Fact Sheet

Women and the Prison System

• Women represent the fastest growing population in prison. Between 1980 and 2000, the growth rate for the female prison population increased over 320%. Currently, approximately 100,000 women are in jails and prisons. The average age of women in prison is 28, and 59% have not finished high school.

• 90% of women in prison are single mothers. There are over 200,000 children in the U.S. whose mothers are incarcerated. (Children with a parent in prison are 8 times more likely to end up in prison when they are adults).

• These mothers in prison are disproportionately women of color, with African American women comprising 46% of the prison population nationwide, White women comprising 36%, and Hispanic Women comprising 14%. Black women, on average, receive longer jail time and higher fines than do white women for the same crimes. Black women are twice as likely to be convicted of killing their abusive husbands than are white women.

• Incarcerated mothers are overwhelmingly poor. The majority of women prisoners (53%) and women in jail (74%) were unemployed prior to incarceration. The majority are in prison for economic crimes, such as check forgery and illegal credit card use. 80% of women in prison report incomes of less than $2,000 per year in the year before their arrest, and 92% report incomes under $10,000.

• Because there are fewer prison facilities for women, an incarcerated woman is ordinarily much farther away from her home and family than the average male prisoner. This increased distance causes substantial transportation problems for children of prisoners and as a result deprives women prisoners of contact with their children: only about 18% of mothers in prison see their children on a regular basis. This lack of contact leads to unstable family systems; difficulties with rebuilding the family system after the mother is released; and even the disintegration of the family. If relatives cannot care for them, prisoners’ children go into foster care, which can further erode family ties.

• 8% of women are pregnant when they enter prison, many of whom give birth in shackles. In some cases, the woman is abruptly separated from her child after giving birth. In other cases, infants can stay in the prison nursery until they are one year old, then must be placed with a relative or go into the foster care system.

• While medical care for all prisoners is poor, the situation is far worse for women prisoners. Because prison health care systems were created for men, pre-natal care as well as routine gynecological care, such as pap smears, breast exams and mammograms, is extremely rare in prisons. Care is frequently only administered once the situation becomes an emergency.

• There are very few adequate drug and alcohol rehab programs in women’s prisons, little or no adequate counseling programs, and limited job training opportunities. Women prisoners spend on average 17 hours a day in their cells, with one hour outside for exercise.

• The U.S. is the only developed country in the world to have male guards in women’s prisons, which has led to sexual harassment and abuse.

Sources: National Women’s Law Center, Washington, D.C., Chicago Legal Aid to Incarcerated Mothers, Women’s Economic Agenda Project
Case Study

Hour Children

At 8 am every Saturday, Amanda, 4; Julia: 5;  Marie, 6; Aurora, 13; Lupe, 14; Claudia, 15; and a Sister of St. Joseph leave Queens, New York City, and head north in a van to a prison in upstate New York. For each of these girls, it is their weekly Mother’s Day, an opportunity for a regular hour-long visit and bonding experience with their mothers in jail—an opportunity they would not have if it were not for the Hour Children program.

The girls live in one of the program’s houses, a former convent now called “My Mother’s House,” where children of prisoners can live with security and safety, can call their mothers regularly on the telephone, can get help writing letters and making presents for them, and can get emotional support when they deeply miss their moms. (The name of the house was chosen specifically so that the children can answer without embarrassment when asked where the live; when asked who takes care of them, they can honestly answer, “my mother’s friends.”)

Michelle was first placed in foster care when her mother went to prison; at 11 years of age, Michelle was forced to serve as caretaker for five other younger foster children in the household. Hour Children co-founders, Sr. Elaine Roulet and Sr. Teresa (Tesa) Fitzgerald, navigated around many obstacles to finally get the young girl transferred to My Mother’s House.

The young girl is now thriving and happy, spending her free time with the “Teen Time” group run by Hour Children, with volunteers providing tutoring, activities and field trips for the young people. Now that Michelle is living in My Mother’s House, her mother can rest in the knowledge that her daughter is safe; she also has greater hope that once she is released, their mother-daughter relationship will be healthy and positive.

After her mother’s release, the two of them will move together into a transitional Hour Children house. Her mother will start a job training program, work with a volunteer life skills mentor, attend a parenting class, and take part in a support group with other newly released women; she will get a second chance as a mother, a worker and a community member.

Sr. Tesa says she often prays to the “God of Second Chances.” “We lock up these women and pretend they and their children don’t exist. My job is give them hope and opportunities.” According to Sr. Tesa, in many cases the arrest of a mother is a symptom of a family in crisis spurred by poverty, often compounded by drug use and domestic violence. She also knows an important part of the healing of the women and their children is community and support.

In a second former convent in a nearby neighborhood, another part of Hour Children can be glimpsed through a playroom window. Lupe is feeding her 16 month old son; she is on a work release program that Hour Children established with the Taconic State Prison, where her son was born. There are nine other mothers and their little ones living there as well—all on work releases negotiated by Sr. Tesa and all with prison-born babies.

Lupe’s arm has a large burn scar; prior to her arrest she overdosed on drugs and passed out on a radiator. However, since becoming affiliated with Hour Children during her incarceration, she has completed a drug rehab program, she is working, and she is finishing a GED program. Next year she will begin taking classes at La Guardia Community College, yet another step towards a new life. Lupe is thrilled to have her son out of the grim environment of the prison; she is relieved to know that he will be able to go to the Hour Children nursery school, with its bright colors, educational toys and activities (the nursery school program was developed to provide a strong foundation of cognitive, language and social skills).

Hour Children provides other services for mothers—both as inmates and after their release—and for their children. It now has several group and transitional homes in Queens; it is also in the process of obtaining an old apartment building for rehab in order to provide long-term housing opportunities for low-income working mothers who do not qualify for public housing (as convicted felons) and cannot afford the ever-increasing New York City area rent.
Hour Children (continued)

Along with serving as the director of the ever-growing program, Sr. Tesa has been a tireless worker and fundraiser for Hour Children for fifteen years. Hour Children runs completely on donations, but has several full-time staff members and over 80 volunteers who provide a wide range of services. In one of the Hour Children houses, Sr. Tesa joyfully points to the many pictures of the families she has helped over the years—smiling mothers and children, happy and healthy together: “This is what true justice looks like.”

Prayer to Mary, Mother of Sorrows, Mother of us All

Mary, Mother of sorrows,
ease the sorrow of mothers in prison cells
separated from their children.
Grant them courage, strength and hope
so that they might rebuild their lives and their families.
Grant us your compassion
so that we might understand their plight
and support the rebuilding of their lives and families
through just laws, policies and programs.

Come, Mary, Mother of us all.
Move us to see that we are all part of your family.
Help us cherish every child,
respect every mother’s dignity,
and tear down the walls that divide us,
so that caring communities might flourish
like May flowers under a blue sky.

Discussion Questions

In the 1990s, the late Senator Hart estimated that the annual cost of corporate “white collar” crime was between $174-231 billion dollars, while the economic cost of “street crimes” was $3-4 billion. This trend continues today, as rich Enron executives continue to enjoy the good life despite major business fraud, while increasing numbers of poor and working class mothers are being sent to jail for petty crimes. Discuss possible reasons for this situation. Does this situation serve the common good, a basic tenet of Catholic Social Teaching? Discuss some possible alternatives to the present system that would benefit the common good.

Since the Church has a special option for the poor, how can people of faith support mothers in poverty in ways that build strong and healthy family systems and give children a promising future? What kind of social and economic investments do we need to support and strengthen all families?

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