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Incarcerated Mothers

The Chicago Project on Female Prisoners
and Their Children

Initial Report --- June 2002



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Purpose Statement

The rates of incarceration of women in the U.S. began to climb dramatically in the 1980's.¹ Today, mothers are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. prison population.² An important difference between the male and female prison population is that these women are usually custodial parents³—when a woman goes to prison there are often children left behind. This change in the U.S. prison population has taken place with little to no understanding of the long-term effects on these women's ability to function as a parent, or the consequences for their children.⁴ Whether or not the State of Illinois and Cook County should increase their investment in programs to improve the outcomes for these offenders as they leave prison is the subject of active debate. The Chicago Project on Female Prisoners and Their Children will provide policy makers with the first reliable benchmarks of the social and economic circumstances of these women as well as suggesting policy alternatives.

The proposed research agenda will unfold in a series of projects planned over several years. The first phase, currently underway, utilizes state level administrative data available through collaborative relationships with the Illinois Department of Corrections and the Chapin Hall Center for Children. With these data we are tracking, for the years 1990-2000, the histories of the approximately 14,000 women admitted to prison in Illinois and their estimated 35,000 children, as they move through the criminal justice system, foster care, welfare programs, and the legitimate labor market.

In the future we will continue to work with a wide range of related institutions including state, county, and school district agencies to enhance the depth and breadth of data sources and, eventually, to construct a credible cost/benefit analysis of providing comprehensive rehabilitation services to improve the outcome for these women and their children.

¹ Rafter, 1990. *Partial Justice: Women, Prisoners, and Social Control*. New Brunswick N.J.: Transactions Books

² Greenfeld and Snell, 2000. *Women Offenders*. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report. U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C. NCJ 175688

³ Mumola, 2000. *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report. U.S. Department of Justice: Washington, D.C. NCJ 182335.

⁴ Wright and Seymour, 2000. *Working with Children and Families Separated by Incarceration: A Handbook for Child Welfare Agencies*. Washington, D.C.: Child Welfare League of America Press.

Incarcerated Mothers in Illinois State Prisons: An Analysis of Administrative Data

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I. Introduction

The most recent U.S. Department of Justice statistics indicate that on any given day there are approximately 84,000 women in federal and state prisons and nearly 70,000 additional women incarcerated in county jails (Greenfeld and Snell, 2000; Beck and Karberg, 2000; Rafter, 1990). Since 1980 these numbers have increased at roughly a 10 percent annual rate. At this rate, the female prison population is doubling every 7 to 8 years.

An important difference between the male and female prison population is that women offenders are usually custodial parents prior to their incarceration. Consequently, when a woman goes to prison there are often children left behind. During 1999, women incarcerated in federal and state prisons or in county jails were mothers to about 250,000 children (Greenfeld and Snell, 2000). About one-half of these children had mothers in prison and 64 percent of these mothers lived with their minor children prior to admission to prison. Most of these children were less than ten years old and about 20 percent were under the age of five (Mumola, 2000). For many of these children, it is likely that their mother will have been incarcerated on multiple occasions (Greenfeld and Snell, 2000).

The role of incarcerated women as primary caregivers to young children makes it especially important to understand their characteristics, their potential to be effective parents, and their prospects to be economically self-sufficient after leaving prison. Because they often are single custodial parents, incarcerating women is likely more costly to society than incarcerating men. When women go to prison, the lives of their economically disadvantaged children are disrupted. This disruption occurs both when these women go to prison and again when they are released. The potentially adverse

consequences of these disruptions extend beyond the children. The consequences extend to these children's extended families, to the child and social welfare agencies that must care for them, and society.

Despite the escalating numbers of incarcerated mothers entering and exiting prison very little information is available about this population. In particular relatively little is known about their economic prospects, their ability to function as parents, or the consequences that prison and their lives leading up to prison has for their children. Such information is essential in order to guide the design and assessment of appropriate interventions to improve the outcomes for these mothers and their children.

Research based on U.S. Department of Justice statistics indicates that incarcerated women are in worse economic circumstances than either incarcerated men or other economically disadvantaged women (Mumola, 2000). The vast majority of incarcerated women are high school dropouts. Only one-half had any type of employment in the month before they were arrested. One in five were homeless during the year prior to their arrest. One in five also have a history of mental illness. Finally, most women in state prisons report a drug or alcohol addiction.

This paper uses the Illinois Department of Corrections admissions and exit files covering a 12-year period between 1990 and 2001 to examine the characteristics of a large sample of female prisoners. Our sample consists of approximately 14,700 women who served time in state prison during this period. Approximately 60 percent of these women are from Cook County (which includes Chicago), the second largest county in the nation. The demographic information in these files includes information on these women's age, when they were admitted to prison, ethnicity, educational attainment,

country of residence, number of children ever born, and whether the woman reported a substance abuse problem at the time she entered prison. In addition these files contain precise information on these women's offenses, time served, and whether they had been in prison before.

We show below that the characteristics of women in our Illinois sample are similar to the female respondents to U.S. Department of Justice's 1997 Survey of Inmates on State and Federal Correctional Facilities. Like their national counterparts in 1997, incarcerated women in Illinois are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. More than 60 reported that they were high school dropouts, never had married, and had a substance abuse problem when they entered prison. Drug offenses have been the most common offenses committed by female inmates in Illinois and most also report having had children. Indeed, in recent years the number of children ever born per female inmate in Illinois is comparable to the number of minor children per female inmate reported nationally. During fiscal year 2000, approximately 2,800 new female inmates reported that they had previously given birth to 7,500 children.

The Illinois evidence suggests that children of incarcerated mothers come from especially disadvantaged backgrounds. Women who have had the most children appear to be the most disadvantaged. This finding is significant for the children involved because about one-half of Illinois children who had a mother in prison between 1990 and 2001 had a mother who had given birth to four or more children.

In this paper we discuss these patterns in greater detail. In section II, we describe the source of our sample of incarcerated women. In section III, we present describe our sample. Conclusions and directions for future research are discussed in Section IV.

II. Data

General Overview

Our study of incarcerated women is based on an analysis of the admission and exit files from the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) Offender Tracking System, covering fiscal years 1990 through April 2001. IDOC creates these files annually to contain information on individuals who enter and exit the Illinois state prison system during each fiscal year. (The state's fiscal year runs from July thru June.) These files include information on a woman's name, age, the dates that she was incarcerated, educational achievement, length of sentence, time served, county of residence, ethnicity and self-reported information on substance abuse. The information on substance abuse reports whether the individual acknowledged a substance abuse problem, with either drugs or alcohol, at the time they entered prison.

Missing from our analysis is information on female inmates prior work and social welfare histories. Information about these characteristics would provide a more complete picture of the well-being of these women, and their prospects for economic self-sufficiency. In future work we plan to merge the IDOC records with information about the women's social welfare histories-including spells on programs such as AFDC/TANF, Food Stamps, and Medicaid. Among these women we also will obtain information about their quarterly earnings histories in regular wage and salary jobs.

The IDOC files also include information on the number of children ever born. The IDOC files do not contain information on who these children are, or whether the mother was the custodial parent when she was admitted to prison. As a result we can not

distinguish among minor and adult children in our sample nor estimate how many children had their caregiver change when their mothers were sent to prison. This information we plan to obtain in future work after we merge the IDOC records with administration records from Illinois social and child welfare agencies, including records from the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services.

Types of Admissions

The State of Illinois categorizes inmates by four primary types of admissions.

- The first is “direct from court.” These are inmates serving a first prison sentence in Illinois.
- The second, “discharged and recommitted,” are inmates who were convicted, served their sentence, were released from the correctional system and then subsequently were arrested, convicted and sentenced on a new charge.
- The third and fourth categories are inmates returned to prison because they have violated the terms of parole, either through a technical violation (for example, not keeping appointment with their parole officer, or testing positive for illegal drugs) or being charged with a new offense while on parole.

For the purposes of the discussion in this paper, we have aggregated categories two, three and four into a single “recidivist” category, which includes all inmates admitted to prison who according to state records have been in prison before. We also examine an alternative measure of recidivism to state prisons by matching women on the exit files to

their id numbers, (names, and ages) on future admission files. Approximately one-third of the women in our sample were admitted to state prisons more than once.

Types of Criminal Offenses

The IDOC files also report the inmate's primary offense. The files provide detailed information on the offense as well as an aggregated variable that categorizes the offense into one of five groups. These groups are involve:

- (a) crimes against persons
- (b) property crimes
- (c) drug offenses
- (d) sex offenses, including prostitution, and
- (e) all other types of crimes.

Unfortunately, because of reporting changes, information on drug offenses was not available on the 1990 to 1992 files.

Sample Size

As shown by Table 1, our sample based on the combined IDOC admission and exit files contains records for 14,724 individual women. Of these women, 3,789 have more than one record because they were admitted to Illinois state prisons more than once during the period studied. In our analysis below, we examine the characteristics of women who were admitted at least once to state prison during fiscal years 1990 through (April) 2001.

III. Analysis of IDOC files on Incarcerated Females

An Economically Disadvantaged Population

Women who have been incarcerated in Illinois prisons possess several characteristics that indicate they are likely to have difficulty becoming economically self-sufficient once they leave prison: 1) They have low levels of schooling, 2) They report a substance abuse problem, and 3) They are single mothers.

Educational Attainment

Female inmates, like male prisoners, have very low levels of schooling. In Illinois, the majority of inmates have less than a high school education. Further, these low levels of educational attainment have changed little among the inmate population since 1990. The percentage of new inmates who were high school dropouts stood at 62 percent in 1990 and was 64 percent in 2000.

Substance Abuse/Dependence

Besides low levels of schooling, the majority of female inmates admit to a substance abuse problem when they entered prison. During the period studied, approximately 65 percent of these women acknowledged that they had a substance abuse problem. This percentage rose during the decade. During 2000, nearly 70 percent of all female inmates exiting prison identified themselves as having a drug or alcohol problem when they entered the system.

Incidence of Single Motherhood

Another indication that incarcerated women are economically disadvantaged is that most are unmarried mothers. Two-thirds of female inmates report that they never married. Another 20 percent report that they are divorced. At the same time, more than 80 percent of female inmates report that they have had at least one child and about 25 percent report having had 4 or more children. Further, the share of female inmates with 4 or more children has increased from 19 percent in 1990 to 28 percent in 2000. This category of women is the fastest growing segment of the female prison population in Illinois. These female inmates are likely poor and, absent substantial intervention, are likely to remain so after they leave prison.

Drug Offenses

The frequent histories of self-reported substance abuse among the female prison population also is consistent with the frequency of drug offenses and of property-related crimes that are likely drug-related among this group. In terms of broad categories of offenses, the IDOC files reveal that nearly 45 percent of female inmates committed a drug offense. Many of these offenses appear to be for small-scale sales of controlled substances. Further, the average annual increase among inmates who were convicted of drug offenses has been about twice the rate of growth for the female prison population as a whole. Accordingly, the proportion of female inmates serving time for drug convictions has risen from about one-fifth in 1993 to nearly one-half of the total female prison population by 2000.

Property Offenses

Another 35 percent of incarcerated women committed a property-related offense. Among these crimes the most common offense was retail theft of less than \$150. Although we can not determine the reason for these offenses from the IDOC data, based on the Department of Justice's survey, we suspect that many of the property-related offenses were related to these women's addictions to crack/cocaine and other drugs.

Other Offenses

By contrast, person-related crimes, sex-related and other categories of criminal behavior together constitute about one-sixth of the offenses for the remaining population of female inmates. These figures support the contention that incarcerated women are usually not violent compared to their male counterparts. Nationally, incarcerated women are about one-half as likely to be in prison for a violent offense (Mumola, 2000). Further, studies indicate that unlike men about three-quarters of women incarcerated for violent offenses had committed simple assault—a category that usually means that there was no bodily injury to the victim (Greenfeld and Snell, 1999).

The Children of Incarcerated Women

The IDOC data suggest that the children of incarcerated mothers have as mothers women who are among the most economically disadvantaged of the female prison population. To see this point, consider that incarcerated women who have given birth to the most children are likely the most disadvantaged among the prison population. As shown by Table 2, women who have had four or more children are more likely to have

served time for a drug-related offense than are women with fewer children. Consistent with this finding, they are more likely than other female inmates to self-report a substance abuse problem and they are more likely to be high school dropouts than other female offenders.

The implications of these findings from IDOC records are twofold. First, having given birth to four or more children predicts diminished prospects for economic self-sufficiency. Second, the incarcerations that affect the most children likely involve the most disadvantaged mothers. As was shown by Table 1, about one-fourth of mothers have four or more children, and nearly 45 percent have three or more children. These figures imply that children with incarcerated mothers likely have mothers who have had many children:

- More than one-half of the children of incarcerated mothers have mothers who have had four or more children, and
- Nearly three-quarters of these children have mothers who have had three or more births.

This evidence suggests that children of incarcerated mothers come from especially disadvantaged backgrounds even relative to the backgrounds for the entire population of female inmates.

The Number of Children with Incarcerated Mothers

We can use these figures on the number of children ever born to women entering Illinois state prisons to estimate how many children in Illinois had a mother serve time in prison between 1990 and 2001. To compute this estimate, we simply add up the number

of children ever born to each of the 14,724 women who served at least one spell in prison. This computation indicates that nearly 35,000 children in Illinois had a mother who spent time in prison. Because most of these children have mothers who are the most economically disadvantaged among the population of incarcerated women, these children are likely especially challenging to social and child welfare professionals.

Our 35,000 figure probably understates the magnitude of the current and future challenge for state authorities. As discussed above, the number of incarcerated women has increased sharply during the period studied. Further, the number of incarcerated women with four or more children has increased even faster. Therefore, looking into the future we expect that more children will have had a mother who spent time in prison during their childhood than has been the case in the past.

Another way to understand the importance of mothers' incarceration for children is to ask how many Illinois children can expect to have a mother who spent time in prison during their childhood? To get a sense of how many children this might be consider the following calculation. During fiscal year 2000, approximately 7,500 children had a mother who spent time in prison. Approximately one-half of these children had mothers who were admitted to prison for the first time. Each year new children are born and other children "age out" of childhood. For simplicity, we assume these numbers are approximately the same. Then we estimate that each year there are 3,250 children born in Illinois who will have a mother who will be sent to state prison at least once by the time they reach age 18.

The foregoing calculation underscores the point that it is relatively rare for a child to have a mother serve time in prison. Each year there are approximately 200,000 babies

born in Illinois. This figure implies that approximately 1 to 2 percent of the state's newborns will have a mother who spent time in prison during their childhood. The discussion in this paper indicates that the reason to study these children is not because their experiences are common, but because they are unusual and at the same time likely pose a disproportionately large burden on the child and social welfare systems. Further, although these percentages are small, the magnetite of the burden for child and welfare agencies is substantial. Even if the numbers and characteristics of the female prison population do not change, during the years ahead Illinois authorities can expect at any one time there to be as many as 60,000 minor children whose mothers spent time in state prison while they were a child.

Age of Incarcerated Mothers

The rising numbers of children ever born to female inmates suggests that the age of this population might be increasing. Indeed, the average age did increase between 1990 and 2000, but more important is the point that female inmates are usually middle-aged. As shown by Table 1, between 1990 and 2001, the average age of newly admitted female prisoners was 32.3 years. Approximately one-sixth of these women was over 40. Therefore the female prison population is not only economically disadvantaged with substance abuse problems, but it largely consists of middle-aged women.

The age of the female prison population explains why so many children are potentially affected by these women's incarcerations. All other things equal, older women are more likely to have given birth to more children than younger women. Consequently, the rising age of the female prison population can explain some of the increase in the proportion of inmates with three or more children. However, even within

age categories the proportion of inmates with three or more children increased between 1990 and 2000. The proportion of women admitted to prison who had three or more children increased from 29 percent to 35 percent among women 30 years of age and younger, and increased from 40 percent to 57 percent among women ages 31 to 40.

Length of Time Served

Women enter state prison having been sentenced to serve one or more years time. But in practice, women are released earlier. Most women serve less than one year in prison and about three-fourths serve less than 2 years prior to their release. These findings imply that when children's mothers are incarcerated, the period without their mother is most often less than one year. But this finding also implies that children's lives potentially are disrupted twice over this period: once when their mothers leave for prison and the second time when they are released. Of course, a mother's release from prison is no guarantee that she will be able to resume custody of her children, even if she had it prior to entering prison. In future work we plan to examine how likely it is that children's caregivers change when their mothers leave for prison and the circumstance under which mothers are reunited with their children after they are released from prison.

IV. Summary and Conclusions

Poorly educated single mothers in their mid-thirties, with multiple children and a history of substance abuse and prior incarcerations are increasingly dominating the female prison population. Overwhelmingly, these women are non-violent offenders serving a year or less for drug related or property offenses.

This information about female offenders is important for assessing these women's labor market prospects and prospects for economic self-sufficiency. Evidence from national data bases indicates that women who are high school dropouts and have children accumulate substantially less employment experience than either their better educated counterparts or even comparably educated women with no children (Holzer and LaLonde, 2000). Because our analysis of the IDOC data indicates that most female offenders have children and are high school dropouts, we expect these women to have had very poor employment histories prior to entering prison. Further, we expect that women who have had the most children to have had the poorest employment histories and consequently have the poorest prospects for economic self-sufficiency. If they are to become self-sufficient, it will clearly require a comprehensive program including life skills, substance abuse treatment and job training and placement.

Even if we do not take into account the likelihood of increasing rates of incarceration of women in the years ahead, the cumulative number of children in Illinois who we expect will have had a mother in prison sometime during the next two decades is high. We computed that during the last 12 years, the figure in Illinois was about 35,000. But this figure was based in part on a relatively low numbers of admissions during the early 1990s. If the admissions of the last few years are representative of what is to come in the future, we expect that over the next generation about 60,000 children will have had a mother who spent time in Illinois prisons. In addition to the consequences associated with growing up in very economically disadvantaged environments, these children will incur the risks for poor developmental outcomes that are associated with separation from their

primary caregivers and from erratic and unpredictable shifts from one caregiver to another.

The evidence presented here indicates that the net social benefits associated with incarcerating women are substantially less than those for men. Studies find that the estimated social benefits associated with incarceration are highest for offenses against persons (Levitt 1996; 1998). Because women are so much less likely to be incarcerated for violent offenses, the benefit that society derives from incarcerating them is likely much less than for male inmates.

While the social benefits of incarcerating women are likely lower than for men, the social costs of incarcerating women are likely higher than they are for men. The Cook County Sheriff's Department estimates pre-sentencing expenses associated with female inmates to average about \$31,000. And once sentenced, a year in prison costs taxpayers about \$25,000. But there are additional costs associated a mother's incarceration if she is still the custodial parent at the time of her arrest or sentencing. These children have to be cared for either by other family members or by the child welfare system. Interventions by child welfare authorities are extremely costly to taxpayers. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, the children of about 10% of incarcerated mothers are being cared for in non-kin foster care while the mother is in prison (Mumola, 2000). The expenditures on foster care amount to approximately \$25,000 annually per child. One way to think about this amount is that putting just one child into the foster care system is about as costly to taxpayers as putting that child's mother in prison for one year.

National statistics indicate that most children of incarcerated mothers are not in foster care (Mumola, 2000). Many more of these children are placed with a grandparent

or relative. These costs to taxpayers are less than those associated with foster care, but they can be substantial. Further, they do not include any indirect costs such as out-of-pocket costs to members of inmates' extended families who may take-in these children, or more importantly for the services to children adversely affected by separation from their mother. The total cost to society of incarcerating women should include the cost of caring for their children whether it is by a relative or by child welfare authorities and their agents.

Future Research

The corrections system lacks a tradition of taking inmates' children into account in any formal manner. But now that the fastest growing segment of the prison population is single mothers with multiple children it is important to better understand the consequences of this practice. To obtain this understanding and to better assess the benefits and costs of incarcerating women and especially mothers, we plan to merge the IDOC data with the integrated database developed by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. This database contains information from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, from TANF, AFDC, food stamps, Medicaid and WIC records, and from state earning records. This analysis will make it possible to develop more comprehensive baseline information about the economic circumstances of female offenders and their children and to establish a time line that includes episodes of incarceration, social welfare receipt, employment, and contacts with child welfare authorities for each woman.

The IDOC data indicates that female ex-offenders' prospects for economic self-sufficiency are very poor. If they are to become self-sufficient, they likely require a

comprehensive program including life skills, substance abuse treatment, education, and job training and placement (Topics in Community Corrections, 2000). Despite the escalating numbers of incarcerated mothers returning to the community very little information is available to guide the design and assessment of appropriate interventions to improve the outcomes for these mothers and their high-risk children. Our future research will contribute to our understanding of the context in which these interventions might take place and under what circumstances they might be successful.

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Table 1

Women Admitted to Illinois State Prisons: 1990 – 2001

Race:	Number	Proportion
White	3,952	0.269
Black	9,914	0.673
Hispanic	754	0.051
Other	94	0.006

County of Residence:	Number	Proportion
Cook County	8,690	0.590
Suburban Chicago	1,702	0.116
Counties with MSAs	1,894	0.129
Rural Counties	2,438	0.166

Age:	Number	Proportion
Less than 22	1,347	0.092
22 – 29	4,788	0.325
30 – 39	6,164	0.419
Over 40	2,425	0.165

Educational Attainment:	Number	Proportion
High School Dropouts	8,225	0.629
High School Graduates	4,850	0.371

Marital Status:	Number	Proportion
Married	2,042	0.139
Single	9,809	0.668
Divorced/Separated	2,833	0.193

Offense:

Person	1,863	0.147
Property	4,485	0.354
Drug	5,519	0.435
Sex	263	0.021
Other	549	0.043
Missing	2,045	-----

Self-reported Substance Abuse Problem:

No substance abuse	5,891	0.400
Prior substance abuse	8,833	0.600

Notes:

1. Number refers to the number of women in our sample who have the indicated characteristic.
2. Proportion refers to the fraction of women in the indicated category.

Table 2A

The Percentage of Female Inmates Serving Time for Drug, Property, Person, or Sex Offenses by Number of Children:

Fiscal Year 2000

	Type of Offense			
	<u>Drug</u>	<u>Property</u>	<u>Person</u>	<u>Sex</u>
No children	38%	40%	17.5%	4.1%
1 child	42.3%	42.3%	11.4%	4%
2 children	45%	36%	13%	6%
3 children	46%	41%	9%	3.7%
4 or more children	52.8%	33.5%	7.6%	6.1%

Table 2B

The Characteristics of Female Offenders by Number of Children:

Fiscal Year 2000

	Less than a High School Education	Age 30 and Younger	Never Married	Self-reported Substance Abuse Problem
No children	63%	61%	80%	59%
1 child	62%	44%	72.3%	60.3%
2 children	61%	37%	63.3%	66%
3 children	61%	31%	57.3%	68%
4 or more children	72%	29%	64.3%	69%

Table 3**The Number of Women Admitted to Prison and The Number of Their Children**

	Fiscal Year 1990			Fiscal Year 2000		
	Number of Inmates	% of Total Inmates	Number of Children ⁵	Number of Inmates	% of Total Inmates	Number of Children ¹
no children	203	20.3%	0	448	15.5%	0
1 child	232	23.2%	232	491	17.0%	491
2 children	204	20.4%	408	553	19.1%	1,106
3 children	174	17.4%	522	579	20.0%	1,737
Four or more children ⁶	186	18.6%	922	821	28.4%	4,193
Totals	992 inmates		2,084 children	2,892 inmates		7,527 children

⁵ “Number of Children” refers to number of children ever born at the time a women was admitted to an Illinois State prison.

⁶ The average number of children in this category is five and the range is from 4 to 14.

Table 4A

Admissions

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total number admitted</u>
1990	999
2000	2,892

Table 4B

**Age of Female Offenders Admitted to Prison:
FY2000**

	Total number admitted
30 or younger	977
31 –40	1,298
41 and older	617