



PRESS RELEASE
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Contact: Zakee Martin
zmartin@usccr.gov
202-376-8359

**U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Releases Report,
*Women in Prison: Seeking Justice Behind Bars***

WASHINGTON – Today, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights released its [report](#), *Women in Prison: Seeking Justice behind Bars*. The report examines the state of federal civil rights protections for incarcerated women to explore women’s experiences while incarcerated. It covers a range of issues incarcerated women face, including access to healthcare, prevention of sexual assault, discipline and segregated housing, parental rights, and availability of programming. The report provides examples of prison administrations seeking to address these issues and it evaluates the response of the federal government. The Commission’s research includes examination of high rates of a history of trauma reported by incarcerated women, as well as policies responsive to this trauma.

Chair Catherine E. Lhamon said, “The evidence and testimony presented to the Commission presented a dire picture of the conditions of confinement for incarcerated women. We urge Congress and the Department of Justice to take immediate action to ensure that correctional officials do not violate the rights of incarcerated women.”

The Commission majority found that many prison policies and facilities are not designed for women or tailored to their specific needs. Rather, many policies were adopted from men’s prison institutions without evaluating their application to women’s prison institutions. Despite federal laws aimed at protecting incarcerated people, many incarcerated women continue to experience physical and psychological safety harms while incarcerated and insufficient satisfaction of their constitutional rights. There is a lack of standardization among prison systems regarding how female-specific healthcare, such as gynecological and prenatal care, is provided. Some prisons provide adequate regular care while others do not.

Sexual abuse and rape remain prevalent against women in prison. Incarcerated women who report sexual assault have experienced retaliation by their institutions and prison personnel in violation of their rights under the Constitution and other federal laws.

When prisons do not take gender-specific characteristics into account, prisons tend to classify incarcerated women at higher security requirement levels than necessary for the safety and security of prisons. This classification results in some women serving time in more restrictive environments than is necessary and appropriate.

Many incarcerated women are placed at facilities far from their families, many times as a result of a lack of regional facilities, despite policies requiring that they be placed as close

to home as practicable. Many prison policies do not prioritize family visits, such as by permitting extremely limited family visitation hours that often do not reflect distances visiting family must travel.

U.S. Department of Justice litigation against prisons involving sexual abuse among other wrongs, has secured important changes to safeguard incarcerated women's rights.

Based on these findings, the Commission recommends that the Department of Justice should continue to enforce the civil rights of incarcerated women in states that violate the rights of incarcerated women.

All prisons should prohibit shackling pregnant women and placing them in solitary confinement, as these practices represent serious physical and psychological health risks. Prisons should ensure they provide adequate healthcare to incarcerated women, including mental and physical healthcare needs.

Congress should provide funding to ensure correctional agencies protect incarcerated people from sexual abuse.

Prison officials should enforce policies that support parental rights and familial contact except where inconsistent with safety concerns. Institutions should provide free video and low-cost phone services to incarcerated persons, and should not ban in-person visits for non-safety reasons.

[Women in Prison](#), based on expert and public input, and extensive research and analysis, will offer actionable recommendations to the President, Congress, and federal agencies. The Commission held a [public briefing](#) on the subject in February 2019, including testimony from academic experts, formerly incarcerated women, prison administrators and policy experts. We invite you to view the [morning](#), [afternoon](#) and [public comment](#) sessions, and the briefing [transcript](#).

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The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights is the only independent, bipartisan agency charged with advising the President and Congress on civil rights and reporting annually on federal civil rights enforcement. Our 51 state Advisory Committees offer a broad perspective on civil rights concerns at state and local levels. The Commission: In our 7th decade, a continuing legacy of influence in civil rights. For more information about the Commission, please visit www.usccr.gov and follow us on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).