

WOMEN IN PRISON PROJECT

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Survivors of Abuse in Prison Fact Sheet

In prison

- A study conducted in 1999 found that 82% of women incarcerated at New York's Bedford Hills Correctional Facility had a childhood history of severe physical and/or sexual abuse and that more than 90% had endured physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes.¹
- This study also found that 75% of the women had experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner during adulthood.²
- Nationwide, more than 57% of women in state prisons and 55% of women in local jails report having been physically and/or sexually abused in the past.³
- Two-thirds of female state inmates with histories of abuse and 68% of female jail inmates with histories of abuse report that the abuse was perpetrated by an intimate partner.⁴
- The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that more than 37% of women in state prisons have been raped before their incarceration.⁵
- The Bureau also reports that female inmates are at least three times more likely than male inmates to have been physically or sexually abused in their past.⁶
- Women in prison are at least twice as likely as women in the general public to report childhood histories of physical or sexual abuse.⁷
- A 1996 government study found that 93% of women convicted of killing sexual intimates – current or former husbands, boyfriends or girlfriends – had been physically or sexually abused by an intimate.⁸
- 89% of women prisoners who report having been abused before arrest state that they used drugs regularly before their imprisonment.⁹
- A 1996 study found that a majority of women incarcerated in the New York City jail system reported engaging in illegal activity in response to experiences of abuse, the threat of violence, or coercion by their male partners.¹⁰
- Counseling programs that assist women in dealing with issues surrounding abuse have proven to reduce recidivism rates: women jail inmates participating in the Trauma, Addiction, Mental Health, and Recovery (TAMAR) Project in Maryland had a recidivism rate of less than 3%;¹¹ women who participated for more than six months in the Family Violence Program at New York's Bedford Hills Correctional Facility had a recidivism rate of just over 10% versus nearly 24% for non-participants.¹²
- Survivors of violence incarcerated for defending themselves against abusers pose little threat to public safety: they have extremely low rates of recidivism, and, most often, no criminal records and no history of violence other than the offense for which they are in prison.¹³
- Of the 38 women convicted of murder and released between 1985 and 2003, not a single one returned to prison for a new crime within a 36-month period of release – a zero percent recidivism rate.¹⁴
- Of the total number of women sent to prison in 1980 for a violent felony offense, only about 9% were convicted of another violent felony after their release.¹⁵

In the general population

- 1.5 million women in the U.S. are raped or physically assaulted by an intimate partner each year.¹⁶
- More than 50% have been assaulted at some point during their lives.¹⁷
- It is estimated that only one in seven domestic assaults come to the attention of the police.¹⁸
- The financial costs of intimate partner abuse are estimated to be more than \$5.8 billion each year.¹⁹
- More than \$4 billion annually is spent on direct medical and mental health care services for survivors.²⁰
- Battering is the number one cause of injury to women in the U.S. Attacks by abusers result in more injuries requiring medical treatment than rapes, muggings and auto accidents combined.²¹
- Since 1976, about 30% of all female murder victims nationwide have been killed by an intimate partner.²²
- Studies show that women in substance abuse treatment programs are significantly more likely to report histories of physical or sexual abuse – especially childhood abuse – than women not in treatment.²³
- Studies also show that girls who have been sexually abused are more likely to be arrested as adults for prostitution.²⁴
- Over three million children nationwide witness domestic violence each year.²⁵
- Women of all cultures, races, sexual orientations, gender identities, income levels and ages experience abuse. Nevertheless, socioeconomic status and cultural background significantly influence the impact of domestic violence: low-income women, for example, often have fewer options than women with more financially stable support networks, such as the option to leave an abusive relationship and still have the ability to afford to take care of children; women who are immigrants may be even more hesitant than citizens to reach out for help or call the police out of fear of being arrested themselves and deported.²⁶

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- ¹ Browne, Miller and Maguin, "Prevalence and Severity of Lifetime Physical and Sexual Victimization Among Incarcerated Women," *International Journal of Law & Psychiatry* 22(3-4) (1999).
- ² *Id.*
- ³ *Prior Abuse Reported by Inmates and Probationers*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice (April 1999), at 2 (hereinafter *Prior Abuse Reported by Inmates and Probationers*), and Doris J. James, *Profile of Jail Inmates, 2002*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice (July 2004), at 10.
- ⁴ *Id.*
- ⁵ *Prior Abuse Reported by Inmates and Probationers*, at 2.
- ⁶ *Survey of State Inmates, 1991*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice (May 1993), at 6.
- ⁷ *Prior Abuse Reported by Inmates and Probationers*, at 1.
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- ⁸ This study found that "[t]he vast amount of harm experienced" by the women interviewed for the study "reinforces the importance of intervention programs for incarcerated women." *Homicide by Women*, New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (June 1996), at 8 and 19.
- ⁹ *Prior Abuse Reported by Inmates and Probationers*, at 1.
- ¹⁰ Beth E. Richie, *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women* (New York: Routledge Press, 1996).
- ¹¹ The TAMAR Project provides "integrated, trauma-oriented services for women with mental illness and co-occurring substance abuse disorders" in local jails in Maryland. *Report of the Reentry Policy Council: Charting the Safe and Successful Return of Prisoners to the Community*, Reentry Policy Council, at 522.
- ¹² This DOCS report tracked rates of return to state prison for the 220 women who participated in the Family Violence Program from 1988 to 1994 and were released to the community. Kathy Canestrani, "Follow-up Study of Bedford Hills Family Violence Program," New York State Department of Correctional Services Research Unit (1994), at 4.
- ¹³ Statistics related to the numbers of people incarcerated for committing crimes as a result of abuse are not currently tracked by government agencies. Although exact statistics do not exist, programs serving currently and formerly incarcerated survivors report that survivors rarely have histories of violent criminal behavior and most often do not recidivate after release. More than 85% of women sent to prison for violent felony offenses in 2007 were first time felony offenders. *Table 1C: Crime by Predicate Felony Status By Gender; 2007 New Court Commitments to NYSDOCS*, New York State Department of Correctional Services, prepared February 14, 2008. As of January 2008, just under 82% of women under custody for violent felony offenses were first felony offenders. *Table 4A: Crime by Predicate Felony Status by Gender*.
- ¹⁴ Testimony on Behalf of the Alliance for Rational Parole Policies, Testimony Before the New York State Senate Standing Committee on Crime Victims, Crime and Correction, January 15, 2008.
- ¹⁵ New York State Division of Criminal Justice Statistics, DCJS Computerized Criminal History System, data based on persons sent to prison from January 1 through December 31, 2006.
- ¹⁶ *Extent, Nature and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence*, U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice (2000).
- ¹⁷ National Violence Against Women Survey, conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1998).
- ¹⁸ "Violence and the Family: Report of the American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Violence and the Family," American Psychological Association (1996); Task Force on Domestic and Sexual Violence, Florida Mortality Review Project (1997).
- ¹⁹ *Costs of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in the United States*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (2003), at 2.
- ²⁰ *Id.*
- ²¹ E. Stark and A. Flitcraft, "Violence Among Inmates, An Epidemiological Review," *Handbook of Family Violence* (1988); Uniform Crime Reports, Special Report: Violence Among Family Members and Intimate Partners, Federal Bureau of Investigation (2003, revised January 2005).
- ²² C.M. Rennison and S. Welchans, *Intimate Partner Violence*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report (May 2000, Revised 01/31/02); See C.M. Rennison, *Intimate Partner Violence, 1993-2001*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Crime Data Brief (February 2003).
- ²³ B.A. Miller, W.R. Downs, and M. Testa, "Interrelationships Between Victimization Experiences and Women's Alcohol Use," *Journal of Studies on Alcohol, Suppl. 11*, 109-117 (1993); S.C. Wilsnack, N.D. Vogeltanz, A.D. Klassen, and T.R. Harris, "Childhood Sexual Abuse and Women's Substance Abuse: National Survey Findings," *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 58(3), 264-271 (1997); T.J. Jarvis, J. Copeland, and L. Walton, "Exploring the Nature of the Relationship Between Child Sexual Abuse and Substance Abuse Among Women," *Addiction*, 93(6), 865-875 (1998).
- ²⁴ C. Spatz-Widom and M.A. Ames, "Criminal Consequences of Childhood Sexual Victimization," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 18, 303-318 (1994).
- ²⁵ Mary Kenning, Anita Merchant and Alan Tomkins, "Research on the Effects of Witnessing Parental Battering: Clinical and Legal Policy Implications," in *Women Battering: Policy Implications*, ed. Michael Steinman (Cincinnati: Anderson Publishers, 1991).
- ²⁶ See, e.g., Beth E. Richie, *Exploring the Link Between Violence Against Women and Women's Involvement in Illegal Activity*, U.S. Department of Justice, Research on Women and Girls in the Justice System (September 2000).