

DOORS SHUT TIGHT:

The mystery behind the walls of Massachusetts' County Jails

Reflections by Maya Laur, WIP intern and Brown University student

This summer, I interned with the Women and Incarceration Project, an organization at Suffolk University dedicated to moving the needle of Massachusetts Criminal Justice towards decarceration, through research and advocacy. I was tasked with researching women in Massachusetts county jails, a body that largely hasn't been investigated to this date. In activist spheres, the focus for criminal justice reform tends to center on prisons over jails, in part because prison populations tend to be viewed as more "dramatic" than jails with features like "Orange is the New Black," and "Shawshank Redemption." And, in part because prisons hold a higher place in the American consciousness. Thus, while our group sees prison reform as pivotal to stemming the tide of mass incarceration, jails, we feel, have largely been overlooked. This gave us the unique opportunity to look into a community of people who are all too often forgotten: women behind bars in Massachusetts' counties.

We started out searching for everything we could find online on women in Massachusetts' county jails, which, we learned quickly, was not very much. It wasn't until 2018 that state laws mandated any sort of standardized, aggregated reporting across Massachusetts state and county correctional facilities, and even now, the available data is limited. In our online research, we weren't able to find much beyond basic demographics of county incarcerated women, and visiting hours and policies, so we turned to county correctional experts - state officials, assistant superintendents, social workers, midwives, activists, academics and more. From them, we mostly gathered stories: of innocent women who couldn't make bail, and lost

their children to foster care because they had been awaiting trial behind bars for ‘too long,’ of women who got put in solitary because they had a headache and couldn’t work, of women who complained of appendicitis and were given an advil. And, yet we were left with so many unanswered questions. How many women and people of marginalized gender in these jails were pregnant? How many were parents? How many had struggled with substance use disorders or mental health conditions? Did they have access to education programs or reentry support? What was the healthcare like? How were trans women and non-binary people treated? Who were these women, and what were their stories?

I started filing public information requests - over 77 - and was met with mixed reactions. Some records officers at jails were happy to answer our questions and others seemed upset that we were even asking. One state official, who organized county sheriffs, said she would be thrilled to give us the data we were looking for and then proceeded to spend most of our meeting talking about how great the new additions to the Western MA Women’s County Jail were. I turned to phone calls, leaving voicemail after voicemail. Some county officials answered my questions, some said they had never “heard” of the kind of things I was asking about, and some sent me from office to office, on a phone-forwarding spiral, until I was back at the same place I had started. It seemed to me that the memo at county jails was “operation cover up.” To deny, divert, and distract from the truth, until the truth seeker forgot what they were looking for and the jailer could carry on behind closed doors. They seemed to me, not unlike the child detention centers of the 2018 border crisis, in which barbed wire and 12 foot high fences masked children in metal blankets sleeping in freezing rooms and toddlers were denied baby formula, and reporters were not allowed in.

Slowly, we started to learn more: that visitors are not allowed to bring baby bottles or diapers into certain jails, that women who can't make bail in specific regions are sent to state prison, because there's no women's jail in their county, that women in certain facilities are forbidden from using nail polish or colored pencils, that some women are released from jail upon conviction, because they've waited longer for a trial than the total length of their sentence. Still, by the end of six weeks, the doors to the jails were just as sealed; what they enclosed, still a mystery. It raises an eye. What would happen if we pried the walls open and let in the sunlight? My hope is a new consciousness. A higher awareness of the neglect and injustice that occurs behind the bars of the Massachusetts County Correctional Facilities, and a greater resolve to do something about them. But, until then, the doors will stay locked, the women's mouths shut, the pages of our findings still blank, unanswered.