

# UNLOCKING OPTIONS FOR WOMEN: A SURVEY OF WOMEN IN COOK COUNTY JAIL



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CHICAGO COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**O**n October 31, 2001, 60 members of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless conducted in-depth, one-on-one surveys with 235 of the 1,117 women detained that day in Cook County Jail.

These surveys were designed and conducted to gain an understanding of women's lives that may dictate and support policy initiatives and further direct service providers in assisting those in need. This study was conducted to document the lives of women detained in Cook County Jail and promote understanding of their many experiences. It reveals a great deal about the lives, current circumstances, and future hopes of 235 women detained that day.



## RESULTS

Study participants were women present on the specified date the surveys were administered. This sample does not represent all women detained in the jail on October 31, 2001, nor is it a random sample. However, we believe that the collective results display a reliable picture of the lives of women detained in Cook County Jail.

## KEY FINDINGS

82 percent of all women detained at Cook County Jail in October 2001 were charged with non-violent offenses.

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Of all 235 women surveyed:

- 45 percent reported being detained two to five times.
  - 82 percent reported being mothers.
  - Women in jail are survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence at two and three times the national average.
- 
- 54 percent reported being homeless in the 30 days prior to entering Cook County Jail.
    - 13 percent said they were offered assistance finding housing while they were detained in jail.
    - 23 percent of unemployed women said they were not employed because they had no place to live.
    - Women without housing are twice as likely to be detained more than six times.
- 
- 54 percent said they were not employed in the 30 days prior to entering Cook County Jail.
    - 60 percent of unemployed women stated that substance abuse was a barrier to employment.
    - 36 percent stated they could not get needed help for an alcohol or substance abuse problem.
- 
- 34 percent were regularly involved in some form of prostitution.
- 
- 29 percent of women said they had an application denied or were cut-off from government assistance in the 12 months prior to entering jail.
-

## THE “TYPICAL” WOMAN

The 235 surveys indicate that the typical woman surveyed is African American and has at least two children under the age of 18 who are in the custody of her family. She is most likely homeless before entering jail and is at high risk of being homeless upon release. She is most likely a survivor of childhood abuse and of adult violence at the hands of a partner. She may have a substance abuse history or an emotional or mental health problem, possibly linked to her prior experiences of abuse, for which she could not access treatment and care.

The typical woman surveyed has a limited education, experiences high levels of unemployment and has been detained in Cook County Jail two to five times thus far. She may also be regularly involved in prostitution for a survival need such as a place to stay or to satisfy an untreated addiction. If regularly involved in prostitution, she is even more likely to be a survivor of violence, face increased rates of detention, and be homeless when not detained in jail.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Women were asked, “At what point in your life would outside help have been beneficial?” The quantitative data collected from these surveys are enhanced by the many responses to this question. From these collective responses we glean some of the most salient recommendations on how best to assist women detained at Cook County Jail.

The Illinois legislature should conduct an in-depth analysis of the impact of detention on women who are charged for committing nonviolent offenses. If many of the women surveyed had access to benefits, services, job training, and housing while not in jail and upon release, chances are they would not be involved in an activity that leads to their arrest. Instead of burdening an already overcrowded county jail system, the Illinois legislature and Cook County government should create sentencing options and invest in programs that not only assist women leaving jail but also are geared toward early intervention and prevention.

### ❑ RECOMMENDATION:

Pass legislation that provides alternatives to incarceration sentencing options so Cook County judges can sentence women to services rather than prison. Create the model Residential Treatment and Transition Center for Women, which will help detainees access the many services they need, reduce recidivism, and help heal families.

### ❑ RECOMMENDATION:

Create a comprehensive housing plan to help women in jail secure housing upon release by augmenting existing resources and investing in the development of affordable housing for formerly detained women.

### ❑ RECOMMENDATION:

Create Government assistance programs that meet the specific needs of formerly detained women and promote utilization of existing supports including childcare assistance, medical coverage, and transportation assistance. Women should be linked with these services immediately upon release from jail. Conviction of any type should not be a reason to bar women from receiving benefits.

### ❑ RECOMMENDATION:

Increase resources in jail to assist women address trauma and other effects of violence. Immediately upon release women should have a safe place to go and be linked to community-based survivor supports.

### ❑ RECOMMENDATION:

Increase resources for community-based inpatient and outpatient treatment programs that provide holistic, gender specific models of care that can accommodate women immediately upon request and provide linkage to women in jail.

# INTRODUCTION

Staff of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) along with 60 volunteers conducted in-depth, one-on-one surveys with 235 of the 1,117 women detained in Cook County Jail on October 31, 2001.

## WHY STUDY WOMEN IN JAIL?

Agencies serving homeless women in Chicago find that these women are increasingly reporting involvement with county corrections systems, violence, and, regular involvement in prostitution. Detention rates for women in Cook County have increased by 89 percent over the past decade. Furthermore, over half of women incarcerated in Illinois prisons are arrested in Cook County. The majority of women at Cook County Jail are detained for nonviolent offenses and have been through the system many times.

## PURPOSE

These surveys were designed and conducted to gain an understanding of women's lives that may dictate and support policy initiatives and further direct service providers in assisting those in need. This study was conducted to document the lives of women detained in Cook County Jail and promote understanding of their life experiences. It reveals a great deal about the lives, current circumstances, and future hopes of 235 women detained that day.

## WHO WAS SURVEYED

Women surveyed were those present on the specified date the surveys were administered. This sample does not represent all women who were detained in the jail on October 31, 2001, nor is it a random sample. However, we believe that the collective results display a reliable picture of the lives of women detained in Cook County Jail.

## PROJECT HISTORY

As a response to growing concerns regarding the many issues faced by women detained in Cook County Jail, the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless created a policy committee to better advocate for the needs of women in jail, for alternatives to incarceration, and for programs that assist women in successfully transitioning from jail to community. Since then this committee has been folded into the policy work of the Prostitution Alternatives Round Table (PART), also a CCH project. PART is a network of organizations in Chicago working to improve social service delivery systems and to promote legislative advocacy to increase resources for persons in prostitution in the Chicago metropolitan area. As of March 2002, PART has 31

*"I would like to help the youth, because I was young once and I went through life the hard way. I want to give back."*

Stable housing and financial security are top desires for women detained in jail. Over and over the women wished to get out of jail, secure housing, be reunited with their children, and get good jobs. As one woman stated, "I want to have a nice life, me and my children, grandchildren, and all my family. That's it." Being reunited with children and securing healthy bonds with family members are very important to most women. Many wished for the health and well-being of their loved ones and those who had helped them in their lives. Some women wished for world peace and desired to live a healthier, spiritual life.

Many women had regrets and wished to fix past mistakes. One woman wanted to "turn back the hands of time—just before things got so bad—and not make the same mistakes that put [me] here." Women seem to desperately want to gain a sense of "normalcy" and live in peace with their families. One woman stated, "I wish I could not have made the mistakes I made with my kids—could have been there to talk to them, meet their teachers."

Many women expressed the desire to help others. One woman said she wanted "to be a millionaire and help the homeless." Another wanted to get "a lot of money and help other women out-buy an agency, a drop-in center."

affiliated members, and formal enrollment is occurring on an ongoing basis. These members include substance abuse programs, domestic violence and sexual assault providers, and governmental entities such as the Cook County Sheriff's Department.

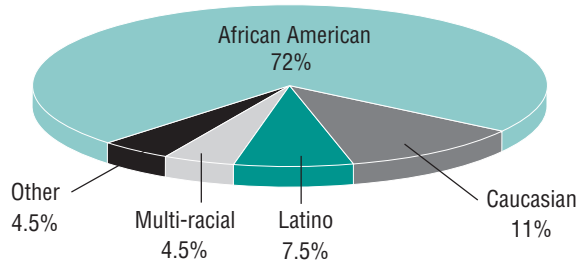
CCH was founded in 1980 to respond to the growing number of homeless individuals and families in Chicago and the lack of resources to meet their needs. Today, CCH's core principles remain unshaken: that decent, safe, and affordable housing is a basic human right and that solutions to homelessness lie in addressing root causes such as the shortage of affordable housing and living-wage jobs.

## 1. DEMOGRAPHICS: WOMEN SURVEYED

### RACE

Although only 26 percent of all residents in Cook County identify as African American, the vast majority of women detained in Cook County Jail identify as such.

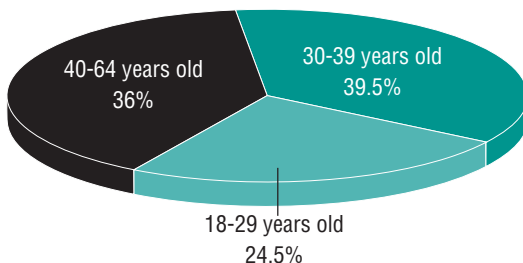
#### Race of Women in Cook County Jail



### AGE

The women surveyed reported being as young as 18 and as old as 62. The median age of women surveyed was 35.

#### Age of Women in Cook County Jail



### EDUCATION

- 8 percent had completed 2-8 years of education.
- 38 percent completed 9-11 years of school.
- 32 percent were high school graduates or GED recipients.
- 17 percent had 12-15 years of education.
- 5 percent were college graduates.

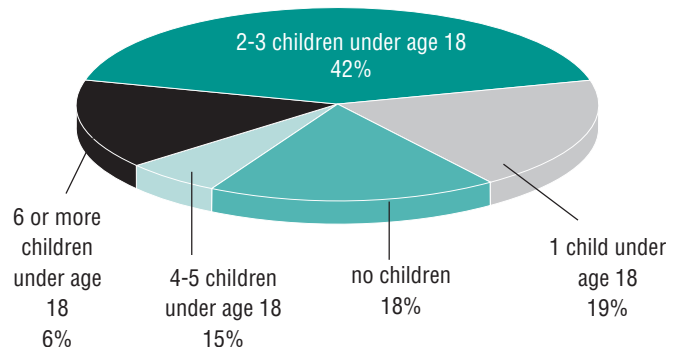


Photo by Anice Schervish

### CHILDREN

Of the women surveyed, 82 percent reported having children. On average, women had 2.32 children, with a mean age of six years for those with children under age 18.

#### Children of Women in Cook County Jail



### CUSTODY

- 16 percent reported having custody of one or more of their children.
- 66 percent reported that a family member had custody of one or more of their children.
- 18 percent said the Department of Children and Family Services has custody of one or more of their children.

### MARITAL STATUS

Only a small percentage of women said they resided with a spouse or partner when not detained in jail.

- 52 percent were never married.
- 13 percent were divorced.
- 7 percent were married with a spouse.
- 7 percent were separated.

## 2. WOMEN IN ILLINOIS CORRECTIONS SYSTEMS

### WOMEN'S INCARCERATION IN ILLINOIS

In the year 2000, 2,663 women served sentences in Illinois prisons.<sup>i</sup>

- 59 percent of inmates in Illinois prisons are arrested in Cook County.<sup>ii</sup>
- 22 percent are sentenced for property offenses.<sup>iii</sup>
- 26 percent are sentenced for drug-related offenses.<sup>iv</sup>
- 76 percent of state prison inmates had one or more prior sentences.<sup>v</sup>

### WOMEN'S DETENTION IN COOK COUNTY

The Cook County Department of Corrections detained 8,196 women in 1990 and 15,521 in 1999, an 89 percent increase.<sup>vi</sup> In the month of June 2001 (latest figures available), 1,355 women were booked.

82 percent of all women detained at Cook County Jail in October 2001 were charged with non-violent offenses. The top three offenses were drug-related, prostitution and theft.

The majority (60%) of women reported having been arrested and detained within two months of the survey. Their lifetime experiences with Cook County Jail are as follows:

- 31 percent reported having been detained once.
- 45 percent reported having been detained 2 to 5 times.
- 13 percent reported having been detained 6 to 10 times.
- 11 percent reported having been detained more than 10 times.

## 3. CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

### MAJOR FINDING: Women in jail are survivors of childhood violence at twice the national average.

Of those interviewed, 13 percent had been wards of the state while growing up; 21 percent said they had experienced homelessness before the age of 18.

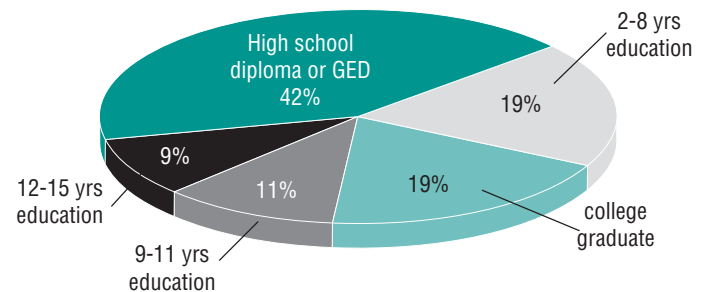
While growing up:

- 39 percent lived only with a mother.
- 37 percent of women lived with both parents.
- 10 percent lived with grandparents.
- 6 percent lived in some other arrangement.
- 4 percent lived only with a father.
- 3 percent lived with other relatives.
- 0.4 percent lived in a foster home or group home.

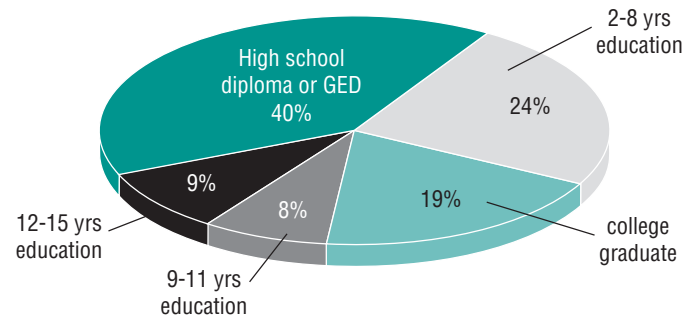
### PARENTS

Many women reported that while growing up they lived with a single parent who completed high school or got a GED.

#### Mother's education:



#### Father's education:



### PARENT PROFILE

Of the women surveyed, 54 percent reported that a parent or someone else they lived with when growing up had an alcohol abuse problem; 27 percent reported that a parent or someone else they lived with when growing up had drug abuse problem; 26 percent reported that a parent or someone else they lived with when growing up had an emotional or mental health problem. Of those surveyed, 23 percent said that a parent or someone else they lived with for a year or longer when growing up had spent time in jail or prison.

<sup>i</sup> Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) data, 2001.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> United States General Accounting Office, Prisoner Releases: Trends and Information on Reintegration Programs, June 2001.

<sup>vi</sup> Department of Women's Justice Services-Cook County Sheriff's Office.

## VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD

Most women reported that while growing up either they were victims of violence or there was violence in their household between adults.

### Chart 1. VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD

- 52 percent said that while they were growing up there was violence between adults in their household.
- 50 percent reported being emotionally abused by someone in their household while growing up.
- 46 percent felt neglected while growing up by parents or those who were raising them.
- 38 percent said they were physically hurt by parents or other family members while growing up.
- 38 percent reported being sexually abused by someone while they were growing up.

## HOUSING

When women were asked to describe their living situations before arrest and detention:

“I was living with people that I did not want to be with, if not I would have been homeless”

“On the streets until I find somewhere to live”

“I had a one bedroom apartment aided by section 8. The gas and light bill got out of hand so I got behind on my rent—so I’m in need of housing.”

“I was homeless—sleeping in the street or at a hospital lobby.”

“I was living on the street and in cars”

“I was staying anywhere to get off the streets”

## 4. NO PLACE TO LIVE

**MAJOR FINDING: The majority of women surveyed (54%) reported being homeless in the 30 days prior to entering Cook County Jail.**

*“I am homeless. I was beaten by my husband. I was staying under a stairwell.”*

Of the women surveyed, 54 percent reported being homeless (defined as residing in an emergency or transitional shelter, doubled up with family and/or friends, staying outside, or in cars) in the 30 days prior to entering Cook County Jail. Women who reported having housing said they rented apartments on their own, lived with roommates, and/or lived in public housing.

Regardless of whether or not they had been homeless in the 30 days prior to entering Cook County Jail, the majority of all women surveyed were unsure of their housing options upon leaving jail. The results indicate that even those who may have had stable housing before being arrested will have fewer options upon release. The women reported having the following housing options upon leaving:

### Chart 2: HOUSING OPTIONS UPON RELEASE

- 32 percent would stay in a “shared place,” doubled up with family, friends, or partners.
- 26 percent said other.
- 24 percent did not know at the time of survey.
- 10 percent expect to be homeless.
- 8 percent will live in their own place.

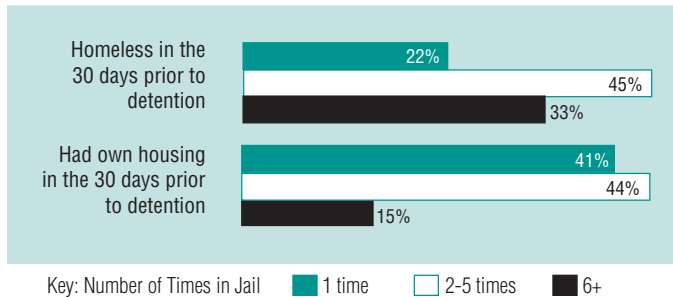
Common responses for “other” were wanting to go to a treatment facility, expecting to live with parents or family, single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels, homeless shelters, and living outside.

*Although the majority of women are homeless upon entering jail and may have difficulty accessing housing upon release, only 13 percent said they had been offered housing assistance at the time they were surveyed.*

## HOMELESSNESS AND REPEAT DETENTION

Women without housing are twice as likely to be detained more than six times than those who have housing.

**Chart 3: HOMELESSNESS AND REPEAT DETENTION**



## 5. VIOLENCE

**MAJOR FINDING: Women surveyed reported experiencing forms of violence at two or three times the national average.**

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, in their lifetimes, 25 percent of women in the U.S. are sexually or physically assaulted by a partner, and 18 percent are survivors of a completed or attempted rape by either a partner or someone else. Women surveyed in jail reported experiencing violence at two or three times these levels.

Although violence perpetrated by a partner was the most common form of violence experienced by the women surveyed, only one person reported having stayed at a domestic violence shelter.

**Chart 4: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

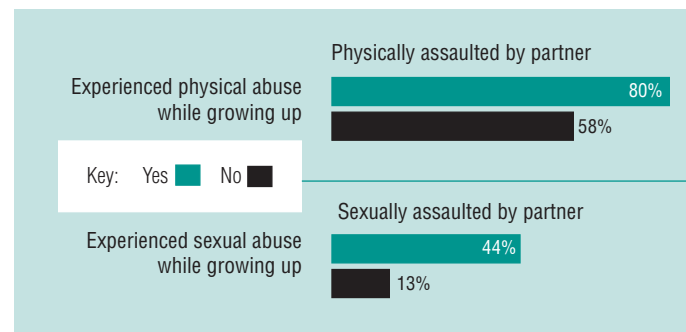
- 70 percent of women surveyed stated that a partner had tried to control or isolate them from other people.
- 67 percent said that a partner had hit, slapped, beaten, pushed, grabbed, or thrown objects at them.
- 62 percent stated that a partner had ridiculed, insulted, or shamed them in front of others or treated them like they were stupid or crazy.
- 32 percent said that a partner had attacked them with a weapon.
- 26 percent said they had been raped and/or sexually assaulted by a partner.

In addition, 46 percent of women surveyed stated that someone other than a partner has attacked them with a gun, knife or other weapon.

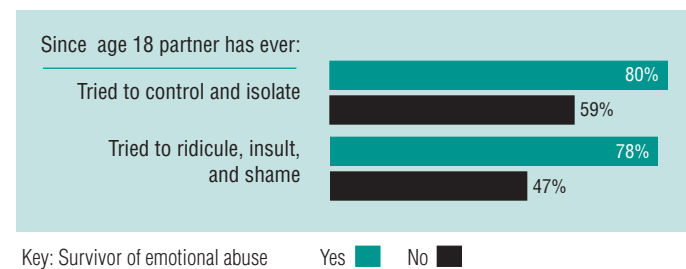
## CONNECTIONS WITH VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD

Women who reported having experienced violence growing up, either witnessing domestic violence in their homes or surviving child abuse, were more likely to be victims of violence as adults. Women who are survivors of childhood sexual abuse are three times as likely to be sexually assaulted as adults by a partner.

**Chart 5: CONNECTION: CHILD ABUSE AND ADULT EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE**



**Chart 6: CONNECTION: CHILD ABUSE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**



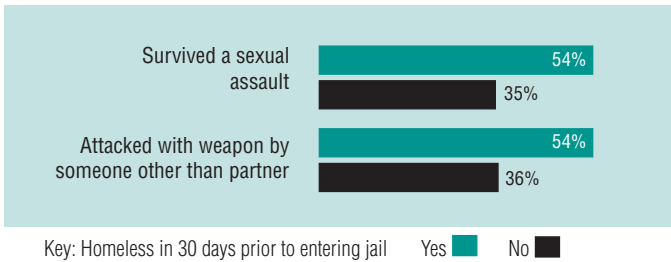
Women who reported being survivors of emotional abuse while growing up were also more likely to have a partner try to control, isolate, ridicule, and shame them when they were adults.

Women who had ever been homeless before age 18 were twice as likely to have experienced domestic violence or sexual assault as adults.

## HOMELESSNESS AND VIOLENCE

Women who were homeless in the 30 days prior to entering Cook County Jail reported having more experiences with many forms of violence than did women who had housing.

**Chart 7: HOMELESS WOMEN AND ADULT EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE**



## DRUG ABUSE

“Cindy” is an African-American woman in her 40’s. She began drinking at the age of 10, when introduced to it by her uncle. She has recently been having some memories of being sexually abused by the same uncle. She started using harder drugs at age 13. Despite her drug use, she was able to not only graduate from high school, but get a BA in accounting and hold down jobs at Arthur Anderson and Bank One. However, at each job, her addiction caught up with her and she was eventually fired. Without intensive drug treatment, her education will continue to go to waste.

## 6. ALCOHOL AND DRUGS: USE AND ABUSE

**MAJOR FINDING: 36 percent of women said they had an alcohol- and/or drug-related problem for which they were unable to get help.**

*“I want to continue bettering myself and get sober.”*

The majority of women surveyed indicated having used alcohol or drugs at least once. The most common substances were alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and heroine.

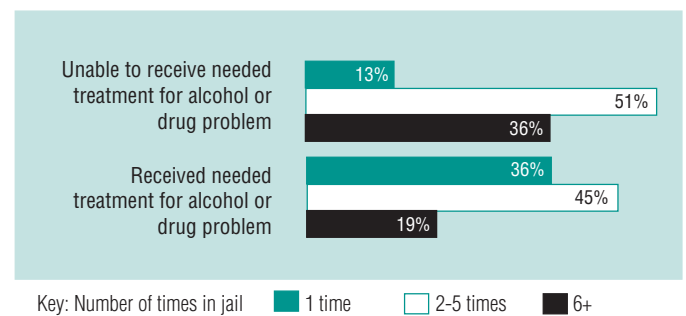
- 88 percent drank alcohol.
- 77 percent smoked marijuana.
- 70 percent used cocaine.
- 53 percent used heroin.

Some women also reported taking hallucinogens, downers, methamphetamines, or inhalants. Although use of drugs does not necessarily indicate an addiction, 46 percent of all women surveyed stated that they had been treated in a substance abuse treatment facility at least once. Furthermore, 36 percent said they were unable to receive professional help for a serious alcohol- or drug-related problem.

### SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND DETENTION RATES

Of all women surveyed, those who reported being unable to get help with an alcohol or drug use problem were also detained more times.

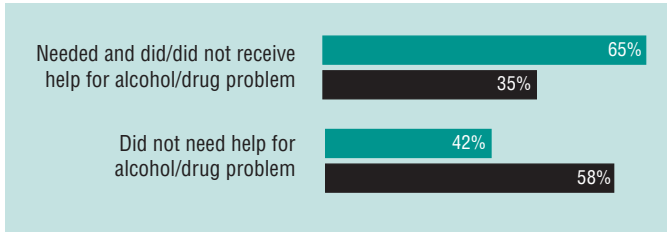
**Chart 8: SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND REPEAT DETENTIONS**



## PARENTAL CONNECTION

A number of women reported that while growing up a parent or someone they lived with had an alcohol abuse problem. These women had more problems themselves with substance abuse than did the women who did not report living under those conditions.

**Chart 9: SUBSTANCE ABUSE: FAMILY HISTORY**



Key: Parent had alcohol abuse problem Yes ■ No ■

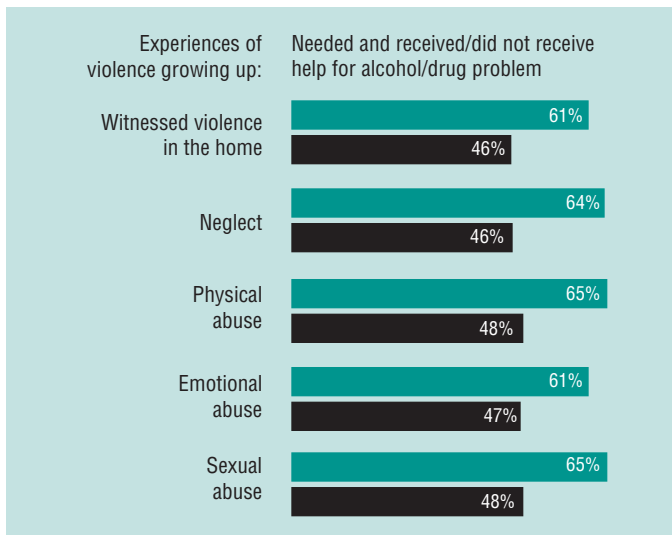
## SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND HOMELESSNESS

Women who reported being homeless within the 30 days prior to entering Cook County Jail were more than twice as likely to have a substance abuse issue that they were unable to get treatment for (47%), compared to those women who had housing (22%).

## SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND VIOLENCE

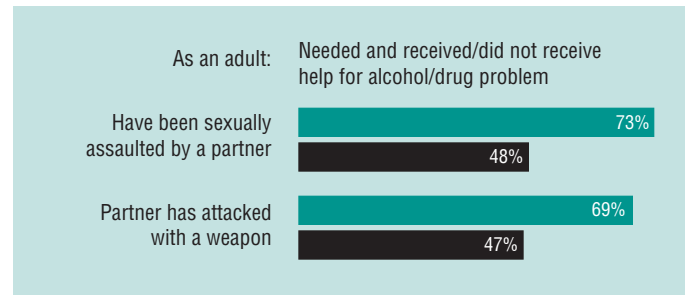
Those who experienced violence as children and/or as adults are more likely to have an alcohol or substance abuse problem than those who have not.

**Chart 10: VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE**



Key: Yes ■ No ■

**Chart 11: ADULT EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE**



Key: Yes ■ No ■

## BARRIERS TO SERVICES

*“There were no beds [in the program], I had no insurance, and they had no way to call me back.”*  
(Statement by woman when questioned as to why help was not available for her drug or alcohol problem.)

Of the women interviewed, 36 percent reported that they were unable to receive assistance for a substance abuse problem. Although the reasons vary, the primary reason women stated they could not access treatment was that they could not afford it or did not have adequate medical coverage. Some women stated that the programs they went to were full.

### Barrier: Lack of Access

- 80 percent said they did not have a medical card.
- 77 percent said they had no money to get treatment.

### Barrier: Treatment Not Available

- 52 percent said that treatment was not available outside of jail.
- 40 percent said that treatment was not available in jail.

### Barrier: Domestic Violence

- 16 percent of women reported that a partner prevented them from receiving treatment for a substance use issue.

## 7. EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

**MAJOR FINDING: Close to half of the women surveyed indicated a problem with depression serious enough to require professional help.**

Of all women surveyed, 32 percent had stayed overnight at least once at a hospital or other treatment program because of an emotional or mental health problem not related to drugs, alcohol, or physical injury; 39 percent once received other forms of treatment for an emotional or mental health problem; 37 percent were treated at least once with medication for an emotional or mental health problem.

### DEPRESSION: MOST COMMON DIAGNOSES

Women who were receiving or had in the past received treatment for an emotional or mental health problem were asked to state their diagnoses in their own words. The most common diagnosis reported was depression. Other conditions were post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. Women also reported having other emotional or mental health issues related to being survivors of violence.

### MEDICATIONS

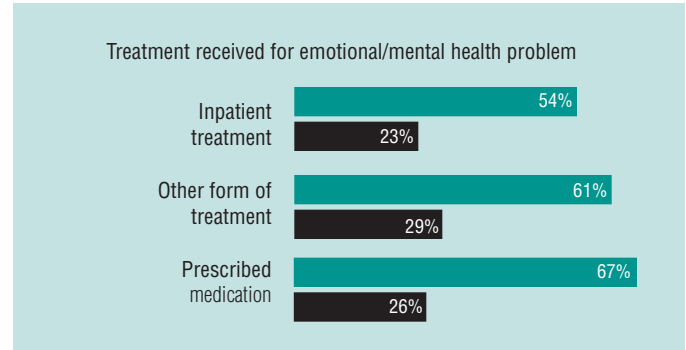
Of those surveyed, 37 percent stated that they had at some point been prescribed (either inside or outside of jail) medication for an emotional and/or mental health problem. Most (58 percent) of those who had once been prescribed such medication were not currently taking it. Although the majority stated they did not currently need it, despite having needed it in the past, reasons for not taking medication varied: 13 percent said they had no access to medication, 3 percent said the medications did not help, and 13 percent said that they did not like the medication's side effects.

### FAMILY HISTORY

Twenty-five percent of all women surveyed reported that a parent or someone they lived with while growing up had an emotional or mental health problem. These women were more than twice as likely to have an

emotional or mental health problem themselves. They were also twice as likely to be clinically depressed as were the women whose parent did not have an emotional or mental health problem.

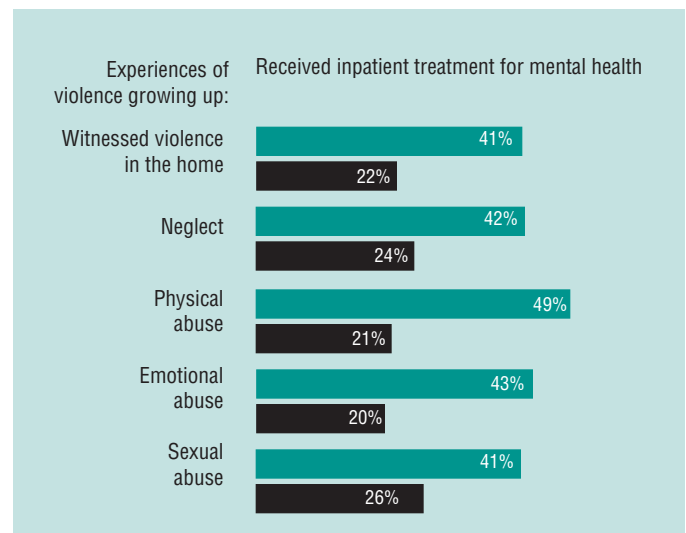
**Chart 12: MENTAL HEALTH: FAMILY HISTORY**



Key: Parent had emotional or mental health problem Yes No

Women who said that they had experienced forms of violence while growing up were almost twice as likely to have stayed overnight at a hospital or other treatment program because of an emotional or mental health problem than were those who had not experienced violence growing up.

**Chart 13: VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD AND MENTAL HEALTH**

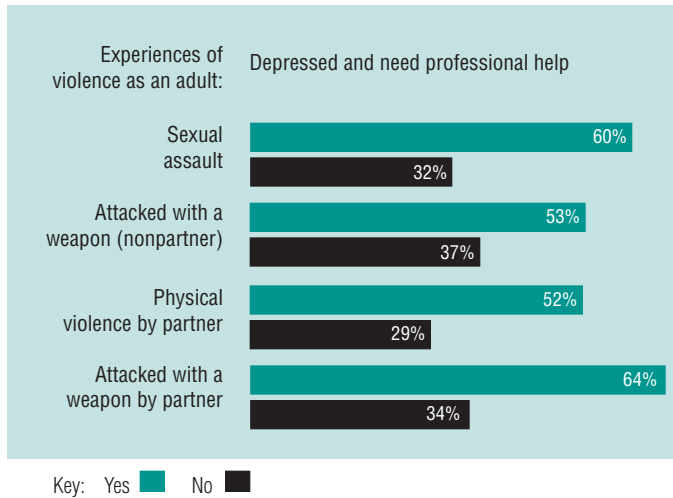


Key: Yes No

## VIOLENCE

Women who said that they had experienced forms of violence as adults were almost twice as likely to report being depressed and in need of professional help as were those who had not experienced violence as adults.

**Chart 14: ADULT EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE AND DEPRESSION**



## ACCESS TO CARE

Of all women surveyed, 27 percent said they were unable to receive needed help for an emotional or mental health problem. The reasons varied:

- 66 percent said they had no money to get treatment.
- 63 percent said they did not have a medical card.
- 48 percent said treatment was not available in jail.
- 47 percent said help was not available outside of jail.
- 12 percent said that their partner prevented it.

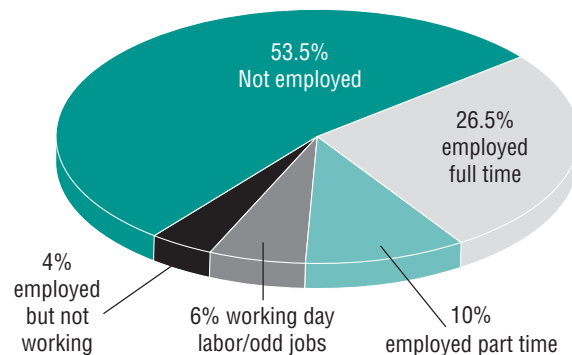
The women stated that lack of money, insurance, and availability of services were the key reasons why they were not able to access care for emotional and mental health needs.

## 8. EMPLOYMENT

*"I had no income, no housing, no address, no start."*

The majority of women surveyed said they were not employed in the 30 days before entering Cook County Jail.

**Chart 15: EMPLOYMENT STATUS**



Just over a quarter of those surveyed were employed full time before entering jail. Of those who were not employed, only a third were looking for work:

- 37 percent were not looking for work.
- 33 percent were looking for work.
- 10 percent were disabled and unable to work.
- 7 percent were homemakers.
- 2 percent were students.

## BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Unemployed women reported facing many barriers to employment. The most common barriers reported by the unemployed were untreated addictions, a past criminal record, and homelessness.

- 60 percent reported an alcohol or substance abuse problem.
- 42 percent reported a past criminal record.
- 23 percent reported being homeless.
- 23 percent reported transportation problems.
- 19 percent reported being ill a lot.
- 13 percent reported childcare needs.
- 10 percent reported that a partner prevented it.
- 9 percent reported having a pregnancy.
- 8 percent reported job discrimination.

## EMPLOYMENT

When asked why she was unemployed:

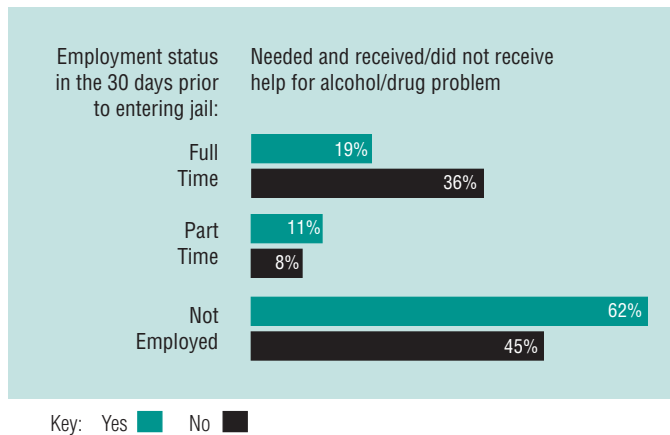
“I found a job but was then fired after one day due to my background”

“I wasn’t stable in the rest of my life.”

### BARRIER: SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Of all women surveyed, those who reported never having needed or received treatment for substance abuse were twice as likely to be employed full time as those who had such issues.

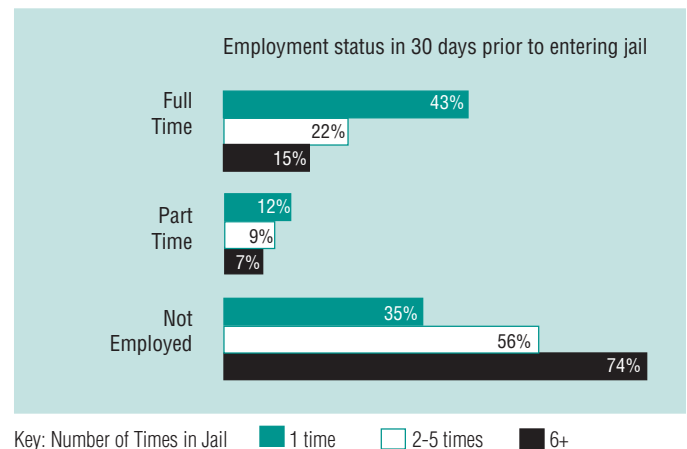
**Chart 16: SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS**



### BARRIER: PAST CRIMINAL RECORD

Forty-two percent of unemployed women reported that a past criminal record was a barrier to employment. Furthermore, the more times women are detained, the less likely they are to be employed.

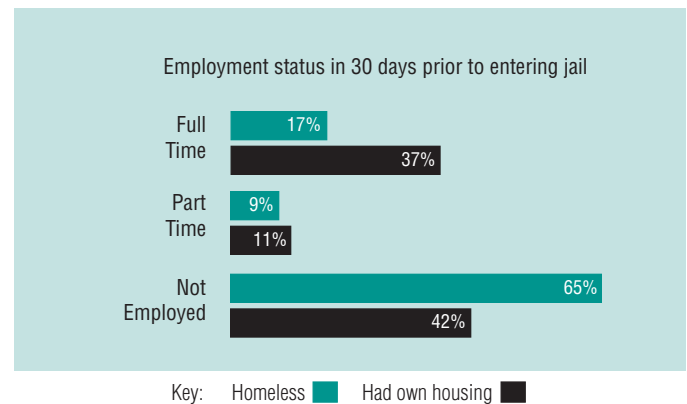
**Chart 17: DETENTION RATES AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS**



### BARRIER: HOMELESSNESS

Women who reported being homeless in the 30 days prior to entering Cook County Jail were less likely to be employed than were women who had housing.

**Chart 18: HOMELESSNESS AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS**



Homeless women have higher rates of detention and are less likely to access substance abuse treatment programs, which affects their employment status. Women who were homeless before entering jail were twice as likely not to access substance abuse treatment as were those who were housed.

## 9. GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

**MAJOR FINDING: In the 12 months prior to entering Cook County Jail, 29 percent of women had been cut off from, or had an application denied for, government assistance.**

Of the women surveyed, 38 percent reported having received some form of benefits or cash assistance from the government. The most common forms of assistance were food stamps, medicaid, SSI, and TANF.

- 69 percent said they received food stamps.
- 59 percent said they had received medicaid.
- 34 percent said they received SSI disability assistance.
- 34 percent said they received cash assistance from TANF.

### ASSISTANCE WITH HOUSING

Of all women surveyed, 54 percent stated they were homeless in the 30 days prior to entering Cook County Jail, but only 10 percent reported ever receiving Section 8 housing assistance vouchers.

### BENEFITS DENIED

Twenty-nine percent of women said they had been cut off from, or had an application denied for, government assistance in the 12 months prior to entering jail. Of those:

- 50 percent were cut off from food stamps.
- 34 percent from medicaid.
- 33 percent from TANF.
- 19 percent from other forms of public assistance.
- 15 percent from SSI.
- 10 percent from unemployment benefits.

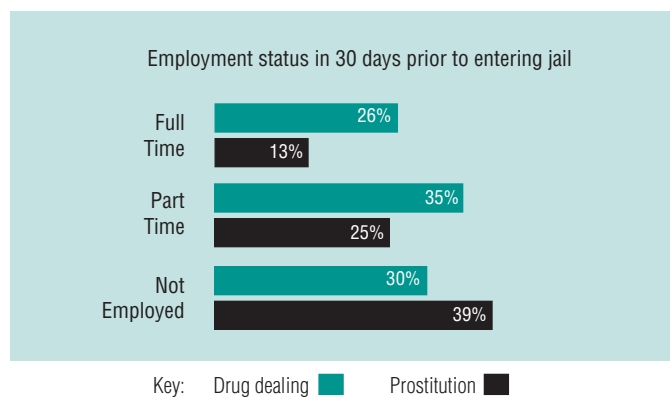
### Top Reason for Being Cut Off: Missed Appointment

Women were asked in their own words to describe why they had been cut off from or denied government assistance. Although the reasons varied, the most common given were missing appointments with a caseworker and detention in jail.

## 10. SOURCES OF INCOME

Regardless of employment status, many women patched together a variety of income sources to make ends meet. The most common sources reported were drug dealing and prostitution.

**Chart 19: EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND OTHER SOURCES OF INCOME**



Other sources of income for all women surveyed, regardless of employment status, were family or friends (33%), some form of government assistance (38%), shoplifting or theft (20%), and panhandling (13%).



Photo by Anice Schervish

## 11. PROSTITUTION: A VIOLENT REALITY

Of all women surveyed, 34 percent said they were regularly involved in prostitution (defined as two times or more a week); 41 percent said they had prostituted at least once. Of those who reported to have had prostitution experiences, 54 percent said they did so within 30 days of entering Cook County Jail. NOTE: Possibly due to privacy and stigma many women were reluctant to reveal their involvement in prostitution. Thus these numbers might be undercounts.

For purposes of this survey, forms of prostitution include street-level prostitution, stripping, escort services, massage parlors, sex tours, trafficking, pornography, and prostitution for survival.

**Chart 20: PROSTITUTION EXPERIENCES**

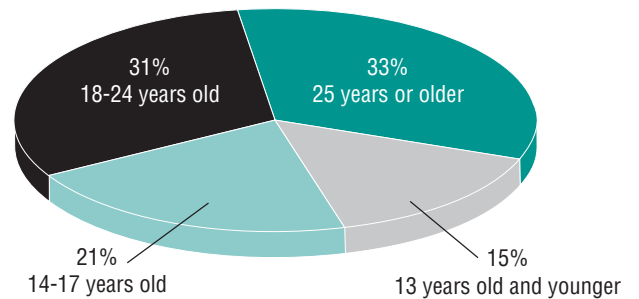


Key: ■ Ever involved in prostitution  
■ Regularly involved in prostitution (2 times a week or more)

### ENTRY INTO PROSTITUTION AS YOUTH AND CHILDREN

Many women reported becoming involved in prostitution at a young age. The median age of entry into prostitution of those surveyed is 20. Of those involved in prostitution, 36 percent started before the age of 18.

**Chart 21: AGE OF ENTRY INTO PROSTITUTION**



### REASONS FOR ENTRY INTO PROSTITUTION

*“Because I was molested, homeless, needed things that I needed to survive, and was too young to work and did not know another way.”*  
 (Statement by woman when asked why she first got involved in prostitution.)

The reasons for initial involvement in prostitution varied. The two most common reasons reported were for survival needs such as shelter and taking care of children and/or to support a drug habit. Other responses included childhood abuse, prostitution being common in the environment in which they were raised, survival need after running away from home, and pressure from a boyfriend.

### PROSTITUTION AND REPEAT INCARCERATION

Women involved in prostitution reported higher rates of detention in county jail than did those who were not regularly involved in prostitution: 42 percent had been in jail more than six times, 43 percent two to five times, and just 15 percent only once. Forty-four percent said that they have been arrested for prostitution in the past.

### PROSTITUTION AND HOMELESSNESS

A majority (58 percent) of women who stated they were homeless in the 30 days prior to entering Cook County Jail reported being regularly involved in prostitution. Of those, 26 percent regularly prostituted for a place to stay. Thirty-one percent of women who said they were regularly involved in prostitution had experienced homelessness before the age of 18.

## PROSTITUTION AND CHILDHOOD VIOLENCE

The majority of women surveyed who said they were regularly involved in prostitution were also survivors of violence while growing up.

**Chart 22: PROSTITUTION AND VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD**

- 63 percent experienced neglect.
- 62 percent witnessed violence in the home.
- 59 percent experienced emotional abuse.
- 53 percent experienced sexual abuse.
- 51 percent experienced physical abuse.

## PROSTITUTION AND VIOLENCE AS ADULTS

Women who reported being regularly involved in prostitution were more than twice as likely to be victims of sexual assault or assault with a weapon by someone other than a partner as were women not involved in prostitution.

- 74 percent said they had been sexually assaulted as adults by someone other than a partner, as compared to 29 percent who were not regularly involved in prostitution.
- 69 percent said they had been attacked with a weapon by someone other than a partner, as compared to 33 percent who were not involved in prostitution on a regular basis.

*“...to take care of my kids. My husband decided to go somewhere else and I had no job. Got to put food on the table and pay the rent”*

(Statement by another woman when asked why she first got involved in prostitution.)

## VIOLENCE BY A PARTNER

The majority of women who said they were involved in prostitution on a regular basis reported being survivors of domestic violence.

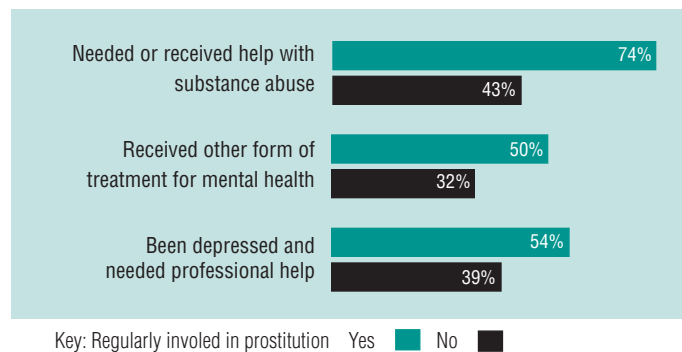
**Chart 23: PROSTITUTION AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

- 86 percent were isolated and controlled.
- 82 percent were slapped, beaten or had objects thrown at them.
- 77 percent were ridiculed and insulted.
- 63 percent were threatened with a weapon.
- 51 percent were attacked with a weapon.
- 50 percent were sexually assaulted.

## SUBSTANCE ABUSE: EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

More women who reported being regularly involved in prostitution reported having problems with substance abuse, depression, and mental health than did women who reported they were not involved in prostitution.

**Chart 24: EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS OF PROSTITUTION**



## EMPLOYMENT

Even some women who reported to have full-time jobs said they were involved in prostitution on a regular basis.

**Chart 25: EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND PROSTITUTION**



Furthermore, 78 percent of those who said they were regularly involved in prostitution also reported being unemployed because of an alcohol or substance abuse issue.

## SOURCES OF INCOME

Women who regularly engaged in prostitution reported that they also relied on other sources of income: 25 percent said they also got money from a job, 43 percent from family and friends, and 25 percent from pan-handling.

## SEEKING TO GET OUT

Of those women who reported engaging in prostitution, 25 percent reported to have at least once sought help to get out of it.

## 12. SELF-ESTEEM AND GOALS

To gauge their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, the women were asked to respond to how they felt about certain statements. A majority (52 percent) strongly agreed with the statement “*I feel I have a number of good qualities*”; 46 percent disagreed and 27 percent strongly disagreed with the statement “*I feel I do not have much to be proud of.*” When asked for their reaction to the statement “*On the whole, I am satisfied with myself,*” 38 percent of women agreed and 32 percent disagreed; one-fifth of the women surveyed agreed with the statement “*At times, I think I am no good at all*”; 35 percent disagreed and 34 percent strongly disagreed. Even women who were homeless and women regularly involved in prostitution and facing the greatest amounts of hardships and violence responded in similar proportions to these questions.

*Despite the hardships that most women in jail face and the high levels of instability, violence, and depression they live with, most women still believe in themselves and have an acute desire to better their lives and give back to society.*

The vast majority of women surveyed wished to continue their education: 88 percent planned to go back to school in the future and 85 percent wanted some other type of future vocational or professional training.

## EDUCATION GOALS

“I want to get a one-year certification for drug counseling”

“I want my own day care center”

“I want to be a drug and alcohol rehabilitation counselor”

### 13. VOICES OF WOMEN AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Chart 26: EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN COOK COUNTY JAIL



Women were asked, “At what point in your life would outside help have been beneficial?”

Other data collected from these surveys are enhanced by the many responses to this question. From them we glean some of the most salient recommendations on how best to assist women detained at Cook County Jail.

The Illinois legislature should conduct an in-depth analysis of the impact of detention on women who are charged with committing nonviolent offenses. If many of the women surveyed had access to benefits, services, job training, and housing while not in jail and upon release, chances are they would not be involved in an activity that leads to arrest. Instead of burdening an already overcrowded county jail system, the Illinois legislature and Cook County government should create sentencing options and invest in programs that not only assist women leaving jail but also are geared toward early intervention and prevention.

#### A. HOUSING, HOUSING, HOUSING

*“I want to have a house when I get out of here.”*

The majority of women have one simple request: HOUSING.

The need for stable housing is paramount for getting and keeping a job, kicking a drug habit, escaping an abusive relationship, and raising children. Far too many women in jail were homeless when they came into jail and expect to be homeless when they leave. Many of those who are not actually on the streets or in shelters are “couch surfing,” or tentatively housed with relatives or friends. Alternatively, they may be in abusive relationships, in which they stay due to a physical threat to escape, because they have no other place to go or means for survival.

Although the majority of the women entering jail reported being homeless, only 13 percent had received assistance with finding housing. Those who reported being homeless in the 30 days prior to entering Cook County Jail were more likely to have been victimized by violence, by both partners and strangers, and were regularly involved in prostitution, sometimes even for a place to stay. Roughly a quarter of women surveyed reported that lack of housing was a barrier to employment. Homeless women were also less likely to be employed full time than were those with housing.

Another major barrier to employment identified by women was substance abuse, and homeless women also reported having less access to substance abuse treatment than did women with housing. All these factors contribute to a woman’s repeat detention: women without housing were twice as likely to be detained six or more times as women with housing.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Create a comprehensive housing plan to help women in jail secure housing upon release by augmenting existing resources and investing in the development of affordable housing for formerly detained women.

#### B. ABUSE/VIOLENCE

*“If I had had help in abusive relationships, I probably would not even be here.”*

A majority of women reported being sexually or physically abused as children and adults or witnessing that abuse in the form of domestic violence. Women were able to point to these experiences as a catalyst for their subsequent drug abuse and other self-destructive behavior.

Many said that if someone had intervened in this situation when they were experiencing it as children or if they would have received counseling or other help for these experiences, they would not be where they are today.

*“And maybe with my father putting his hands on my mother, because maybe I wouldn’t have thought it was right for someone to do it to me.”*

Of all women surveyed, only one person reported having stayed at a domestic violence shelter in the past, although up to 70 percent of all women reported having been a survivor of some form of domestic violence. The results indicate that many women are trapped in cycles of violence and abuse from childhood to adulthood. Women who had survived such forms of violence also had higher rates of substance use and abuse and of emotional and mental health issues. Furthermore, 10 percent of women reported that a partner prevented them from being employed, and 16 percent could not access substance abuse treatment because a partner prevented it.

Women involved in prostitution reported surviving even higher levels of violence than other women did, and many were snared at young ages. These women had more problems with substance abuse and emotional and mental health. Prolonged exposure to violence, common among all women in jail and more common among those who are homeless and in prostitution, often results in severe physical, emotional, and psychological trauma with long-term effects. According to Melissa Farley Ph.D, founder and clinical psychologist at Prostitution Research and Education in San Francisco, California, at least 66 percent of women in prostitution suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

*“I needed compassion and someone to tell me I could leave.”*

The acceptance of the constant presence of violence, or at least tacit acceptance of the normalcy of abuse or violence, follows the women into their teen and adult years. Many women surveyed noted that they were unable to get needed help when they were in abusive

relationships or trying to leave those relationships. To be independent enough to leave—and survive—they needed help that was not only emotional but also financial and physical in terms of housing and jobs.

Women in prostitution and others who survive prolonged exposure to violence need assistance that specifically helps them address the subsequent trauma. To deal with past violence and regain a sense of security, women need access to safe housing options and to long-term support and benefits.

**RECOMMENDATION:** *Increase resources in jail to assist women address the trauma and other effects of violence. Immediately upon release women should have a safe place to go and be linked to community based survivor supports.*

### C. DRUG AWARENESS/DRUG TREATMENT

*“Education in the elementary schools ... let them know what’s happening in the streets.”*

Several women stated that if they had received more drug education in their teen years, before they started using drugs, they would not have ever started. In addition to early education, many women stated that they see a need for more accessible, inpatient drug treatment programs. The decision to get off drugs can be very tenuous, and treatment beds need to be easily accessible and open. Additionally, these programs need to be available when the help is needed. There are far too few beds and far too many women on waiting lists.

According to the women surveyed, waiting lists and lack of sufficient services are a huge barrier to getting assistance. Additionally, while living in the state of chaos that typifies “normal” life for many of the detained women, they experience frequent crises. Service provision systems need to be coordinated and responsive to immediate needs and able to offer immediate assistance.

*“[There need to be] more programs where you can get help when you take drugs. No waiting lists [so] you can get help when you are ready.”*

Thirty-six percent of women surveyed said they were unable to get needed help for an alcohol or substance abuse problem. These women also reported having been detained more times. Clearly, untreated addictions have a direct correlation to increased detention rates and lower rates of employment. Women's problems with drug use were also intergenerational: those who have such problems were more likely to have parents or primary caregivers who had such problems. Women who reported being survivors of childhood or adult violence were also more likely to have problems with substance abuse—possibly as self-medication to deal with trauma caused by prolonged exposure to violence. The vast majority of women did not have a medical card or money to get treatment, and many simply said that help was not available either inside or outside of jail.

**RECOMMENDATION:** *Increase resources for community-based inpatient and outpatient treatment programs that provide holistic, gender-specific models of care to accommodate women immediately upon request and that provide linkage to women in jail.*

#### **D. ACCESS TO EXISTING BENEFITS**

*“If I was getting the benefits that I needed, I wouldn’t have been in the situation to commit the crimes.”*

In the 12 months prior to entering Cook County Jail, 29 percent of the women surveyed had been cut off from or had an application denied for some form of government assistance. The majority of women in jail need assistance with housing and substance abuse; however, only 10 percent were ever recipients of Section 8 housing vouchers, and 34 percent were cut off of medicaid. A primary reason for being cut off was missing an appointment. Because many women surveyed did not have custody of their children, they will not be eligible for TANF benefits and will need financial assistance as a bridge. Thirty-three percent of women who were not working reported they had looked for work in the 30 days prior to entering jail, but only 5 percent of all women were receiving unemployment compensation. Among the top barriers to employment were lack of transportation, childcare needs, and constant illnesses, issues for which women can receive assistance through existing benefits but many were not.



Photo by Anice Schervish

According to change in welfare regulations women who commit the most serious drug-related (Class X or Class 1) felonies, and were convicted after August 21, 1996, are banned from receiving TANF benefits for life. Less serious drug related felonies trigger a two-year ban after the offense is committed. This ban, however, can be lifted should the person access treatment or an after-care program. Although most women in Cook County Jail are detained for misdemeanor offenses (a few are finishing sentences for felony convictions), repeat arrests, even for misdemeanors, may result in felony upgrades. Barring women from benefits only limits their access to already scarce much needed assistance.

**RECOMMENDATION:** *Create Government assistance programs that meet the specific needs of formerly detained women and promote utilization of existing supports including childcare assistance, medical coverage, and transportation assistance. Women should be linked with these services immediately upon release from jail. Conviction of any type should not be a reason to bar women from receiving benefits.*

*“If I could have gotten help three months ago when I needed it, I would have had an income, and no one could have pressured me into going out there and doing stupid stuff that ended me up here.”*

## E. Right Now!

*“Now is better than no time at all!”*

Finally, several women pointed out that being arrested and coming to jail can be an important turning point in a woman’s life. For many women who are addicts, the time in jail is the longest stretch of time that they have been clean and sober for years. Although women in need should receive assistance outside, they may respond to offered help while detained. Many pointed out that “right now” would be a good time to get help. Most women indicated that, at this point, their primary concern is housing upon release from jail.

Despite the efforts of Cook County Jail, the Cook County Sheriff’s Division of Women’s Justice Services, and other private agencies, resources for women in jail are severely lacking. Furthermore, not only do women need access to services for the reported issues but also a comprehensive plan of support needs to be implemented and followed through with each woman upon release.

In early 2001, Cook County government created the Cook County Integrated System for Women Offenders Project (ISWO). This multi-agency approach to women in the justice system has the following mission statement: “Create innovative sentencing options, and develop a system-wide response to address the needs and accountability of female offenders through a collaborative effort of the criminal justice system and community.” Since its inception, the ISWO project is leading the way to create and implement innovative and gender-responsive treatment models that focus on rehabilitation and assistance for women detainees.

**RECOMMENDATION:** *Pass legislation that provides alternatives to incarceration sentencing options so Cook County Judges can sentence women to services rather than prison. Create the model Residential Treatment and Transition Center for Women, which will help detainees access the many services they need, reduce recidivism, and help heal families.*

## 14. METHODOLOGY AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On October 31, 2001, members of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless conducted in-depth one-on-one surveys with 235 women detained that day in Cook County Jail. On that day, 1,117 women were detained in the two women’s divisions (Division 3 and 4) of the jail and in the Female Furlough Program (SFFP), MOM’s, and the Gender Responsive Drug Treatment programs of the Cook County Sheriff’s Division of Women’s Justice Services. The surveys were conducted by volunteers and staff who had received extensive prior training on the survey procedures. All women interviewed had volunteered to be surveyed and then received randomly assigned numbers. Each woman waited for her number to be called and was then interviewed.

Each survey took approximately 15-30 minutes to complete. The women received no compensation or benefits for participating. Prior to agreeing to be surveyed, they were read a statement informing them of the voluntary nature of this survey, that the information recorded could not be traced back to them specifically, and that agreeing to participate in the survey in no way affected the disposition of the current charges against them.

Women surveyed were those present on the specified date the surveys were administered. This sample does not represent all women detained in the jail on October 31, 2001, nor is it a random sample. However, we believe the collective results present a reliable picture of the lives of women detained in Cook County Jail. Although great effort was made to ensure high validity of the survey through its administration by trained volunteers and staff, the possibility still exists that some questions were interpreted differently by some participants than by others.

Surveyors included Chicago Coalition for the Homeless staff, college students, staff of social service agencies, community activists, and one woman who had been formerly detained in Cook County Jail.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**Special thanks to all women who participated in the surveys and  
to all volunteers who dedicated their time to conduct the interviews.**



## THREE WISHES

Each woman was asked to name three wishes. Based on the answers,

- Get out of jail
- Get a job
- Be reunited with kids
- Secure housing
- Stay clean and sober
- Turn back hands of time
- Be financially stable
- Continue education

