



Mom  
In  
Jail...  
Kids  
Pay  
the  
Price

**Mothers' Incarceration:  
Effects on  
Children's Education**

◆ HEAR US Inc. ◆

December 2008

This report is made possible by a training grant from Cook County Sheriff's office, Women's Justice Services.

Report by Diane Nilan. December 2008. Photos © Diane Nilan



For more information, contact:

**HEAR US** Inc.  
Diane Nilan, President, [diane@hearus.us](mailto:diane@hearus.us)  
1163 E Ogden Ave., 705-329, Naperville, IL 60563  
[www.hearus.us](http://www.hearus.us) vm/fax 630/225-5012

### TABLE of CONTENTS

Preface .....3

Background.....4

Topics .....5

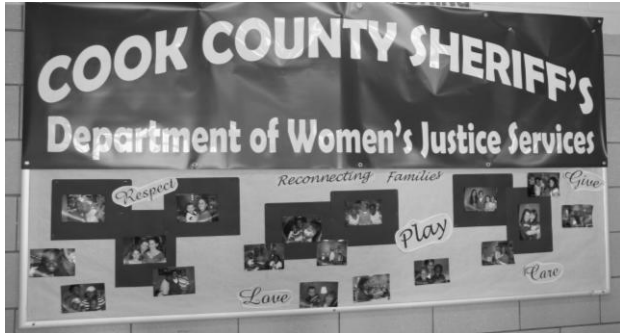
Findings .....6-7

Summary .....8

Recommendations .....9

# PREFACE

HEAR US Inc., a national nonprofit organization that raises awareness of and advocates for homeless children and youth, conducted interviews of over 75 women inmates at Cook County Jail who are parents of school-age children in Sept. 2008.



This survey was funded by the Cook County Sheriff through the Cook County Jail's Women's Justice Services. CCJ-WJS facilitated the survey process and collaborated on the questionnaire.

The women, nonviolent offenders, were participants in either the Women's Residential Program or the Sheriff's Female Furlough Program located in a separate building on the Cook County Jail campus in Chicago, IL. This group represents the majority of woman inmates at CCJ.

Participants volunteered to be interviewed by HEAR US staff/board members (all women). Not all inmate-parents participated. Most women were from the Cook County (urban) area. Interviews were conducted individually in semi-private areas, with a fixed set of questions and some basic demographic questions. HEAR US representatives asked the questions and recorded the responses. All those interviewed were English-speaking. The great majority of the subjects were African-American.

Women interviewed were awaiting further court action to determine their status with the legal system. Their presence in jail simply meant that they were arrested and charged with an offense, not convicted. Some were participating in the furlough program, where they would be in jail during the day, attending counseling and self-help programs, returning to their homes at night. Those interviewed were separated from their families for an indefinite time causing untold strain on their families.

**The purpose of the interviews** was to determine how incarceration-related homelessness affected children, focusing on how the children's educational needs were being met, especially for those children who became homeless because of their mother's incarceration.

HEAR US thanks Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart; Terrie McDermott, executive director of the Women's Justice Services at Cook County Jail; CCJ-WJS staff; and, most of all the mothers who participated in this survey. ■■



*Children are the world's most valuable resource  
and its best hope for the future.*  
John Fitzgerald Kennedy

## BACKGROUND

Mothers are going to jail in record numbers. The tragic side effect: children often bear the brunt of their mothers' incarceration.

The Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that as of June 30, 2007, over 2.3 million people were locked up in local or county jails, and state or federal prisons. The proportion of women more than doubled from 4% to 9%.

In Cook County (IL), over 13,000 women were locked up for pretrial detention in 2007. Their crimes are overall nonviolent and poverty-related.

When arrested, women are confined in a city or county jail while they await trial. They typically are picked up off the streets, with no prior notice, without opportunity to make arrangements for their children, who end up in the "best" cases haphazardly being cared for by relatives or friends. In the worst cases the children end up in the beleaguered child welfare system. The moms do not know how long they will be detained. Whether or not she has any contact with her children depends on local jail policy and the ability of the caretaker to arrange a visit.

### A survey of the characteristics of Women Offenders in Cook County (IL) conducted in 1996 by Northwestern University found:

- 80% are single mothers with 3 or more children.
- 80% have been charged with non-violent offenses; (i.e. shoplifting, larceny, passing bad checks, drug sales/possession, prostitution)
- 75-90% of the women are addicted to drugs or alcohol. - Women frequently commit crimes to sustain their drug addictions.
- 80% have been physically or sexually abused.
- 80% suffer from the co-occurrence of addiction, mental health disorders and trauma.
- Women enter jails with poor health and experience more serious health problems due to poverty, poor nutrition, inadequate health care, and substance abuse.
- An increase of 69% since 1991 in women testing positive for HIV.
- Women offenders are at greater risk for breast, lung, and cervical cancer.
- 55% of women in jails have a high school diploma.
- Jobs are low skill, entry level, low paying – 2/3 of women offenders report they never held a job paying more than \$6.50 per hour.
- The pathways to criminality for women are: physical and sexual abuse, poverty and substance abuse.

Many things can wait.  
Children cannot. Today  
their bones are being  
formed, their blood is  
being made, their senses  
are being developed. To  
them we cannot say  
'tomorrow.'  
Their name is today.

- Gabriela Mistral  
(Chilean teacher 1899 - 1957)

Once convicted, they may serve their sentence at the county jail or be sent to a state or federal institution.

If found not guilty, women return home, if they still have one, and try to rebuild their lives, and the disrupted lives of their children. Because of their mother's incarceration, the children, often rendered homeless by loss of housing due to hardship, bounce from place to place, or temporarily move in with someone willing to look after them. Respected research by others confirms that separation is harder on the children than the mother.

To those conducting the survey, the mothers interviewed for this project honestly shared the pain of being away from their children—a reality that gets little attention in this prison-focused society.

**Moms in Jail, Kids Pay the Price** offers a glimpse at the human cost of incarceration, focused on Cook County Jail, an assessment that easily applies across the country to the thousands of parents, mostly women, who sit behind bars while their children pay the ultimate price. ■■

## HEAR US INTERVIEW TOPICS:

- Mother/family’s housing status before incarceration
- Mother/family’s anticipated housing status post-incarceration
- Mother’s previous experience of homelessness
- Mother’s previous experience of incarceration
- Household income prior to incarceration
- Mother’s school experience (last year completed, overall school experience)
- Children’s experience of school, including
  - Pre-incarceration educational stability/participation
  - Who is responsible for children, housing status/stability during the mother’s incarceration
  - School attendance during parent’s incarceration
  - School’s knowledge of (and response to) parent’s incarceration
  - Effects of incarceration on children’s behavior/education
  - Need for assistance to overcome obstacles to education caused by homelessness (related to parent’s incarceration)



**The premise of the survey:** incarceration of parents can cause major disruption in a child’s life. Included in the disruption, often overlooked, is when the child becomes homeless as a result of losing, even though temporarily, their parent and their home.

**Homelessness**, according to the federal Department of Education’s definition (are those who) *lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and includes:*

- children and youths who are ***sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;***
- children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings....

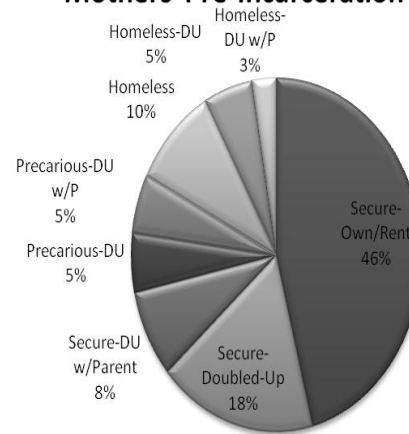
Lost  
housing +  
hardship =  
**HOMELESS**

By nature of **hardship (parent in jail)** and **loss of housing** (includes moving in with a caretaker, officially designated or not), children whose parents are locked up can easily become homeless. They have specific rights to educational access and stability, rights often overlooked by schools and families alike. ■■

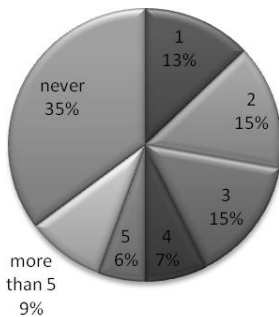
## FINDINGS:

- Most women indicated they were “securely” housed prior to incarceration, however that included being doubled-up (informal, unstable and often unsanctioned, e.g. violation of lease, living with another person).
- Incarcerated women often relied on their parent/s for housing.
- Homelessness was the pre-incarceration reality for a sizable number of the women interviewed.

### Mothers' Pre-Incarceration Housing



### Previous Incarceration



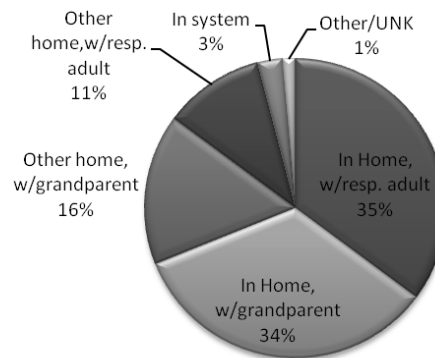
- About two-thirds of the subjects had multiple incarcerations.
- Employment income (full/part-time) was rare, with some form of public assistance being the main source of income for over half of the interviewees.

*If we don't stand up for children,  
then we don't stand for much.*

Marian Wright Edelman

- Of children remaining in the family's housing, half were being cared for by grandparents. Of children forced to relocate because of the incarceration, half were living with and being cared for by grandparents.
- Almost all children had attended school regularly prior to and during the mothers' incarceration.
- To the credit of the Cook County and Chicago school systems, it appeared that most homeless children's educational rights were adhered to, intentionally or by accident.

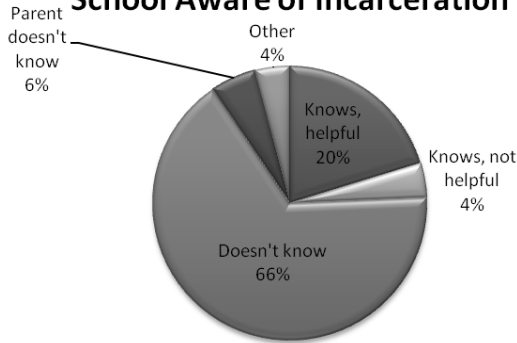
### Housing While Parent is Incarcerated



*For many homeless children, school is the  
only source of stability in their lives.*

Congresswoman Judy Biggert (13-IL)  
long-time champion for homeless children and families

### School Aware of Incarceration

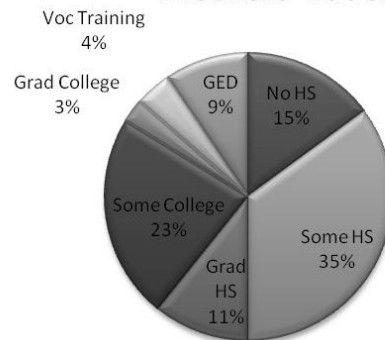


- Schools often did not know of the parent’s incarceration, in many cases the preference stated by the mother. When it was known by the schools, most were considered helpful.
- Mothers interviewed were unaware of the provisions of McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act that would have provided stable education for their children rendered homeless because of their being locked up. Fourteen mothers requested assistance with McK-V related issues.

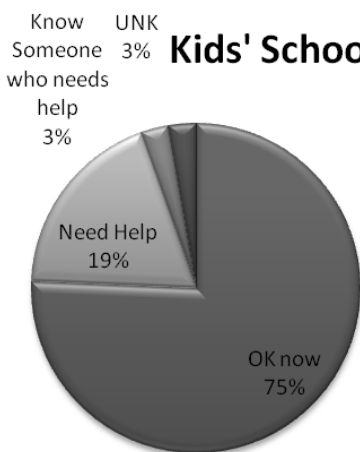
**I didn't want the school to know... I was ashamed... and afraid that they would kick my kids out of school...**  
survey participant

- Most mothers considered their own school experience good, with only a handful describing it as “poor.”
- Junior year in high school was the point at which most women dropped out of school. Although the majority did not complete high school, a sizable number graduated HS and some attended, and graduated, college.

### Mothers' Education Levels



### Kids' School Status



- Although most mothers believed their children’s school experience was overall positive, about half reported their children had significant adjustment issues related to the mother’s incarceration.
- It appears that most children were able to successfully remain in school, with only a handful of problems reported regarding school access and services (related to McKinney-Vento homeless education). ■■

**School stability is critical for all children, but even more so for children experiencing the trauma of homelessness.**  
Barbara Duffield, Policy Director  
National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

## SUMMARY

- **Housing instability** was a common issue, often long-term, for most families. Many interviewees seem to understate or underestimate their housing vulnerability, often not considering “doubled-up” to be homeless.
- **Grandparents** are the safety net, albeit old and worn, for the children and families. Some women shared that they were in their parent’s home; or the children with grandparent/s while their mother was in jail, and that this living arrangement was precarious due to lease restrictions, poverty and/or overcrowding.
- **Qualification for public housing**, in jeopardy because of pending felony conviction for drug-related offenses disqualifying them from public housing, was a reality that faced many of the women, one which they seemed unaware.
- **Mothers were proud** of their children’s attendance and participation in school, often citing outstanding grades or talking about their children who attended college. Anecdotally it appears that education held a great value to these mothers.
- **Mothers appreciated the opportunity** to participate in this project/survey, welcoming attention to the vulnerability of their children.
- **Women were open about their mistakes**—becoming involved in drugs, alcohol abuse, and illegal activities—factors that have contributed to their families’ difficulties. Likewise they expressed hope for a chance to change things for the better, using the coping skills they were learning in jail.
- **Mothers were encouraged to know about their children’s educational rights** and that this project was designed to share information about those rights. None seemed aware of this prior to their interview.
- **Information about McKinney-Vento homeless educational rights** would be helpful for other families outside the jail known by the women inmates.
- **Poverty** seemed to be the predominant underlying issue in the women’s/families dilemmas. Income levels reported by the women rarely would be adequate for self-sufficiency for one person, much less a family. They all face the challenges of housing cost and availability, education shortfalls, and fractured family support networks, among other concerns.
- **Involvement with the criminal justice system** likely means the women will struggle to attain self-sufficiency. Employers and landlords increasingly check criminal records and eliminate those deemed risky because of prior criminal convictions. Without jobs or housing, the women and their families will be forced to resort to precarious arrangements for housing and illegal activities for income.
- **The children are vulnerable** because of their mothers’ involvement with the criminal justice system. This vulnerability potentially means another generation growing into the criminal justice system, a poor substitute for a stable lifestyle and productive future. ■■

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### HEAR US recommendations (specific to homeless student's access to education):

- Develop and encourage ways for the mothers to learn positive ways to interact with their children's schools during and after incarceration.
- Inform mothers of their children's McKinney-Vento rights to attend school, especially for those children forced to live with others while their mother is incarcerated. (HEAR US offers REACH products—training video, flyer, poster)
- Facilitate incarcerated parents' advocacy on behalf of their homeless child's educational rights.
- Educate school staff about how homelessness due to a parent's incarceration gives the student specific rights under McKinney-Vento. (REACH training film)
- Sensitize school staff about issues relating to children of incarcerated parents. (pending HEAR US mini-documentary featuring homeless children whose parent/s are incarcerated)
- Train jail personnel to be alert to this common issue of jeopardized children's educational stability due to incarceration-related homelessness.

**REACH**, a project of HEAR US, offers tools to help incarcerated women advocate for their homeless children's educational stability.



- **VIDEO: REACH: Connect Your Child to Education**, 11-minute training video that explains the basics of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education legislation. (available January 2009)
- **BROCHURE: REACH: Connect Your Child to Education**, easy-to-understand flyer with essential information and a postage-paid tear-off postcard so parents or the children's caregivers can advocate for the children's homeless educational rights. (1/2009)
- **POSTER: REACH: Connect Your Child to Education**, eye-catching poster that raises awareness about homeless children's educational rights to urge incarcerated parents to help their children. (1/2009)

To order or for more information, [www.hearus.us](http://www.hearus.us) or call 630/225-5012. Visit the HEAR US website for more information and resources about homeless children and youth.

