

# Female inmates on rise as opioid abuse soars

**JACKSBORO, TENN. (AP)** — On opposite sides of the county jail, a mother and her son chat about school, girls, birthday gifts — and their future together.

They aren't allowed to see each other face-to-face, so the inmate and the fifth-grader connect by video.

"Hi, Mommy," 10-year-old Robby says to Krystle Sweat, clutching a phone in the visiting room as he looks at his mother on a screen, sitting in her cell.

Robby hasn't hugged or even touched her since Christmas Day 2015, just before Sweat wound up back behind bars. He runs a hand through his hair, shifts his weight from one leg to another, and says that on the day his mom is released, he wants to show her how he can ride no-hands on his bike.

Sweat laughs, but knows their reunion must wait. For years, she has cycled in and out of jail, arrested more than two dozen times for robbery, driving violations



and other crimes — almost all related to her drug addiction that culminated in a \$300-a-day pain pill habit. She's tried to quit, but nothing has worked. Now she says she's ready to make the break when she's paroled again, possibly this summer.

"I'm almost 33," she says. "I don't want to continue living like this. I want to be someone my family can count on."

This lone county jail in a remote corner of Appalachia offers an agonizing glimpse into how the tidal wave of opioids and methamphetamines has ravaged America. Here and in countless other places, addiction is

| WOMEN IN JAIL  |                 | WOMEN IN PRISON        |                 |
|--|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| Incarcerated women are the fastest-growing correctional population in America. |                 |                        |                 |
| <b>WOMEN IN JAIL</b>   | <b>Year No.</b> | <b>WOMEN IN PRISON</b> | <b>Year No.</b> |
|  | 1980 – 13,258   |                        | 1970 – 5,600    |
|  | 2016 – 102,300  |                        | 2016 – 110,000  |

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics

driving skyrocketing rates of incarcerated women, tearing apart families while squeezing communities that lack money, treatment programs and permanent solutions to close the revolving door.

More than a decade ago, there were rarely more than 10 women in the Campbell County Jail. Now the population is routinely around 60.

Most who end up here have followed a similar path to Sweat: They're arrested on a drug-related charge and confined to a cell 23 hours a day. Many of their bunkmates also are addicts. They receive no counseling. Then weeks, months or

years later, they're released into the same community where friends — and in some cases, family — are using drugs. Soon they are again, too.

And the cycle begins anew: Another arrest, another booking photo, another pink uniform and off to a cell to simmer in regret and despair.

Sarai Keelean has been jailed about eight times in six years. One Christmas, her mother joined her. Like Keelean, she is addicted, and had been arrested on a driving offense. Mother and daughter spent the holiday crying in each other's arms.

In America's ongoing battle against addiction, Campbell County faces formidable odds. In 2015, it had the third-highest amount of opioids prescribed per person of all U.S. counties. The numbers identified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were more than five times the national average — or enough opioids to medicate every single resident here around-the-clock for 15 weeks.

Mayor E.L. Morton blames the pharmaceutical industry and doctors, and two lawsuits against opioid makers are pending on behalf of the county and its 40,000 residents. "If you were fighting the Mafia, you'd be aiming for the head of the organization," he says. "Well, the top of this organization is fully legal, and we have the most respected profession that is doing it to us."

Pills, though, aren't the only problem. With 500 square miles of mountains, thick woods, winding back roads and deep hollows, this county on the Kentucky bor-

der has been a prime spot, too, for meth. While home-grown labs are on the wane, a powerful strain of the drug from Mexico has found its way here.

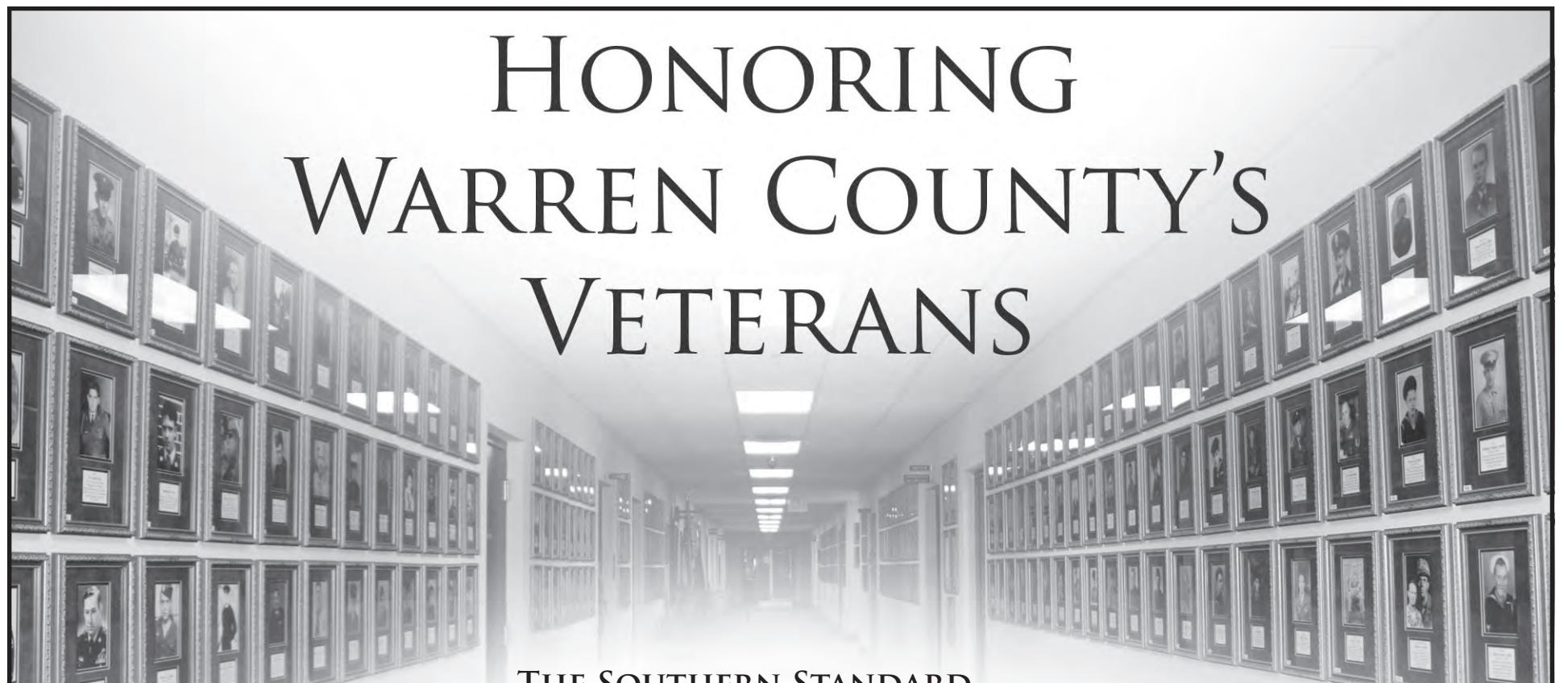
Nowadays, as much as 90 percent of the crime in a five-county district that includes Campbell is connected to drugs, the local prosecutor says. Women are often the culprits, and communities across the nation are seeing similar patterns.

Women in jail are the fastest-growing correctional population in America.

Their numbers rose from 13,258 in 1980 to 102,300 in 2016, with the biggest jump in smaller counties, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Similarly, the female prison population skyrocketed from 5,600 in 1970 to more than 110,000 in 2016. Between 1980 and 2009, the arrest rate for drug possession or use tripled for women, while it doubled for men.

Opioid abuse has exacerbated the problem.



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