from federal prison were rearrested at just **35%** vs. 52% of men within 8 years.

## MENTORSHIP & REENTRY IMPACT

**57%**

decrease in convictions among youth paired with credible messenger mentors (New York)

**80%**

reduction in violent rearrests in intensive peer-led programs (RSVP, San Francisco)

**<4%**

recidivism rate in programs combining education and peer mentorship (Bard Prison Initiative)

**40%+**

national average recidivism rate — the gap mentorship is actively closing

Those who received peer mentorship were significantly less likely to recidivate than those in standard reentry services alone.

— Sells et al., 2020 · Randomized Controlled Trial · U.S. Dept. of Justice / Criminal Justice and Behavior

## WHAT EFFECTIVE MENTORSHIP DELIVERS

**Cognitive & behavioral shifts:** helps women reframe identity and build toward desistance from crime

**Improved mental health:** greater healthcare engagement, medication adherence, and reduced substance use

**Self-empowerment:** lived-experience mentors build confidence, hope, and motivation to change

**Social navigation:** connecting women to housing, employment, and community resources

**Family reconnection:** structured support around parenting and family reunification

## THE UNMET NEED

Among individuals who reported a **high need for mentoring** during reentry, only **15% actually received it**.

Mentorship is one of the most chronically underprovided services in reentry, even as evidence confirms it works.

For 40 years, Better Decisions has proven that the right tools, support, and community change lives. As the need grows, so does our commitment, because the women we serve deserve nothing less.

Sources: Prison Policy Initiative, Women's Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie (2024), Council on Criminal Justice, Women's Justice: By the Numbers (2025), The Sentencing Project, Incarcerated Women & Girls (2025), Sells et al., 2020, Criminal Justice and Behavior, Matthews, 2021, Journal of Offender Rehabilitation