



Photo: by Chuck Cheney, Chicago Tribune

Alternatives to Incarceration for Women

By Jessica Falk

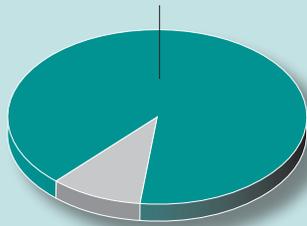
Women in Illinois are incarcerated at record rates and at enormous cost to the state. Most are jailed for nonviolent offenses and have experienced trauma, addiction, and economic and social barriers. As a result of women's incarceration, their children are more likely to have psychological health issues, to be placed in foster care, and to engage in delinquent behavior.

Many of these women do not receive treatment and therefore become repeat offenders or parole violators. This trend is likely to be reversed if women are provided with the services they need instead of incarceration. These services include educational services, drug treatment, family reunification services, and individual and family counseling. Research shows that addressing women's multiple needs through well-designed programs, such as "Families Building Communities" in Chicago and "Positive Options, Referrals and Alternatives" in Springfield, can save the state money and help women recover.

Women Involved in the Criminal Justice System

Designing effective treatment programs requires an understanding of the needs of the clients the programs intend to serve. Recent findings show that many treatment programs—designed originally for men, based on men's needs—do not work well for women involved in

90% of women in Illinois prisons are incarcerated for non-violent offenses.



the criminal justice system. Instead, restorative programs for women should be based on information known about women's lives:

- **Incarcerated women are nonviolent offenders.** Sixty-one percent of women prisoners in Illinois are serving sentences for property and drug offenses,¹ and 80 percent of women admitted to the Cook County Jail were admitted for nonviolent offenses.²
- **Incarcerated women are mothers.** Of women admitted to the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), 81 percent are mothers, the majority of whom lived with their children before arrest.³
- **Incarcerated women have experienced trauma in their lives.** Although the majority of women were incarcerated for nonviolent offenses, most of them have been the victims of violent crime in their past:

81 percent of incarcerated women had experienced physical and/or sexual abuse, often beginning in childhood.⁴ Women incarcerated for prostitution, in particular, are likely to be victims of repeated violence and sexual assault. For all prostituted women surveyed in Cook County Jail, 86 percent were victims of domestic violence; 75 percent were victims of sexual assault; 66 percent were victims of incest; and 62 percent were prostituted before the age of 18.⁵

- **Incarcerated women often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental illness.** Often these mental health issues are a direct result of the physical and sexual violence women have encountered in their lives.⁶ Other life stressors, such as economic barriers, may also impact the incidence of mental illness among incarcerated women.
- **Incarcerated women face economic barriers.** The majority of incarcerated women have few job skills, and their only job experiences are at low-wage employment.⁷ In addition, many of the women have experienced homelessness in the past,⁸ and many are likely to experience homelessness after release.⁹
- **Incarcerated women often have multiple health issues.** Women typically enter jails in poor health and experience more seri-

ous health problems than the general population of women. These problems are usually the result of poverty, poor nutrition, inadequate healthcare, and substance abuse.¹⁰

- **Incarcerated women often are drug or alcohol dependent.** In 2000, nearly 70 percent of the women exiting IDOC were drug or alcohol dependent.¹¹

Addressing Women's Needs

Women involved in the criminal justice system need treatment services to help them maintain relationships with their children, to address mental health needs, and to recover from drug and alcohol addiction. They need job training and financial services. Most importantly, the women need to know that while they are in the treatment program their and their children's basic needs, such as housing and safety, will be met. Recent research on

Experiences of Women in Cook County Jail

from "Unlocking Options for Women: A Survey of Women in Cook County Jail" Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, April 2002

Homelessness:	54%
Child Abuse:	53%
Domestic Violence:	66%
Prostitution:	34%
Substance Abuse:	54%
Unemployment:	54%

(continued on reverse)

(continued from reverse)

drug-recovery programs for women shows that programs that address all of the women's needs, including those discussed, are more effective than programs that focus only on one area of treatment, such as drug recovery.

Stephanie Covington, a leading specialist in the development and implementation of gender-responsive services, has identified 17 issues that should be recognized when creating a comprehensive program.¹² Covington also emphasizes the importance of recognizing women in treatment as individuals by creating individualized treatment plans. Women in the criminal justice system often have much in common, yet each woman has her own background and needs. A one-size-fits-all approach inadequately serves women's needs and therefore is not as effective in helping women recover and not re-offend.

Model Programs in Illinois

The Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights' program, Families Building Community (FBC), in Chicago and Positive Options, Referrals and Alternatives (PORA) in Springfield provide useful models for programs offered as an alternative to incarceration for nonviolent female offenders. Rather than focus on one treatment aspect, FBC and PORA incorporate many key components of the integrated treatment model.

FBC recognizes that stable housing, employment, and financial stability are key to reducing recidivism and to keeping families intact. To further these goals, FBC provides rental subsidies, housing advocacy assistance, shelter transition assistance, and transitional jobs/career assistance. The program also emphasizes family preservation and reuniti-

COMPARISON OF THE COST OF INCARCERATION VS. THE FAMILIES BUILDING COMMUNITY PROGRAM

CURRENT SYSTEM:		FAMILIES BUILDING COMMUNITY:	
Women's Incarceration:	\$30,554	Job Training:	\$13,860
DCFS per Child:	\$28,334	Rental Support:	\$9,909
TOTAL:	\$58,888	Social Services:	\$4,974
		TOTAL:	\$28,743

fication. Women involved in the program are able to have their children live with them and the program provides parenting skill development, children's services, and family reunification support.

The FBC program "meets the client where she is at" by providing services tailored to the specific needs of an individual woman and her family. These services can include substance abuse support services, trauma treatment, individual counseling, group counseling, and referral case management services. By providing integrated services, the FBC program is designed to help women recover and achieve self-sufficiency within a year's time.

Like FBC, PORA provides holistic, integrated, treatment for women who worked in prostitution, have substance abuse issues, and/or have been sexually, physically, and verbally abused. Women in PORA attend counseling sessions tailored to their individual treatment needs, attend meetings on substance abuse, and participate in parenting classes. In addition, the women attend a meeting led by their peers, allowing them to build positive relationships. PORA also provides individual case management assistance and helps participants find permanent housing. To ensure a successful transition, PORA provides after-care for women who

graduate from the program.

PORA, like FBC, is time limited; it is designed to help women recover and achieve self-sufficiency within two years. The primary difference between PORA and FBC is that FBC's housing is scattered-site apartments and PORA has a group home in which women have their own rooms but share bathrooms, a kitchen, and so on.

Conclusion

Chicago Coalition for the Homeless recognizes that women can recover and not re-offend if they are offered services. To address this issue, CCH has written and advocated for laws that allow for alternatives to incarceration, including ILPA 92-0806 and the First Offender Probation Act. ILPA 92-0806, which was passed in 2002, allows Cook County judges to sentence mothers to a treatment program in lieu of prison time. The First Offender Probation Act allows judges to offer probation with rehabilitation to first-time felony prostitution offenders; it was passed on May 22, 2007 and is now awaiting Governor Blagojevich's signature.

If these laws and similar programs are to meet their full potential in reducing recidivism and costs to the state, the treatment pro-

vided must be designed to meet the needs of the women it will serve. Women involved in the criminal justice system often need housing, family services, job training, and mental health and drug treatment. Integrated approaches that address these multiple needs and treat women as individuals are shown to help women recover. Programs offered as alternatives to incarceration that include an integrated and individualized approach help women achieve full recovery within a limited time frame.

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¹ Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers, "Women in Prison Fact Sheet" (2007). Retrieved on May 10, 2007, at <http://www.claim-il.org/about.html>.
² Cook County Sheriff's Office Department of Women's Justice Service (2007). Retrieved on May 17, 2007, at <http://www.cookcountysheriff.org/womensjustice/index.html>.
³ Cook County Sheriff's Office; Chicago Legal Aid for Incarcerated Mothers.
⁴ Chicago Legal Aid for Incarcerated Mothers.
⁵ Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, "Unlocking Options for Women: A Survey of Women in Cook County Jail" (April 2002).
⁶ Cook County Sheriff's Office.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, "Unlocking Options for Women: A Survey of Women in Cook County Jail" (April 2002).
⁹ N. Freudenberg, "Adverse Effects of U.S. Jail and Prison Policies on the Health and Well-Being of Women of Color," *American Journal of Public Health* 92(12) (2002).
¹⁰ Cook County Sheriff's Office.
¹¹ S. George, S. LaLonde, & R. LaLonde, "Incarcerated Mothers in Illinois State Prisons: An Analysis of Administrative Data" (2002). Retrieved on June 21, 2007, at http://harrisschool.uchicago.edu/Centers/chppp/pdfs/lalonde_incarceratedmothers.pdf.
¹² S. Covington, "Helping Women Recover: Creating Gender-Responsive Treatment," in *The Handbook of Addiction Treatment for Women: Theory of Practice*, ed. Straussner & S. Brown (S.L.A. Jossey-Bass, 2002).