



# WPA Focus on Women & Justice

WOMEN'S PRISON ASSOCIATION

Trends in Incarceration 1

August 2003

## THE POPULATION OF WOMEN IN PRISON INCREASES RAPIDLY

### BACKGROUND

Since 1977, the population of all prisoners sentenced under state or federal jurisdiction has grown tremendously. While this decades-long expansion of the correctional system has recently slowed and even reversed in some states, the size of its impact remains staggering. The current population of prisoners is as large as the combined populations of the cities of Atlanta, Miami and Washington, D.C. Men continue to make up the bulk of the prison population, but the rate of female incarceration is growing at a much faster pace. The population of women in prison is now as large as the population of the city of Trenton, New Jersey. The increase in female incarceration has significant consequences for the criminal justice system, families, and neighborhoods.

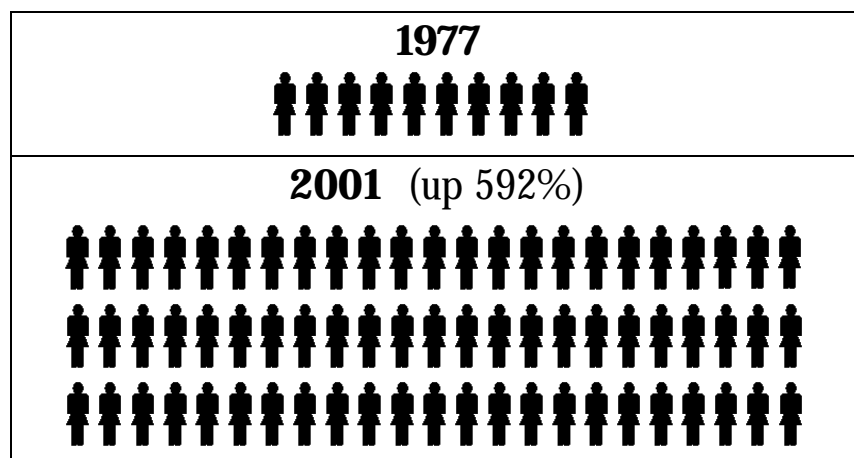
### THE NATIONAL CONTEXT<sup>1</sup>

The yearly rate of growth for women is 1.5 times higher than the rate of growth for men.

### BETWEEN 1977 AND 2001

- n The population of all prisoners grew by **348%**—from 300,024 in 1977 to 1,344,512 in 2001.
- n The population of female prisoners grew by **592%**—from 12,279 in 1977 to 85,031 in 2001.
- n The population of male prisoners grew by **338%**—287,745 in 1977 to 1,259,481 in 2001.

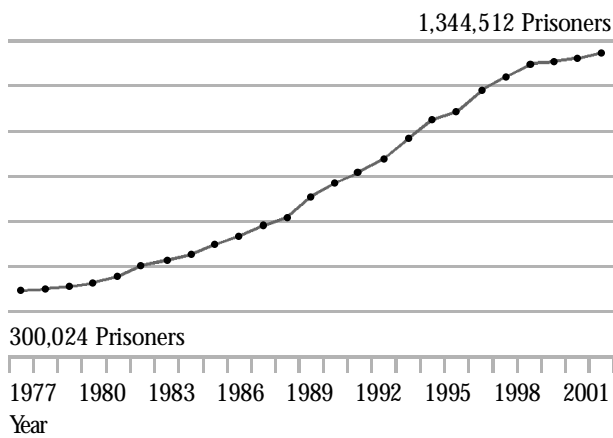
### NUMBER OF WOMEN SENTENCED NATIONALLY



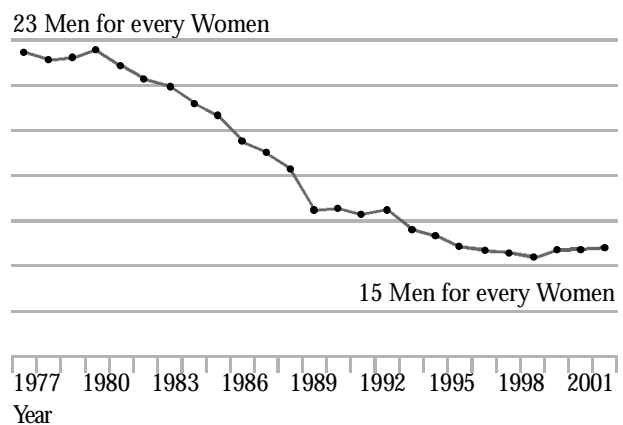
## WOMEN MAKE UP A GREATER PERCENTAGE OF TODAY'S PRISON POPULATION THAN EVER BEFORE.

- n Because the increase in the incarceration rate for women continues to outpace that for men, the gap between the number of men and the number of women in prisons has narrowed considerably.
- n In 1977, there were 23 men for every woman in state and federal prisons. In 2001 there were 15 men for every woman in prison.

### NUMBER OF MEN AND WOMEN IN PRISON INCREASES



### RATIO OF MEN TO WOMEN IN PRISON DECREASES



## THE RATE OF INCREASE IN FEMALE INCARCERATION IS AMPLIFIED IN NEW YORK STATE<sup>2</sup>

### BETWEEN 1977 AND 2001

- n The population of imprisoned women in New York State grew by 511% compared to 253% for men. Before the female incarceration rate began to decline in 1996 to levels closer to those of the early 1990s, the population of women in NYS prisons had increased by 628%.
- n The rate of growth for women was two times higher than the rate for men.
- n The percentage of the prison population that were women increased by 75%—nearly 1.5 times higher than the national rate. In 1977 the percent of the sentenced population that were women was 2.6% and in 2001 it was 4.6%.
- n In 1977 there were 37 men for every woman in New York prisons, compared to a rate of 20 to 1 in 2001.

## DISCUSSION

- n The growth of the female prison population corresponds directly to the mandatory minimum sentencing laws in effect since the early 1970s. Since more women are convicted for non-violent, drug-related crimes than for any other, these sentencing policies have had a particularly profound effect on women. Ten years after mandatory sentences for drug offenses were enacted, the number of women sentenced to state prisons has increased ten-fold<sup>3</sup>. New York State's Rockefeller Drug Laws are among the harshest of these sentencing schemes and have contributed to a 277% increase in incarceration for drug felons. Currently, approximately 50% of all women in New York State prisons are serving time for drug related offenses<sup>4</sup>.
- n The majority of women in prisons are mothers. Because women typically are the primary caretakers of children, the increase in female incarceration has significant consequences for children, families and neighborhoods. Once incarcerated, a woman is at increased risk of losing her children to the foster care system, and possibly even of having her parental rights terminated. However, this usually does not translate into greater stability and well-being for the children. Children of prisoners are at great risk of instability, trauma and interrupted development. Furthermore, in communities with a large percentage of incarcerated men, women are often the central providers of financial, social, and emotional resources. When women are incarcerated, support networks in already disadvantaged neighborhoods are further compromised.
- n The dramatic increase in female incarceration means that the demands on the corrections system have far outpaced its ability to provide necessary supportive services for women. For example, women require different health care

services than have been traditionally administered in prison. Many women enter prison pregnant and/or in need of treatment for reproductive health problems. Current gynecological services are inadequate to meet this need. Psychological counseling services also are in short supply, yet a substantial number of women in prison have suffered physical and/or sexual abuse<sup>5</sup>. Finally, since a significant number of women in prison report having regularly used drugs before their arrest<sup>6</sup>, treatment services are needed so that they are better able to re-enter society without returning to substance abuse. Failure to provide supportive services makes reentering the community more difficult.

## SOLUTIONS

- n Incarceration does not solve the problems associated with drug use and trafficking in poor communities. Instead, treatment, social service provision and increased economic opportunity are needed in areas ravaged by the loss of an economic base, service cuts, and social and political disenfranchisement.
- n Preventive education and treatment are far more cost effective than arrest and imprisonment. In Arizona taxpayers saved 2.6 million dollars in the first year after legislation passed mandating drug treatment instead of prison for non-violent drug offenders. New York would benefit from such an initiative. Currently, each year we spend \$32,000 per prisoner in our upstate prisons, and about \$68,000 per bed in the New York City jail system. This represents a total of \$860 million a year to operate its jail system.
- n Sensible sentencing reform, a greater investment in Alternatives to Incarceration (ATIs), and a reevaluation of how we punish female offenders would begin to stem the tide of women into prisons and jails.

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### References

<sup>1</sup>All National and State data up to 1998 are taken from the National Prisoner Statistics Data Series conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. National data for 1999 through 2001 are taken from the "Prisoner and Jail Inmates at Midyear" and "Prisoners" series published annually by the Bureau of Justice Series. <sup>2</sup>New York State data for 1999 through 2001 are taken from "Men and Women Under Custody, 1987-2001" published in 2002 by the State of New York Department of Correctional Services. <sup>3</sup>Drug Policy Alliance. "Race and the Drug War." Downloaded May 5, 2003, available online at <http://www.drugpolicy.org/race/womenofcolor>. <sup>4</sup>State of New York Department of Correctional Services. 2001. Female Offenders:1999-2000. <sup>5</sup>Ditton, Paula M. 1999. Mental Health and Treatment of Inmates and Probationers. <sup>6</sup>Mumola, Christopher J. 1999. Substance Abuse and Treatment, State and Federal Prisoners, 1997.

# MISSION

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*Founded in 1844, WPA works to create opportunities for change in the lives of women prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families. WPA provides a range of services through which women acquire life skills needed to end their involvement in the criminal justice system and to make positive, healthy choices for themselves and their families.*

*WPA maintains a 159-year tradition of public information and advocacy designed to ameliorate jail and prison conditions for women. WPA also strives to increase public awareness of and support for effective, community-based responses to crime.*

**WPA SUPPORTS THESE AND OTHER  
ADVOCACY EFFORTS  
THROUGH OUR WORK WITH  
AND ON BEHALF OF FEMALE PRISONERS  
AND EX-PRISONERS.**



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