

September 19, 2019

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# Overlooked: Women and Jails in an Era of Reform

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Benedict Center's Women & Justice Event

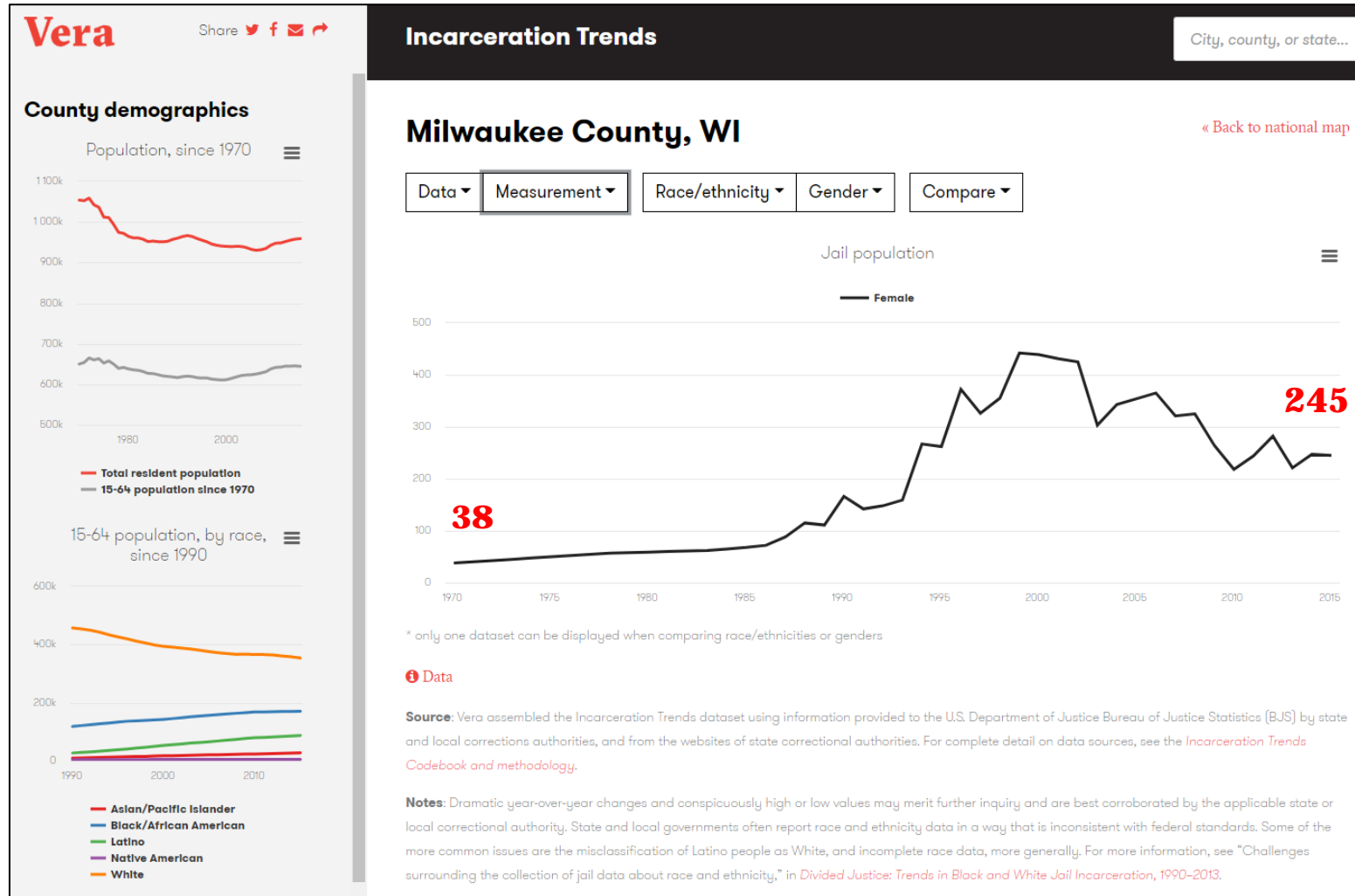
Liz Swavola  
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# Vera Institute of Justice

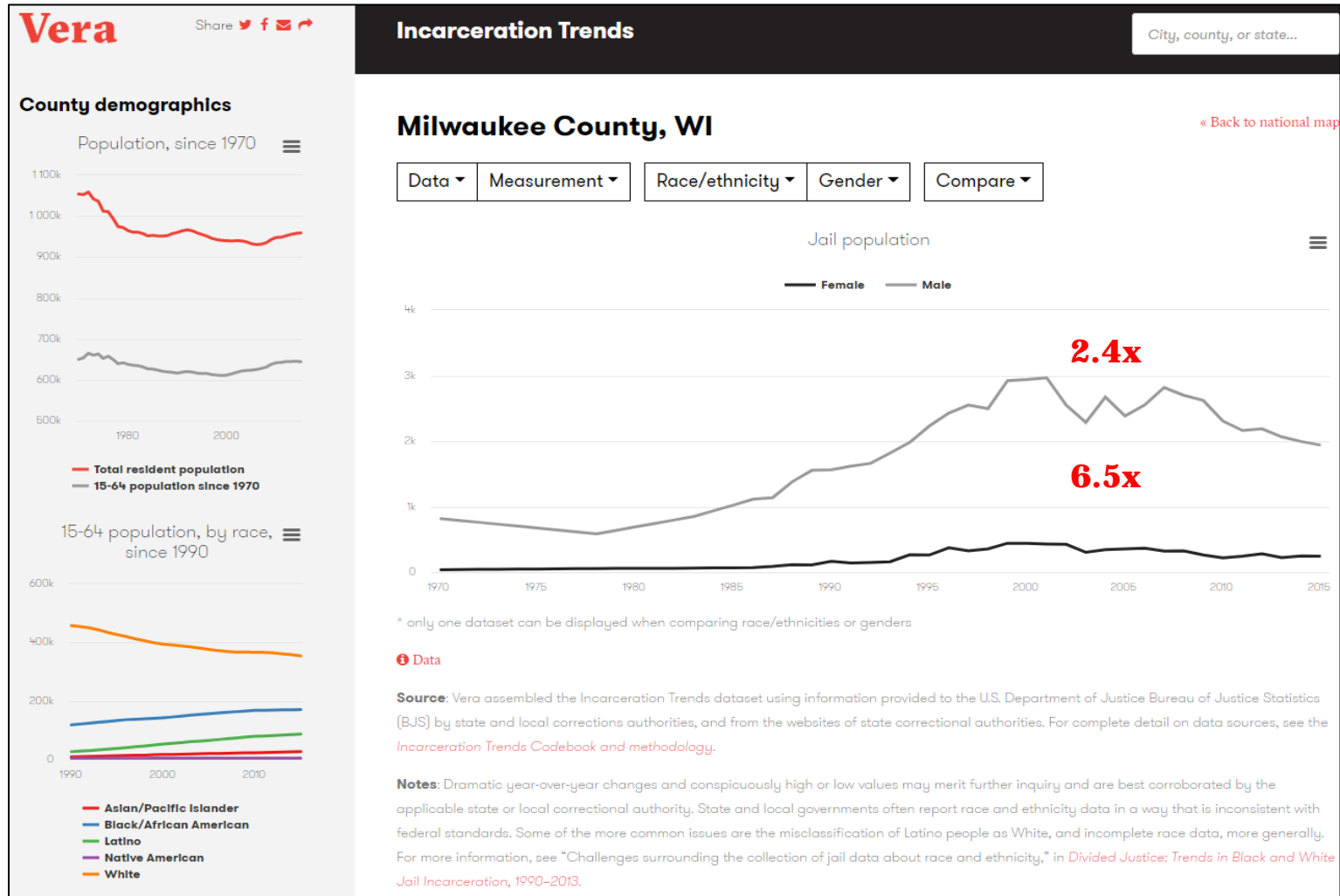
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- Vera is an independent nonprofit organization
  - Study and analyze problems in justice systems
  - Produce and use evidence to drive effective policies and practices
  - Pilot solutions
  - Engage diverse communities
- Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections partners with state and local systems and communities to advance justice policies that promote fairness and protect public safety
  - Advance access to high quality college education behind bars
  - Reduce solitary confinement
  - Close mass incarceration's front door by reducing overuse of jails

# Incarceration Trends



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## Milwaukee County, WI

[« Back to national map](#)

Data ▾

Measurement ▾

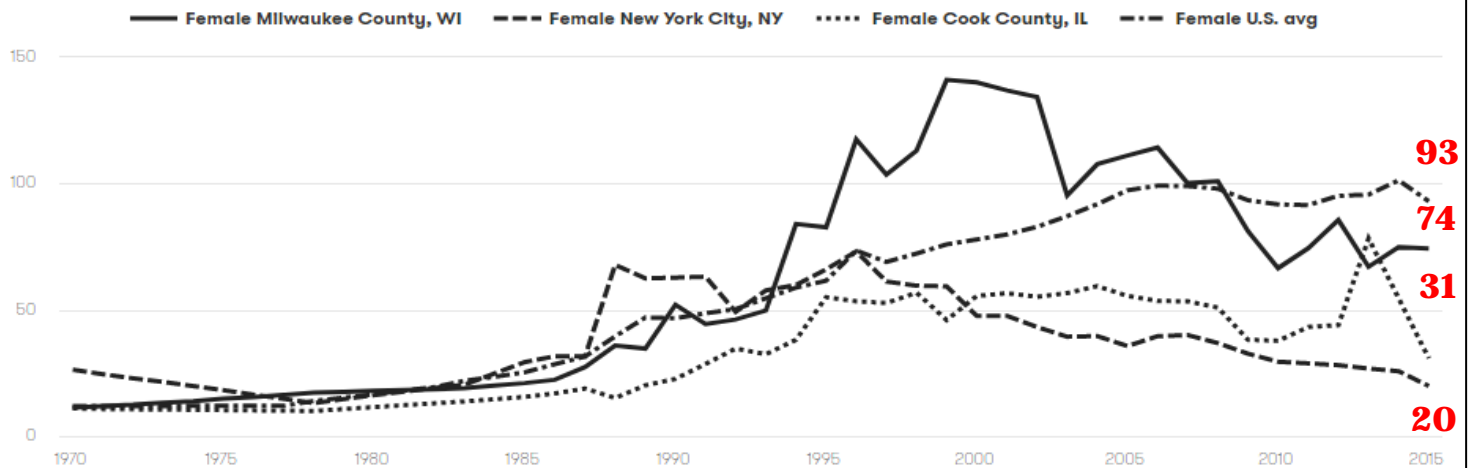
Race/ethnicity ▾

Gender ▾

Compare ▾

### Jail population

Per 100,000 residents age 15-64

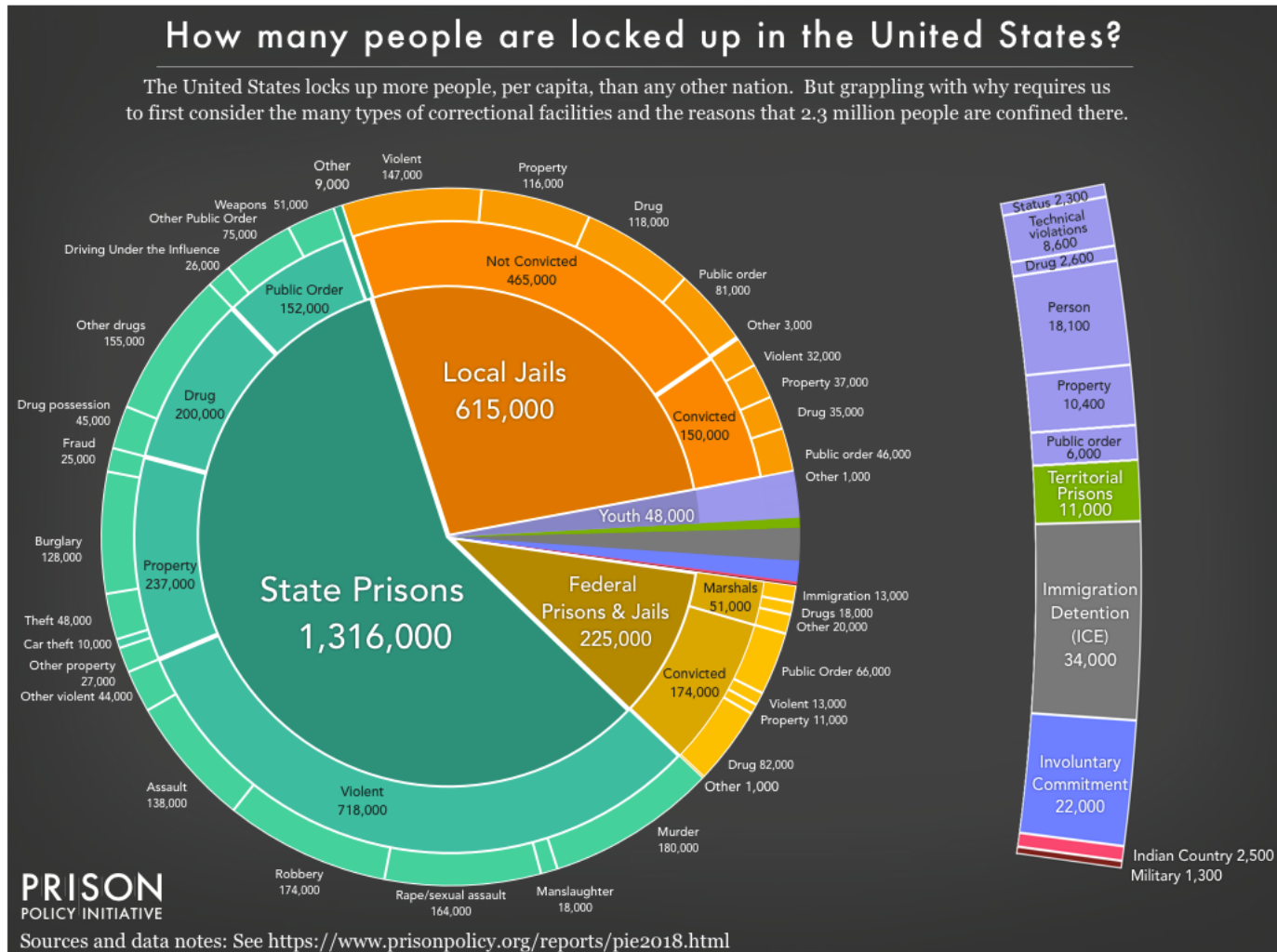


\* only one dataset can be displayed when comparing race/ethnicities or genders

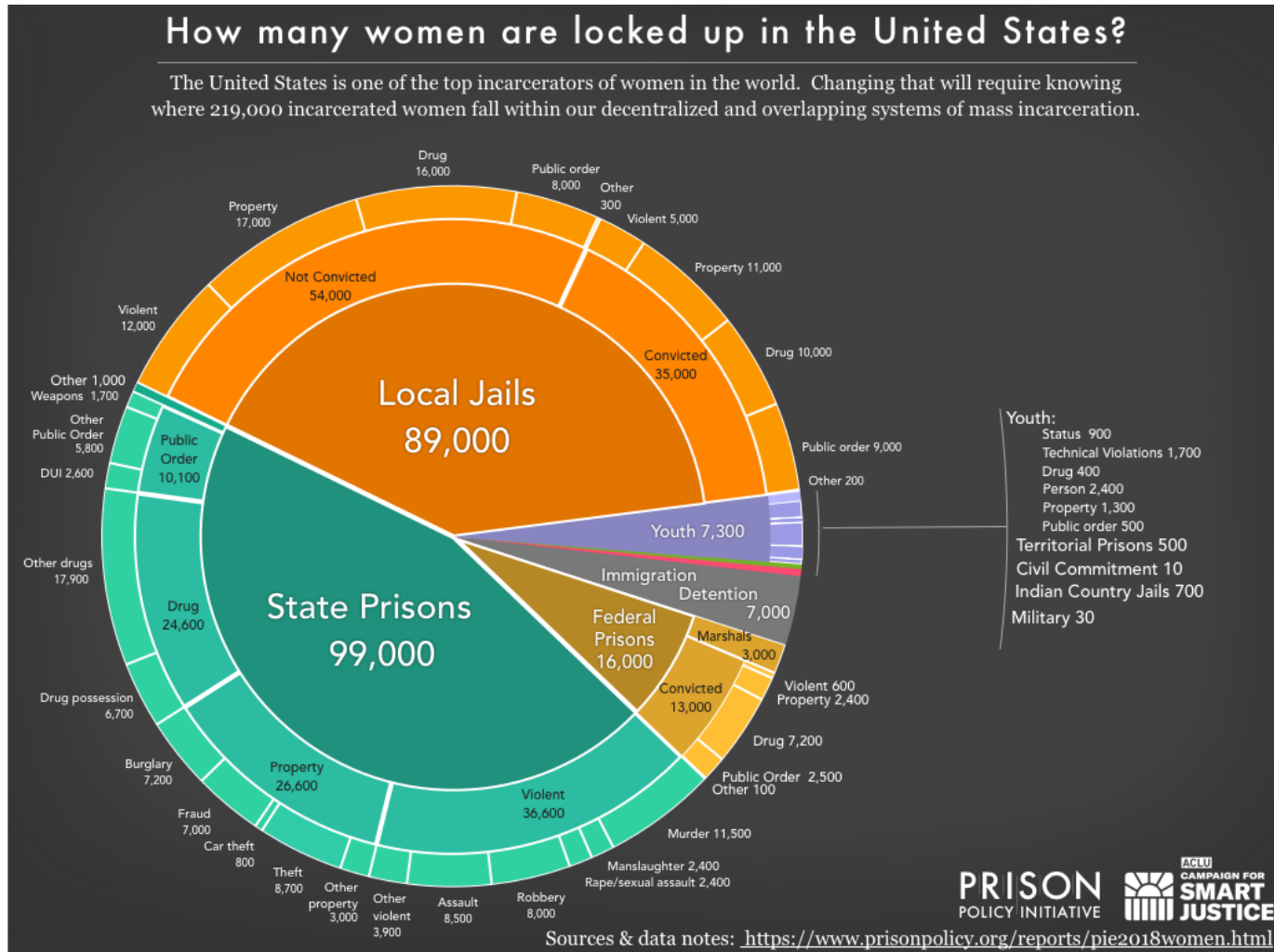
[Data](#)

**Source:** Vera assembled the Incarceration Trends dataset using information provided to the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) by state and local corrections authorities, and from the websites of state correctional authorities. For complete detail on data sources, see the [Incarceration Trends Codebook and methodology](#).


# Incarceration's Front Door



# Mass Incarceration of Women



# Decades of Growth

 Women in jail in small counties



In 1970, **73 percent** of counties across the U.S. reported **zero women** in their jails.

- Since 1970, the number of women in jails has increased **14-fold**—8,000 to 110,000—or **1200%**
- This growth has been most dramatic in small counties, increasing **31-fold**
- Recent decreases in admissions only apply to men

**1970**



**2014**

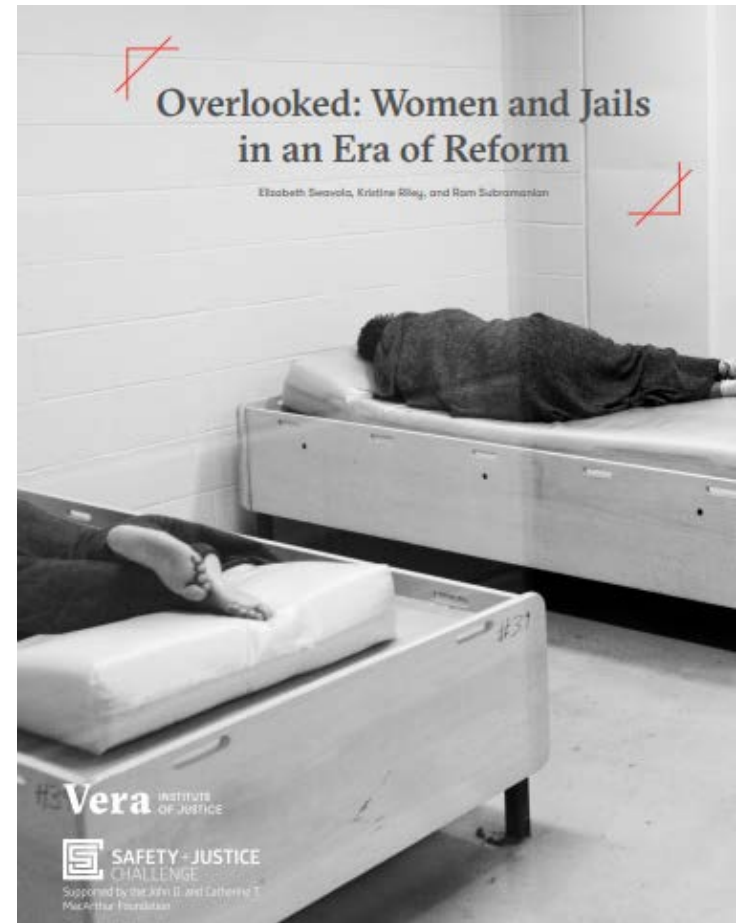




# Overlooked: Women and Jails

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- One in a series Vera is releasing with the Safety and Justice Challenge
- Other publications include:
  - *Incarceration's Front Door: The Misuse of Jails in America*
  - *The Price of Jails: Measuring the Taxpayer Cost of Local Incarceration*
  - *The Human Toll of Jail*, a multimedia storytelling project



# Racial and Ethnic Disparities

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Nearly two-thirds of women in jail are women of color—44 percent are black, 15 percent are Hispanic, and 5 percent are of other racial/ethnic backgrounds—compared to 36 percent of women who identified as white.

■ Women of color    ■ White women



- Local, more recent data point to starker disparities
- The total number of **Native Americans & Alaskan Natives** in jail nearly doubled between 1999 and 2014

# Disparities in Gender Identity and Sexuality

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- Lesbian and bisexual women are over-represented in jails at a rate **8x** their representation in the general public

*Sexuality and representation in general public v. jail*

Men	Gay/bi	Women	Lesbian/bi
US pop.	3.6%	US pop.	3.4%
Jail	3.3%	Jail	<b>26.4%</b>

- **21% of trans women** and **12% of gender non-conforming people** report having experienced incarceration

# Unmet Economic Needs

The vast majority (82 percent) of women are in jail for nonviolent offenses.

Property offenses



32%

Drug offenses



29%

Public order offenses



21%



**Nearly 80 percent of women in jails are mothers.**

Six out of 10 women in jail did not have full-time employment prior to their arrest.



Unemployed prior to arrest



Employed prior to arrest



# High Prevalence of Health Issues

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Prevalence of health issues among women in jail



Medical problems



Serious mental illness



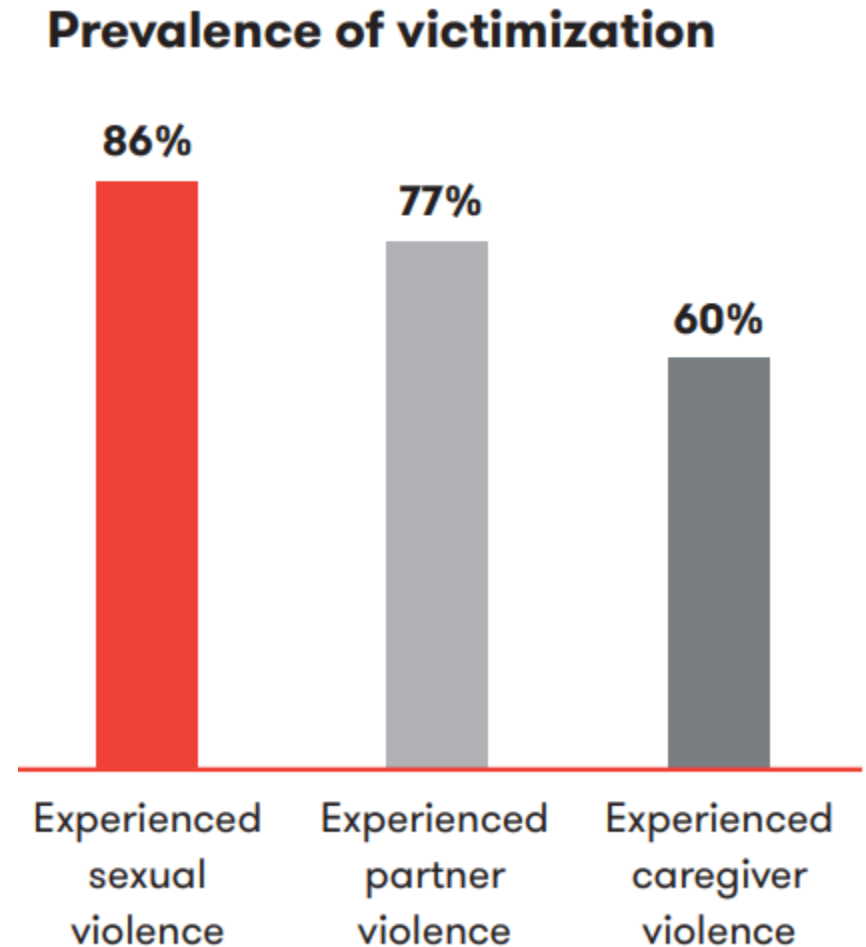
Drug or alcohol  
abuse/dependence

- **3/4** report symptoms of a mental health disorder in the past 12 months
- **1/3** experienced post-traumatic stress disorder in the past 12 months
- **1/5** has experienced SMI, PTSD, and substance use disorder

# Staggering Rates of Trauma and Poly-Victimization

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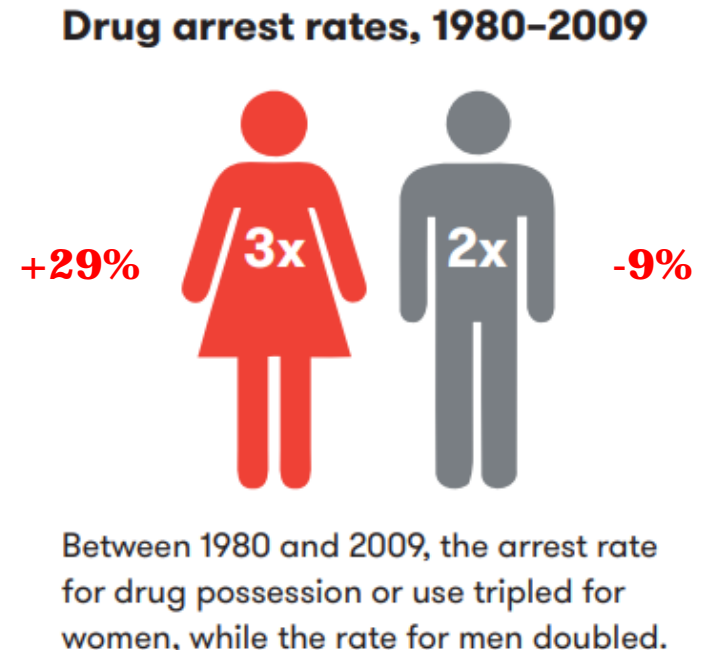
- Histories of trauma and abuse are **nearly universal** among women in jail



# Drivers of Women's System Involvement

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- Quality of life policing and the War on Drugs coincided with increasing arrest rates for women
- Pretrial release and supervision practices may ignore the realities of women's lives
- Community supervision can undermine women's outcomes



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	People in jail unable to meet bail (prior to incarceration)		Non-incarcerated people	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
All	\$15,598	\$11,071	\$39,600	\$22,704
Black	\$11,275	\$9,083	\$31,284	\$23,760
Hispanic	\$17,449	\$12,178	\$27,720	\$14,520
White	\$18,283	\$12,954	\$43,560	\$26,136



# Reframing Justice for Women

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- There are system responses that, if brought to scale, can reduce the number of women in jail
  - Policy choices that move away from using arrests to respond to low-level offenses
  - Assignment of defense counsel at the earliest possible stage
  - Elimination of cash bail
  - Investment in diversion programs and alternatives to incarceration
- **But, reforms must be *data-driven* and focus deliberately on women**

# Thank You!

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