

Women's Pathways Into and Out of Jail in Buncombe County

November 2022

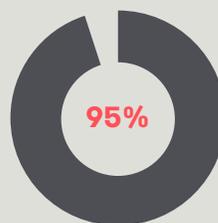
Fact sheet

The Vera Institute of Justice analyzed jail booking data (January 2017 to April 2021) and conducted video surveys and interviews with 40 women held in the Buncombe County Detention Facility in September 2021. This fact

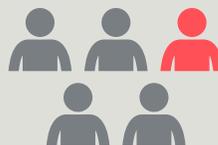
sheet presents key themes from these findings and recommendations for reducing women's jail incarceration. This research is part of Buncombe County's participation in the Safety and Justice Challenge.

Findings from jail booking data and surveys and interviews with women in jail

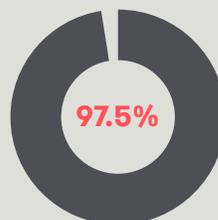
- The women's incarceration rate in Buncombe County increased **tenfold** from 1970 to 2019, compared to a threefold increase for men.
- The number of women in jail dropped in 2020 during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic but **is approaching pre-pandemic levels** with an average of 54 women incarcerated for the first five months of 2022.
- **Black women are dramatically overrepresented in the jail:** in 2020, they represented 14 percent of women in the jail but just 6 percent of the county's population of women.
- **Seventy-five percent of women surveyed had been booked into the jail before**, and 35 percent had been booked seven times or more.
- **Drug-related charges** are a growing driver of women's incarceration: women's jail bookings due to a drug-related charge increased from 9 percent in January 2017 to 16 percent in April 2021.
- Twenty-one percent of women's jail bookings in 2020 were for **property-related charges** (such as theft and trespassing).



95 percent of women in the jail had experienced some form of victimization in their life, such as domestic violence or sexual assault.



On an average day in 2020, **1 in 5** women in the jail were held for a pretrial supervision, probation, or parole violation.



All but one of the women surveyed (97.5 percent) reported a current or past substance dependency.



68 percent of women surveyed reported having a past or currently diagnosed mental illness.

Challenges

Criminalization of poverty

Actions that stem from the pressures of poverty—such as sleeping in public spaces—remain illegal in North Carolina.

Bail

Money bail is a key driver of women’s jail incarceration.

Community supervision (pretrial services and probation)

Restrictions on housing location, required drug abstinence, and probation fees were difficult conditions for women to meet.

Substance use (mostly possession only)

Methamphetamine possession is the most common drug-related charge.

Jail conditions and costs

Staying in jail is expensive due to the cost of basic needs like phone calls, hygiene supplies, and medical visits. Being isolated in single cells for 23+ hours per day due to COVID-19 protocols takes a mental and physical toll.

Interagency coordination and communication

Lack of information about court cases caused distress and delays. Women reported difficulties reaching lawyers and missed court appointments due to lack of coordination.

Recommendations

- Expand affordable housing options.
- Provide alternatives to arrest and/or jail.
- Create a decline-to-prosecute policy for low-level charges.
- Expand warrant resolution options.
- Eliminate legal system fines and fees and end detention as a penalty for nonpayment.

- Expand on and codify COVID-era pretrial release practices, such as nonmonetary release conditions.
- Assess ability to pay before setting bond.

- Eliminate supervision conditions that do not affect public safety or address women’s needs.
- Reduce length of time on supervision.
- Eliminate jail as a penalty for supervision violations.

- Advocate for changes to state laws and local practices to decriminalize drug possession.
- Expand access to and capacity of substance use treatment in the community.
- Prioritize peer-led support programs.
- Ensure continual free access to treatment and counseling services during and after detention.

- Expand women’s time out of cells, including during pandemic restrictions.
- Allow in-person visits for women and video calls when children are in the home.
- Expand access to in-person and virtual programming.
- Ensure medical visits, phone calls, video calls, and virtual programming are free.

- Provide frequent and clear information about court cases.
- Expand peer navigator programs in the jail to include a focus on navigating the pretrial and court process.

For more information

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See the full report at www.vera.org/publications/womens-pathways-jail-buncombe-county.

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