



INCARCERATED WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICA: CHARACTERISTICS AND RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR

While males have traditionally been the largest segment of Latin America's prison population, the percentage of incarcerated females has been increasing. Between 2005 and 2011, the percentage of incarcerated women grew faster than that of men in nine Latin American countries. Risk factors for incarceration among women vary from those of men and include a combination of social, economic, and household factors that can and should be addressed by governments in a targeted manner.

The results of a survey of 8,285 prisoners are summarized in a new report entitled "Incarcerated Women in Latin America: Characteristics and Risk Factors Associated with Criminal Behavior."¹ The report highlights important gender differences in criminal activity and in experiences of social exclusion prior to imprisonment.

Major Findings

I. Gender Differences in Criminal Activity among Incarcerated Populations

Women commit less violent and less aggressive crimes:

- Robbery: Women (22%), Men (41%)
- Homicide: Women (14%), Men (21%)
- Sexual crimes: Women (2%), Men (15%)

Women (38%) are more likely than men (12%) to be involved in non-violent drug offenses such as possession or trafficking of illicit drugs.

Women (11%) are less likely than men (28%) to have carried a firearm while committing a crime; and are less likely (26%) than men (61%) to have possessed a firearm in their life.

Women are more likely to be incarcerated for the first time later in life (30 years old) than men (28), and thus are generally criminally active for less time.

Women are more likely to commit a crime while accompanied (65%) than men (51%). Women (39%) are also more likely to have an incarcerated partner than men (5%).

II. Risk Factors for Criminal Behavior among Surveyed Women

Women live in situations of greater vulnerability than men prior to entering prison.

Characteristics of incarcerated women:

1. They are adolescent mothers (55%) in a majority of cases; single mothers (24%); and have multiple children.
2. They are more vulnerable economically:
 - 8% have never worked vs. 6% of men;
 - 27% did not work the month before detention vs. 17% of men;
 - 64% worked the month before detention vs. 77% of men.
3. They experience problematic consumption of alcohol and/or illicit drugs in the household.
4. They experience direct or indirect violence in the household. Women experience intrafamily violence (56%), though at lesser rates than men (59%); and consume less alcohol and illicit drugs.
5. They have a criminally active peer group.
6. They are detained at a later age than men.

Women were more likely to be sent to a youth detention facility if:

1. They left home before turning 15.
2. There were problematic consumers of illicit drugs and/or alcohol in their childhood household.
3. They had criminally active friends.

Women are more likely to be repeat offenders if:

1. They have children.
2. They were problematic consumers of illicit drugs and/or alcohol.
3. They experienced violence in their childhood household.
4. They had criminally active friends in their youth.
5. They were detained for the first time at a young age.

Recommendations for Policymakers Based on These Findings

Policymakers designing crime prevention programs should focus on risk factors associated with behavior that leads to the incarceration of women.

Recommended strategies include:

- Household and family-based interventions that specifically target risk factors like household poverty, availability of childcare, and factors contributing to a weakened family structure.
- Policies designed to reduce repeat offenses by supporting women during the period of post-incarceration reintegration. These programs should focus especially on labor market insertion, quality childcare, and women's empowerment programs.

1 This study is based on "Encuesta de presos condenados," conducted by the Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos sobre Inseguridad y Violencia (CID/CELIV-UNTREF) in eight countries: Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador, Mexico, Peru, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Chile. 8,285 women and men were interviewed.



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Methodology

The report's findings are based on a survey of 8,285 incarcerated women (1,287) and men (6,998) in eight Latin American countries. The report has two objectives: 1) to describe important elements in the life of incarcerated women, including their demographic characteristics, socialization context, types of criminal behavior, and economic situation at the time of imprisonment; and 2) to describe the risk factors associated with the incarceration of women.

The analysis is based on both descriptive and multivariate research methods. To allow for gender comparisons, the entire sample of women and men is included in the descriptive analysis.

In the multivariate analysis, both logistical and linear regressions are utilized to explore the risk factors associated with criminality among women. The dependent variables include rates of recidivism among women; whether women have ever been placed in a youth detention facility; and their age upon first detention. Independent variables include risk factors that are known to influence criminal behavior, such as demographic characteristics, socialization context, and economic situation.