

Women in California's Prisons

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INTRODUCTION

Nationally, women represented only 7% of people in prison in 2023. The number of women in federal or state prisons has decreased over the past decade, dropping by 18% between 2012 and 2022.

In California, women make up a smaller share of the prison population than in the country as a whole (4% compared to 7%). This brief examines women in California's state prison system, highlighting trends in prison admissions over time, the characteristics of women who are incarcerated, the types and lengths of sentences they receive, and differences by race and ethnicity.

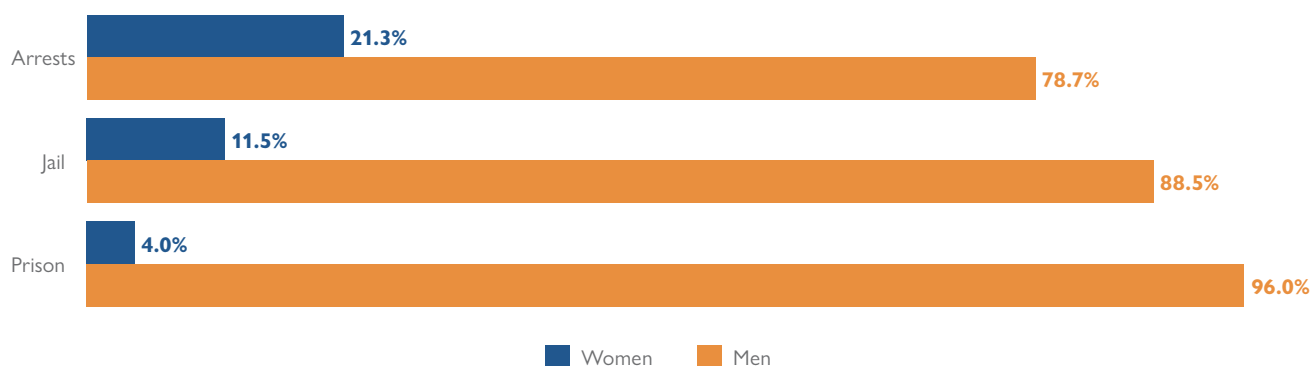
Data sources: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) (2014–2024), CDCR Adult Characteristics historical reports (2004–2013), California Department of Justice Automated Criminal History System (2010–2023), Jail Profile Survey (2002–2024), and census data from the California Department of Finance.

Data on sex is not self-reported in the administrative data used for this analysis, and we are limited to binary categories (men or women) for gender.

Women are a much smaller share of people involved in the criminal justice system at every stage relative to men

Women made up 51% of California's adult population in 2024, yet constituted a substantially smaller share of those that had contact with the criminal justice system ([Figure 1](#)). In 2023, women comprised 21% of all arrests; 12% of the average daily jail population in 2024; and 4% of the average daily prison population in 2024.

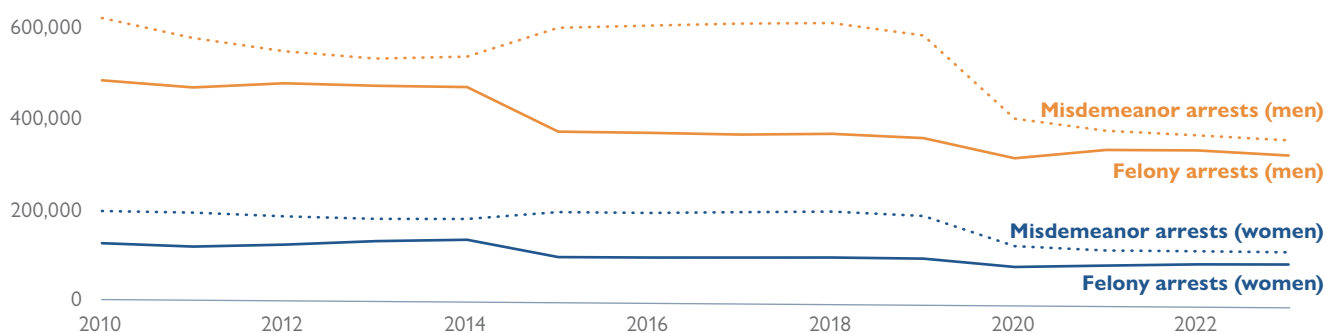
FIGURE 1: Share of women arrested and incarcerated in jail and prison in California



Sources: California Department of Justice Automated Criminal History System (arrests); The Board of State and Community Corrections Jail Profile Survey (jail); and California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (prison). Note: This figure uses the most currently available data, which is 2023 for arrests, and 2024 for jail and prison. Jail and prison data are average daily populations.

The total number of arrests in California declined by 40% from 2010 to 2023, and arrests of women declined by more than arrests of men (43% compared to 39%). Trends in felony and misdemeanor arrests diverged following the passage of Proposition 47 (2014), which reclassified some drug possession and property offenses from felonies to misdemeanors. Felony arrests between 2014 and 2015 dropped by 29% for women and 21% for men, while misdemeanor arrests increased by 9% and 12%, respectively (Figure 2). In 2020, arrests fell sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic, with declines in misdemeanor arrests outpacing declines in felony arrests for both men and women. Although arrests have rebounded slightly since then, they remain well below pre-pandemic levels for both men and women.

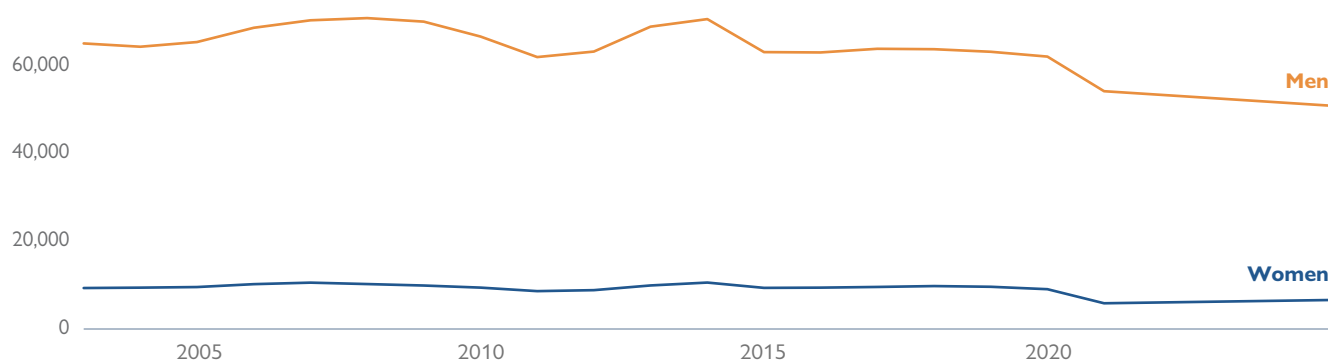
FIGURE 2: Felony and misdemeanor arrest frequency for men and women in California, 2010-23



Source: California Department of Justice Automated Criminal History System (ACHS). Note: These frequencies may look different from other sources due to differences in how an arrest event is measured.

The average daily jail population declined for both men and women over the past two decades, with a larger decrease among women (29%) than men (22%). Over the past twenty years, jail populations have fluctuated after major policy changes and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 3). The average daily jail population rose after Public Safety Realignment (2011) — which shifted responsibility for housing people convicted of certain non-serious, non-violent felonies from state prison to county jail and supervision — but it then declined after the passage of Prop 47 in 2014. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the jail population dropped sharply — a 35% decrease for women and 13% for men between 2019 and 2020. Since then, jail populations have increased, but remained below pre-pandemic levels, especially for women: the female average daily jail population was 27% lower in 2024 than in 2019, while the male average daily jail population was 18% lower in 2024.

FIGURE 3. Annual average daily jail population for men and women in California, 2002-24

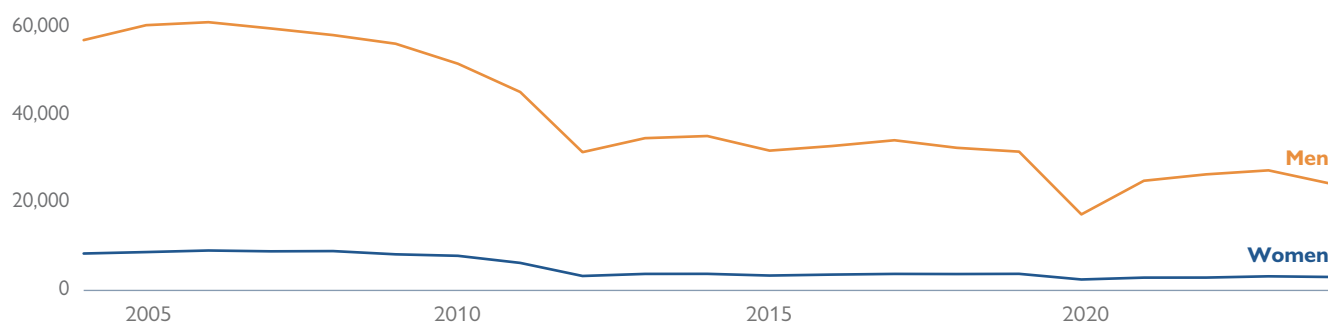


Source: The Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC) Jail Profile Survey.

Over the past two decades, the number of women admitted to prison declined by more than 70%. Prison admissions in California peaked in 2006, with 7,987 women entering prison that year. By 2024, that number had fallen to 1,953 — 25% of the peak. For men, the decline was less steep: 2024 admissions (24,620) were 40% of the 2006 peak (61,421).

The downward trend in prison admissions was accelerated by Senate Bill 678 (2009) —which incentivized counties to reduce probation revocations and Public Safety Realignment (2011) (Figure 4). Following Realignment, prison admissions fell by 60% for women, compared to 32% for men. During the COVID-19 pandemic, admissions declined again, by 40% for women and 34% for men. While admissions have increased slightly since 2021, they remained below pre-pandemic levels as of 2024: 27% lower for women and 23% lower for men compared to 2019. Women currently make up around 7% of annual prison admissions and, as of 2025, just 4% of the current prison population.

FIGURE 4: Annual prison admissions for men and women in California, 2004-24



Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24) & California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Adult Characteristics historical reports (2004–2013). Note: See Figure A-1 for prison admission rates per 100,000.

Average prison sentences are shorter for women than men for similar controlling offenses

The average sentence for men admitted to prison from 2014 to 2024 was more than two years longer than that of women (6.9 years compared to 4.4 years) (Table 1). Among the currently incarcerated, men have an average sentence that is double that of women (30.4 years compared to 14.7 years) (Table 2).

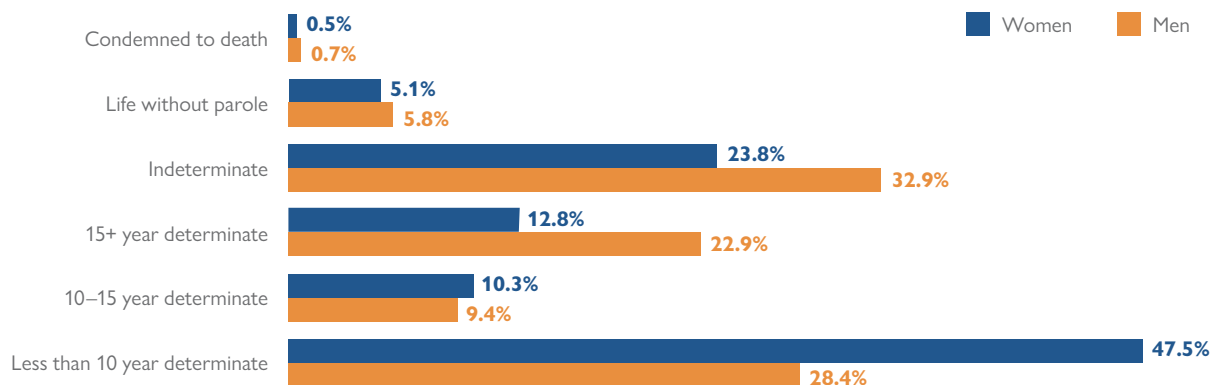
Note: The main analyses focus on admissions to CDCR from 2014 to 2024. We also include data on the currently incarcerated population (as of December 31, 2024) when trends differ for women. Admissions include a larger share of people serving shorter sentences, while the currently incarcerated population includes more people with serious offenses and longer sentences.

A greater share of women were admitted to prison with sentences of less than ten years. Among women, 92% of those admitted and 48% of those currently incarcerated received a determinate sentence — one with a fixed length — of less than 10 years (Figures 5 & 6). In contrast, men made up a larger proportion of those with more severe sentences, including indeterminate (e.g., 25-years-to-life) and life without parole (LVOP) across both admissions and the incarcerated population.

FIGURES 5: Sentence types for admissions to California prisons by gender, 2014-24



FIGURE 6: Sentence types for currently incarcerated people in California prisons by gender, December 2024



Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24)

Note: Sample sizes are as follows, for admissions (24,454 women, 322,040 men); for the currently incarcerated (3,675 women, 88,987 men).

There were 63 men and fewer than five women admitted to CDCR with a condemned sentence.

Assault is the most common offense for women in prison. Since 2014, the three offenses for which women were admitted to prison most frequently have been assault, robbery, and burglary (Table 1). For men, the most common offenses were assault, weapon possession, and robbery. Even within the same controlling offense categories (i.e., the most serious charge on the admission), women received shorter average sentences — likely due to differences in criminal history, enhancements, and additional offenses in the conviction. The largest gap is robbery, where women received an average sentence of 4.5 years compared to 7.5 years for men.

TABLE 1. Most common controlling offenses by gender for admissions to prison in California, 2014-24

	WOMEN			MEN		
	SHARE OF ADMISSIONS (%)	AVG. SENTENCE (YRS)	# OF ADMISSIONS	SHARE OF ADMISSIONS (%)	AVG. SENTENCE (YRS)	# OF ADMISSIONS
Assault	31.1	4.1	7,595	29.8	6.0	95,896
Robbery	11.6	4.5	2,835	9.1	7.7	29,446
Burglary	11.5	3.8	2,818	8.4	4.9	27,084
Weapons	5.0	2.3	1,210	12.2	2.7	40,501
TOTAL		4.4	24,454		6.9	322,040

Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24)

Assault is the most common controlling charge among both men and women who are currently incarcerated — 26% for both (Table 2). Men with assault charges have an average sentence that is nearly twice that of women (21.4 years compared to 11.3 years). First-degree murder is the second most common, and men receive nearly twice the average minimum sentence as women (50.8 years compared to 28.3 years). Women also receive shorter sentences for second-degree murder (21.7 compared to 32.1 years) and manslaughter (16.1 years compared to 20.7 years).

TABLE 2. Most common controlling offense for men and women currently incarcerated in prison in California, December 2024

	WOMEN			MEN		
	CURRENTLY INCARCERATED (%)	AVG. SENTENCE (YRS)	# OF WOMEN	CURRENTLY INCARCERATED (%)	AVG. SENTENCE (YRS)	# OF MEN
Assault	26.0	11.3	954	26.1	21.4	23,190
First-degree murder	12.9	28.3	475	14.5	50.8	12,906
Robbery	12.4	11.0	456	12.9	24.9	11,896
Second-degree murder	9.6	21.7	354	14.5	32.1	5,586
Manslaughter	6.7	16.1	242	3.8	20.7	3,376
TOTAL		14.3	3,675		29.9	88,987

Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24)

Note: For indeterminate sentences, we use the minimum term of the sentence to calculate the average length. Additionally, we cannot observe the underlying factors that determine the degree of the murder charge and there may be differences in sentencing that we cannot observe.

Women in prison are less likely to have enhancements that lengthen sentences. Sentence enhancements — additional time added to a prison sentence based on specific factors, like prior felony convictions or use of a weapon — likely explain some of the difference in sentence length for men and women. Enhancements were present in 43% of male admissions, compared to 34% of female admissions. Enhancements added 5.6 years for men, on average, and 3.1 years for women.

TABLE 3. Most common case and offense enhancements by gender for admissions to California prisons, 2014-24

	WOMEN			MEN		
	SHARE OF ADMISSIONS (%)*	AVG. SENTENCE (YRS)**	# OF ADMISSIONS	SHARE OF ADMISSIONS (%)*	AVG. SENTENCE (YRS)**	# OF ADMISSIONS
No enhancements	65.9	—	16,121	56.6	—	182,396
Case enhancements						
Second strike	16.5	2.4	4,365	26.0	3.7	92,446
PC 667.5(b) — prior prison	3.7	1.5	913	5.9	1.6	19,217
PC 667(a) — prior serious felony conviction	1.5	5.6	368	3.6	6.8	11,693
Offense enhancements						
PC 12022.7(a) — Inflict great bodily injury	4.3	3.1	1,083	3.7	3.2	12,268
PC 12022(b) — Use of deadly weapon	2.0	1.0	513	2.0	1.5	6,696
PC 186.22(b)(1) — Street gang act	1.7	5.4	423	3.2	5.9	10,579
PC 12022.5(a) — use of firearm	1.1	5.5	280	3.1	5.6	10,340

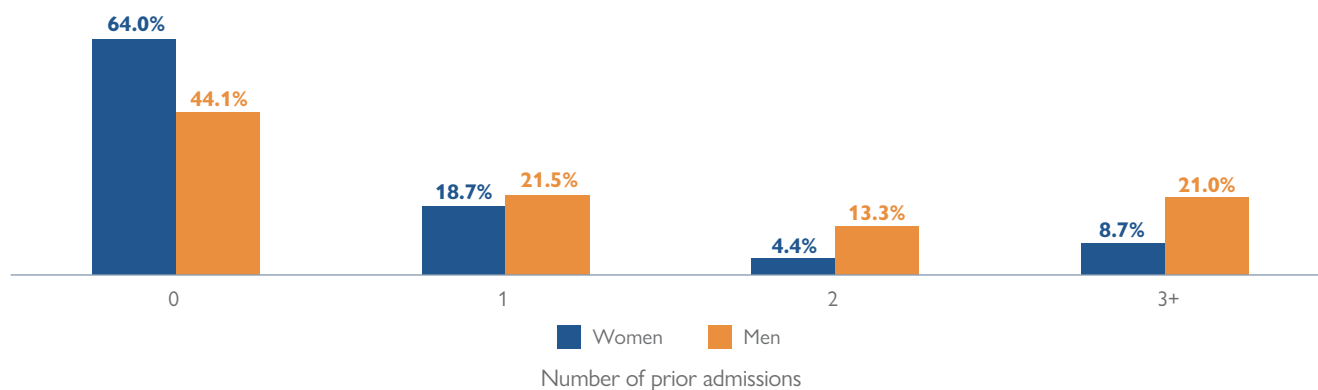
Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24)

* Share or count of admissions with one or more of these enhancements (some admissions have multiple).

** Average sentence years added per all counts of the enhancement on a term.

Two-thirds of women admitted to prison had no prior prison admission. Differences in criminal history may also contribute to the differences in sentence length between men and women. Of women admitted to prison since 2014, 64% were serving their first prison sentence in California, compared to 44% of men (Figure 7). The trend is similar among the currently incarcerated, with 70% of women incarcerated on their first admission compared to 54% of men (Figure A-2).

FIGURE 7: Prior admissions among men and women admitted to California prisons, 2014-24



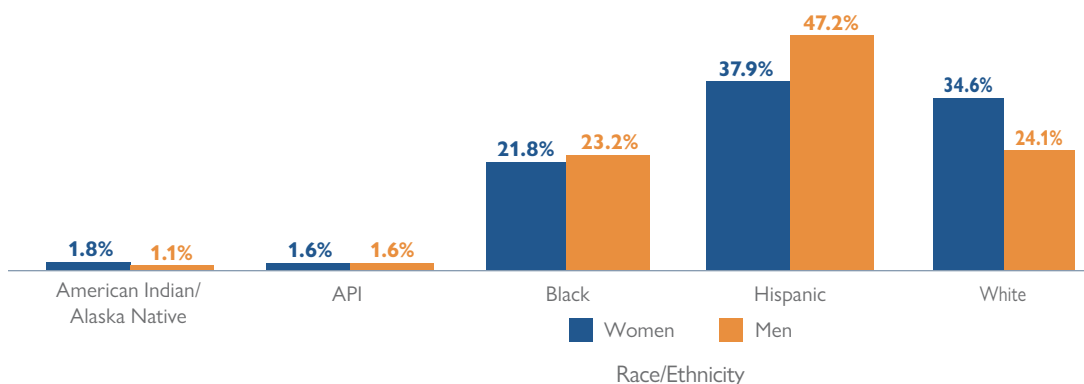
Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24)

Note: Total N for women is 24,454; for men is 322,040.

Two-thirds of the female prison population are Hispanic (38%) or White (35%), and charging and sentence severity vary across racial and ethnic groups

Hispanic women make up the largest percentage of the female prison population. Among people admitted to prison since 2014, 38% of women and 47% of men were Hispanic (Figure 8). White people represented a larger share of the female prison population than the male population, at 35% compared to 24%. A slightly higher percentage of incarcerated women were American Indian/Alaska Native relative to men (2% compared to 1%). Black men and women each accounted for just over 20% of admissions. The racial and ethnic distribution of the currently incarcerated population is very similar (Figure A-2). Below we explore patterns of charging and sentencing within the female prison population.

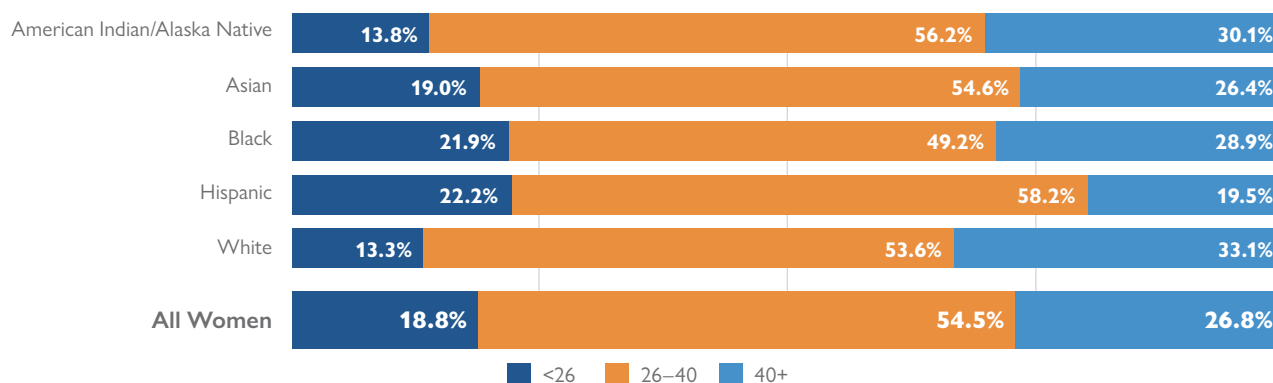
FIGURE 8. Racial and ethnic composition of those admitted to prison in California, 2014-24



Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24). We exclude people with race/ethnicity recorded as “Other” or “Unknown” in the administrative records (which represent 2.3% of women and 2.9% of men). Note: Information on race and ethnicity may not be self-reported and can reflect classifications made by prison staff, court officials, or arresting agencies. Total N for women is 24,454; for men is 322,040.

A larger share of Black and Hispanic women were under 26 at admission than other groups, whereas a larger share of White women were over the age of 40. From 2014 to 2024, over half (55%) of women admitted to prison were between ages 26 and 40 (Figure 9). About one-quarter (27%) were over the age of 40, and 19% were under the age of 26, with an average age at admission of 35. A larger share of Black and Hispanic women were under 26 at admission (22%), compared to 13% of White women. In contrast, 33% of White women were over age 40 at admission, compared to 29% of Black women and 20% of Hispanic women. These differences may reflect broader demographic shifts in California in the last decade. While White people make up 53% of the population over the age of 65, they make up only 26% of the population aged 18 to 24. In contrast, Hispanic people make up only 22% of the population over 65, but 50% of the population aged 18 to 24.

FIGURE 9. Age at admission to California prisons for women, by racial and ethnic group, 2014-24



Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24)

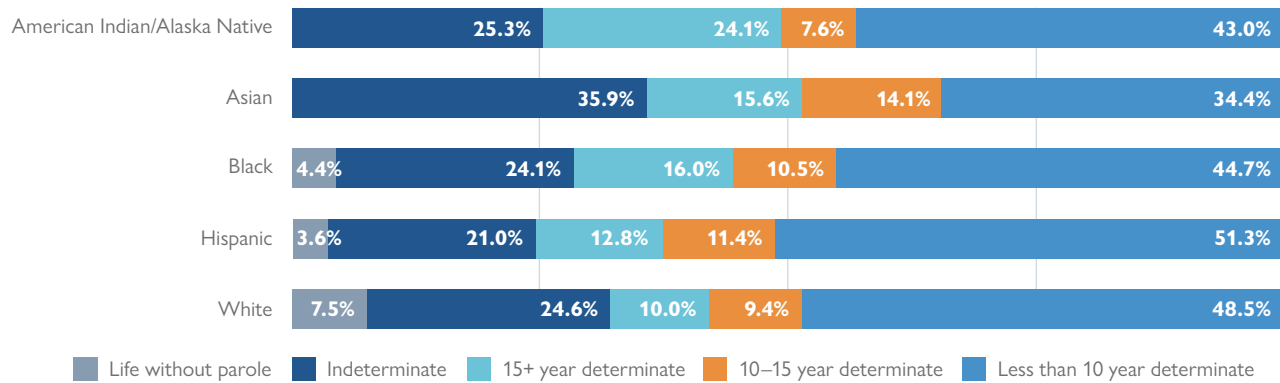
Note: Information on race and ethnicity may not be self-reported and can reflect classifications made by prison staff, court officials, or arresting agencies.

Total N by race is as follows: American Indian/Alaska Native (429); Asian (401); Black (5,324); Hispanic (9,259); and White (8,469).

A larger share of White and Asian women are serving LWOP sentences, compared to Black and Hispanic women. Among currently incarcerated women, 5% are serving an LWOP sentence. A larger proportion of White women are serving LWOP sentences (8%), compared to Black and Hispanic women (4%). While Asian women make up a very small proportion of the female prison population, over one-third of incarcerated Asian women are serving indeterminate sentences, compared to one quarter or less of women in all other groups. There are 19 women currently serving a condemned sentence. Most are White (n=9) or Hispanic (n=5), and there are no American Indian/Alaska Native women serving a condemned sentence.

A larger share of Hispanic women (51%) and White women (49%) are serving determinate sentences of less than 10 years, compared to Black (45%), American Indian/Alaska Native (43%), and Asian (34%) women.

FIGURE 10. Distribution of sentence types for women currently incarcerated in California prisons (as of December 2024), by racial and ethnic group



Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24)

Note: Information on race and ethnicity may not be self-reported and can reflect classifications made by prison staff, court officials, or arresting agencies. The sentence type categories are mutually exclusive. Condemned sentences are excluded. Total N by race is as follows: American Indian/Alaska Native (82); Asian (67); Black (883); Hispanic (1,312); and White (1,186).

Trends in the admissions sample are similar (Figure A-5), with most women admitted with determinate sentences of ten years or less. Asian women admitted to CDCR had a slightly larger share of indeterminate sentences (3.5% compared to 1% or 2% for other groups).

A larger share of American Indian/Alaska Native (38%) and Black (38%) women are imprisoned for assault. Assault was the most common offense for all women admitted (31%), though American Indian/Alaska Native had slightly higher shares admitted for assault (Table 4). Robbery was more common for Black and Hispanic women (16% and 12%, respectively) than women in other racial or ethnic groups. A larger share of American Indian/Alaska Native and White women had a drug charge as their controlling offense (10% and 9%, respectively).

TABLE 4. Most common controlling offense for women admitted to California prisons, by racial and ethnic group, 2014-24

RACE/ETHNICITY	N	ASSAULT (%)	ROBBERY (%)	BURGLARY (%)	DRUG (%)
American Indian/ Alaska Native	429	38.0	8.2	7.0	9.8
Asian	401	26.9	9.7	9.7	6.7
Black	5,324	37.6	16.0	10.3	3.7
Hispanic	9,259	31.1	12.2	10.4	7.9
White	8,469	26.8	8.6	13.7	9.2
All women	24,454	31.1	11.6	11.5	7.4

Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24)

Table note: Information on race and ethnicity may not be self-reported and can reflect classifications made by prison staff, court officials, or arresting agencies.

American Indian/Alaska Native women received the longest average sentences. American Indian/Alaska Native women had an average sentence length of 5 years, compared to 4.4 years for all women admitted to CDCR ([Table 5](#)). They also received the longest average sentences across admissions with assault, burglary, or robbery as the controlling offense. Asian women convicted of burglary or drug offenses received longer than average sentences as well — 4.8 years for burglary (compared to 3.8 years) and 4.6 for drug offenses (compared to 3.7 years). Black women also received slightly longer sentences, on average, than all women (4.6 years compared to 4.4 years).

TABLE 5. Average sentence for women admitted to California prisons, by racial and ethnic group and controlling offense (2014-24)

RACE/ETHNICITY	N	OVERALL	ASSAULT	ROBBERY	BURGLARY	DRUG
American Indian/ Alaska Native	429	5.0	5.1	8.0	4.8	3.8
Asian	401	4.8	3.9	4.2	4.8	4.6
Black	5,324	4.6	4.4	4.5	3.9	3.4
Hispanic	9,259	4.3	4.1	4.7	3.6	3.6
White	8,469	4.2	3.8	4.1	3.8	3.8
All women	24,454	4.4	4.1	4.5	3.8	3.7

Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24)

Note: Information on race and ethnicity may not be self-reported and can reflect classifications made by prison staff, court officials, or arresting agencies.

Women made up between 4% and 8% of prison admissions across California’s most populous counties

Women made up 7% of admissions to CDCR between 2014–2024. They were a smaller share of admissions from Alameda (4%) and San Francisco (3%) counties, and a larger share in Ventura, San Diego, Riverside, and Orange (8%) ([Table 6](#)).

See [Table A-1](#) for all women admitted and currently incarcerated by county.

TABLE 6. Women admitted to California prisons from the 15 most populous counties (2014-24)

# OF WOMEN ADMITTED		% OF ADMISSIONS THAT WERE WOMEN	# OF WOMEN ADMITTED		% OF ADMISSIONS THAT WERE WOMEN
Ventura	453	8.3	San Mateo	232	6.3
San Diego	1,960	8.0	Sacramento	898	5.8
Riverside	2,104	7.7	Contra Costa	209	5.6
Orange	1,232	7.5	Santa Clara	430	5.5
San Bernardino	2,317	7.4	San Joaquin	439	5.0
Kern	1,089	7.1	Alameda	223	4.1
Los Angeles	6,561	7.0	San Francisco	36	3.2
Fresno	964	6.3			

Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24)

CONCLUSION

Women make up a small share of California's prison population — just 4%, or about 3,700 people. On average, women received shorter sentences, partly due to differences in enhancements and criminal history. Two-thirds of currently incarcerated women are Hispanic or White, though sentence types and lengths vary across racial and ethnic groups. Five percent of women are currently serving life without parole sentences, with the highest share among White women (8%). Asian and American Indian/Alaska Native women, while a small share of the population, were more likely to receive longer or more severe sentences. Over one-third of incarcerated Asian women are currently serving indeterminate sentences, compared to one-quarter or fewer in other groups. American Indian/Alaska Native women had the longest average sentence length — 5.0 years versus 4.4 years for all women.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This research stems from a partnership between the California Policy Lab at the University of California and the Committee on Revision of the Penal Code, a state agency that studies and makes recommendations to improve California's criminal legal system.

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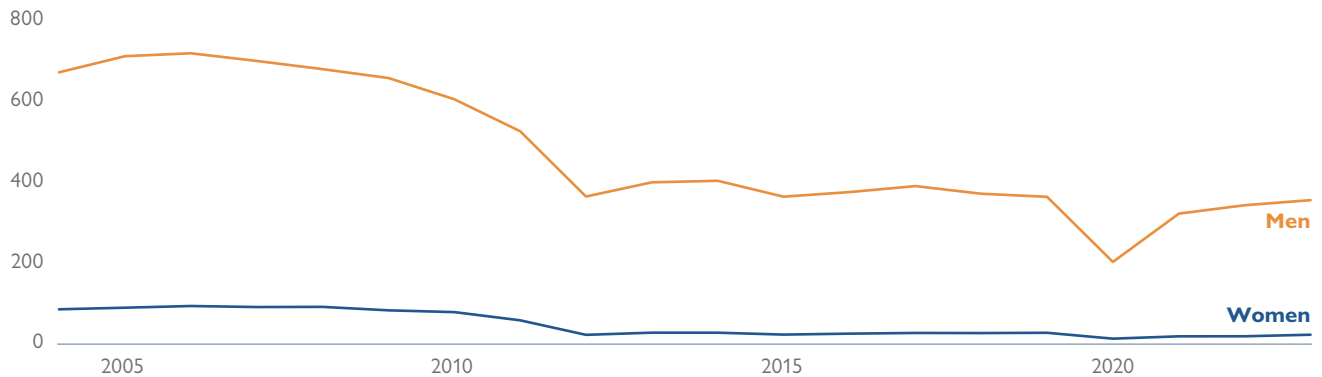


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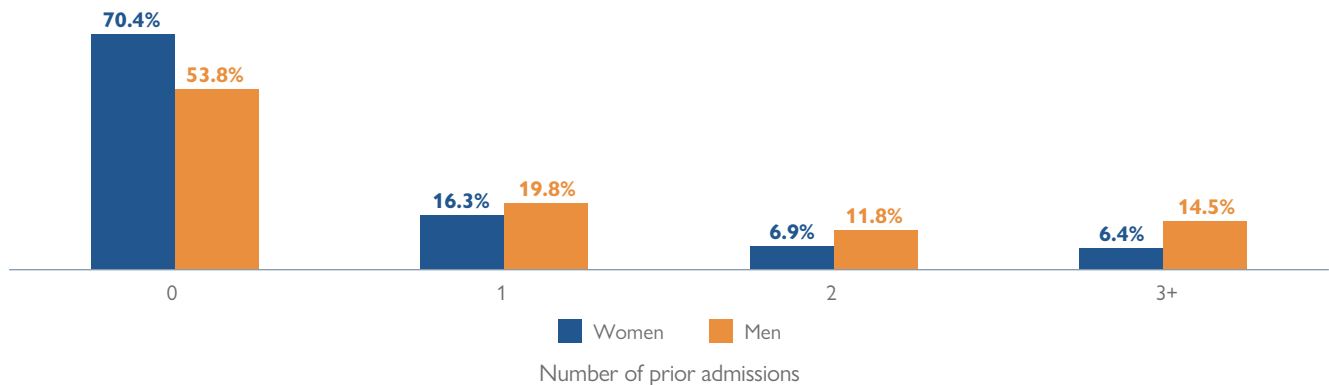
APPENDIX

FIGURE A-1: Prison admission rate in California per 100,000 by gender, 2004-23



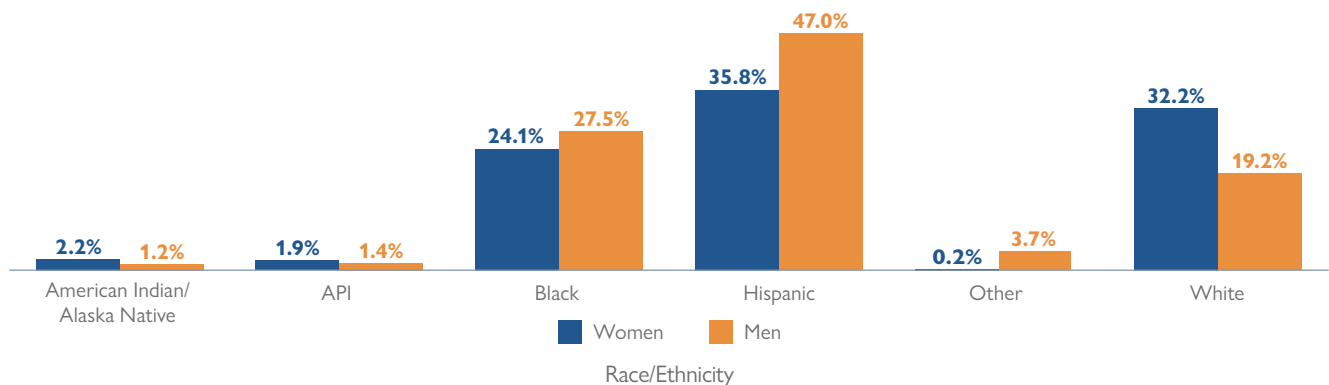
Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24), California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Adult Characteristics historical reports (2004–13), California Department of Finance (2004–20), and American Community Survey (2021–23). Note: The denominator is restricted to the adult population by sex in California aged 18–49, in line with the denominator used in CDCR's population projections. For the years 2021–2023, the denominator is men or women 20–49, due to differences in the age categories reported in the ACS. These rates may look different from other sources due to differences in the denominator or population data source.

FIGURE A-2: Number of prior admissions to CDCR among the currently incarcerated by gender, December 2024



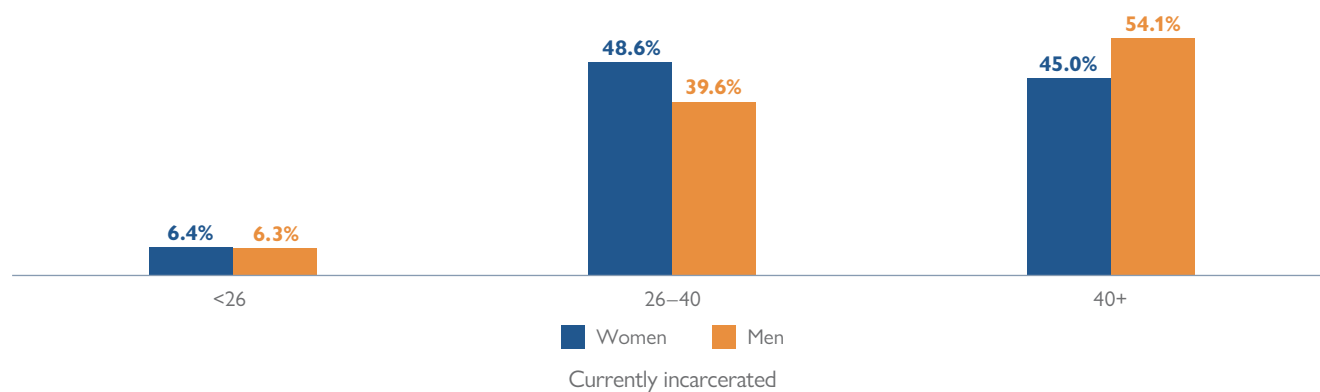
Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24). Note: Sample sizes for the currently incarcerated (3,675 women, 88,987 men).

FIGURE A-3: Racial and ethnic composition for men and women currently incarcerated in prison in California, December 2024



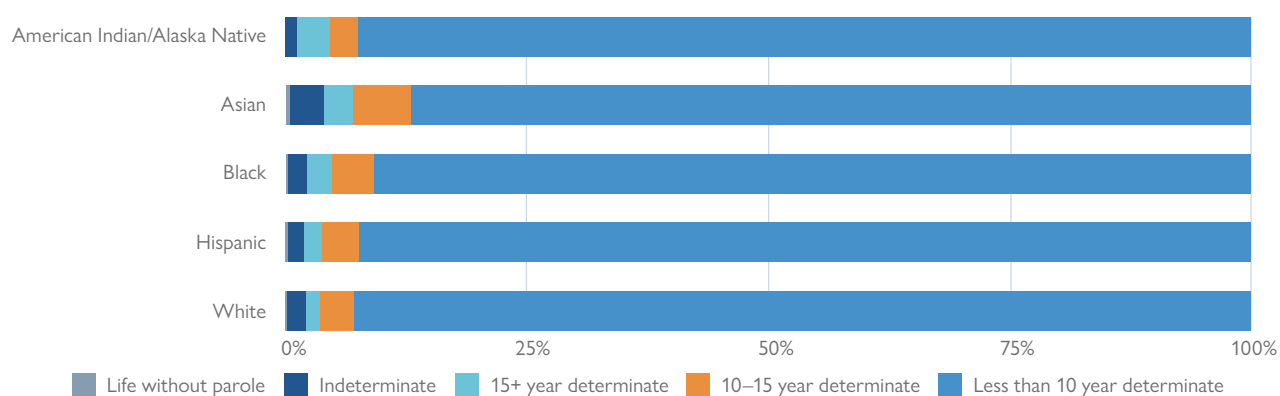
Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24). Note: Sample sizes for the currently incarcerated (3,675 women, 88,987 men).

FIGURE A-4: Age of currently incarcerated in California by gender, December 2024



Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24). Note: Sample sizes for the currently incarcerated (3,675 women, 88,987 men).

FIGURE A-5: Share of sentence types for women admitted to prison in California by race/ethnicity, admissions, 2014-2024



Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24)

TABLE A-1: Women as a share of admissions to prison (2014-24) and the currently incarcerated population (December 2024) by county

COUNTY	ADMISSIONS, 2014–2024			CURRENTLY INCARCERATED		
	TOTAL	# OF WOMEN	% OF WOMEN	TOTAL	# OF WOMEN	% OF WOMEN
Alameda	5,430	223	4.1	2,188	57	2.6
Alpine	5	0	0.0	—	—	—
Amador	546	46	8.4	124	—	—
Butte	3,566	329	9.2	802	49	6.1
Calaveras	382	30	7.9	65	—	—
Colusa	351	21	6.0	62	—	—
Contra Costa	3,712	209	5.6	1,462	58	4.0
Del Norte	602	82	13.6	119	8	6.7
El Dorado	1,400	115	8.2	347	25	7.2
Fresno	15,326	964	6.3	3,175	131	4.1
Glenn	361	40	11.1	66	—	—
Humboldt	1,516	97	6.3	363	15	4.1
Imperial	1,505	99	6.6	258	12	4.7
Inyo	205	25	12.2	30	5	16.7
Kern	15,263	1,089	7.1	3,508	166	4.7
Kings	3,929	337	8.6	844	29	3.4
Lake	1,320	87	6.6	243	10	4.1
Lassen	502	28	5.6	130	6	4.6
Los Angeles	93,083	6,561	7.0	27,099	943	3.5
Madera	2,472	234	9.5	575	40	7.0
Marin	605	44	7.3	184	7	3.8
Mariposa	183	16	8.7	45	—	—
Mendocino	1,418	113	8.0	286	15	2.2
Merced	3,050	159	5.2	750	16	2.1
Modoc	139	13	9.4	21	—	—
Mono	66	10	15.2	21	—	—
Monterey	4,718	311	6.6	1,426	50	3.5
Napa	1,160	85	7.3	264	8	3.0
Nevada	408	31	7.6	115	—	—
Orange	16,444	1,232	7.5	4,044	155	3.8
Placer	3,318	285	8.6	701	35	5.0
Plumas	199	13	6.5	36	0	0.0

continued

COUNTY	ADMISSIONS, 2014–2024			CURRENTLY INCARCERATED		
	TOTAL	# OF WOMEN	% OF WOMEN	TOTAL	# OF WOMEN	% OF WOMEN
Riverside	27,431	2,104	7.7	7,878	396	5.0
Sacramento	15,525	898	5.8	4,833	175	3.6
San Benito	366	21	5.7	96	7	7.3
San Bernardino	31,330	2,317	7.4	5,822	277	4.8
San Diego	24,544	1,960	8.0	6,930	298	4.3
San Francisco	1,133	36	3.2	443	7	1.6
San Joaquin	8,717	439	5.0	2,235	83	3.7
San Luis Obispo	2,482	176	7.1	585	26	4.4
San Mateo	3,654	232	6.3	868	41	4.7
Santa Barbara	3,611	189	5.2	1,012	19	1.9
Santa Clara	7,819	430	5.5	2,895	49	1.7
Santa Cruz	1,222	67	5.5	396	9	2.3
Shasta	3,909	383	9.8	1,049	71	6.8
Sierra	28	5	17.9	—	—	—
Siskiyou	650	58	8.9	215	12	5.6
Solano	2,724	126	4.6	727	24	3.3
Sonoma	2,606	170	6.5	730	29	4.0
Stanislaus	7,089	459	6.5	1,611	66	4.1
Sutter	1,260	130	9.6	239	11	4.6
Tehama	1,456	152	10.4	318	21	6.6
Trinity	233	17	7.3	41	—	—
Tulare	5,210	350	6.6	1,864	74	4.0
Tuolumne	908	95	10.5	253	18	7.1
Ventura	5,431	453	8.3	1,366	51	3.7
Yolo	1,760	95	5.4	446	16	3.6
Yuba	1,991	163	8.2	451	28	6.2

Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2014–24)

Note: Cells sizes that represent fewer than five people are suppressed and will show “—” in the table.