

New York City Council – Women’s Issues Committee
Hearing:

“Women of Color and Incarceration in New York City”

February 27, 2003

Testimony by: Walter Stafford and Diana Salas
Women of Color Policy Network and the Roundtable of
Institutions of People of Color at NYU Wagner School of Public
Service

City Council Testimony

Walter Stafford and Diana Salas of the Roundtable of Institutions of People of Color and the Women of Color Policy Network, the Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service
Thursday, February 27, 2003

Thank you for inviting us to discuss the relationship of poverty, arrests and incarceration among women of color in New York City. We welcome the opportunity because we are seriously concerned about the criminalization of Black and Hispanic women. My name is Walter Stafford. I am a professor of Urban Planning and Public Policy at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University. I am joined by Diana Salas, a graduate research assistant for the Women of Color Policy Network and co-author of the report. We are representing the Roundtable of Institution of People of Color and the Women of Color Policy Network based at the Wagner School of Public Service at NYU.

The discussion will be limited to Black and Hispanic women due to the lack of arrest and incarceration data for Asians.

Associations Between Poverty, Arrest and Incarceration

Poverty and lack of access to jobs are associated with the high arrest and incarceration rates of Black women and Latinas. In 2000, 73 percent of all women in poverty were women of color. The majority of the arrests of Black women and Latinas occur in the areas with high concentrations of poverty. These areas include the South Bronx, upper Manhattan, and Central Brooklyn.

As shown by the following maps, high arrest rates of Black and Hispanic women correlate with the high poverty areas outlined above.

In 2000, 27 percent of Black women lived in poverty. Thirty-nine (39) percent of Black women in poverty were in Harlem, Crown Heights, East New York, Bedford Stuyvesant, Brownsville, and Jamaica Queens.

Overall, 34 percent of Latinas lived in poverty and 37 percent of the Latinas in poverty were in five community districts in the South Bronx (Mott Haven,

Highbridge/Concourse, Fordham, Kingsbridge and Soundview), and also Washington Heights Manhattan and Bushwick in Brooklyn.

Only 12 percent of white women lived in poverty in 2000 and 30 percent of them were concentrated in four community districts in Brooklyn – Greenpoint-Williamsburg, Bensonhurst, Borough Park, and Gravesend-Sheepshed Bay.

Eight-five (85) percent of all women arrested in 2000 were Black women and Latinas, and Black women's arrest rates are the only ones that have increased for either males or females since 1995. The arrest and incarceration rates for Black women are higher than those for white males.

The leading causes of arrest among Black women and Latinas are controlled substances, assault, larceny and prostitution. We are also including in our discussion an examination of marijuana arrests. Between 1995 to 2001, the arrest rates for marijuana for Black women jumped from 67.9 per 100, 000 to 244.3. Among Latinas, the rate in 1995 was 22.2; by 2001 the rate climbed to 132.6. The rates among white women increased from 6.2 to 43.1.

Incarceration

Slightly more than 8 of every 10 (84 percent) of the women arrested and sentenced to prison from New York City were Black women and Latinas in 2001. (Black women accounted for 58 percent and Latinas for 27 percent). Three causes accounted for nearly three-fourths of all incarcerations for Black women: controlled substances, causes not identified, and prostitution. Seventy-five (75) percent of Latinas were incarcerated for the same reasons.

The increased share of teenage women 16-24 sent to prison is a cause for concern. Interviews with young women of color by one of our colleagues suggest that prostitution is a serious problem. Between 1995 and 2001 the proportion of incarcerated young women from New York City increased from 15 to 19 percent. Black teenagers made up the dominant share of these women. In 2001, nearly 63 percent of the teenagers were Black and 27 percent were Latinas.

Lack of training and educational opportunities also limit opportunities for women of color in the market. Nearly 50 percent of Latinas over 25 have less than a high school education. Twenty nine percent of Black women have less than a high school education and they tend to start college, but a high proportion don't finish.

Ending poverty is an increasingly difficult problem for many of these women. They were unable to find jobs during the economic boom of the 1990s and now have limited access to welfare. The average unemployment rates for Black women and Latinas exceeded other groups during the prior decade.