

'Drugs, money & love'

Journalist takes a hard look at the U.S. prison experience for women, America's hidden human rights crisis

'The U.S. is so good about speaking out about human rights issues around the world, but we often forget to look at what's going on in our own backyard'

BY MEREDITH DAUGHERTY 05.19.17



VICE CORRESPONDENT ISOBEL YEUNG SPEAKS TO A WOMAN IN CUSTODY AT THE INDIANA WOMEN PRISON. CREDIT: VICE ON HBO

It's 2017 and the United States is No. 1 — but don't get too excited because congratulations aren't exactly in order. We aren't the new fashion capital of the world or the winner of a world soccer championship. The distinction America has achieved is being No. 1 at putting people behind bars.

The U.S. is home to the largest incarcerated population in the world and when many people hear the word "prison" they may automatically think about men. But statistics show that the fastest growing piece of the prison population is women. Over the last 30 years, the number of women behind bars has ballooned by more than 700 percent. While it's true that female prisoners account for fewer than 10 percent of the entire prison population, that percentage works out to about one million women; a million women serving time behind bars, away from their families caught in a cycle of abuse, crime and incarceration.

In her latest documentary *Women Behind Bars*, VICE correspondent Isobel Yeung traveled around the country visiting U.S. prisons and jails. She even

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spent a full 24 hours in a Texas correctional facility interviewing inmates, prison personnel and lawmakers about their experiences. Yeung's deep dive into the prison system gave her a unique glimpse into the challenges that make life in prison so difficult for women and their families. Women in the World talked with Yueng about her project, which debuts Friday, May 19, on HBO at 11 p.m., and what she hopes viewers will take away from it.

You've investigated a wide variety of topics over the years, what inspired you to take a closer look at the U.S. female prison system?

I have a particular interest in covering stories about women's rights. I think women's rights in general are a really good indicator of where society is at as a whole. Obviously, I cover stories all around the world but the one thing that struck me about this subject is that the U.S. is so good about speaking out about human rights issues around the world, but we often forget to look at what's going on in our own backyard.

I started thinking about that and I came across a statistic one day that said women are the fastest growing incarcerated population in the U.S. and the second highest in the world. And that number has increased drastically, about 8 times in the last three decades which was just astounding to me. I started looking into it a bit more and thinking about the different experiences that women face when they go through the justice system. What I found was really shocking, and I think that it's pretty shameful that we in the U.S. can stand on this moral high ground and not face up to some of the issues we have in our own country. I wanted to bring attention to that.

According to the International Centre for Prison Studies, nearly one-third of the entire world's documented female prison population is housed in the United States and most of these women are behind bars for non-violent crimes. Did you find that this was true for most of the women you spoke with?

Yes. I think it's about two-thirds of women in state's prisons are there for non-violent offenses and most of the women we met with were there for pretty low-level crimes. I found generally that those crimes tended to revolve around three things: drugs, money, and love. The rate of crimes relating to drugs for women are higher and we found that the women committing those drug crimes are at the lower rungs of the 'drug conspiracy chain.' Often, it's their male partner who ropes them into being an accomplice, women end up not ratting out their partners and often serve longer sentences. Then their male partners end up dropping them while they're in prison. I think that in general, the mandatory minimum has more impact on women than men. Drugs came up all the time as a theme of why they're there. Money is also an issue because women are the primary caregivers to children and in terms of how to support their families, a lot of crimes were committed to help make financial gains for their families, feed their habits and the drug cycle they've gotten into.

Statistics show that more than 60 percent of female prisoners are

mothers, and a large majority of them have children under 18. What did you learn about the struggle that incarcerated mothers trying to maintain relationships with their children and their families?

It's so heartbreaking. When women are incarcerated there is so much collateral damage. You're never just incarcerating one woman, you're having an immediate impact on that woman's family and then on society as a whole because it's such an easy and inevitable slide downward as we saw with one woman who was living in a half-way house seeking early release. She was trying to regain her parental rights and custody of her son. When she went into jail, her son was 8 years old and tried to commit suicide. That doesn't happen in a normal society. It's really hard to overestimate the impact that taking women, particularly a mother, out of society has on communities.

It's hard to have children on the outside but what is it like to give birth in prison and raise a baby? There are several programs for fathers in prison but they're almost non-existent for mothers. Is there any effort being made to create better child care options for mothers behind bars?

If I'm right, there are nine states that have prison nursery systems including one in Ohio and one in Indiana where we visited and they've been incredibly successful. Firstly, the rate of women who have their children with them in prison are way less likely to re-offend than those separated from their children at birth. That is one really positive impact that bringing the babies in has had on these women. There is also research to show that the babies themselves have huge advantages growing up in having that physical contact and emotional relationship with their mothers. There is evidence to show that programs like this can and do work.

Obviously, there is resistance on a national level because people feel strongly that babies shouldn't grow up in prisons and that's understandable.

According to the [Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency](#), more than 70% of inmates have suffered physical abuse. It would seem like that using inmates who might have issues of their own to monitor fellow prisoners on something like suicide watch would put those women under more psychological stress?

I think that the decision came from a good place. I think they wanted to give women a sense of purpose, have them look out for their fellow inmates and help see them through which of course would be better off coming from a fellow inmate than an officer. But I don't think the trauma that those women have to experience is taken into consideration.

A major criticism of female prisons is that they are ill-equipped to handle the health and hygiene needs that women require; more than 70 percent of inmates alone have documented mental health issues.

How do incarcerated women deal with this lack of resources?

I think it's the fact that so many of the institutions are overcrowded as well as the bulk of them are, of course, designed for men. Things like tampons and sanitary papers and whatever else isn't taken into account in the funding that goes to these places. We definitely heard stories that were really heartbreaking when it comes to not getting the access to the medical care that they needed. On the other hand, and we see this in the documentary, the women have a real resilience to cope with that in their own method but it is definitely an issue.

As the fastest growing prison population in the United States, shouldn't we see more emphasis on restructuring the system to help address women's needs?

Firstly, you've got to remember that the female incarcerated population is still only a fraction of what it is for males; somewhere around nine percent of the total incarcerated population is female and I think it stems from that. I think it also stems historically from the fact that these systems have always been targeted towards males and that the decision makers, those making the calls about the criminal justice system, are also males. Interestingly, the system has softened somewhat in terms of who we incarcerate in the male population but it hasn't let up with females at all. I do attribute that to men not taking into consideration the collateral damage that occurs when you put a woman in prison.

You chose to spend 24 hours in a correctional facility. How did that change how you conducted your interviews with inmates going forward?

I wouldn't pretend to say that I lived their lives because obviously, I am able to walk out of there any minute and leave that place shackle free. But I do think that I didn't really know what to expect going in there. You see *Orange is the New Black* and other media portrayals of what it's like to be inside a jail, but when I got in there I really felt that the women were incredibly warm and incredibly nonthreatening. They helped me make my bed, they talked about how to go to the public toilet without anyone watching you, how to wear your socks on your head so you don't get cold; all sorts of prison hacks. That put me at ease immediately and it made me realize that everyone wanted to talk and share their story.

There is a real sense of community and wanting to support each other in these shared experiences and to open up and talk about it. I respected that. So many of these women are going through similar experiences that it really helps home in, when making a documentary, on the topics that are most important. Going there we read this wealth of research on some of the issues that women face more than men; you've got health care issues and sanitary issues and that was a thing, but it wasn't a priority for these women. What was a priority was seeing their children, developing these relationships, and missing relationships on the outside. I think talking to

these women and spending time with them helped the focus of the documentary as a whole.

There seems to be a heightened public consciousness right now surrounding the prison system in the U.S. for both men and women. From television shows like *Orange is the New Black*, to A&E's *60 Days in*, to Ava DuVernay's film *13th*. Do you think that these shows are doing a good job depicting the reality of life in prison?

I think it's good that there is a media and a public interest in these institutions. I think in general those shows—and I haven't seen all of them—tend to focus more on the relationships and the sensational side and the sex that goes on inside the prisons and those things do exist. In terms of the fundamental issues that go on, I think there is still a lack of awareness. Some of the bigger societal issues are lacking from that rhetoric.

What are you hoping audiences will take away after watching *Women Behind Bars*? What action, if any, do you hope people will take?

Practically, I'd love to see an increase in the resources provided to these women, the health care and the support services offered to help those going through re-entry. I want to highlight the role that women play and help maintain for them a sense of purpose which I think comes back to allowing them to have relationships with their families and their children. The thing that was most striking for me was when you take away a woman's, or anyone's sense of purpose, then they are often left with nothing and that is when society goes down the drain.

I do realize that some people will watch this and think *they're in there because they committed crimes, end of story*. More than anything I want to question that stance. I want people to question how they got there and what that says about society as a whole, rather than putting it all on the individuals. Ultimately, we need to figure out how to keep women from entering the system when they pose zero threat to society, and how to improve the experiences and reinvigorate a sense of purpose for women who are incarcerated.

Below, watch a short preview of *Women Behind Bars*.

Pregnancy During a Prison Sentence: VICE on HBO (Preview)



This interview has condensed and edited for clarity.

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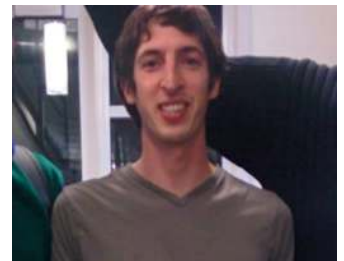
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