

# **THE IMPACT OF THE INCREASE OF BLACK WOMEN GOING TO PRISON IS DEVASTATING THE BLACK FAMILY**

By Dr. Rosie Milligan

Donna Ann Smith-Marshall, Long Beach, California, is a mother, wife, and a prison reform activist. In her new book *TIME ON THE INSIDE: Behind the Walls in a Maximum Security Women's Prison from an Insider's View*, Donna helps the reader to understand the need for compassion for those who are incarcerated. She vividly takes you behind the walls of Central California Women's Facility, the United States' largest women's penitentiary, and Sybil Brand Institute, formerly the largest women's jail in California.

Psychologists, scholars, and politicians, when trying to make a score for election, will paint a picture of the criminals of today being hardcore and violent, but the masses aren't. It is important for society to understand that the people behind bars are not always what the media has portrayed them to be. Yes, there are some who have committed horrific crimes against adults and children, but please understand that these are not the individuals who continuously go in and out of the prison system.

If you cannot find compassion in your heart for Mrs. Smith after reading her story, you will not be able to have compassion on your child, your sister, or your mother, any of whom could easily be staring at the steps of a prison door. It takes just *one* slip-up. It's easy—not hard—to get there.

Donna states, "I had high hopes of going to college and becoming a journalist. Instead, I became a teen mother and had to quit school and go to work. In spite of my situation, I landed a job with the Internal Revenue Services and General Services Administration. However, providing for my children became an overwhelming burden. I needed to prove that I could make it, despite being a teenage mom. I tried to remain independent and not ask anyone for help. That's how I began my journey of falsifying financial statements and forgery. It didn't take long to land 2½ years in a maximum security women's prison. Am I worthy of an opportunity for a new chance? Do I deserve compassion? I think so, and so do many others who committed a non-violent crime."

The book points out that the penal system does not actively pursue rehabilitation. With a current capacity of over 165,000 inmates in the state of California and an operating budget of \$5.7 billion, the average annual cost per inmate is almost \$31,000. According to the CDC's projection report, women currently make up 14 percent of this population, with over 12,000

women in prison today as opposed to 8,000 ten years ago. An inmate doing a sentence of 2½ years, earning a mere \$0.15 an hour, will never earn more than \$780 within a year. Sounds like a new form of slavery to me. The question that should be raised is—how come inmates can work for the federal government and large corporations while in prison, but can not get employed by them when they are discharged from prison after serving their time and making restitution?

When inmates are released from prison, they are given only \$200 to begin their new life on the outside again. Donna was lucky. She had help from her family. But she was saddened to think about those women who had no one to help them. Her sister kept her children while she was in prison, but for many incarcerated women, their children are caught up in the foster care system and their mothers are never able to get custody of them again.

An employer's survey revealed that 80 percent of employers said that they would not hire an ex-convict. And the punishment does not stop even after serving time, because if you were convicted of a felony, you would not be able to receive general relief, you could not receive food stamps, you could not receive a Section 8 certificate for housing, nor could you receive a school grant to further your education. Therefore, without the aid of a good support system, many are forced to return to what they were doing before they went to prison—non-violent crimes.

The author states, "There are those who would like you to believe that everyone in the state prison has done some hideous crime and they aren't worthy of being a part of society. This is not the case. I am worthy, and so are many others. I was in prison from 1993 to 1995, but I was determined to start my life over again, so I lied on my job applications. I was hired as a program director in the pediatric department at King Drew Medical Center in April 1996. In 1998, I was employed by Molina Healthcare. I managed a \$6 million dollar budget, was responsible for 12 employees, and managed three departments. I am no exception to the rule. I am just one who penned my story in hopes that it would educate the public to the truth about what really goes on behind bars.

Black women are the pillars of the Black community—by necessity, not by choice. Black men were forced out of the home in order for their families to receive welfare assistance when they were not able to provide their loved ones with shelter, food, and clothing. In the past, many Black men had to leave their families behind to avoid lynching. Today, when Black men cannot provide the basic necessities for their loved ones, they sometimes just disappear. I realize that the media portrays these men as trifling, lazy, and irresponsible, however, that is *not* the case in most instances—ask Black men. They can speak for themselves. My point is that 60 percent of Black households are headed by Black women. Therefore, when Black women are incarcerated, the

Black homes are highly impacted in a devastating manner. Black children are displaced and are cared for most often by someone other than a family member due to financial hardships, resulting in the children being placed in homes outside of their culture and familiar environment.

An entire generation of Blacks is being destroyed—adults and children—because of an unjust penal system and media propaganda about those who are at risk. I am grateful to Mrs. Donna Ann Smith-Marshall for bringing this issue to the forefront while making her life transparent. But why is it that our political leaders and high-profile ministers are so silent on this critical issue? Why? Or do they truly understand the cancer associated with the prison industrial complex which eats away and destroys Black families? What will happen to the remnant? What will happen to these children who are scattered? Will they grow up to be loving or hateful adults? Will they learn to be forgiving or resentful? Will they become an asset or a liability to themselves, their loved ones, and society? The children of these Black women who are being incarcerated will grow up to be our neighbors, our children's spouses. Will they value life or will they take lives? This may seem like a Black problem today, but I promise you the effects of incarceration on Blacks and denying them the opportunity to reenter society whole again WILL impact *every* race, creed, and color.

Blacks are impacted the most by incarceration because there are fewer Black employers who have the ability to hire their own people. So when you couple this with racism and the current economic climate, the picture looks gloomy for Blacks and their offspring.

After reading *TIME ON THE INSIDE: Behind the Walls in a Maximum Women's Prison from an Insider's View*, I cried. I became depressed for a quick moment, then I decided to do something constructive about it and bring it to the public's attention, and that is when I began to write. And so I did my part. Now it's up to the media, especially the Black media. The media needs to raise public awareness of this cancer that is slowly destroying the Black family when Black women go to jail and leave their offspring behind. *This is a cry for help! Help, somebody—anybody—everybody—help!* Prison may be closer to your house and your family than you think.

For additional information about the book, contact the author at 310-438-3483 or e-mail her at [Fmapublishing.com](mailto:Fmapublishing.com)

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