

FEMALE INMATES AT SANTA BARBARA COUNTY JAILS

Making Better Choices

SUMMARY

There are two distinct populations in Santa Barbara County's jails: male and female. The 2024-25 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury conducted an investigation into the living conditions for female inmates. As required by the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States, jail administration has the responsibility to ensure that female inmates receive the same consideration as male inmates.

Female inmates only make up approximately 10 to 11 percent of the daily average population at both of the County's jails, and the Jury finds that this results in certain disparities in conditions for male and female inmates. Even minor changes in living conditions could have a remediating effect on female inmates' physical and emotional welfare, extending beyond the jail.

BACKGROUND

The Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) has a mandate under California Penal Code §919(b) to inspect the local prisons and jails. Almost yearly, the Jury has written a report describing the conditions and management in the County's jails, as well as in the municipal detention facilities that operated until recently. These past reports have played a role in urging the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors to build a new jail in North County, to make repairs, and to change practices for better efficiency. This year, the Jury looked at the jails from the perspectives of the female inmates.

In 2024, the average daily female population at the South Branch Jail (Main Jail) was 49 (12 percent of total inmates) and 37 (10-11 percent of total inmates) at the Northern Branch Jail. Women have their own units separated from the men's units. There are no special accommodations for women: they eat the same food; sleep on the same type of beds; and, wear the same type of clothes as the male inmates. Although there are women in the jails who are sentenced for a number of years, most are only in the jail for a short time. Of the 849 female inmates who stayed at either jail in 2024, for example, 533 women, or 63 percent, were there only one day, and 170 women, or 20 percent, were in jail two or three days. Those staying more than ten days numbered 8 percent, or 67 women.

At the older Main Jail, the accommodations are stark. Some of the women live behind bars, as in the jails of old, with a narrow approximately 30' x 15' front area filled by picnic tables with

attached benches, leaving little extra open floor space. A shower stall is on one wall and next to it is a wall-mounted television. Off this central space there are three areas approximately 10' x 7' or 8' for sleeping cells separated by bars, with up to four women in each bunk area. A toilet behind a low partition is at the back of these tight sleeping quarters. The maximum occupancy in the unit is 12, and the average number is between eight and eleven women.

This section of the Main Jail is noisy. A fan runs constantly in the hallway because of the absence of access to outside air and the poor ventilation in the old jail. The noise echoes off the cement wall facing the cell bars. For some time in fresh air, the women are escorted to a large yard, on a set schedule, with a different time slot three days a week (early morning, mid-morning, or early afternoon). They can be outside for two hours, and all in the group cell must go at the same time.

There are other areas in the Main Jail for women where there are two contained living units with cement walls. These have a larger shared open space, or dayroom, which is 950 square feet in one unit and 550 square feet in the second. Metal picnic tables with secured metal stools are about the only furnishings in the dayroom. There is a shower room and a phone stand. A small outside area is accessible, to which the women can have access following a two-hour schedule every day of the week. Only a small window in the door leading to the outside area lets in natural light, leaving the entire unit cold, dim, and hard.

Sleeping cells in these units are on an upper and lower floor against two of the walls. These sleeping quarters have metal doors with a small window. The doors can be locked from the outside to keep the women in their dorm section off and on during the day as well as at night. Depending on the compatibility of the women, each sleeping cell will be allowed in the open day room at various times. The larger unit has 16 sleeping cells for two women each, and each area is a confining 8.5' x 8.5'. The smaller unit has three sleeping cells for four women each in an only slightly larger area of about 10' by 10'. The overall effect is constrictive in the sleeping cells, but the women are able to move around at times and change space, which the women behind the units with bars do not benefit from.

On the other hand, the living conditions at the Northern Branch Jail (NBJ) are more comfortable. The units in NBJ appear more spacious, brighter, and quieter. They feature a dayroom that is more like a central living space, and it is larger and thus able to accommodate couches, picnic tables, a phone station, a water fountain, a wall-mounted television, and a serving station. The shower area is larger here than in the Main Jail.

The NBJ can house a maximum of 48 females—32 general population inmates and 16 additional inmates with particular mental health needs. In the general population unit, the eight sleeping cells have four bunk beds (eight women) and a toilet, which has a partition blocking it off somewhat. The sleeping cells in the units have a large glass window looking out at the central area. These

large windows let in more light, but they can be problematic when male guards make their rounds. Some sleeping units have paper taped to the window for some privacy when male deputies patrol.

The central living space is about 20' x 30' and has been designed to provide a comfortable space. One wall has a large glass window that brings in natural light. It looks out on a small triangular outdoor area, a cement-walled open space. During the two jury visits, many occupants moved around freely, seemingly in constant motion, and often chatting and laughing with others around.

There are nine female custody deputies total at the Main Jail and nine at NBJ, almost enough to cover shifts around the clock. When there is a shortage of female deputies due to absences, a male will stand in. The deputies have a raised enclosed platform between the two female units at the NBJ, but they also move around the unit as needed. The deputies at NBJ undergo extra training for this direct supervision in order to orient them to this different approach to supervising inmates.

Women at the NBJ have their own Behavioral Health Unit next to the female general population unit, configured in the same way with a central open space and two-story sleeping cells. It is next to the women's unit for general population. There are fewer women in this unit, as they each have their own sleeping cell. The 16 single-bed cells are usually at maximum capacity. These women stay within their cells much of the time. Some of them need to be in the open space individually, minimizing risk of confrontations with other inmates. If they can get along, more are let out of their cells at the same time. Staff does have daily supervised group activities for the small cohort of mental health inmates, which gives them some social time. There is no comparable Behavioral Health Unit for women at the Main Jail.

If possible, jail management will move women to the NBJ, where living conditions are better. However, if the unit at the NBJ reaches capacity, some women will be transferred back to the Main Jail. Women can request a transfer to NBJ, but as the women's unit is often full, there is no guaranteed timeline. Roughly ten female inmates are able to transfer each month. The Sheriff's Office makes an effort to place the mental health female inmates in the Behavioral Health Unit of the NBJ as soon as possible, and it is almost always at full occupancy. Not all women choose the more comfortable units up North because a deputy is always in the unit with them, and they would rather not be observed constantly. At the Main Jail, deputies walk down the halls at least once an hour for safety checks, which gives the women a bit more time not under the eyes of deputies.

METHODOLOGY

In addition to full-Jury inspections of living conditions for all inmates at both jails and background research, female jurors visited both jails and interviewed female inmates, going twice to the NBJ and once to the Main Jail. At the Main Jail, a meeting was set up with inmates who volunteered to

speaking with jurors; there was one group of four and another group of two. For the NBJ, the jurors went on two different occasions, speaking to three volunteer inmates the first time and two the second time. Comments from the eleven female inmates echoed each other, across groups, and across facilities. In addition, the jurors talked to three female custody deputies at the NBJ, including one who had volunteered to work in the Behavioral Health Unit, and to management staff and one deputy at the Main Jail. Management and staff generally corroborated what these female inmates said.

Jurors also researched articles regarding the experiences and conditions of female inmates in jails and prisons.

OBSERVATIONS

The Female Inmate Perspective on Living Conditions

The female inmates have common concerns and common complaints that vary only somewhat between the two facilities. The complaints ranged from choices for the little things in daily living to options for life-enhancing activities.

One such concern was that men can join work crews and prepare meals in the kitchen, do the laundry, do maintenance, or clean the facility. There are enough men to fill a work crew, and if someone is sick, a replacement can be found. Women, on the other hand, are fewer in number. So, when a female inmate is sick, or does not feel like working, which can happen often, there are not enough women available to fill the crew. The result is that women have few work detail opportunities in the jails at this time.

This loss of work opportunities affects the women in several ways. First, they lose the ability to do something, to be active. Some women are said to be so bored that they sleep all day. Additionally, they do not feel productive, which reduces their self-esteem. Women at both jails described this as a true lack of opportunity. Moreover, the loss of not being able to work is that they are not learning or practicing skills that they could use outside the jail to look for a job. Many do not have a strong support system, and leaving the jail without a job skill or recent experience worried them. Without a family, a social group, or a system to keep them afloat, the women were anxious about being released.

The Sheriff's Office is reconsidering the minimum number of women required for work crews in recognition of their ability and willingness to work. Custody management is looking into allowing fewer women to make a team for some tasks such as cleaning, and are also discussing how to incorporate women into work crews.

Classes in jail can also prepare inmates for release, especially if the classes train for some sort of job. At the NBJ, classes in installing solar panels are in demand. But the females could not join them, again because of not enough female inmates to reach the minimum of ten people to fill a class. The women are cut off from the one job skill preparation class that does exist. The Sheriff's Office is discussing lowering the minimum required to eight people rather than ten. Other job training in the jail is not available at this time with the exception of a program offered at both jails, known as SERVSAFE, which trains for a Safe Food Handling certificate. At this time, however, only male inmates can practice this skill in the jail kitchen duty.

Female inmates also directed the Jury's attention to the commissary. The commissary vendor has reduced the number of options for women. As stated in the April 1, 2025, letter to the Board of Supervisors concerning the new contract for the vendor, the Sheriff's Office wrote:

Commissary services play a crucial role in the proper management of incarcerated individuals by providing access to items that can improve quality of life, such as snacks, better hygiene products, and other personal care items. Having the ability to choose and buy items helps mimic the out-side world's consumer choices and can contribute to a sense of normalcy among inmates.

The current vendor has reduced the number of options to one kind each for such basic items as shampoo and soap. As a result, shampoo and soap products favor the much larger male population. The vendor is further seen as providing additional items for men only such as aftershave, shaving gel, and shaving cream. For hair conditioner and body lotion, there is only a generic brand in small travel-sized bottles. There is no other choice as there had been with the previous vendor, which had a "feminine package" that included brands more used by women. Since they do not have these options, the women inmates feel robbed of their dignity. This vendor has a one-year contract, and the female inmates hope that the next vendor will provide them with more options.

In addition, the Jury found that, in general, the women were frustrated by the lack of food choices. They were enthusiastic about a new food vendor last fall, but disappointment grew as food offerings became more limited. The initial welcome came with the addition of fruit and fresh vegetables with the new vendor. Unfortunately for the NBJ, while some of the women invented small pies with the fresh fruit, some men saw fruit as an opportunity to make homemade alcohol, causing the vendor to remove fruit from their offerings to both men and women. Women at the Main Jail complained less about the food as they still received fruit. This situation has been remedied, but then the main dinner course offering was reduced to beans and rice for a time, which female inmates criticized for lack of variety. The nutritional value of the food is questioned especially by women who want to keep their weight down, a difficult ambition given the lack of food variety and the lack of exercise available.

A prior disparity between men and women was mentioned for clothing. For a time, men were allowed to wear shorts; the women were not. When the men began to cut off their pants to make them shorts at the Main Jail, once again jail management had to disallow shorts for everyone. Also, there was some confusion over women not being allowed to wear their sweatshirts to classes at NBJ, but the men could. This was eventually resolved in the women's favor, and they can wear the sweatshirts when they leave their unit for another activity.

However, women at the Main Jail will have to wait indefinitely for a different disparity to be resolved: television. Only one channel can be shown at a time across all the televisions in the technologically-challenged Main Jail. Female inmates therefore "watch a lot of soccer" because the Deputies program what the male inmates want to watch. At NBJ, the women's units can select their own choices in television shows and movies.

When inmates have a complaint or a suggestion, the process requires them to file a grievance and get signatures of other inmates. Grand Jurors did not find an example of female inmates petitioning for change. However, when women convey a problem to the custody deputies, they quickly respond to fix it. "They're cool," one inmate said; "They help."

How Women Benefit from Incarceration

There are educational classes at NBJ provided by Allan Hancock College that have greatly uplifted the inmates, and the female inmates seem particularly aware of the personal growth attained. Hancock College typically teaches three to four credit classes per semester. In fact, the women at NBJ asked for more general education credit classes and expressed a desire to continue studying at the college once released. They are encouraged by Hancock's Rising Scholar program that assists former justice-involved inmates with fitting in, giving them supplies, mentoring, and even loaner laptops. In June 2025, Allan Hancock College awarded certificates of completion to 55 inmates at NBJ; six of these were women. Additionally, the jurors learned of one woman who continued classes until she received a college degree. Allan Hancock College will also start computer classes for credit at the NBJ later in 2025.

Educational offerings at the Main Jail in Santa Barbara have not come back to the pre-Covid level of offerings. Currently, two classes are offered by Santa Barbara City College on alternating semesters at the Main Jail, a stress management class and a "College Ready Study Skills" class. At one time, computer literacy classes were offered at the Main Jail, but now these classes will exist only at NBJ. The return of computer classes at the Main Jail would offer educational and vocational enrichment to this population that is so appreciative of opportunities to change. Classes are available on the personal tablets issued to each woman at the jails, but these classes are not always free. It would benefit the women at the jail to also have the stimulation of contact with teachers and other students.

The Public Defender's Office has staff that meet with inmates as they enter the jail. Their intention is to get to know the inmate, find out what their needs are, and help expedite solutions for their release. The Public Defender's holistic defense program is not as well developed in South County as it is in North County, so there exist fewer Public Defender staff members to direct female inmates to support programs in South County. The female inmates in the Main Jail expressed understanding: "Oh, they're so overworked." The Jury learned that the Sheriff's Office is hoping to arrange a one-year pilot program to boost the Public Defender's program in South County. If this effort succeeds, it will be an important step towards supporting female inmates after their release.

The Sheriff's Treatment Program (STP) has been a successful program for decades. Classes center around personal development and interpersonal skills. Especially noted are the STP classes in drug and alcohol education, criminal and addictive thinking, and anger management. The female inmates mentioned this program and its role in helping them endure incarceration. There are also occasional counseling groups and therapy sessions with volunteers outside the jail that the inmates can attend. In addition to the Sheriff's Treatment Program, each jail has different opportunities provided by different community organizations: at NBJ women meet with Planned Parenthood and yoga groups, and the acclaimed Freedom to Choose program will begin. At the Main Jail, there is a book group for women, and one organization in particular was praised: GOGI, Getting Out by Going In. The emphasis on a better future life by knowing oneself encouraged the female inmates to look ahead, giving them a will to change behavior. Well known organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) also help the inmates. At the moment, NA is not meeting in the Main Jail.

The women at both jails appreciated their access to mental health services. They could request a visit from a mental health counselor, and one would come with no long delay. Counselors help them to help themselves. The Jury learned that one female inmate, who had attended required group counseling at another jail, stated that having to go to group sessions helped her and other inmates and gave them something to do.

Medical care was less praised. The female inmates had to put in a lot of "kites," or call slips, to see someone, and if it was a specialty doctor, there was a long wait time. There is only one full time doctor and only one dentist at the moment who spend their time helping incarcerated individuals. Thus, a request for care can seem to go unanswered for a long time. However, the women affirmed that health issues specific to women were not neglected. Santa Barbara County's new contract (signed April 1, 2025) with the existing healthcare provider at the jails adds more nurses and mental health aides to the jail, which will help to some degree, as there are many inmates inside the jails who need medical care.

Overall, what should be noted is that the female inmates see the jail staff as helping and see themselves as getting help. There are disadvantages that are inherent in being incarcerated. When asked what is bad about being in jail, one woman answered, “You are in jail.” All agreed. They also shared the opinion that the hardest aspect of that was being away from their family. There are annoyances such as not enough products for women in the commissary, the mail being extremely slow, and not being able to go outside often enough, but these facts are part of living within the cement walls of a detention facility. Some are grateful to have a bed, food, a shower, and shelter. The women who would be homeless outside the jail were especially relieved. As one said, “It’s humbling, but it’s a safe place.”

Female inmates understand that they are there for a reason. The female inmates also seem to know that they are there for a purpose and recognize that they can change. The benefits of incarceration mentioned by these women were:

- Getting healthier
- Getting into a routine
- Being off drugs and alcohol
- Connecting with your higher power
- Building a foundation
- Learning patience and anger management
- Having time to think
- Getting to know yourself
- Being with the girls

While the women in jail can be frustrated by limited choices in daily living, they know that they can make better choices in life.

CONCLUSION

Meeting with female inmates and hearing them express themselves was an experience that should be shared with administrative staff at the County’s jails, the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors, and the public. Paying attention to requests for more positive experiences in the jails, such as vocational and educational opportunities, could help these female inmates reach that awakening that we hope every inmate can have. The women at the County’s jails want to be heard and want to maintain their dignity. The Jury learned that female inmates want to improve some conditions that are bothersome, but, at the same time, that they want to assure staff and volunteers that their contributions are working.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1: To their detriment, female inmates have fewer work opportunities than male inmates in preparing them for life outside jail.

Recommendation 1: The Grand Jury recommends that the Sheriff's Office provide work detail opportunities to female inmates at both of the County's jails in crews that allow for a more flexible number of women. To be implemented by January 1, 2026.

Finding 2: College classes are not available at the Main Jail to the same extent that they are available at the Northern Branch Jail, depriving women at the Main Jail of equivalent educational opportunities.

Recommendation 2: The Grand Jury recommends that the Sheriff's Office expand current educational and vocational course offerings at the Main Jail in cooperation with local colleges. To be implemented by January 1, 2026.

Finding 3: Women inmates are receptive to therapy and self-improvement groups. While the Sheriff's Treatment Program is available at both of the County's jails, the activities provided by community organizations—such as yoga, book clubs, and mutual-support recovery groups—vary between the two facilities.

Recommendation 3: The Grand Jury recommends that the Sheriff's Office expand its efforts to make more community-provided self-improvement and therapy programs available to educate and motivate inmates at both jails, including the women.

REQUIREMENTS FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to California Penal Code §933 and §933.05, the Grand Jury requests each entity or individual named below to respond to the findings and recommendations within the specified statutory time limit.

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- Agree
- Disagree with an explanation
- Disagree partially with an explanation

Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:

- Has been implemented, with a summary of the implementation actions taken
- Will be implemented, with an implementation schedule

- Requires further analysis, with an analysis completion date of fewer than 6 months after the issuance of the report
- It will not be implemented with an explanation of why

Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office – 60 days

Findings 1, 2, 3

Recommendations 1, 2, 3