



Orphaned By the Drug War

By Bobbi Murray, AlterNet

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"I live a sad life," says Mattie White. "Every time I think it's going to be okay, it's not, and I just get sad again."

And there is no happy ending in sight for Mattie, who at 51 is raising her granddaughter Roneisha, 8, and grandson Cashawn, 5, while their mother, Kizzie White, 25, serves a 25-year sentence in a Gatesville, Texas, prison. Kizzie was arrested in 1999 for selling cocaine as part of a large-scale and now highly controversial sting operation in Tulia, Texas. Cashawn's father was also arrested as part of the same bust, and is now serving an 80-year sentence. Her kids ended up with Mattie.

A Tale of Injustice

Kizzie was one of 46 defendants -- 37 of them black -- who were rounded up in a mass arrest that netted roughly one out of every eight residents of Tulia's small African-American community. There are an estimated 300 black residents in Tulia. Three of Mattie's kids were arrested: Kizzie, Kareem (sentenced to 60 years), and Donnie (sentenced to 12 years). "I just couldn't believe it -- all these people locked up like this," says Mattie White, who manages the Tulia 46 Relief Fund. "Ain't no 50 people selling drugs, ain't no 30 people selling drugs (in Tulia)."

And Mattie has no doubts of her daughter's innocence. To her knowledge, Kizzie never used or sold drugs. "They didn't find no drugs," she says of the bust.

The massive drug sweep was based on the word of one officer, Tom Coleman, who is now accused of being corrupt, and a tiny bag of cocaine. The ACLU -- which, along with the NAACP of Texas, filed a civil rights complaint with the US Department of Justice in Oct., 2000 -- called the 18-month-long Tulia sting "a blatant, racially-motivated act of police and prosecutorial misconduct."

Reform advocates see Tulia as a high-relief example of the way the war on drugs is prosecuted nationally. "Drug abuse cuts across class and race lines, but drug enforcement is located in low-income communities of color," says Marc Mauer, assistant director of the Washington DC-based prison reform organization and author of the book, "Race to Incarcerate."

Mom is in Jail

Like Kizzie, most women of color in prison are doing time for minor non-violent drug offenses, which account for the rapidly growing rate of female incarceration. A Sentencing Project report shows that the number of women incarcerated for drug offenses rose a breathtaking 888 percent from 1986 through 1996, fueled by the escalating war on drugs. Drug offenses accounted for nearly half of all female convictions. And 80 percent of these female inmates had children.

Significantly, a large percentage of women sentenced for drug offenses are African-American and Latina; in New York, a staggering 91 percent of those sentenced to prison for drug offenses are black or Latina, as are 54 percent in California.

And they are overwhelmingly poor. According to sociologist Dorothy Ruiz, "Eighty percent of imprisoned women report incomes of less than \$2000 in the year before the arrest and 92 percent report incomes under \$10,000." Kizzie, who worked at a meat processing plant making a paltry \$8 an hour until a month before her arrest, was actually better off than most others.

A vast majority of women convicted for drug offenses are involved with holding and using small amounts of narcotics, while others get caught for conspiracy, that is, being involved with men who use and sell. Both men and women can serve long sentences thanks to mandatory minimum sentencing, but women usually end up serving more time for lesser offenses. Kizzie, for example, was imprisoned on charges of delivering cocaine on three occasions and marijuana on one. According to Mattie, her daughter would be facing 52 years behind bars but for the judge's decision to run the sentences concurrently.

"The only way you can escape mandatory minimum is by cooperating, and that means giving someone else up," says Monica Pratt, of Families Against Mandatory Minimums. But a woman is more likely to be a low-level user than a drug kingpin and therefore has little to trade for a lighter sentence, while her boyfriend who may be more deeply involved can cut a better deal.

When women are imprisoned, it also affects three generations of family: the grandmother, mother and children. Rather than turn the kids over to the child welfare system, the grandmother often steps forward to take care of kids.

Living With Grandma

Mattie still lives in Tulia, a seven-hour drive from her daughter, and juggles two physically demanding part-time jobs -- as a prison guard and an in-home care worker for infirm women -- while she raises two active young children.

"It's a stressful job for grandmas to raise grandkids -- the kids think they can get away with everything," she says. Mattie admits that she sometimes lets some things slide because she feels sorry for the kids, who only see their mother two or three times a year. Compassion and the sheer exhaustion of cooking, cleaning and otherwise caring for the children makes it hard to keep constant tabs on the

children. "We teach them right from wrong, though," White says firmly.

Mattie is one of thousands of African-American grandmothers being squeezed by a cruel effect of the war on drugs: the spiraling incarceration rate for African-American women, who make up fully half of the female prison population. With the mothers behind bars, grandmothers become the primary guardians of the children left behind. Fifty-three percent of the children of incarcerated parents are cared for by their grandmothers. The result is a crushing emotional, physical and financial burden imposed on older women of color, the enormity of which is only beginning to be assessed.

"Female incarcerations place three generations at risk and destroy families, leaving lasting scars on children as well as putting an enormous financial and health burden on grandmother caregivers," Ruiz writes in a recent paper published in the Western Michigan University, School of Social Work Journal.

These grandmothers often suffer from number of health problems, such as depression, insomnia, hypertension, back pain, and stomach pain, caused by physical and emotional stress. Mattie suffers from high blood pressure, and was hospitalized twice in June with a stomach ailment that doctors linked to stress. The women also tend to suffer social isolation as they juggle their various responsibilities. But the grandmothers often tend to under-emphasize their health problems to avoid being seen as too infirm to take care of kids who often have nowhere else to go.

The financial burden is often severe, as well. Many have worked low-wage jobs all their lives and, unlike surrogates in the foster care system, do not receive monetary support from the government. The arrangement can be precarious for both the caretakers and the children. Mattie talks about shuffling grandkids between other relatives while she works (her husband is also out of the house on the job). She often worries about the health of granddaughter Roneisha, who doesn't get to sleep until after Mattie gets home after 10 at night. "She's a sick little girl," she frets.

In Mattie's eyes, the entire White family is a victim of the drug war and its agents. "He (Coleman) messed up a bunch of people's lives, not only the ones in prison, but their children and the grandparents that are looking after them," she says.

A Bleak Future

Unless Kizzie is cleared of all charges, her release from prison won't put an end to the White family's problems. If she can't find a job, she will be ineligible for welfare. Persons with felony convictions for drug use or sale permanently lose all welfare benefits under changes instituted to welfare laws in 1996. As a result, grandmothers often retain responsibility for kids during a lengthy transition period after the mothers leave prison.

If the family lives in public housing, there is a substantial risk of losing their home if the returning ex-offender is still addicted -- one offense by a relative and the

whole family, including the grandmother and the children can be thrown out. "It's a complex problem. They're using drugs, and some of these women are terrible mothers. But it's not the kids' faults. The long-term goal should be to re-unite the kids with a drug-free mother," Mauer says.

Pratt points out that there is virtually no drug rehabilitation until the last few months in prison, and, at the federal level, it is left to the discretion of prison officials. "So you go to prison, going cold turkey, not learning any new behavior patterns, drug treatment at the very end of your sentence, if at all. What support do you have to stay clean?" Pratt asks.

But there is hope in Kizzie's case, at least. Randy Credico, of the William Moses Kunstler Fund for Racial Justice, which is involved with the Tulia 46, says Kizzie could be released from prison if state officials find evidence of official misconduct. Texas Attorney General John Cornyn opened a state investigation into the bust in August.

Credico says, "The Attorney General could vacate the sentences, or could take over the cases and drop them and give them a new trial in a new city." The defendants could also receive a pardon or clemency, but that would require them to admit guilt, which Credico says is highly unlikely.

For now, Mattie White continues her balancing act. Her grandkids are getting more used to not having their mom around. "They stopped asking me when she was coming home, will she be back before my birthday, that kind of thing," she says. "But when they see other kids' parents getting out, they feel sad."

To learn more about the effects of the drug war on people of color, visit the Web site of the [Breaking the Chains conference](#), taking place this weekend in Los Angeles.

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