What the Geography of Mass Incarceration in California Means for Women with Incarcerated Loved Ones
In partnership with the Prison Policy Initiative, Essie Justice Group released a new report that provides the most cutting edge data to date on the geography of incarceration in California. This was made possible by redistricting reform that ensures incarcerated people are counted in the communities where they live, ending the notorious practice of prison gerrymandering. This report affirms what women with incarcerated loved ones have understood for decades: the communities that are systematically deprived of resources are also disproportionately criminalized and incarcerated in California.

The insight from this report also makes clear that mass incarceration is a race and gender justice issue—1 in 4 women and 1 in 2 Black women have an incarcerated loved one and are uniquely burdened by the financial and emotional hardships of incarceration, profoundly impacting the health of families and communities at large. In addition to bolstering targeted and effective reentry and diversion programs in heavily impacted communities, the data in this report can equip community members, activists, scholars, and public officials alike to advocate for deep investments in community resources and systems of care, which women with incarcerated loved ones know are what truly what make us and our communities safe.
Key Findings

1. **The idea that incarceration is a problem uniquely experienced in large California cities is a myth.** While the data shows that the largest number of incarcerated people are from large cities such as Los Angeles, San Diego, Sacramento, and Fresno, several small and rural counties—like Kings, Shasta, Tehama, and Yuba counties—also have high incarceration rates. This means that although certain communities are disproportionately impacted, people from every county, congressional district, and legislative district in California are navigating the devastating impacts of mass incarceration.

2. **High-incarceration neighborhoods were engineered through decades of racist policies and decisions about where to invest resources, rather than the result of “criminality” or other “behavioral issues” within communities of color.** For example, the city of Compton, in Los Angeles County, has an imprisonment rate of 980 per 100,000 residents—more than three-times the state average. As a result of the predatory real estate practice known as “blockbusting” decades prior, Compton’s current population is 28% Black and 69% Hispanic or Latino. Poorer communities of color, like Compton, have experienced decades of systemic oppression and divestment, as well as a history of heavy policing—leaving them vulnerable to mass incarceration, particularly in the age of COVID-19. The on-going pandemic has exacerbated racial inequity, especially for Black women with incarcerated loved ones, “who are the unseen and uncompensated care workers on the frontline in the fight against the virus behind bars.”

3. **High local incarceration rates in California and across the country have been correlated with a wide range of community barriers and negative health outcomes by researchers, suggesting that mass incarceration compounds with the other forms of systemic violence heavily impacted communities face.** For example, research conducted across the country reveals correlations between high community incarceration rates and negative impacts on life expectancy, sexual health, mental health, exposure to environmental dangers, and educational performance. These cumulative impacts of mass incarceration are particularly harmful to Black women, contributing to their significantly higher rates of maternity complications and rates of Black infant mortality.

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How to Use this Data

1. **To determine the best locations for community-based diversion and reentry programs that help prevent involvement with the legal system.** These programs, such as offices of neighborhood safety and mental health response teams, would work independently from police departments to support community members in times of crisis and need.

2. **To identify the under-resourced communities in need of broad and bold investments in programs and services that foster community wellbeing, reduce vulnerabilities for criminal legal system contact, and address the lasting harms of incarceration.** Given that we know place of origin correlates with various measures of community wellbeing, this report’s findings suggest that the enormous resources currently invested in policing and incarceration—especially in the high-incarceration communities found in this report—would be more effective if put toward reducing poverty and improving local health, education, and employment opportunities.

3. **To design resources that reduce the unique financial and emotional harms women and gender non-conforming people experience from being directly impacted by incarceration.** Women with incarcerated loved ones are more likely to live in high incarceration areas, meaning that they are also more likely to experience other consequences of underinvestment in community wellbeing. As our landmark Because She’s Powerful report shows, these combined challenges make women with incarcerated loved ones particularly vulnerable to the financial and emotional tolls of incarceration. Bail, court fees, and missed economic opportunities financially destabilize women, who are often the unseen pillars of their families and communities. When their incarcerated loved ones do come home, women serve as the informal reentry system, financially and emotionally supporting them with a host of reentry challenges, such as difficulty finding employment, a lack of housing, and mental health issues from their traumatic experiences during incarceration.
Regional Statistics

Los Angeles

Los Angeles has a long history of racist policing and divesting from its communities of color, resulting in Black and Latino communities experiencing disproportionate policing and imprisonment. In Los Angeles, the 14 neighborhoods with the highest imprisonment rates are all clustered in South Central Los Angeles – a predominately non-white region of the city – where 57% of residents are Latino, 38% are Black, and 2% are white.

Socioeconomic status and poverty also play into neighborhood differences in all levels of involvement in the criminal-legal system. The South Central L.A. neighborhoods with the highest incarceration rates have median incomes far below the city average.

San Francisco

The citywide population of San Francisco is 5% Black, but 38% of people arrested by the San Francisco Police Department are Black. In 2021, Black people were stopped at a rate more than five and half times that of white people in the city and were ten times as likely to be searched as white people.

Residence data show that some San Francisco communities are disproportionately affected by mass incarceration. The neighborhood of Bayview, considered one of the most “hazardous” areas during redlining, and a predominantly Black neighborhood, imprisons residents at a significantly higher rate of 335 per 100,000 residents than San Francisco as a whole, which imprisons residents at a rate of 118 per 100,000 people.

Native Communities

Native reservation and trust land in California has an imprisonment rate of 534 per 100,000 people, nearly double the state average of 310 per 100,000.
Read the full report here:
Where people in prison come from: The geography of mass incarceration in California

**Essie Justice Group is the country’s leading organization of women with incarcerated loved ones taking on the rampant injustices created by mass incarceration.**

**Questions?**
For questions about the report, please reach out to Felicia Gomez, Senior Policy Associate at Essie Justice Group, at felicia@essiejusticegroup.org

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