

...for the children

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## WOMEN IN PRISON FACT SHEET

Although crime rates have been on the decline since 1994, the 1990s were the most punitive decade in U.S. history, with more people incarcerated than in any prior decade. The total number of prisoners reached two million in February of 2000, giving the U.S. one quarter of the world's eight million prisoners. Women's incarceration rate has risen at more than twice the rate of the men's since 1993 in Illinois. Women prisoners usually are convicted of non-violent offenses, and their absence has an immediate, dramatic impact on their children and families.

- The number of women in Illinois state prisons at year-end 2002 was 2,520 – a 173% increase in ten years. As of year-end 2002, the number of incarcerated women nationwide was 97,491. Arrests of women for murder and manslaughter decreased 35.5% in that time.
- Nationwide the percentage of women has more than doubled as a proportion of the population under correctional supervision, from 4% to 9%. About 15,000 women are detained in Cook County Jail annually and about 1,200 women are in the jail on any given day. 82 percent of all women detained at Cook County Jail in October 2001 were charged with non-violent offenses. More than 61% of women prisoners in Illinois serve sentences for property (32%) and drug (29%) offenses. Women's crime has not become more violent, but sentencing has become harsher.
- Like poverty, imprisonment disproportionately affects women of color. In 2002, 72% of women in pre-trial detention in Cook County were African-American, 7.5% were Latina, 11% were white, and 9% were multi-racial or other. Between 1990 and 2001 women admitted to Illinois prisons were 67.3% African-American, 26.9% white, and 5.1% Latina, with Asians and American Indians making up the other less than 1%. Nationally, black women were more than eight times as likely as white women to be in prison in 1997.
- Both childhood and adult histories of abuse are strongly correlated with drug use among women. A 1994 study reported that 80% of women prisoners had experienced physical and sexual abuse, often beginning in childhood.
- The Illinois Department of Corrections estimates that 80% of women prisoners need drug treatment, but it is available to only 20% of them.
- In Illinois, more than 60% of women entering prison have not attained a high school diploma.
- Rates of HIV infection are much higher in the prison population than in the general population. At year-end 2000, 3.6% of female state prison inmates were HIV-positive, compared to 2.2% of males. Prisoners in Illinois are paid as little as \$15 per month for prison assignments but they must pay \$2 for each doctor visit in prison.
- Prisons are generally male-oriented and male-dominated. While there is a lack of programs and services for prisoners overall, the shortage for women is more stark.

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## MOTHERS IN PRISON

- 82.5% of women incarcerated in Illinois are mothers. In fiscal year 2000, approximately 2,800 women entering state prison reported that they had given birth to 7,500 children. Nationwide, women under correctional supervision are mothers of an estimated 1.3 million minor children. More than 10 million children have had a parent imprisoned at some point in their lives. Many mothers were their children's sole caretakers before arrest.
- Nearly 90% of fathers in prison in the U.S. report that their children live with the mothers; 28% of incarcerated mothers report that their children are being cared for by the fathers.
- In 2003, 63 babies were born to mothers in the custody of Dwight Correctional Center. Nationwide, about 5% of women are pregnant when they enter prison. Another 15% have babies less than six weeks old. Newborns are separated from imprisoned mothers within a day or two of birth, missing the crucial, ir retrievable period of mother-child bonding, which affects development for the rest of their lives.
- Studies demonstrate that regular visits between children in foster care and their mothers enhance the children's emotional, scholastic, and social adjustment to placement. Numerous studies show that family contact has a strong, positive impact on parole success when the mother is released.
- When a mother goes to prison, it is her children who suffer most. Studies link parental incarceration with problems including poor school performance, aggression, emotional problems, and post-traumatic stress. Young children may be severely traumatized by the sudden separation from their mothers, resulting in developmental delays and later emotional problems. Children commonly experience sadness, anger, confusion, grief or apathy due to the separation. Children's substitute caregivers often are stretched beyond their resources. Visits to distant prisons and long-distance, collect calls are the only available contact for children who are too young to benefit from letters.
- 84% of mothers in federal prisons and 64% of mothers in state prisons lived with their children before arrest. When they are released, they face multiple barriers to reuniting their families, reintegrating into their communities, and obtaining stable employment and housing.
- A 1985 study found that less than 1% of mothers in a California prison were sentenced for child abuse.
- Children of imprisoned mothers who go into state foster homes may be separated from brothers and sisters, moved to a series of foster homes, and denied visits with their mothers. Foster care workers often fail to provide mandated visits and services. There is little coordination or continuity of services when the mother returns to the community. An estimated one in four children in the Illinois foster care system are abused in their foster homes. Foster children have an increased risk of delinquency in adolescence and homelessness in adulthood.
- Maternal imprisonment affects future generations: children's psychological health and sense of family is severely damaged by the separation from their mothers. Increasingly, families are destroyed forever through termination of parental rights, permanently cutting off the mother-child bond even if nobody adopts the children. Illinois in particular has targeted prisoners for destruction of their families through legal severance of family ties, so that the children and mothers have no further communication, visits, or even information about each others' welfare.

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