

BELLY OF THE BEAST

Directed By Erika Cohn



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BELLY OF THE BEAST

A POWERFUL EXPOSÉ OF HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES OF WOMEN IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.

Logline:

When an unlikely duo discovers a pattern of illegal sterilizations in women's prisons, they wage a near impossible battle against the Department of corrections. Filmed over seven years with extraordinary access and intimate accounts from currently and formerly incarcerated people, *Belly of the Beast* exposes modern-day eugenics and reproductive injustice in California prisons.

Synopsis:

The pastoral farmlands surrounding the Central California Women's Facility, the world's largest women's prison, help conceal the reproductive and human rights violations transpiring inside its walls. A courageous woman who was involuntarily sterilized at the facility, teams up with a radical lawyer to stop these violations. They spearhead investigations that uncover a series of statewide crimes, primarily targeting women of color, from inadequate access to healthcare to sexual assault to illegal sterilization. Together, with a team of tenacious heroines, both in and out of prison, they take to the courtroom to fight for reparations. But no one believes them. As additional damning evidence is uncovered by the Center for Investigative Reporting, a media frenzy and series of hearings provide hope for some semblance of justice. Yet, doctors and prison officials contend that the procedures were in each person's best interest and of an overall social benefit. Invoking the weight of the historic stain and legacy of eugenics, *Belly of the Beast* presents a decade long, infuriating contemporary legal drama.



ERIKA COHN

DIRECTOR/PRODUCER



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Centering the narrative around the experiences of those inside the “belly of the beast,” reframes the lens through which we view crime, punishment and rehabilitation. Amid a time of exploding prison populations, disproportionate incarceration of people of color, privatization and overcrowding, our criminal justice system is in crisis. Women of color are the fastest growing prison population and yet there’s a profound lack of resources, attention and interest surrounding women’s incarceration. Additionally, the immense dehumanization and fear of retaliation often inhibits incarcerated people’s voices from being heard, further marginalizing an already “near-invisible population.” Until now, this film has remained undercover to protect both the privacy of participants inside prison, and preserve the campaigns to end sterilization abuse. It is my hope that by shining a light on the healthcare and human rights abuses inside, *Belly of the Beast* will become a rallying point to call attention to injustices within our criminal justice system.

Prisons are so far out of sight, out of our consciousness, far from our physical reach – we are rarely granted access to the world behind the walls that isn’t dramatized or sensationalized. I wanted to reimagine how we visualize imprisonment, using imagery that evokes memory and passage of time, contrasting confinement and freedom...viscerally placing the viewer within intimate, vulnerable and uncomfortable spaces. From the shots of anxious feet dangling from the pelvic exam table, to the first person POV gurney shot rolling into surgery, to the camera peering down the shower drain – water droplets splashing in swirling slow motion, our team pursued a cinematic language that conjured the notion of consent...how can informed consent be obtained behind prison walls?

From my years as a legal advocate working with people inside women’s prisons, I recall waiting for each meeting within a small brick room devoid of color and life, and yet when each person would enter, the room would dance with descriptives and energy...time stood still. Though our audience may not have the opportunity to meet all those I had the privilege to work with, I wanted to transport viewers into the worlds which were carefully described and shared with me. Our filmmaking team didn’t have access to some of these spaces, and therefore chose to carefully reconstruct, agonizing over every detail, feeling the weight of responsibility and gravity of accurately depicting each memory, each moment, each restricted space. Our team strove to visually demystify incarceration and cinematically push the boundaries of verité filmmaking, utilizing a combination of first person POV, recreation and observational footage.

Cynthia Chandler and I were first introduced in 2010 through a mutual friend. I was inspired by Cynthia's compassionate release work and intrigued by Justice Now, one of the only – if not the only – US organizations with board members in prison. I was haunted by their “let our families have a future” campaign, which exposed the multiple ways prisons destroy the human right to family, one of the most heinous being the illegal sterilizations. This screamed eugenics. I wondered who this was happening to, what the circumstances surrounding these procedures were, why there hadn't been repercussions and why no one else was talking about this?

The next ten years would dramatically change my life, as I slowly uncovered answers to these questions through multiple lenses; artist, activist, journalist, friend. Cynthia invited me to volunteer for Justice Now and I later became a volunteer legal advocate, providing direct service needs for over 150 people in California's women's prisons. From there, I began working with people inside on a project that would become *Belly of the Beast*. Without their mentorship, support and courage – this film would not exist.

A few years later, Kelli Dillon and I met in Los Angeles and began collaborating on a variety of projects, including *Belly of the Beast*. The more I learned about her experiences as a survivor, her courage and selfless advocacy for others, I felt the film really needed to center around her story. As we reveal in the film, Kelli's discoveries catalyzed Justice Now to begin investigating the illegal sterilizations in prison, through which we meet other survivors.

Belly of the Beast's journey has captured my heart, my soul, my life. Navigating the nuances in approaching this project through multiple lenses humbled me and I was fortunate to be surrounded by an incredibly collaborative key creative team and brilliant advisors who helped guide our film through various challenges. I am in awe by the sheer volume of people who poured their hearts into this film. I am endlessly grateful to Kelli and Cynthia for allowing us to journey alongside them and to Courtney Hooks and the Justice Now team for revealing years of their David and Goliath battle on camera.

BIO

Erika Cohn is a Peabody and Emmy Award-winning director/producer who Variety recognized as one of 2017's top documentary filmmakers to watch and was featured in DOC NYC's 2019 “40 Under 40.” Most recently, Erika completed *The Judge*, a Peabody Award-winning and Emmy-nominated film about the first woman judge appointed to the Middle East's Shari'a courts, which premiered at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival and was broadcast on PBS' 2018 Independent Lens series. Erika co-directed/produced, *In Football We Trust*, an Emmy award-winning, feature documentary about young Pacific Islander men pursuing their dreams of playing professional football, which premiered at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival and was broadcast on PBS' 2016 "Independent Lens" series. She has received numerous accolades for her work, including a Director's Guild of America award for her fiction short film, *When the Voices Fade*. Erika grew up attending the Sundance Film Festival as a native Utahn, where she first began her career and later studied at Chapman University (California) and Hebrew University (Jerusalem) where she received degrees in Film Production, Middle East Studies, and Acting Performance. In 2013, Erika founded [Idle Wild Films, Inc.](#), which has released three feature documentaries and produced numerous branded content and commercial spots, including Gatorade's “[Win from Within](#)” series, for which she received a 2016 Webby award nomination. *Belly of the Beast* is her third feature-length documentary.

ANGELA TUCKER

PRODUCER

PRODUCER'S STATEMENT



Thousands of black women have been sterilized without their knowledge or consent through state enforced eugenics programs. This is a history that most people do not know about, but it is an open secret in communities of color. As a black woman, I had heard these stories. I always knew someone should make a film about modern day eugenics practices to bring these injustices to light.

Then, in 2017, I met filmmaker Erika Cohn at the Sundance Film Festival. She reached out to meet up about her project, *Belly of the Beast*, which needed a producer. In our meeting, she told the story of Kelli Dillon and I was immediately hooked. Kelli is truly unique. She has a way of being so tough but exhibiting so much vulnerability all at the same time. She is a true warrior and I knew her story -- the stories of women fighting for justice -- needed to be told. The journey to make *Belly of the Beast* has been truly life altering.

BIO

Angela Tucker is a writer, director and Emmy nominated producer who works in narrative and documentary genres. Her directorial work includes "All Skinfoolk, Ain't Kinfolk", a documentary short which aired PBS' Reel South about a mayoral election in New Orleans; "All Styles", a narrative feature currently available on Amazon; "Black Folk Don't", a documentary web series that was featured in Time Magazine's "10 Ideas That Are Changing Your Life"; and "(A)sexual", a feature length documentary about people who experience no sexual attraction that streamed on Netflix and Hulu. She is in her ninth year on the PBS strand, "AfroPoP", now as a Co-Executive Producer and is currently producing "Belly of the Beast" (dir. Erika Cohn) which will broadcast on PBS' Independent Lens this fall. Her production company, TuckerGurl, is passionate about stories that highlight underrepresented communities in unconventional ways. A Visiting Professor at Tulane University, Tucker was a Sundance Institute Women Filmmakers Initiative Fellow. She received her MFA in Film from Columbia University.

KELLI DILLON

FILM PARTICIPANT, SURVIVOR OF DOMESTIC AND STATE VIOLENCE, CITY OF LOS ANGELES COMMISSIONER, CO-CHAIR OF EMPOWERMENT CONGRESS SOUTHEAST, AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE NON-PROFIT BACK TO THE BASICS.

STATEMENT



In the making of *Belly of the Beast*, I feel like everyone, from the people behind the camera to the people on this side of the camera, we all really poured our hearts out to get this film into the world. Erika has gone through so much to craft her art. I really respect documentary filmmakers, how they have to capture the human side of the person, every aspect of their life, and still focus on the story. At times, the process felt overwhelming and intrusive because I had to tap into thoughts and emotions from the past, to walk another viewer through what I'd been through for the sake of freeing other people. But, I knew it had to be done for the knowledge and exposure of what happened, that it had to be done for the survivors. It was interesting participating in a film, not just for entertainment, but also for educational purposes, and a lot goes into achieving that mission or goal.

I didn't start off wanting to be an advocate for others. Once I started to realize how many others were affected, I became passionate about making sure this doesn't continue to happen to other people. I think that the work kind of found me, drew me in. Fighting against the California Department of Corrections in seeking justice for myself, gave me the fearlessness and courage to continue fighting. Walking through that myself, along with an amazing team at Justice Now, provided the tools and the support that's needed for other survivors who are walking through that now. I want to ensure that #1 the sterilization abuse is exposed and stopped and #2 to make sure that the survivors receive some type of justice and compensation for what they've gone through.

People don't hear a lot about what's going on inside women's prisons, because the communication is controlled. Prisons control who comes to see you, how long your phone calls are - if you get phone time. Visits and phone calls are not rights, they're privileges. So, if my privilege has been restricted or reduced, it's really hard to funnel out the information, if some form of injustice or mistreatment has happened to me. In addition, correctional officers sometimes withhold the mail that's going out for legal aid or to certain media outlets.

KELLI DILLON'S STATEMENT CONTINUED

Someone in prison has to put their freedom on the line, risking their parole date, or potentially adding time to their current sentence, by funneling out (through an underground system) information to make sure that people in the “free world” know what’s going on. I have found that men are more willing to make these sacrifices, because women have the disadvantage of worrying about our children, our parents. By nature, we are givers of life and preservers of life. If I want to take the chance to get information out, the one thing I’m going to think about is they might not allow me to see my kids, and that might stop me.

I’m hoping that audiences will be invoked to demand justice for the survivors and ensure that the unlawful and non-consensual sterilizations don’t continue throughout our country. That people will look into the prison system and practices in their own state. I want them to actually see our faces, and understand the human side of what’s happening. In the climate of our current presidential administration and the no longer hidden racism that’s so proudly expressed on all forms of media, I’m anticipating that we’re going to have some viewers who applaud the fact that these things have happened to people of color. Some might say, “they don’t deserve to have children anyway.” I hope the takeaway when we hear those types of comments, will further expose the true heart of America, the racist, power hungry America that uses horrific practices such as eugenics, biological experimentations, and murder to maintain control. We proclaim to be the champions of the American Dream, liberation and equality. Yet, we are the wolf in sheep’s clothing. We invite people in to eat them alive, or enslave them and strike the whip of discrimination upon their back to get production out of them.

In light of *Belly of the Beast* being released during the COVID19 pandemic, I hope we can talk about the disproportionate amount of black people and people of color who are not receiving the level of care that allows them to have a better quality of life or healthcare needed to survive this particular outbreak. The sterilizations in California state institutions mirror the same medical negligence, as well as the medical inequality and unfairness that most people experience in prison. Whether it’s sterilization abuse or withholding medical care in order to reduce the population of people of color, it’s another strategy, an octopus’ multiple tentacles that all lead to the nucleus head of racism, discrimination and population control.

Right now, I am working on the California reparations bill AB3052, which provides justice and compensation for the survivors. Should it pass, it is evidence that California has a willingness to acknowledge the medical injustices, the medical malpractices, and the lack of respect for human life for people of color, in which they have suffered at the hands of the people who were supposed to preserve it and protect it. I believe the actual financial compensation that survivors will receive is a mere humble peace offering that should be handed with a public and sincere apology.

BIO

Kelli Dillon is the Co-Chairperson for the Empowerment Congress Southeast neighborhood Council. She is a survivor of domestic/gang violence and an advocate for violence prevention and intervention programs. Kelli found herself incarcerated at the age of 19 and was sentenced to serve a 15-year sentence. Her case intensified from a domestic violence incident, in defense from preventing an attack from her abuser. While in the California Department of Corrections, her advocacy and community social work began during this time assisting fellow inmates with counseling and social justice issues. Since that time, Kelli continues to advance in education and has received certifications of training in the areas of Anger Management, Domestic Violence, Batterer's Intervention Program, Art Therapy, HIV/STI Education and Peer Advocacy, Homeless prevention, and Sociology. In 2014, Kelli worked as an advocate with Justice Now, Inc. alongside of Senator Hannah-Beth Jackson on the SB 1135 Anti-Sterilization Bill. Her testimony was key in helping the Senate and Gov. Jerry Brown pass this bill into law, to ban unlawful and non-consensual sterilization of California prisoners. Kelli has received several awards for her passionate work and continues to volunteer her time in the community of Los Angeles. Kelli is now the Vice President of the Empowerment Congress Southeast Neighborhood Council and newly appointed Commissioner and Board Member for the Department of Community and Family services. In addition, she is the founder and executive director of Back to the Basics, a community empowerment organization and outreach program.

**"I HAVE THE POWER TO
CHANGE LIVES WITH THE
AWARENESS OF WHAT
HAPPENED TO ME."**

Kelli Dillon



CYNTHIA CHANDLER

FILM PARTICIPANT, PRISON INDUSTRIAL
COMPLEX ABOLITIONIST AND ATTORNEY

STATEMENT

When I was 9-10 years old, my elementary school class showed up to school with permission slips for a circus field trip. Instead, we were taken on a scared straight trip to a local maximum-security youth facility. I lived in a racially divided town. The debasement of the caged children, who were all black, was so gross, and the facility so blatantly inhumane and racist, that I left there knowing this system could not go on and I had to do something to stop it. The adults thought they were shaping us to live the straight and narrow. They birthed an abolitionist.

What an honor it has been to watch myself, my family, my work, and my movement grow over a decade on film! It also has been a challenge. Lawyers objectify their clients all the time - we reduce people's lives and experiences to small paragraphs of facts. This process has pushed me to reflect on the ways policy campaigns and legal arguments objectify spokespeople to caricatures through soundbites, and to see how that process can be done more or less violently and with more or less care. I am in awe of Erika Cohn's ethics - she worked tirelessly to ensure everyone in the film, especially people in women's prisons, were respected throughout the process, even as we were vulnerable or exposed.

The silence on imprisonment of women echoes the deafening silence on the disappearance and death of women, girls and transgender people of color. The invisibility of people in women's prisons is emblematic of a lack of value placed on the health and well-being of women and transgender people of color and impoverished people of all races.

I feel that Kelli's and my relationship both embodies and transcends racism in America. We met as two young women. But for racism mixed with gender oppression, Kelli would not have been in prison for defending herself from violence, nor would she have been sterilized without her knowledge. But for racism, I would not have had access to educational privilege and been able to decipher what happened to her. Working across those divides to work to erode that system is arguably one of the most radical things we will ever do.

CYNTHIA CHANDLER'S STATEMENT CONTINUED

I hope people walk away from the film with a better understanding of the dangers of eugenics, and questioning the reliance on imprisonment as a go-to solution for many of our most intractable social problems. I hope there is a growing awareness of how destruction of the right to family - the denial of the right to create a future for oneself, one's family and one's community - is an insidious form of state violence and part and parcel of imprisonment and systems of slavery. Lastly, I want people to demand that people in prison who were sterilized have a right to know that that was done to their bodies, and no one should ever suffer denial of the right to bodily integrity.

We are not merely experiencing a pandemic, we are living in a eugenic moment of rising fascism: politicians and business owners are flippantly demanding the sacrifice of elders and people with preexisting medical issues for the betterment of capitalism and the State; "essential" has become the adjective to sugar-coat the expendable working class, which is disproportionately women of color. By giving a history to the dangers of eugenic policy and modeling modern struggle, I hope the film inspires activism and resistance. I hope the film inspires people to make a better world - if people work together and persevere, greatness happens.

BIO

Cynthia Chandler has dedicated her life to achieving gender and racial justice while challenging violence in all its forms, including imprisonment. Cynthia is an always-bold founder, coach, and life-learner with over 25 years' experience as a social entrepreneur, activist, academic and attorney. In collaboration with HIV-positive activists in prison, she founded the first organization advocating for HIV-positive women in prison. She co-founded Critical Resistance and Justice Now, early prison industrial complex abolitionist organizations influencing the Black Lives Matter network. She has coached the launch of dozens more social ventures. As an attorney, her practice is equally innovative: when law does not allow the relief she seeks for her clients, she changes it. She helped create the compassionate release legal process through loopholes in the law, representing the first terminally ill people granted release from prison in California. Her cases became the case studies used to codify the process in California, and later nationally. She uncovered California's coercive sterilization of women in prison through 2012, and led efforts to pass successful legislation to stop it. Cynthia maintains a legislative practice, contributing to key legislation aimed at shrinking imprisonment. In all her work, she serves as an ally and coach, supporting disenfranchised people in realizing their own solutions for freedom. Cynthia has received numerous awards for her innovative work, including: California Women Lawyers' prestigious Fay Stender Award, 2015; Women's Health Activist Network's Top 30 Activist for Women's Health, 2005; Ford Foundation Leadership for a Changing World Award, 2001; and California Law Business' Attorney to Whom California Can Be Most Grateful, 1997. Cynthia received her JD from Harvard Law School and a MPhil in Criminology from University of Cambridge. She is the mother of two artists and scholars.

FACTS & STATISTICS

WOMEN ARE THE FASTEST GROWING PRISON POPULATION.

The Sentencing Project

NEARLY 80% OF INCARCERATED WOMEN ARE MOTHERS.

Vera Institute of Justice

3/4 OF INCARCERATED WOMEN ARE OF CHILDBEARING AGE (BETWEEN 18-44 YEARS).

Bureau of Justice Statistics



BACKGROUND

Throughout our own investigative reporting process in addition to chronicling Corey Johnson's work via CIR, we wondered how prevalent the illegal sterilizations were and if it was happening in other states. We calculated from California State audit and prison records nearly 1,400 sterilization procedures occurred between 1997-2013. Since 2014, California is required to report the number of sterilizations performed each year in women's prisons and prove medical necessity around each procedure. Our team sent FOIA requests to dozens of states across the country and discovered that only 6 states have banned sterilizations, 5 states allow for medically necessary sterilizations, 3 states still allow sterilization procedures and all other states either did not respond to our requests, declined to provide information or stated they have no policies relevant to our request. In speaking with other organizations across the nation who work with people in women's prisons, we know the sterilization abuse is happening, yet we do not know to what degree.

We are coming up on the 100-year anniversary of the infamous 1927 Supreme Court Case - Buck v. Bell, which upheld a statute instituting compulsory sterilization of the unfit "for the protection and health of the state," and set a precedent for states to legally sterilize people in prisons. While state, federal and international law explicitly ban compulsory sterilization, this decision has yet to be overturned.

DEMOGRAPHICS IN WOMEN'S JAILS

44%

African American

36%

White

15%

Hispanic

5%

Other

VERA INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

FACTS & STATISTICS

The majority of women who are incarcerated are non-violent offenders and imprisoned for crimes of survival.

Prison Policy Initiative

An estimated 92% of women in California prisons have been "battered and abused" in their lifetimes.

ACLU

The US has the largest prison population in the world at 2.3 million incarcerated people, the highest per-capita incarceration rate, and the incarceration rate for women across the globe.

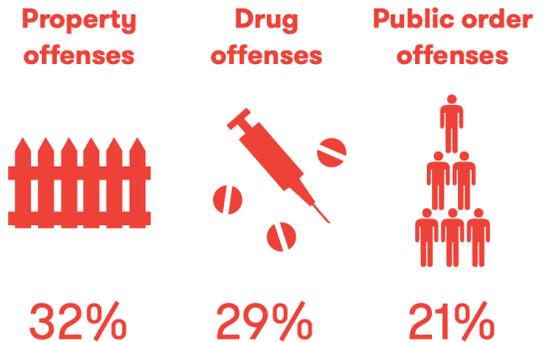
Prison Policy Initiative

There are 231,000 women currently incarcerated in the U.S. and 1.3 million women under the supervision of the criminal justice system (including those on probation and parole).

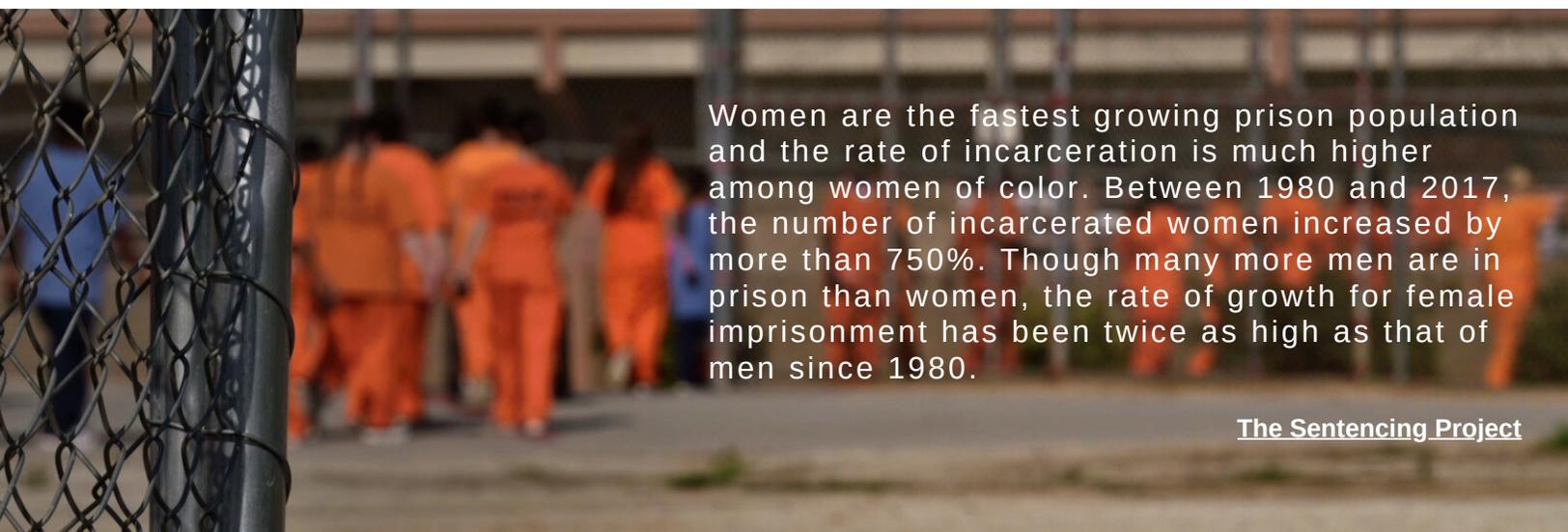
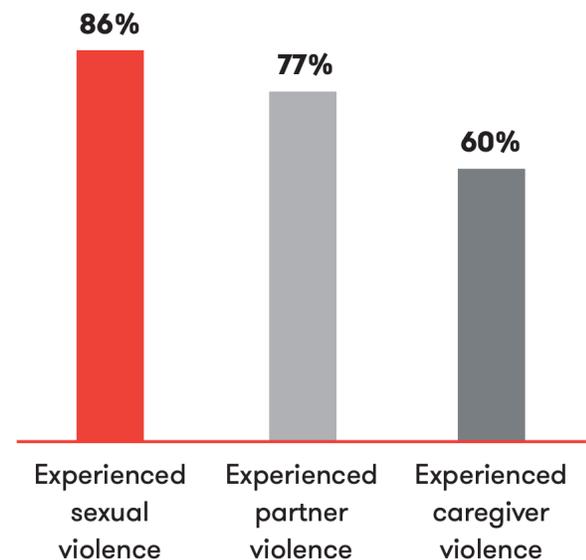
Prison Policy Initiative and The Sentencing Project

Why are women in jails?

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



Prevalence of victimization



Women are the fastest growing prison population and the rate of incarceration is much higher among women of color. Between 1980 and 2017, the number of incarcerated women increased by more than 750%. Though many more men are in prison than women, the rate of growth for female imprisonment has been twice as high as that of men since 1980.

The Sentencing Project



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A full credit list is available upon request

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Melody Nickles
Courtney Hooks
Corey Johnson
Dorothy Roberts
Kimberly Jeffrey
Robin Levi
Crystal Nguyen
Former OB Nurse
Senator Hannah-Beth Jackson

“See What You’ve Done”

Written by Mary J. Blige,
Darhyl Camper, Jr., Denisia
Andrews and Brittany Coney
Performed by Mary J. Blige

Mary J. Blige appears courtesy of
Mary Jane Productions, Inc.



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