

# **WOMEN'S INCARCERATION IN RHODE ISLAND**

## **OpenDoors**

Trends, Findings & Policy Implications: 2021–2025

March 2026

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## Key Findings

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This report tracks changes in the female population at Rhode Island's Women's Facility 1 across four years of data, from the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic through late 2025. It also incorporates new findings from Rhode Island's 2024 Special Legislative Task Force on Female Recidivism and qualitative research with recently released women. Five findings stand out for policymakers:

### **1. The population has nearly doubled since the COVID trough and is still growing.**

From 72 women in January 2021, the facility has grown to an average of 138 individuals in October–November 2025. That's a 92% increase in four years, and the trajectory continues upward. The facility currently operates at about 65% of its legal capacity (Palmigiano Capacity: 213), but at the current rate of growth, capacity pressure becomes a real concern within a few years.

### **2. More than half the women in the facility have not been convicted of anything.**

In the most recent data (October–November 2025), roughly 65% of the population was awaiting trial, up from about 47–49% in 2021. In practical terms, the majority of incarcerated women in Rhode Island today are pretrial detainees, not sentenced offenders.

### **3. Drug charges and property crimes now dominate the charge picture, a major shift from 2021.**

The January 2021 population was heavily shaped by the pandemic: 64% were classified as violent offenders, and homicide/murder was the largest single charge type (18%). By 2025, drug-related charges lead at 29%, followed by property crimes (17%) and domestic violence (15%). As pretrial detention rates have increased, the facility has moved from largely incarcerating people for violent crimes to a more typical cross-section of women's arrests in Rhode Island.

### **4. Short stays are the norm but short stays make rehabilitation difficult.**

RIDOC's own FY2023 data shows that the median pretrial stay is just 3 days, and 84% of sentenced women served 6 months or less. Most women pass through the facility too quickly to benefit from available programs. The facility manages enormous throughput (1,345 new pretrial admissions in FY2023 alone), while the subset of women who could most benefit from intensive services are often gone before enrollment is complete.

### **5. The COVID era was a natural experiment: fewer women incarcerated, crime did not rise.**

Court disruptions during 2020–2021 caused a historic drop in the women's prison population — from roughly 150–180 pre-pandemic down to 72 in January 2021. Rhode Island crime rates did not increase as a result. This is among the most important underexamined findings in the state's recent criminal justice history, and argues strongly for studying which COVID-era court policies drove the decline and whether they can be made permanent.

## 1. Population at a Glance

This table summarizes the shifts in the population at the Rhode Island women's prison from 2021 to 2025. The population had declined substantially as of early 2021 during the pandemic and then increased progressively up through the end of 2025.

| Period                     | Avg. Population | Awaiting Trial | Sentenced | AT Share | Context                                                           |
|----------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Jan 7, 2021</b>         | 72              | 35             | 37        | 49%      | COVID trough; courts near-closed                                  |
| <b>Jul–Aug 2021</b>        | 92              | 43             | ~49       | 47%      | Courts reopening; case backlog beginning to build                 |
| <b>FY2023 (RIDOC data)</b> | 122             | 56             | 63        | 46%      | Mid-recovery; courts processing backlog                           |
| <b>Oct–Nov 2025</b>        | 138             | 88             | ~48       | 65%      | Population near pre-COVID levels; pretrial share sharply elevated |

## 2. The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Lasting Effects

Understanding these trends requires understanding what the pandemic did to Rhode Island's criminal justice system not just in 2020, but through 2025. The pandemic was not a brief disruption. Its effects on court operations, case processing, and the prison population stretched for years.

### Spring 2020: Emergency Depopulation

When COVID hit in March 2020, Rhode Island courts entered emergency operations and dramatically curtailed in-person proceedings. RIDOC simultaneously moved to reduce the prison population through emergency releases. The result was a historic drop in the female prison population, from roughly 150–180 before COVID (and a peak of 245 in 2008, per RIDOC) down to the 72 women present in January 2021.

Emergency release protocols prioritized low-risk individuals. What remained by early 2021 was a selective group: people serving time for the most serious offenses, people with long records, people deemed flight risks. This is why the January 2021 population looks so different from later years: 64% classified as violent, homicide/murder the top charge type, sentenced individuals already having served a median of nearly two years.

### 2021: Courts Reopen, Backlog Still Building

By July and August 2021, the population had grown to about 92. This is up 28% from January. Courts had resumed operations, new cases were entering the system, and the charge composition was shifting toward the more typical pattern of women's arrests: drug offenses, property crimes, domestic violence,

assault. This increase was the beginning of a court backlog that would drive the pretrial population upward for years.

### **FY2023: Court Systems Functioning and Clearing Backlog**

RIDOC's own FY2023 data shows a facility that had climbed back to an average of 122 women, 57% of capacity. In FY2023 alone there were 1,345 new pretrial admissions, nearly four new women arriving every single day — through a facility holding only about 56 pretrial residents at any given moment. The median pretrial stay was just 3 days.

### **2025: Population Rebounded, Composition Shifted**

By October–November 2025, the population had reached 138 people — approaching pre-pandemic norms and almost double what it was in early 2021. The pretrial share has jumped from 46% in FY2023 to roughly 65% in 2025. Where the facility was once roughly balanced between sentenced and pretrial residents, it is now predominantly pretrial. This is a likely consequence of the cumulative court backlog from 2020 through 2023.

#### **The COVID Decarceration Did Not Raise Crime Rates**

Crime rates in Rhode Island did not increase during this time of low incarceration. According to state crime data, there was a significant drop in crime during the pandemic overall. Non-violent crime rates decreased from 2020-2021, were flat from 2021 to 2022, and then increased slightly from 2022 to 2023. The one exception was motor vehicle theft, which increased during the pandemic. Violent crime rates rose from 2020-2021 but had reverted to their baseline numbers by 2022 and then continued to decrease.<sup>1</sup>

If fewer women being incarcerated did not produce more crime, policymakers must grapple seriously with what that means particularly for policies on pretrial detention, probation violations, and the viability of community-based alternatives. OpenDoors supports commissioning a systematic study of which COVID-era court policies drove the decline and whether any should be made permanent.

## **3. Population Growth and Capacity**

The chart below shows the trajectory from COVID trough to current levels. After a collapse to 34% of legal capacity in January 2021, the facility has grown steadily to 65% today.

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<sup>1</sup> Rhode Island State Police Reports on Crime in 2020 through 2025, <https://risp.ri.gov/public-information>

| Period                        | Population | % of Palmigiano Capacity (213) | % of 2008 Peak (245) | COVID Phase       | Source             |
|-------------------------------|------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| <b>2008 (historical peak)</b> | 245        | N/A                            | 100%                 | Pre-pandemic      | RIDOC historical   |
| <b>January 7, 2021</b>        | 72         | 34%                            | 29%                  | COVID trough      | Original dataset   |
| <b>Jul–Aug 2021 (avg)</b>     | 92         | 43%                            | 38%                  | Early recovery    | Original dataset   |
| <b>FY2023 (avg)</b>           | 122        | 57%                            | 50%                  | Mid-recovery      | RIDOC presentation |
| <b>Oct–Nov 2025 (avg)</b>     | 138        | 65%                            | 56%                  | Post-COVID growth | Original dataset   |

The population has grown by 92% in four years. The primary driver of near-term population growth is the pretrial population: it has grown from 35 women (49%) in January 2021 to roughly 88 women (65%) by late 2025, an increase of 151%. The sentenced population has grown more modestly from 37 to roughly 48 and has declined as a share of total population. This means the levers most likely to affect future capacity are pretrial-side interventions.

## 4. What Women Are Charged With And How It Has Changed

The charge picture in 2021 was heavily distorted by the pandemic. What we see in 2025 looks much more like a representative cross-section of women's involvement with the criminal justice system in Rhode Island.

### The COVID Filter Effect: 2021 Was Not a Normal Year

In January 2021, 64% of all incarcerated women were classified as violent offenders (using RIDOC's own coding). Homicide and manslaughter accounted for 18% of all individuals. This was the result of the emergency releases of 2020: the people who remained were, by design, those whose offenses were most serious. By July–August 2021, homicide dropped to 4% and the charge mix started looking more typical.

## 5. How Long Women Are Incarcerated

Length of stay varies enormously depending on whether someone is awaiting trial or sentenced, and within those groups on the nature of their case. The overall picture is of a high-volume, short-stay facility for most women, with a smaller group of long-term residents whose presence shapes the daily population count.

### Awaiting Trial: Days, Not Weeks, for Most

| Period / Data Type                   | Median Stay | Average Stay | Data Type | Notes                                                |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|--------------|-----------|------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Jan 2021 — stock snapshot</b>     | 27 days     | 123 days     | Stock     | From commit date; n=34 with dates                    |
| <b>Jul–Aug 2021 — stock snapshot</b> | 27 days     | 99 days      | Stock     | From commit date; n=75 with dates                    |
| <b>FY2023 — releases (RIDOC)</b>     | 3 days      | 17 days      | Flow      | Release events; n=1,344 — most women are out in days |
| <b>Oct–Nov 2025 — stock snapshot</b> | 41 days     | 102 days     | Stock     | From incarceration date; n=77 with dates             |

### Why Do Flow and Stock Medians Look So Different?

The 3-day median (flow data) describes the typical experience of an individual woman entering the facility. The 27–41 day snapshot median describes who is occupying beds on a given day. A woman held for 200 days appears in 20 consecutive weekly snapshots; a woman released after 3 days appears in only one. Both numbers are real, they just answer different questions. Both have policy implications: the 3-day median means court-side interventions need to be fast-acting; the longer snapshot median reflects the subset driving most bed-day costs.

### Sentenced Population: Short Sentences for Most, Very Long for Some

According to RIDOC’s FY2023 data on sentenced releases, 41% served one month or less and 84% served six months or less. The average sentence length was 104 days; the median was 56 days. This is primarily a short-stay sentenced population but a “stacking effect” RIDOC itself identifies means violent offenders with very long sentences are always present, shaping the daily count even though they represent a small fraction of new arrivals.

| Sentence Length (FY2023 releases) | Number | % of Sentenced Releases | Policy Note                                                          |
|-----------------------------------|--------|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1 month or less</b>            | ~115   | 49%                     | Out before most programs can begin                                   |
| <b>1–6 months</b>                 | ~104   | 34%                     | Limited program completion; discharge planning critical              |
| <b>6 months – 1 year</b>          | ~18    | 6%                      | Sufficient time for structured programming                           |
| <b>1–2 years</b>                  | ~7     | 3%                      | Full program participation possible                                  |
| <b>2+ years</b>                   | ~5     | 2%                      | Longest-stay sentenced residents; parole eligible at 1/3 of sentence |

Source: RIDOC FY2023 sentenced release data (expiration of sentence). Counts are approximate.

## 6. Recidivism, Reentry, and the Discharge Planning Challenge

RIDOC's CY2019 recidivism data (followed for 36 months post-release) shows that women return to the system at lower rates than men: 49% of women released pretrial returned within three years (vs. 55% for men), and 34% of women released from sentences returned (vs. 46% for men). These are still substantial rates, roughly one in three sentenced women will be back within three years.

| Group   | Pretrial Return Rate | Sentenced Return Rate | Notes                                                       |
|---------|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Women   | 49%                  | 34%                   | Lower rates than men on both measures                       |
| Men     | 55%                  | 46%                   |                                                             |
| Overall | 54%                  | 45%                   | Source: RIDOC CY2019 recidivism cohort (36-month follow-up) |

RIDOC identifies age at release, education level, offense type, security level at release, and risk assessment score as the factors most strongly correlated with recidivism. This suggests that targeted reentry interventions especially around education and stable housing for higher-risk subgroups could meaningfully move the needle on return rates.

The 2024 Commission also found that recidivism among female prisoners over age 50 is driven by probation and parole violations, not new criminal offenses, underscoring that probation reform is essential to any serious decarceration strategy.

### The Short-Stay Problem for Programming

The most direct policy challenge highlighted in the RIDOC presentation is this: most women leave before they can be helped. As RIDOC itself states, “many incarcerated females are released from Women’s Facility 1 before they have been able to obtain the full benefit of available institutional programs and course offerings.”

With 84% of sentenced women serving six months or less, and most pretrial women present for just days, the window for in-facility intervention is narrow. RIDOC’s response has been to invest in discharge planning and transitional services. But the barriers women face on release, housing access, benefits enrollment, healthcare connections, transportation, childcare, remain substantial. Building those community-side support systems is where the greatest leverage lies given current sentence lengths.

## 8. The 2024 Commission on Female Recidivism: Findings & Recommendations

In 2023, the Rhode Island General Assembly established the Special Legislative Task Force to Improve the Long-Term Outcomes and Reduce Recidivism of Females in the Criminal Justice Population (the “Commission”), through House Resolution H6163. The 19-member Commission included legislators from

both parties, the Director of RIDOC, the Public Defender, the Parole Board Chair, judges, law enforcement, and community organizations including OpenDoors RI. After multiple hearings in fall 2024 featuring expert testimony and lived-experience testimony from formerly incarcerated women, the Commission issued its Final Report in June 2024.

### Key Commission Findings

| Finding Area                | Commission Conclusion (2024)                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Long-term trend             | 50% reduction in female population at RIDOC since 2008, attributed to good-time credits and drug law changes                       |
| Sentence length             | Median 56 days; average 104 days; 84% of released women serving 6 months or less                                                   |
| Offense composition         | 58% of all sentenced female releases in FY23 were non-violent offenses                                                             |
| Recidivism—sentenced        | 34% return within 36 months                                                                                                        |
| Recidivism –awaiting trial  | 49% return within 36 months                                                                                                        |
| Recidivism driver (age 50+) | Probation & parole violations, not new criminal offenses                                                                           |
| Prison-based therapy        | Historically ineffective; incarceration and involuntary treatment linked to high rates of fatal overdose post-release              |
| Health impacts              | Incarcerated women more likely to die prematurely; higher rates of TB, hepatitis, high blood pressure vs. never-incarcerated women |
| Short-stay problem          | Many women released before accessing available institutional programs                                                              |
| Racial disparity            | Black women are 19.8% of incarcerated women; 5.4% of RI general population                                                         |
| RI vs. national             | Rhode Island has a low incarceration rate for females compared to the national average                                             |

### The Commission's 10 Recommendations

The Commission reached bipartisan consensus on the following recommendations to the General Assembly and state agencies:

1. Continued expansion of justice reform initiatives by improving community supervision, resentencing medical parole, and parole and clemency programs.
2. Evaluate and create more supportive housing, shelter services, and community-based transitional programming statewide, a crucial first step toward decreasing both incarceration and recidivism.
3. Explore potential housing opportunities on the RIDOC campus, including empty/unused buildings.
4. Review potential funding sources via state and private partnerships to support reentry services and housing for reentering female prisoners, with a focus on gendered pathways to incarceration.
5. Create and support RIDOC programming specifically for the women's facility and its transient population, recognizing that 'short stay' incarceration is prevalent.

6. A coordinated state agency effort to make transitional housing available to women held for 'short stays.'
7. Promote collaboration between the Judiciary, RI defense bar, the Attorney General's office, and RIDOC on identifying female prisoners likely to be released within six months.
8. Develop a greater focus on job training near end of sentence and assistance with job placement upon reentry.
9. Create programming to ensure reentering women have assistance obtaining necessary identification documents (Social Security card, birth certificate, driver's license or state ID).
10. Identify female prisoners in need of substance abuse and trauma recovery services and ensure every treatment option is consistently available before release.

OpenDoors endorses all 10 of the Commission's recommendations. The She Thrives program and Foundations transitional housing facility directly embody Recommendations 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10.

## 9. Voices from the Field: Who Is in the Facility

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The data in this report describes population-level trends. The following case studies are drawn from qualitative research conducted by Miranda Grundy, "Reducing the Incarceration of Women in Rhode Island: What Will It Take?" (CUNY Qualifying Paper, 2024). Grundy conducted in-depth interviews with nine recently released women at OpenDoors' Foundations transitional housing. Names are pseudonyms. These profiles illustrate the structural patterns the data points to and the distance between what incarceration costs and what it produces.

### Case Study: Lia – Trauma and Addiction

Lia, 34, is Latina and has cycled through the ACI multiple times. Her father died of drug use when she was 13; her mother directed alcohol-fueled abuse at Lia. At 15, she was kidnapped and sexually abused for seven days. She dropped out of school, turning to alcohol to cope. Her most recent incarceration was a probation violation for attempting to flee a domestic violence situation. Of the ACI she said: "The women get nothing. The yard is the size of a basketball court... there's 4 people to one cell." She said she thinks 90% of women in the ACI are there because they've been using substances to cope with past abuse.

### Case Study: Deb – Surviving Domestic Violence

Deb, 38, received an Ivy League scholarship before an abusive partner derailed her educational trajectory. After seven years as a certified nursing assistant, she lost her career to substance use driven by domestic violence. She was repeatedly arrested for domestic violence, usually as the victim. She later discovered that the partner who abused her for five years was a paid police informant whose role was to manufacture her criminal record. "Without him in my life, my life would absolutely, 1 bajillion percent, have taken a different course."

### Case Study: Val – The Drug Economy

Val, 40, served a four-year sentence for drug dealing following the stabbing death of her husband. Unable to cope with grief or make ends meet, she was recruited to sell drugs. Her son, who has a severe disability, was relocated to Florida. She is now sober, attending AA, and pursuing child reunification services. Her case illustrates a pattern visible in the charge data: drug-related charges now lead at 29% of the 2025 population, and many of those cases, like Val's, involve circumstances better addressed by grief counseling, economic support, and treatment than by incarceration.

## 10. Policy Implications

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Taken together, the trends in this data, combined with the 2024 Commission's findings and the COVID-era natural experiment, point to several areas where policy attention could have the most impact.

### Court Processing and the Pretrial Population

The single biggest driver of the facility's current population profile is the elevated pretrial share, now about 65% of all incarcerated women. Continued investment in court capacity, case management, and pretrial services infrastructure will determine whether the pretrial population stabilizes or continues to grow. At \$172,479 per person per year, each reduction of ten pretrial detainees saves roughly \$1.7 million annually.

### The COVID Natural Experiment: Study What Worked

The COVID era showed that Rhode Island can significantly reduce the number of women held at the ACI without raising crime rates. OpenDoors supports a systematic study of which specific court policies drove that decline, expanded personal recognizance releases, deferred arraignments, reduced prosecution of technical probation violations, and whether any should be made permanent. This would be among the most valuable criminal justice research investments the state could make. The Commission's finding of a 50% reduction in the female prison population since 2008 further shows that decarceration is achievable through deliberate policy choices.

### Short Sentences and the Programming Window

With 84% of sentenced women serving six months or less, the facility cannot realistically deliver multi-month programs to most of the women it houses. This argues for two complementary strategies: first, expanding community-based programming and reentry support so services don't depend on the window of incarceration; second, identifying the subset of women with sentences long enough to meaningfully engage with in-facility programming and ensuring those programs are available. The Commission recommends a coordinated state agency effort specifically to reach women held for 'short stays.'

### Drug Charges as the Leading Driver

Drug-related charges are now the top category (29% of all individuals in 2025), up from 14% in January 2021. RIDOC's FY2023 data shows that drug-related charges account for 24% of pretrial commitments but only 8% of sentenced commitments, a gap suggesting most drug-charge pretrial detainees do not end up with custodial sentences. Pretrial diversion, drug court pathways, and treatment referrals represent an opportunity to reduce incarceration without compromising public safety.

### Domestic Violence: A Consistently Significant Factor

Domestic violence appears consistently across all time periods (13–24% of the awaiting trial population) and often carries mandatory hold provisions that prevent pretrial release. The Commission found that gender-based violence and vulnerability to further violence are core gendered pathways to incarceration. Coordinated interventions that support both victim safety and the accused's ability to prepare a defense are particularly important given that a significant share of women charged with domestic offenses are themselves victims.

### **Probation Reform**

Rhode Island has the second-highest rate of people on probation nationally and the third-longest average probation sentences. In FY23, 39% of the pretrial ACI population were alleged probation violators. Under current law, a probation violation results in a minimum 30-day pretrial detention before any determination of guilt. The Commission recommends continued expansion of community supervision alternatives. Reforming how probation violations are handled, including legislation allowing bail on violations, could meaningfully reduce the pretrial population.

### **Community-Based Alternatives and Housing**

The Commission's top recommendation is to evaluate and create more supportive housing and community-based transitional programming. OpenDoors' Foundations transitional housing provides a model: at \$28,000 per bed per year, it costs one-sixth of ACI incarceration and produces better outcomes. The Commission specifically recommends a coordinated state agency effort to make transitional housing available to women held for short stays. Capacity planning decisions made now, whether focused on physical expansion, population management, or diversion — will shape options for years.

## **11. Data Sources and Notes**

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### **About the Four Primary Datasets**

This analysis draws on four sources compiled by OpenDoors from publicly available data:

- January 7, 2021 snapshot: A single-day record of 72 individuals incarcerated at Women's Facility 1, with detailed individual-level records including DOB, commit date, charge descriptions, explicit violent/nonviolent coding, and sentence lengths.
- July 28 – August 25, 2021 weekly data: Nine weekly snapshots yielding 178 unique individuals and a clean average weekly population of ~92. Charge data available for most awaiting trial individuals but sparse for sentenced individuals.
- October 15 – November 19, 2025 weekly data: Six weekly snapshots yielding 354 unique individuals and an average weekly population of 138. Status data complete for first four weeks.
- RIDOC Women's Commission Presentation, November 2023: Institutional data covering FY2023 (July 2022–June 2023), presented by Acting Director Wayne T. Salisbury Jr. The only source with flow data (admissions and releases), recidivism rates, and complete fiscal year counts.

Additional sources incorporated in this revised report: Commission on Female Recidivism, Final Report (June 2024); Grundy, M., "Reducing the Incarceration of Women in Rhode Island: What Will It Take?" (CUNY, 2024); "Can We Close the Rhode Island Women's Prison?" (law review article, on file with OpenDoors).

## **Key Limitations**

- These datasets use point-in-time (stock) sampling, which overrepresents long-stayers relative to the actual experience of the typical incarcerated woman. The FY2023 flow data (median 3-day pretrial stay) is essential context for interpreting the stock data.
- Charge categories are not directly comparable across datasets. The January 2021 dataset uses RIDOC's own violent/nonviolent coding. Later datasets use researcher coding from free-text charge descriptions. The RIDOC presentation uses "most serious offense type."
- COVID's effect on the 2021 population cannot be cleanly separated from other changes over this period. Legislative reforms, changes in enforcement priorities, and demographic shifts all overlap with the pandemic timeline.
- The January 2021 population is not a representative baseline for trend analysis — it is the COVID-filtered residual of an emergency depopulation, showing who remained after emergency releases, not a typical snapshot.
- Commit dates were available for only a subset of individuals in each dataset (69/72 in January 2021; 81/178 in Jul–Aug 2021; 92/354 in Oct–Nov 2025), which limits precision of custody-duration calculations but still allowed for analysis of shorter stays.