


# Jailcare: Finding the Safety Net for Women behind Bars

*By Carolyn Sufrin*

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Thousands of pregnant women pass through our nation’s jails every year. What happens to them as they carry their pregnancies in a space of punishment? In this time when the public safety net is frayed, incarceration has become a central and racialized strategy for managing the poor. Using her ethnographic fieldwork and clinical work as an ob-gyn in a women’s jail, Carolyn Sufrin explores how jail has, paradoxically, become a place where women can find care. Focusing on the experiences of incarcerated pregnant women as well as on the practices of the jail guards and health providers who care for them, *Jailcare* describes the contradictory ways that care and maternal identity emerge within a punitive space presumed to be devoid of care. Sufrin argues that jail is not simply a disciplinary institution that serves to punish. Rather, when understood in the context of the poverty, addiction, violence, and racial oppression that characterize these women’s lives and their reproduction, jail can become a safety net for women on the margins of society.

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## Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

“There were pregnant women in every prison and jail I have been held in or have visited. Carolyn Sufrin holds the fates of these women and their children up to the light and reveals the complexity of motherhood and reproductive justice in the most difficult circumstances—behind bars. *Jailcare* is a moving and galvanizing story of pregnant women in jail and those responsible for their health. It is essential reading for anyone who cares about women, children, and justice.”—Piper Kerman, author of *Orange Is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison*

“*Jailcare* delves deep into the complex and tragic realities of mass incarceration in a large city jail for women. We follow the author, an anthropologist and jail physician, hard at work as a caring and critically reflexive ‘double agent.’ Sufrin’s clients are revolving-door jail inmates—women with multiple medical, social, psychological, and addiction problems—for whom a few nights or weeks in jail is about as stable a home place as it gets. Jails, like most other penal institutions, produce both violence and care. Sufrin’s captivating, beautifully told, but extremely disturbing stories of pregnant women and mothers in jail and the people charged with caring for them indict a cruel society that all but coerces women living on the extreme margins of urban life to commit a crime in exchange for transient but necessary medical and reproductive care. This stunning book is a must-read not only for professionals in the field, but for every citizen who does not understand the consequences of mass incarceration for women, their children, their caretakers, and the society that allows it. Sufrin makes clear that we cannot ignore our own complicity in the Kafkaesque system.”—Nancy Scheper-Hughes, author of *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*

“Carolyn Sufrin’s unique positionality as a physician/anthropologist delivering healthcare to pregnant women in the San Francisco County Jail renders visible the coercive and bureaucratically litigious contortions of caregiving for ‘unworthy’ mothers. Her ethnography of the judgmentally triaged, hypermedicalized practices of a clinical oasis within the carceral services documents genuine expressions of solitary care by guards wielding arbitrarily discretionary punitive power. It serves as a condemnation of our society, in which indigent, addicted mothers too often access prenatal care only behind bars.”—Philippe Bourgois, author of *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* and coauthor of *Righteous Dopefiend*

“In this remarkable and vividly descriptive ethnography, Carolyn Sufrin has given us a fresh and sophisticated exploration of the contemporary intersection between custody and treatment, punishment and ‘care.’ Disturbing and unforgettable, *Jailcare* is a must-read for anyone concerned with the fate of women in the U.S. criminal justice system.”—Lorna A. Rhodes, author of *Total Confinement: Madness and Reason in the Maximum Security Prison*

“The art of mass incarceration has been finely tuned in the United States, such that more women are incarcerated there than in any other nation in the world—more than Russia, China, and India combined. The devastating conditions that some women experience behind bars, including medical neglect, are rarely seen or documented. Sufrin opens Pandora’s box and provides an absorbing, accessible, and stunning view of women’s reproductive health within the criminal justice system. *Jailcare* offers a rare, substantive engagement on the intersections of sex, race, and class behind bars and exposes the strange and troubling paradoxes that attend pregnancy and reproductive health behind bars.”—Michele Bratcher Goodwin,

Director of the Center for Biotechnology and Global Health Policy, University of California, Irvine School of Law

About the Author

**Carolyn Sufrin** is a medical anthropologist and an obstetrician-gynecologist at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

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