



North Lawndale Employment Network

Drugs, Crime, and Consequences

Arrests and Incarceration in North Lawndale

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The Alternatives to Incarceration Project

The North Lawndale Employment Network (NLEN) and the Center for Impact Research (CIR) are partnering on the Alternatives to Incarceration Project. This project conducted research to document the high rates of involvement in the criminal justice system of North Lawndale adults as there is no single data set that provides this information. To provide a context for the figures, CIR interviewed participants and staff of NLEN's Ex-offender Employment Services Network (EESN) to better understand the circumstances related to criminal activity. The project's second phase will entail research, including working with community advocates as court watchers to determine the extent to which sentencing alternatives are available to and used by low-income, minority offenders. The research process will provide information for planning an advocacy campaign and will build the capacity of community leadership to promote alternatives to incarceration for non-violent drug-related offenses.

North Lawndale Employment Network (NLEN) is a partnership of community-based organizations, economic development agencies, and businesses working together to meet the workforce development needs of North Lawndale residents and employers. As an intermediary, NLEN works with over 100 committed organizations to address the range of employment and economic development issues through a collaborative approach. NLEN seeks to enable North Lawndale residents to secure jobs that pay family-supporting wages and offer opportunities for advancement, help employers within and outside of North Lawndale to recruit and retain qualified employees from among North Lawndale residents, build the capacity of and cooperation among organizations that provide employment and training services to North Lawndale residents and employers, and advocate for public policies and employer practices that expand employment opportunities for North Lawndale residents and foster economic development of the community.

NLEN programs include the EESN, a health care career initiative, an out-of-school youth job readiness and skills training program, an Individual Development Account (IDA) collaborative, employer partnerships for client placements, business and employer attraction and retention, AmeriCorps program coordination for other local agencies, a community resource job center that is under development, and partner agency capacity building activities. In addition to coordinating and providing services, NLEN advocates for public policy that supports effective workforce development activities, especially in the area of ex-offender reentry.

NLEN's Ex-offender Employment Service Network (EESN) is a partnership of local organizations that, together, offer

support services, training, and job placement for ex-offenders in North Lawndale and surrounding communities. EESN offers clients a broad range of services, including anger management training, basic skills training, case management, childcare, clothing/food, drug testing, substance abuse treatment, family reunification, financial education and credit counseling, job placement, legal services, mental health treatment, occupational skills training, post-placement and retention support, resources and identification cards, and peer counseling. In the three years since it began, the EESN has served more than 600 returning offenders.

Center for Impact Research (CIR) is an independent nonprofit policy research center at the forefront in the fight against poverty. Its mission is to improve the social and economic conditions of the poor through grass-roots research aimed at identifying innovative policy strategies that address the needs of low-income women, men, and children. CIR projects result in new poverty solutions crafted in collaboration with low-income persons, community-based organizations, and governmental agencies.

CIR undertakes its mission through two key activities: applied research and innovative practice.

CIR conducts research and demonstration projects and provides technical assistance and training at the grass-roots level to promote public policies that more accurately reflect the needs/interests of low-income people.

CIR brings together researchers and practitioners, community activists and organizers, policy makers, public service workers, and funders to inform the field and to develop new approaches to address systemic issues of poverty.

CIR's focus on key poverty issues and action-oriented research changes attitudes, policies, and lives. CIR's research led directly to the adoption of the Family Violence Option in the 1996 federal welfare reform legislation, to the Illinois State Board of Education's improvements to the Chicago GED testing system, to the creation of the U.S. Department of Labor's Chicago Sweatshop Task Force, and to the establishment of the Prostitution Alternatives Roundtable. CIR's Teen Project led to the establishment of on-site domestic violence services at two Illinois Department of Human Services Teen Parent Services sites and to the appointment and training of teen specialists in each local welfare office.

CIR focuses its efforts in three policy centers: the working poor, violence and poverty, and teen girls.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The North Lawndale Employment Network (NLEN) commissioned the Center for Impact Research (CIR) to prepare this report. NLEN is made up of a coalition of groups and agencies in the North Lawndale community and works to reduce poverty through the full employment of North Lawndale residents.

City, county, and state governmental entities provided the data on arrests, sentencing, parole, and probation that are presented in this report. To complement the data on arrests and sentencing and learn about the specific situations of ex-offenders in Chicago's North Lawndale community, CIR interviewed staff, consultants, and participants in the Ex-Offender Employment Service Network (EESN) program of NLEN. These interviews provide a contextual framework for the North Lawndale data, particularly about how drug addiction is implicated in crime.

NLEN will use the information in this report to advocate for community-based services that individuals need to successfully negotiate re-entry to the community from incarceration, and to advocate for alternatives to incarceration.

SERVICE NEEDS OF EX-OFFENDERS

The interviews with EESN staff and participants reveal that before and after arrest and incarceration, this population of ex-offenders struggles with drug addiction, poverty, low levels of education, unemployment, unstable housing, and homelessness. However, intensive case management and substance abuse treatment programs combined with job readiness training can break the cycle of addiction, crime, and incarceration and lead to positive results for ex-offenders. All of the staff agreed that the current level of resources are inadequate for meeting the needs of ex-offenders for stable housing, adequate nutrition, employment, substance abuse treatment, and family reunification. Staff members said that there is a need for more community corrections programs and adult transition centers, and better case management for those on parole and probation.

Both EESN staff and participants spoke at great length about the destructive impact of substance abuse on individuals and the community and how drug sales and use are implicated in much of the criminal activity in North Lawndale. One staff

person said, "this is a drug habituated environment. People become desensitized by constant exposure to the drug users and drug related crime. Drugs are a major cause of the downward spiral of individuals and communities." Staff and participants emphasized that more resources must be directed toward services for at-risk children. Speaking from their own experience, participants also spoke of the need for parents to be actively involved in the daily lives of their children and the negative consequences of the lack of parental or adult attention and guidance.

NORTH LAWDALE ADULTS IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

New Involvement in Criminal Justice System in 2001

Sentenced to the Department of Corrections	.2,442
Sentenced to Probation	.3,857
Total	.6,299
Percentage of total North Lawndale population 2000	up to 24%

Total Adults Involved in the Criminal Justice System in 2001

Sentenced to Department of Corrections	.2,442
Sentenced to Probation	.3,857
On Parole	.2,487
Still Serving Time at DOC (approximately)	.9,893
Still on Probation	.3,458

Total North Lawndale individuals in criminal justice system* .22,137

Percentage of all North Lawndale adults in criminal justice system up to 57%

**The data provided are not unduplicated. The total may be an overstatement in that there might be duplication in an undetermined number of cases.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

It has been widely recognized that low-income communities have high rates of involvement in the criminal justice system. The magnitude of this involvement is clearly delineated by the data in this report: nearly one-quarter of North Lawndale's adult population became involved in the criminal justice system in 2001, and nearly three-fifths of all North Lawndale adults in 2001 were on probation, parole, sentenced to prison, or incarcerated. In order to address this issue through policy changes on sentencing and by increasing the resources and services for ex-offenders, NLEN plans to continue and expand its efforts directed at:

- Increasing public awareness about the interconnected problems of substance abuse, crime, unemployment, and poverty.
- Increasing awareness among government and community agencies of the need for pre- and post-release services.
- Advocating for basic reforms within the Illinois Department of Corrections in order to improve the employment prospects of ex-offenders.
- Advocating for increasing transitional services for the incarcerated and post-incarcerated.
- Advocating for wider implementation and ongoing improvements in community-based employment services for ex-offenders, with continued participation of NLEN in the Best Practices subcommittee of the State Workforce Board's Taskforce on Ex-offender Employability.
- Advocating for alternatives to incarceration for non-violent, drug-related crimes.

Further research needs to be conducted to assess the complex consequences of so many adults being involved in the criminal justice system and of the large numbers of ex-offenders returning to the community from prison. Effective advocacy for alternatives to incarceration for non-violent offenses requires accurate information not only on the need for alternatives, but also on the forms these alternatives might take, and the resources necessary to support them.

Authorization of sentencing alternatives is the first step; however implementation requires allocation of adequate resources. For example, Illinois HB 1961 provides Cook County judges with the authority to sentence women detained in Cook County Jail for certain nonviolent felony offenses to a pilot Residential Treatment and Transition Center rather than

state prison. As yet, no funds have been allocated to support the pilot Center. NLEN is planning to work with the police, courts, the Department of Corrections, legislators, community organizations, and funders to build support for a demonstration project in North Lawndale that offers an alternative to incarceration for non-violent offenses.

DRUGS, CRIME, AND CONSEQUENCES: ARRESTS AND INCARCERATION IN NORTH LAWNDALE

The North Lawndale Employment Network (NLEN) commissioned the Center for Impact Research (CIR) to prepare this report.¹ NLEN is made up of a coalition of groups and agencies in the North Lawndale community and works to reduce poverty through the full employment of North Lawndale residents. City, county, and state governmental entities provided the data on arrests, sentencing, parole, and probation that are presented in this report. They all had to undertake special data runs to produce the information specific to the North Lawndale community, and ultimately did so without cost to NLEN. To complement the data on arrests and sentencing and to learn about the specific situations of ex-offenders in Chicago's North Lawndale community, CIR interviewed staff, consultants, and participants in the Ex-Offender Employment Service Network (EESN) program of NLEN. These interviews provide a contextual framework for the North Lawndale data, particularly about how drug addiction is implicated in crime. NLEN will use the information in this report to advocate for community-based services that individuals need to successfully negotiate re-entry to the community from incarceration, and to develop new strategies and to advocate for alternatives to incarceration.

NUMBER OF NORTH LAWNDALE ADULTS INVOLVED IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM EACH YEAR

According to the 2000 Census, there were 25,819 persons in the North Lawndale community 18 years of age and older. Of these, 41% were men and 59% were women. However, this is not a true picture of the number of adults in the North Lawndale community because the Census does not count those individuals who are incarcerated and out of the community at the time of the survey. When we factor in the approximate number of adults from the North Lawndale community incarcerated at the time of the Census, the total adult population rises to 38,819.

North Lawndale residents, 18 years of age and older, are involved in the criminal justice system in one of five major ways:

- Arrest
- Incarceration with the Department of Corrections
- Parole after discharge from confinement
- Return to the Department of Corrections due to parole violations
- Probation through the Circuit Court of Cook County

Arrests

We gathered information from the Chicago Police Department about the number of arrests in North Lawndale for 1999 and 2000. North Lawndale straddles two police districts, District 10 and District 11. The community is part of nine police beats, 1011, 1013, 1021, 1023, 1131, 1132, 1133, 1134, and 1135. The department was able to provide us with information on the number of arrests in the nine beats.

This arrest information covers all arrests made in the police beats comprising the North Lawndale community — that is, anyone arrested in the neighborhood is included, regardless of whether he or she lives in the neighborhood. The department is not able to sort arrests by home address. Nor do the arrest figures provide an unduplicated number of individuals arrested in the community, but rather they tally the total number of arrests within a given year.

Number of arrests According to the Chicago Police Department, there were 17,059 arrests made in the North Lawndale community in 1999, and 15,927 in 2000 of men and women over 18 years old.

Type of crime Table 1 on the following page shows the five major crime categories making up 75% of all arrests in North Lawndale.

Narcotics Narcotics-related arrests represented the most frequently occurring arrests, with 31% in 1999 and 27% in 2000. Within the narcotics category, possession of a controlled

¹ This research report was made possible with the support of a grant from the Woods Fund of Chicago.

TABLE 1
NORTH LAWDALE ARREST CRIME CATEGORIES²

Crime	1999	% of arrests	2000	% of arrests
Narcotics	5,258	30.8%	4,357	27.4%
Battery	3,345	19.6%	3,193	20.0%
Theft	2,075	12.2%	2,037	12.8%
Criminal damage	1,261	7.4%	1,353	8.5%
Assault	928	5.4%	1,012	6.4%
Other	4,228	24.6%	3,975	24.9%

substance was the most common arrest, accounting for 76% of all narcotics arrests in 1999 and 79.6% in 2000. The substances most commonly seen in all narcotics-related arrests were crack cocaine (34.5% of all narcotics arrests in 1999 and 34.3% in 2000), and heroin (26.7% of all narcotics arrests in 1999 and 26.2% in 2000).

Gender and age The Chicago Police Department provided data on gender and age for 11,163 arrests in 2000 (traffic offenses were excluded). Seventeen percent of individuals 18 years of age and older who were arrested were women, and 83% were men. Almost 47% of adults arrested were between the ages of 25 and 44, and 29% were between the ages of 18 and 25, with the remaining 24% over the age of 44.

Convictions

In 2000, 6,559 persons 18 years of age and older residing in North Lawndale were convicted of crime and remanded in some way to one aspect of the criminal justice system; in 2001 the figure was 6,299. (Smaller numbers only paid fines and these cases are not included here.) As there were 25,819 persons 18 years of age and older in North Lawndale at the time of the 2000 Census, approximately 24% of North Lawndale adults were convicted in 2001 in the criminal justice system for cases carrying higher sentences than fines. Convicted persons in Cook County are sentenced to the Department of Corrections or given two different forms of probation, one served at the Department of Adult Probation, and the other at the Department of Social Services. After serving time in a Department of Correction institution for the original conviction, persons are discharged to the community but remain on parole. Large percentages of those on parole violate

the conditions of parole and are returned to the Department of Corrections. This section of the report reviews data for each of these dispositions.

It is important to note that there could be some duplication in the figures presented below. For example, a North Lawndale resident already on probation for

one offense may be sentenced and remanded to the Department of Corrections for another crime in the same year. Although the number of times this occurs within a given year may be low, given the different management information systems of each entity, it was not possible to cheaply and easily ascertain any duplications. We caution, therefore, that the numbers and percentages provided may be overstating to some extent an unknown number of unduplicated individuals involved in the criminal justice system during any given year.

Department of Corrections

Table 2 below provides details on the number of North Lawndale residents who are committed to the Department of Corrections, the type of offense, and the average length of the sentence for each of the preceding four years. The Department of Corrections divides the crimes committed into three main categories: offenses against persons, such as assault and battery; drug crimes; and those involving property, such as theft.

The 2,442 individuals from North Lawndale sentenced to the Department of Corrections in 2001 represented about 12% of the Department's yearly intake of new prisoners for the entire state. This was about 8% of North Lawndale's adult population sentenced to the Department of Corrections in 2001, with an average sentence length of between 3.6 and 4.3 years.

Large percentages of North Lawndale residents released from the Department of Corrections to parole then violate parole conditions and are returned to the Department of

² Battery is defined as intentionally or knowingly causing bodily harm to another; assault is conduct which places another in reasonable apprehension of receiving a battery; and criminal damage is knowingly damaging any property of another without consent. Narcotics-related offenses include possession and sale.

TABLE 2
ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS
NORTH LAWDALE COMMUNITY*
OFFENSE TYPE AND AVERAGE SENTENCE LENGTH
 1998-2002 (through March)

	1998		1999		2000		2001		2002	
	Number	Avg. Sentence(years)	Number	Avg. Sentence(years)	Number	Avg. Sentence(years)	Number	Avg. Sentence(years)	Number	Avg. Sentence(years)
Person	458	7.1	402	7.9	286	6.0	243	6.8	39	6.9
Property	670	3.8	596	4.0	504	3.5	458	3.5	95	3.7
Drug	1,981	3.7	1,909	3.3	1,675	3.0	1,672	3.1	287	3.1
Sex	33	10.8	53	3.9	57	3.8	56	5.0	21	3.5
Other	14	2.6	19	2.9	15	2.6	13	2.4	18	2.5
Total	3,156	4.3	2,979	4.1	2,537	3.5	2,442	3.6	460	3.5

*North Lawndale community includes zip codes 60608,60612,60644, and 60650.

Corrections. Data about parole violations will be discussed below under "Parole."

As demonstrated by Table 2, drug offenses represent the large majority of all sentences to the Department of Correction. The data over a four-year period between 1998 and 2001 show that the percentage of drug-related incarcerations has steadily risen, from 62% in 1998 to a high of 68% in 2001.

Probation

Cases on probation are referred to two different departments of the Circuit Court. According to the Adult Probation Department of the Circuit Court of Cook County, 2,752 individuals from North Lawndale were sentenced to probation in 2000 and 2,818 in 2001. Typically, 95% of all the probation cases were felonies. The Social Service Department of the Circuit Court also reports that 1,270 persons from North Lawndale in 2000 and 1,039 in 2001 were referred to the Social Service Department. That department primarily supervises misdemeanor and traffic offenders, with the bulk of cases involving driving under the influence and domestic violence.

In all, 4,022 North Lawndale residents were sentenced to probation in 2000 and 3,857 in 2001.

About 65% of the persons on probation remain on probation for 13 to 24 months, and another 21% for 25 to 36 months.

Parole

The Department of Corrections informed us that in August 2001 there were 2,487 parolees 18 years of age or older in the North Lawndale community. Sixty-four percent had served time for drug-related crimes and 86% were male. According to the Department of Corrections, approximately 45% of all those on parole fail to meet the conditions of parole and are returned to prison to serve the remaining time of their sentence.

Data Summary: North Lawndale Adults in the Criminal Justice System in 2001

In this final section we summarize the data that we have presented. We break the data down into the number of individuals who entered the criminal justice system in 2001, and then we present a chart adding new arrivals to those already involved in the system. We caution again that these numbers might be overstatements since there might be duplication in an undetermined number of cases.

The fact that the Census shows that 60% of the persons over age 18 are female may reflect the fact that almost 10,000 adults, mostly males, were absent from the community as they were incarcerated at the time of the Census. In the 1990 Census, the breakdown of the total population was 46.4% male and 53.6% female, perhaps reflecting the fact that fewer males were incarcerated than are the case today.

NORTH LAWDALE ADULTS IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

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INTERVIEWS WITH EX-OFFENDERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

To complement the data on arrests and sentencing and learn about the specific situations of ex-offenders in Chicago's North Lawndale community, CIR interviewed staff, consultants, and participants in the Ex-Offender Employment Service Network (EESN) program of the North Lawndale Employment Network (NLEN). These interviews provide a contextual framework for the North Lawndale data, particularly about how drug addiction is implicated in crime. They also provide information necessary for developing further research to assess the need for alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent offenders who need mental health and substance abuse treatment. The interviews reveal that before and after arrest and incarceration, this population struggles with drug addiction, poverty, low levels of education, unemployment, unstable housing, and homelessness. However, intensive case management and substance abuse treatment programs combined with job readiness training can break the cycle of addiction, crime, and incarceration and lead to positive results for ex-offenders.

CIR interviewed three EESN program staff who themselves are ex-offenders and two consultant instructors, both of whom are mental health professionals; of the five, four are men and one is a woman.⁴ They spoke about the goals and content of the twenty-two day EESN course and their general observations on participants and the program's impact on them. They were also asked more specific questions such as the extent to which drug use and sales are involved in non-violent and violent arrests and convictions and the range of criminal activities related to drug use. EESN staff commented on

the role of gang activities as well as their assessment of issues related to drug use and mental health, literacy and educational levels, and housing and homelessness. They also discussed measures to prevent members of this community from becoming involved in drugs and crime and to assist ex-offenders in rebuilding their lives after incarceration.

After obtaining an overview of the program and participant population from the interviews with EESN staff, CIR interviewed eight EESN participants. These participants were selected with the assistance of the EESN program manager to represent a range of ages and situations. In pre-interview conversations, potential interviewees were told that the interviews would be confidential and they would be remunerated \$20. CIR explained that we were working with NLEN to provide information that could be used to advocate for treatment options and alternatives to incarceration for non-violent offenders.

About 75% of EESN participants are male and the majority are African-American. Five of the participants interviewed are men and three are women; seven are African-American and one is Puerto Rican. The age range of 31 to 44-years-

³The figure is computed by dividing the number of individuals in the criminal justice system by the number of persons over 18 in North Lawndale. For the latter figure, the denominator, we added to the Census figure the number of individuals already serving time at the Department of Corrections who were not included in the Census count.

⁴In the discussion of the interviews, "EESN staff" includes the program manager, EESN instructors, and consultant instructors.

old is also representative of EESN participants. Two interviewees had been recently released on parole and were currently enrolled in EESN classes. The other six had completed the EESN course within the past six months and were still accessing EESN support services. Three were working and two were looking for employment; three were still on parole. Participants were asked about their family background, current living arrangements, education and employment history, drug and alcohol use, involvement in activities that led to arrest, experience with the criminal justice system, service needs, and suggestions on preventative measures. The life experiences of all but one of the interviewees led them to talk at greatest length about their drug addiction and recovery and their arrest and incarceration history.

Arrests and Incarceration

Staff members were asked to comment on the North Lawndale statistics for arrests, sentencing, and types of crimes. Staff members said that for the most part property crimes such as burglary and theft were commonly motivated by addicts trying to get money to buy drugs. One staff person who lives in North Lawndale noted that selling drugs has become a top money-making activity for gangs and has driven up drug activity. Another staff member estimated that prior to their arrests, at least 40% of participants received their primary source of income from drug sales. Charges for drug possession are often made in conjunction with arrests for other crimes.

Like the majority of EESN participants, those who were interviewed were repeat offenders; some had more than 20 years of history with the criminal justice system. Three had been juvenile offenders and several had been involved with gangs. Most participants talked readily and at length about their offenses, the disposition of their cases, and their time on probation, in prison, and on parole. The only man who was reluctant to talk had been incarcerated when he was 18 and had served 12 years for his involvement in a gang murder. He gravely stated the circumstances of the offense

...crimes such as burglary and theft were commonly motivated by addicts trying to get money to buy drugs.

and added, "I was a young kid who made a wrong turn." The offenses of the other participants included drug possession and sales, retail theft, robbery, burglary, domestic violence, and weapons violations. The women said that they first had become involved in criminal activities—drug sales, possession, prostitution, retail theft—after they became addicted to heroin and cocaine.

One man said that he first got into trouble as a teenager when he joined a gang and dropped out of high school: "My turning point was when I was 13 or 14 and I started with a street gang. I was anxious to know about what goes on on the streets. I already knew what goes on at home." Another man talked about starting to smoke marijuana during his early teens and getting into trouble at school: "I worked on my rebellious image." But he also had a paper route "which really got my attention. The hustling and all. It gave me money for smoking and drinking." He spent time in foster care and juvenile homes throughout his youth. When his family moved to the Cabrini Green public housing project, he joined a gang and started getting in more serious trouble: "first I was sent to work camp but then they sent me behind the wall for threatening a prison officer." After his release, he continued with the gang and just before he turned 18, he was shot in both legs during a gang fight. He recovered from the gunshot wounds and over the next 16 years, he was in and out of prison for new offenses as well as for probation and parole violations. During one prison sentence, he started using heroin. He recalled "constantly getting into trouble" while in prison. It was only during his most recent incarceration that he resolved to change his life and he entered a drug treatment program.

One woman said that she started going to jail when she was selling drugs to support her addiction to heroin and cocaine. During this period she was also living in abandoned buildings. Her last conviction was three years ago and she was released on 30 months probation. After she had been in treatment, the length of her probation was reduced: "This was encouraging to me."

One man spent three years during his late thirties in housing projects on the south side. He was addicted to heroin. His arrests or “cases” involved retail theft and later narcotics possession. One day he was hit in the face by a rifle butt during an attack by an enemy gang and ended up unconscious in the hospital. After his most recent arrest a few years ago, he was brought to the Cook County Narcotics Court. The judge placed him on probation with mandated treatment and drug testing. He said that he is grateful that the judge encouraged him to go into treatment but he knows that the judge is strict; if he violates his probation and uses drugs, he will be sent to prison.

After recounting a lengthy history of juvenile offenses, another man said that his first adult offense was sexual assault of a prostitute, whom he attacked because “I wanted to rob her but she didn’t have any money. There was no penetration but I know it’s still wrong. It’s something I really regret.” He said that he was addicted to heroin and cocaine when he went into prison but was not offered drug treatment during his three years of incarceration. After his release he lived with his sister, who helped him find a job at a restaurant. He started using cocaine again as soon as he completed parole and later had several convictions for retail theft, using the money he made from selling the stolen goods to buy drugs. The most recent conviction was last year, when he was sentenced to six months in prison. He has since entered treatment.

One woman said that she had her first case at age twenty-one when she was arrested for selling drugs. Throughout her years of addiction to heroin in the decade since then, she has had many convictions for retail theft, selling what she stole for drug money. When she was sentenced to six months in prison for retail theft in 2000, she was on the waiting list for a substance abuse treatment program. She entered treatment after her release.

Background of EESN Participants

Staff members estimated that 85% to 95% of participants are repeat offenders; participants who are first-time offenders are usually women. One of the staff members said that participants enroll in the program because they are

“sick and tired of being sick and tired.” Participants are generally between 30 and 50 years old and the desire not to go to prison motivates them to enroll: “The older you get, the harder prison life becomes. Once you’re 25 or 30, in prison other men start calling you ‘pops.’”

EESN staff members had a variety of perspectives on the interrelationships among crime, poverty, drugs, family background, and the community setting. Staff members agreed that economic conditions on the West side contribute to the high arrest and incarceration rates in North Lawndale. One staff member noted that the scarcity of employment opportunities in this community “leads to hopelessness and crime.” Another staff person stated that most ex-offenders committed desperate acts in specific situations because of a lapse of judgment. He added that many of these acts are related to the compulsions of drug addiction. Other desperate acts are related to loss of emotional control by people ill-equipped to handle anger and frustration in domestic and social situations. Environmental stresses compounded by a lack of communication skills contribute to this violence. He also said that the daily struggles of poverty are far removed from the daily life of the mainstream and many ex-offenders lack the social and personal living skills to be mainstream: “Daily life for many in this community consists of doing something wrong or illegal or not doing much at all.” In his view, the omnipresence of crime in impoverished communities desensitizes people to criminal activities. For many ex-offenders, “it is not so much they try to break laws but the struggle for survival requires conformity to a non-mainstream system.”

Accordingly, this staff member finds the concept of rehabilitation to be flawed because it presupposes “a return to the mainstream for many people who have never been in the mainstream.” Furthermore, incarceration adds a larger burden to this process because “prison life reinforces everything subcultural.” In his experience, programs for ex-offenders need to assist in “restructuring” them so that they are in better accord with mainstream society. These programs should also address ex-offenders’ lack of direction and absence of positive role models, which can be

particularly acute at the time of release. Another staff person said that the EESN program is designed to “get people on a positive track” and to help them overcome the beliefs and negative behaviors they learned at home and in the community.

Seven of the EESN participants interviewed by CIR grew up in the Chicago area, including three who spent some of their childhood in public housing projects. One of the interviewees grew up in Puerto Rico and New Jersey and was 35 years old when he came to Chicago. Many of them recounted their childhood as being marked by disruptive changes of caregivers and residence, unavailable or absent parents, and early exposure to alcohol and drugs.

One participant, a 31-year-old woman, dated the start of her troubles to her junior year in high school when she moved from suburban Harvey to Chicago so that her mother could take care of her ill grandmother in North Lawndale. She said that before the move, “I loved school. I was always on the honor roll. My old school was a real school where you learned things. At the Chicago school people only hung out. I began to cut classes, which I never did at my old school. I met my children’s father when I was 17. He was five years older than me. I became pregnant and didn’t graduate high school.”

About growing up on the West side, a 31-year-old man recounted: “We had a good family, my brother and I were honor roll students.” When he was in eighth grade, he won a scholarship to the Joel Hall dance school: “I loved to dance and in grammar school I was in theater.” He said that as he became older, “I

had no place in my neighborhood to show my talent except at home. Later I showed it on the streets.” When he was 18, he was sentenced to twelve years imprisonment for a gang-related crime.

Thinking back on his upbringing, a 44-year-old man began with the appraisal: “I’m from a dysfunctional family.” He was born in Mississippi and moved to Chicago when he was eight

to live with his stepfather. Later he lived with his grandparents. He left high school during his junior year.

In another interview, a 37-year-old man talked about the anger he felt when he was nine and he had to move with his mother to the Cabrini Green public housing project. Prior to that he was being raised primarily by his great-aunt on Chicago’s West side: “I had a lot of anger and resentment and animosity about leaving my great-aunt and all my friends. And there was a lot of negative activities going on in the projects.” He recollected that his mother kept him involved in school activities and that she “was strict and enforced a lot of rules. Other kids could do things but not us.” However, because she worked so much, his mother was “hardly ever home.”

A 35-year-old woman said that when she was growing up on the West side of Chicago with her mother and older and younger brothers, she never had a relationship with her father. After her grandmother passed away when she was ten, “basically we were by ourselves. We had a lot of time to get in trouble. My mother wasn’t a bad person. She worked the 3 to 11 shift and just wasn’t around.” When she was fifteen she had her first baby and left school after ninth grade “because I didn’t have a babysitter.” Her mother

moved the family to California but it didn’t work out and they moved back to Chicago after one month.

A 43-year-old man said that his family moved to New Jersey from Puerto Rico when he was seven. His mother remarried when he was ten and he lived with her and his step-father. His father remained in Puerto Rico with

his girlfriend and their children. Two of his brothers stayed in Puerto Rico; their involvement with drugs and gangs resulted in the death of one and imprisonment of the other. Another brother living in New Jersey became addicted to heroin and died from AIDS. He noted that his father and uncles were “social drinkers” and not drug users. During high school, his girlfriend became pregnant and he dropped out and started working full-time. Until he became addicted

“Basically we were by ourselves. We had a lot of time to get in trouble. My mother wasn’t a bad person. She worked the 3 to 11 shift and just wasn’t around.”

to heroin in his mid-thirties, he had steady employment as a delivery driver.

Born in Gary to a single mother from Little Rock, a 41-year-old man said that at the age of five he and his brother were placed in a foster home in Hammond. He recalled his foster parents as being strict and religious; his foster father worked and his foster mother was at home: "They made sure we went to school and gave us a good structure." Occasionally, his mother visited, bringing them presents. When he was 14, his mother regained custody of him and his brother and they went to Chicago to live with their mother and sister in the Cabrini Green housing project. About his move to the projects he said: "They're dangerous and there's too many people living there. The months I was there seemed like a lifetime." After about six months, they moved to Uptown, a low-income neighborhood on the North side. Living with his mother was very different from his earlier years with his foster parents: "My mother would leave us alone. She was into the club scene. She never had a husband or a steady boyfriend. After my foster father, I never had a father figure to guide me and my mother was never there. I took to the streets when I got lonely." He was suspended during his first year of high school. When he didn't return after his suspension, "my mother didn't try to keep me in school."

A 34-year-old woman spoke about her difficulties with her mother during her childhood in Chicago: "My mother never treated me like her other children. She didn't pay any attention to me and was harder on me. This made me become quiet and closed. I hardly talked to anyone." She lived with her mother, two half-brothers, and half-sister in the Hilliard Homes public housing project on the South side. She recalled that her father was very affectionate to her but she rarely saw him after her parents split up when she was nine. She finished high school and was seventeen when her first child was born. Later she lived with her children in Stateway Gardens, another South side housing project: "It was horrible and dangerous all the time. I'd take my kids to

the playground and have to run to cover them when the gang shootings started."

Participants' Children

With the exception of one man who was to become a father for the first time in a couple of months, all of the other participants are parents. Of the four men who are fathers, two of them live with their children and their children's mother. One man spoke with great pride about his son who is a college graduate and army officer; another was worried about his drug-dealer son.

The women all had given birth to their first child when they were teens. One has six children, another five, another three. These mothers lost custody of all of their children due to their drug addiction and incarceration.⁵ In some instances they lost all parental rights and their children were adopted without their knowledge or consent. These women's children are in the custody of family members, typically maternal and paternal grandmothers and aunts. For some women, family disputes make the difficult process of regaining custody even harder. One woman noted that her maternal aunt, who has custody of two of her children, is resisting returning them to her because her mother and aunt are feuding. Disrupted relationships with their children and loss of custody are painful issues for all three mothers. All of them expressed determination to improve their lives so that they could be positive role models for their children.

One woman recalled: "When I was using, I just couldn't see that I wasn't taking care of my children. You think you're there taking care of them but you're not really there." Another woman described the circumstances of losing her young children after she became addicted to drugs: "Everything started going real bad. I was very unmanageable. The only thing I lived for was to get high. I tried to hide it but it was obvious because of the way I was carrying myself. I felt ashamed. I wasn't taking care of my kids properly." This woman has regained custody of one child and is attempting to reunite with two

EESN participants who are mothers...are highly motivated to build positive relationships with their children.

⁵ In contrast to these three women, an EESN staff member noted that the majority of the women EESN participants do have custody of their children.

others. The third woman who was interviewed also recounted with sadness her similar experience: "It was hardest when the children were removed from my custody. I couldn't shake the pain and started to use more."

An EESN staff person said that for ex-offenders, particularly those who are mothers, it is important to learn more about issues related to children and family relationships. Some parents may have lost custody of their children well before their incarceration. After release others become reunited with their children or attempt to regain custody. He observed that EESN participants who are mothers—regardless of whether they have custody—are highly motivated to build positive relationships with their children. "Bridging the gap" in these relationships is important to their self-esteem. He also commented that child care does not seem to be a substantial obstacle for participants who are custodial mothers, possibly because other family members already had been providing care during the woman's incarceration.

Housing and Homelessness

All of the EESN staff stated that ex-offenders face serious difficulties in finding and maintaining stable and safe housing, which results in their high risk and high rate of homelessness. One staff member estimated that at least one-third of participants have problems with their living arrangements. He also said that homelessness can be difficult to document and is likely to be more prevalent than it appears. Furthermore, even when EESN participants have a place to stay, their living arrangements can be "shaky." Many ex-offenders are "living with one foot in the house and one foot in the street." They also may face pressure to contribute money to the household where they are staying, money that they often do not have. Another staff member commented that participants want to hide their housing difficulties: "Some give a relative's address and won't tell you that they don't have a home. It's embarrassing for them."

EESN staff agreed that participants with good living arrangements are more likely to do well and complete the

program. One staff member emphasized: "Homelessness is a huge issue and housing is the first need. It's key for eating, hygiene, and stability. Participants need a stable environment to succeed." Another staff member illustrated that housing problems increase during the cold with the example that "they can't sleep on their sister's or aunt's back porch in winter." When participants become homeless and seek assistance, EESN staff members make referrals to shelters and transitional homes.

...ex-offenders face serious difficulties in finding and maintaining stable and safe housing...

One staff member noted that it is not uncommon for women to have more trouble than men in "getting back into the family" after release from incarceration: "Family members don't show the same good will to women."

He said mothers and grandmothers are happy to get sons and grandsons back and are hopeful for them. However, possibly because of issues around the custody and care of children, mothers and grandmothers are less welcoming to ex-offenders who are mothers: "Men are seen as a potential asset. It's good to have a man around the house. Women, especially if they have children are seen more as a liability."

The current living arrangements of the eight EESN participants who were interviewed include: one man and one woman with their mothers; one woman with her mother and one of her children; one man with his father; two men with their children and their children's mother; one woman with her fiancé; and one man in a transitional home. Those who were living back in their old neighborhoods expressed the need to be vigilant against associating with people from their past who are still involved with crime and drugs. One man said: "Right now my family is taking care of me. I'm living at my mom's house and I try to avoid my old contacts." One woman who was recently released said that except for coming to EESN class, she avoids going out because she doesn't know whom she might meet on the street.

One participant said he was saving money so he could move out of his father's home and rent a small apartment for himself. The man living in the transitional home with

fourteen other men spoke positively of the year that he has spent there: “We are like a family away from the family. There’s no arguing—if you have a two-liter bottle of soda, you share it.” His low monthly rent of \$130 has allowed him to save \$1,000 in past six months for his expenses when he moves out to a studio apartment in a couple of months.

Another man expressed concern about the stability of his living arrangements. He lives with his partner of twenty years and their three children: “Sometimes she throws me out.” Two years ago he was sent by the court to a substance abuse treatment program after he was arrested for domestic violence. Thinking aloud about the possibility of being thrown out again, he said: “I don’t know what I’d do. Maybe I’d have to go into some kind of transitional home. I’m forty-one-years old, I don’t want to live with my mother and I can’t live with my sister because she has her family and kids.”

Educational and Literacy Levels

Although a small percentage of EESN participants have had some post-secondary education, the majority do not have a high school degree or GED. Commenting on the women in the program, one staff member said: “Many don’t have their GED but they’re smart and they read a lot.” A staff member with extensive experience as a literacy volunteer said that most participants have adequate literacy levels for the class and are motivated to learn. He speculated that since the program is voluntary, those with low literacy levels are not likely to enroll because “they want to hide their secret.” He added that with EESN’s new contract with the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), which expands enrollment, they may begin to see more participants with learning disabilities and low levels of literacy. In order to evaluate the educational level of participants and make appropriate referrals, EESN is planning to administer the TABE (Test Adult Basic Education) to all participants.

Staff members agreed that low educational levels and lack of job skills are barriers to employment for many participants. The lower their literacy and educational levels,

the more difficult it is for participants to advance within the program and find stable employment. Another staff member said that educational and literacy levels are becoming more of an issue among employers who want to be sure that employees can read well enough to understand posted materials such as safety guidelines and OSHA regulations. EESN refers participants to adult education and GED classes. But for participants who start at the fourth or fifth grade

level, it can take four or five years to pass the GED. Committing so much time to classes is difficult, especially with the pressure to earn money and meet family responsibilities.

Of the eight participants who were interviewed, only one had completed high school. Five had no high school degree or GED; one man completed his

GED and two Associates degrees during his twelve years in prison, where he also earned certificates in computer training, custodial work, and food services; one man studied for his GED while in prison but was released before he took the test. One woman, who had completed her GED while in prison and was recently released, beamed as she said: “I just got my GED certificate in the mail. I’m real smart.”

Both staff and participants lamented the extent to which the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) has reduced the availability of educational services to inmates. One staff member said that the trend over the past five years has been to limit access to education and give priority to younger prisoners and those with shorter sentences. With its focus on the GED, IDOC has eliminated many opportunities for post-secondary education. One participant who had dropped out of high school commented on trying for his GED in prison: “The way it’s set up now is changed from the 1980s. Being a four-time loser, they put me on the bottom of the list. After a while I got into some ABE (adult basic education) and then pre-GED, but lost interest and then was released.”

“Many participants are completely unprepared for employment. They have no idea of the kind of behavior expected in the workplace.”

Employment Experience

The majority of EESN participants have limited employment experience. Some have never worked a regular job and have practically no employment history. One staff person said: "Many participants are completely unprepared for employment. They have no idea of the kind of behavior expected in the workplace. They're playing ping pong when corporate America plays live tackle football."

The participants who were interviewed had a range of past experience in low-wage employment such as housekeeping, fast food, retail, telemarketing, and hospital food service. Two of the men had worked steady jobs before being incarcerated, one as a forklift operator, the other driving a delivery truck. All of them expressed the desire and determination to either find a job or move to a better job. For example, one man said: "Everywhere I go I fill out applications." Several of the interviewed participants were placed in jobs after completing the EESN program. One man and woman were working on the assembly line at a North Lawndale factory, where they can become eligible for union membership and benefits after 90 days employment. One man working part-time at Walgreens can become eligible for benefits after 6 months and has asked to be scheduled for more hours. Another man was working a part-time job at a fast food restaurant without benefits, where his parole officer had referred him; he also applied to work a second job at a factory.

Two men were unemployed and actively looking for work. One had recently resigned from a position at a suburban warehouse, with a daily commute of nearly four hours: "I'm a certified forklift operator and worked in warehouses for many years. I've been a supervisor and foreman in the past. But now after 6 months in federal prison it's hard to find a job." Two women were enrolled in EESN class and were not yet employed.

Each of the participants expressed specific occupational interests. One woman who was enrolled in the program at the time of her interview said: "I like numbers. I'm very good at any kind of math. I would like to work in accounting

or bookkeeping if I can." The woman, who had completed high school and had taken some college courses, was hoping to enroll in classes "to learn more about computers." The man who had completed his GED and two Associates degrees while in prison and had found a job in factory said that he would like to work with youth: "I would like to give back. I would like to be a youth counselor and develop a program to help kids stay in school and stay away from drugs." He also recalled his childhood interest in theatre and said: "I'm still interested in drama but I have never told anyone else. You're the first one I've told. I'd like to be in a sitcom." Another participant also expressed an interest in working with youth as a drug counselor but said that he would need to first get his GED and then an Associates degree. A man in his forties who has worked delivering meals in hospitals wanted to get his GED and then attend a trade school for "something like computer repair. I want to find a career for the rest of my life."

Substance Abuse, Addiction, and Treatment

A large proportion of EESN participants have histories of substance abuse and addiction. One staff person estimated the figure to be 75%. Many participants have been through court-mandated or voluntary treatment programs. While they are enrolled in EESN classes, participants are tested for drugs. If they test positively, EESN will not place them in a job until they test negatively. EESN staff are also vigilant for indications of alcohol use, and one staff member said that he sees many signs of it among participants. Those with drug and alcohol problems are referred to treatment centers.

Both EESN staff and participants spoke at great length about the destructive impact of substance abuse on individuals and the community and how drug sales and use are implicated in so much of the criminal activity in North Lawndale. One staff person said: "This is a drug habituated environment. People become desensitized by constant exposure to the drug users and drug related crime. Drugs are a major cause of the downward spiral of individuals and communities." He stated that drugs motivate much of the

"I want to find a career for the rest of my life."

community's criminal activity: "In an overwhelming number of cases—at least 90%—drugs or alcohol are involved." And alcohol is frequently related to crimes involving violence. However, he noted that the role of drugs and alcohol is usually not cited in crime reports unless it is specifically a drug crime. Drug addiction leads to involvement in a range of criminal activities, including selling drugs, theft, burglary, and robbery.

Another staff member said that alcohol or drug use is implicated in 100% of the crimes in the 6 to 12 hour period before the crime: "Drugs are the engine that's driving all the crime." He also said that addicts take just about any risk to obtain money for drugs, including armed robbery, prostitution, and burglary. In referring to prostitution, women sometimes tell him: "'You don't know all the things that I've done to get my drugs.'" A different staff member noted that women who are arrested for drug possession and for retail theft often say: "The desire for drugs pushes me into crimes I'd never commit if I was sober." According to another staff person: "Drug use is so common that it's become normal within the community." In these circumstances, women turn to selling drugs as "another way to get money for family expenses." Given the difficulties ex-offenders face in finding regular paid employment, one staff person said that some begin or return to selling drugs because it offers one of the few readily available avenues of making money.

One of the EESN mental health consultants said that participants report having started to use alcohol as young as eight or nine years old, with 13 to 15 the average age. Few participants admit to problems with alcohol or to being an alcoholic although some have been in treatment programs. He noted that participants refer to past alcohol abuse with comments such as "'it may have been a problem but I slowed it down.'" He does not hear people say that they no longer drink because they had an alcohol problem in the past. Participants talk about having started drug use, typically smoking marijuana, between ages 13 and 17 years old. He noted that "marijuana is the drug of choice for the young. Many are already using alcohol. Later they start trying harder drugs, around the ages of 18 to 21. Rock

cocaine is the favorite followed by heroin—inhaling cocaine, inhaling heroin, then injecting."

EESN staff agree that among the ex-offender population, drug use primarily relates to emotional and psychological issues, with drugs being used as a form of self-medication for depression and anxiety. In the words of one staff member: "Drug use for self-medication is very common. People are going after a state of numbness." The depression and anxiety arise from the distress caused by difficult home and social environments, lack of education and job skills, and "negative self-assessment." As one of the EESN mental health consultants put it: "There are horrible childhood histories among this population and the reasons for depression and anxiety as adults are related to being mismanaged as a child." Such histories include physical, sexual, and emotional abuse as well as neglect and abandonment by parents and other caregivers. In these conditions, it is not uncommon for "youth to turn to the streets for support" and for those in pain to seek relief through "the soothing effects of drugs." In a similar vein, another of the EESN staff related drug use to social and economic conditions: "When all around you is despair, you look for something to give relief from hopelessness. And drugs are so easy to find. Someone around you will bring them to you. People will come under their influence when they are at their weakest, most vulnerable, and neediest."

All the participants who were interviewed—except the man who was incarcerated at age 18 for a long sentence—are recovering from long-term addiction to crack cocaine and heroin. All of them had their own particular constellation of circumstances leading to drug addiction: young women whose drug-addicted partners introduced them to heroin; a man who first started using heroin in prison; a man who worked a regular job and used cocaine on weekends; and a man who became addicted after first using heroin in his mid-30s. As their addictions took hold, they all became enmeshed in criminal activities.

One woman recounted the circumstances leading to her addiction: "I was so stressed from my husband I started using drugs. I never used any drugs or alcohol before. My

husband used heroin and got me started on it.” She spoke about how her life spiraled out of control with her growing addiction: “When you’re on drugs, eventually you do things you never thought you would. I even tried prostitution. But it was too scary. I was beat up three times and so many girls who do it are found dead. I began to sell drugs.” Another participant said that he started using heroin when he was in prison in the 1980s: “I got the drug habit in prison and when I was released it was plentiful on the streets.” One man started using crack cocaine when he was thirty; he was a weekend user for thirteen years until he was arrested and imprisoned for fraud. When recalling how her mother and aunt often went out in the evenings and that they liked to drink and smoke marijuana, one woman recovering from heroin addiction commented: “I thought that growing up was about going out and having fun. I grew up around adults using drugs and became attracted to that lifestyle.”

One man spoke at length about how desperate his life became when addiction to heroin took it over at age 37: “The drugs really messed me up. My friend told me not to try heroin, he knew it would be bad for me. I didn’t know I would get a habit.” When he later moved to Chicago, he first slept in alleys next to dumpsters and later rented a room in another heroin user’s apartment in a housing project on the South side. For several years he worked in the projects as a lookout for drug dealers: “The big drug dealers are addicted to money, not drugs. They have big houses in the suburbs and drive Lincoln Navigators.” During these years, he was involved in other criminal activities as well: “I started stealing, robbing, and doing what I need for my habit.”

A man with a twenty-year history of addiction to cocaine and heroin said: “Drugs really destroy lives, not only in our neighborhood. Drugs do not discriminate. It doesn’t matter if you’re black or white. I lost all of my jobs because of my addiction.” He started smoking marijuana when he was fifteen and later tried “acid and powder.” He spoke of his youthful ignorance: “Being that age I didn’t know what I was getting into. I got locked up because of drugs. I didn’t

...available openings for treatment programs both inside and outside prison do not meet the need.

find out until I was locked up that the guys I was hanging with were Black Souls [gang members]. I didn’t get involved with the gang until I was in prison but let the gang go after my release.” He started using cocaine again as soon as he

completed parole. However, he never dealt or sold drugs: “I knew the consequences. I was just a user.” In reflecting on what may have led to his drug use he said: “We turn to drugs because of our pain. Drugs are addictive and people who are

hopeless and depressed use them. I know I’m not a bad person but the drugs make me do bad things.”

Like other participants, one woman noted the toll that drug addiction has taken on other family members; her sister is also in recovery from addiction to heroin and her brother is still using it. She started using drugs when she was about 21, first trying marijuana and crack cocaine. Later because “my boyfriend used heroin, one day I tried it. You think you’re having fun and then you’re an addict.” About her life as an addict she said: “When you’re an addict, it’s a nonstop process of getting, using, and getting more.”

Staff agreed that treatment is key to supporting participants in overcoming and recovering from addiction, particularly given the physiological addiction that results from alcohol, cocaine, and heroin use, which makes cessation extremely difficult without treatment. For many in this population, the criminal justice system and prison are the most common places where they encounter treatment opportunities. Staff noted that motivations for treatment vary: some may enter treatment programs in prison thinking that they will have better conditions than the general prison population and it is a way to “lighten their sentence.” Others enter because they want to “quit for good.”

However, available openings for treatment programs both inside and outside prison do not meet the need. And the quality and comprehensiveness of available programs is uneven. Given the difficulty that many ex-offenders with histories of addiction face in sustaining sobriety, and the number of occasions they may need to return to treatment,

readily available treatment opportunities and options are essential for supporting them in their recovery. Transitional homes for ex-offenders after their release also are important resources for this population and provide continuing support to those who were in treatment while in prison. A number of EESN participants are mandated to continue substance abuse counseling during their period of parole.

Just as each person who was interviewed has his or her own account of addiction, each has a particular story of treatment, relapses, and recovery. Some have been in recovery for a few weeks, others for several years. One man minced no words: "Fighting drug addiction is like a war." One woman said treatment taught her that "drugs are a slow suicide. When you're in recovery, you find out what's really going on. I was sexually abused and raped. Drugs themselves are not the problem."

About her experience with treatment, another woman said: "I had a problem and didn't know how to deal with it." She said that she never asked for treatment when she was in jail but as soon as she went to prison, she entered a treatment program. She participated in the program for nine months: "I found out a lot about myself. I had a lot of anger. I talked about the things I always held inside. I had bad things happen to me. I had my throat slashed, my husband abused me, my parents split up." She contrasted the first time she was released from prison with her most recent release, coming out after having been in treatment: "The first time I got out of prison, I didn't have any plans. Because of Gateway [treatment program], I knew I would need help when I got out. It was wonderful. At the time I didn't think of it as helping but I know it did."

One man talked about having been "pushed into treatment in the past by his mother and his fiancée." He went back to drugs and was incarcerated for 12 years: "This time was real different. I had got so tired. I got in touch with myself in county jail. I asked for help and I got in Gateway and involved myself wholeheartedly. I shared with the group and there I found God. I accepted Jesus Christ. As a kid I had heard about him but with things around me being the way they were, I didn't know he existed. Before I had so much

fear within about what someone else would think. I did a lot of fellowship and witnessing. I wasn't self-centered anymore. I was thinking for others." He continues to attend NA and AA meetings. He describes his sponsor as being "like a mentor. He's been clean 14 years and is working. And he's a landlord, father, and grandfather. If I have a problem outside of the meeting, I talk to him."

One woman said that she had been in and out of treatment programs for years. Most recently, at the end of parole she was convicted again and sent for treatment for six months. She spent three months in an in-patient program and three months in outpatient treatment for her heroin addiction: "This changed my life around. I was sick and tired of being in and out of jail and really tired of using drugs. I asked God to help me remove this obsession." She tries to go to meetings but it is more difficult now that she is working 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. She met her fiancé at an AA meeting: "he's made 12 years and I made 3 years on July 27."

One participant said that he was living on the East coast when his mother read about a treatment program in Chicago and put him on a bus to send him to the program. When he arrived, he did not go for treatment but instead spent the next five years on the streets as an addict. He never had any treatment during his numerous stays in Cook County Jail. Looking back on the ravages of his addiction, he said: "When I was caught by police in 1999, I was a dead man walking. I laugh now when I think about it." He now co-leads an NA meeting and lives in a transitional home, which requires that he attend at least 5 meetings per week. He also has a mentor from AA. He expressed delight in his new life in recovery and his involvement with his recovery groups: "In AA and NA groups people say, 'keep coming back, it works if it's working.' In group we become like psychologists. We can tell what others are feeling. We're like therapists."

Another man said that he had been a cocaine and heroin addict for 20 years before he first entered a treatment program. However, seven months after the program, "I went back to my old ways, being with the wrong people and started using again. I wanted to change but didn't know

how." After being arrested for a domestic violence offense, the court sent him to a 30-day in-patient program. Again he started using after being released from treatment. At the time he first enrolled in EESN he was still using and was referred to another treatment center, where "the program manager at that center is the guy I started shooting heroin with in the 1970s." In the past year, he went through that treatment program and then returned to the EESN program and completed it.

One woman said that she struggled with heroin addiction for over ten years. The first time she tried to stop using, she had a three-day detoxification treatment but no follow up and was soon back to using. She spoke about her current methadone treatment program, which she started two years ago: "I went into treatment because I was so tired. I was tired of living just to get a bag. My kids are getting older and I want to be a good role model." She feels this treatment is helping her change her life: "It keeps me from the desire for heroin. I'm down to a small dosage now. I go to meetings often—whenever I feel like I need it—to keep from using again." She lives with her fiancé, a recovering addict who has not used drugs for three years and is a deacon at his church: "He turned his life around too."

Other Mental Health Issues

Staff members agreed that working with participants on mental health issues requires sensitivity to the relationship between perceptions that equate mental health problems with "being crazy" and widespread resistance to counseling in this community. One staff member said that the anger management component of the EESN curriculum is the "Trojan horse" that introduces participants to mental health issues and therapy. The instructor of this course, who also conducts mental health assessments of participants, said that the two most common psychological problems among these ex-offenders are depression and adjustment disorder with mood and anxiety symptoms. He noted that some also exhibit personality features related to anti-social conduct, which was the basis of their survival in the past on the streets and in prison. He also observed that although participants generally profess to be in good health, there is

some denial about alcoholism. Another staff member commented that participants often start the program feeling discouraged and have low self-esteem; he sees "young people who already feel disappointed with themselves"

The anger management instructor said the goals of the course are to educate participants about emotions with a focus on anger and to reorient participants to how they feel by introducing them to new thought processes. The class also provides an introduction to a group psychotherapy experience. By speaking and listening to others in a group setting, participants begin to dispel silence, isolation, and shame about painful experiences from their past, especially experiences of abuse. In this setting, participants also examine relationships with their parents, partners, and children. Over half of the participants express an interest in receiving counseling at the conclusion of the class. However, despite follow-up contacts, a small proportion of participants actually make use of these free counseling services. These services are also available to those participants who are mandated by the terms of their parole to continue to receive counseling or substance abuse treatment.

Many participants face issues related to domestic violence. Two men had been arrested for domestic violence offenses. One staff member estimated at least 80% of female ex-offenders are victims of domestic violence. Of the participants who were interviewed, three women spoke of being abused in the past. One participant said that she is currently trying to help her young niece who is a victim: "My niece now has a two-week-old baby and is abused by the baby's father. She has an order of protection. She's a CNA [certified nursing assistant] and is really stressed out. I try to help her and tell her about domestic violence and how it hurt me."

Service Needs of Ex-Offenders

Staff and participants discussed features of the prison system that create barriers to receiving services that prepare ex-offenders for their release, particularly the scarcity of openings in educational and treatment programs. The lack of services is compounded by the constant movement of inmates within the prison system, which means that those

who are on a waiting list for classes or treatment programs are placed at the bottom of another waiting list when they are moved. Some participants said that when they finally started in a treatment or educational program, they were moved or released before completing it. According to the Department of Corrections, the movement of inmates is necessitated by changes in their security status; the Department attempts to ensure that inmates who are in treatment programs continue them after moving to a different facility, but inmates on waiting lists face even longer waits after they are moved. One staff member also expressed concern about the large number of young women who are medicated, which keeps them dependent on drugs and can disqualify them for work release.

The EESN offers job readiness and employment sector training to ex-offenders to attach them to the labor market quickly while providing them with the pre- and post-placement support and case management they need to keep a job and move forward on a career pathway. In their interviews, the participants uniformly spoke with enthusiasm and appreciation for the EESN program, the dedication of the staff, and the support of other participants. Several commented on how meaningful and inspiring it was to have ex-offenders on the EESN staff.

One of the participants said that at EESN, “people there were just like me. I didn’t have a fear of rejection anymore. I didn’t mind sitting in the room sharing. And the instructors were very helpful. I knew one of them from his reputation when he was in prison. To see him now inspired me.” Speaking of another staff member, one participant said: “I heard of that gentleman when he was doing time. He really brightens me. He goes out of the way to help. He’s really concerned.” Another man said with a smile: “I’m glad I found this program. I was crazy when I was using drugs. Back in my madness, all around me were drugs and guns. The program has opened many doors for me. People really care. I have nothing but good to say about the program.” Two other participants spoke about the program with similar

enthusiasm. One said: “I’m very grateful for the EESN program. It enlightened me on the things I’m using on the job.” And the other commented: “I’m glad they’re here, I need the support.”

Several of the participants mentioned having been in other employment programs, but they found the EESN program more effective since it focuses on ex-offender issues. One man who had been to two other programs before enrolling in EESN said: “Of all of the programs, this is the one that really helped me. The staff are really inspiring. They understand and go deeper; they find out what’s really going on. The program builds my level of confidence.” He also commented that the curriculum’s emphasis on communication skills and how to get along with people has especially helped him. Another man said that since taking the class he knows he must continue to “work on my thinking problem.” Speaking about the class materials being developed and piloted by EESN that focus on the emotional and social issues of female ex-offenders, one woman said that it fits her circumstances: “It’s really our lives in that book we use in class.”

Participants said that the job placement phase was particularly useful because it prepares them well for interviews and because EESN refers them to employers who hire ex-offenders. One man said that before EESN, he did not know what to say in interviews. Now with training and practice, he felt ready for his interviews: “I can hold my head up high and I wasn’t worried.” Another man said that the resume-writing class helped him make a resume that includes skills he gained from prison jobs.

...the younger participants are generally "less ready" to change their lives than older ones...

One staff member said that to succeed in the EESN program, participants need a network of people who support and encourage them—family members, friends, and church, recovery and self-help groups. He also felt that more information was needed about “the gap of loneliness” that ex-offenders face after their release from prison and the extent to which it may be a factor in the recidivism that results from taking up with former contacts. The staff member who developed the class

materials for women said that they could benefit from mentors, particularly for guidance on issues related to their children and their fears about their children getting into trouble. Better information about community resources and referrals to services for food and clothing would also benefit participants. Staff also noted that the younger participants are generally “less ready” to change their lives than older ones: “The younger they are, the more willing they still are to do the crazy stuff.” However, even for the younger ones, “a little of the class might sink in. It may be helpful for later.”

In talking about the services that were helping them or other services they might need, participants concurred with staff that need was greatest for stable and safe housing, financial resources, family counseling, mentoring, and substance abuse treatment. One woman said: “My biggest problem is letting go of the anger against my kids’ father. He hurt me and he hurt my kids. I have to forgive him.” One man felt that people with past drug problems needed more help while they were going through the program. He said he stayed drug free throughout the EESN program but he was afraid that as soon as he started working and earning money, he would start using drugs again.

Another participant was burdened with serious financial problems. His family had to use his retirement money to pay bills while he was in prison and he was filing for bankruptcy because of his wife’s medical bills from her pregnancy and the birth of their child. He also mentioned fighting with his wife over disciplining their children. One man said that his current problem was “dealing with women.” Both were reminded of EESN’s free counseling service. One woman said that she was staying in touch with some of her past treatment counselors and would like a mentor with whom she could discuss her problems. A woman who had talked at length about losing the custody of her children said that a support group for ex-offenders who are noncustodial

mothers might be useful: “Maybe it would help to talk with others like me. Children need their mother. We love them like no one else can.”

The staff all stated that the current level of resources are inadequate for meeting the needs of ex-offenders for housing, adequate nutrition, employment, substance abuse treatment, and family reunification. They agreed that these needs are particularly great following release from prison. One staff member described this volatile period: “For ex-offenders, the transition from imprisonment is like the space shuttle coming in from outer space— it’s hot on re-entry.” Another staff member felt that not all ex-offenders are ready to

enter programs like EESN immediately after their release. He said that many of those who have just been released are “scared to death. Half have never had a regular job; many have no work skills and low verbal skills. They’re struggling with fear and desperation and are content being cared for.”

Staff members said that there is a need for more community corrections programs and adult transition centers, and better case management for those on parole and probation. These and other services would help to “build bridges for ex-offenders from prison back to the community.” When discussing alternatives to incarceration, one staff member said that these programs needed more effective screening tools as well as more outcome and evaluation data. He added: “These alternatives are not for everyone. Some people need to serve time.”

Prevention

All of the instructors agreed that more resources must be directed toward services for at-risk children. One staff person emphasized the need for more “positive programming early on to expose and motivate children to become involved in other lifestyles and to provide attractive alternatives to gangs, drugs, and violence. There must be more community support for the healthy social and educational development of children.” He said that 10 to 13 is the typical age range when boys join gangs—“looking to

...the current level of resources are inadequate for meeting the needs of ex-offenders for housing, adequate nutrition, employment, substance abuse treatment, and family reunification.

get in where I fit in.” He added that by the time gang members are 25-years-old, they begin to regret being in the gang and most are completely out by age 35.

Speaking from their own experience, participants also agreed about the need for community-based programs to educate children and youth about drugs and gangs and their consequences and alternatives. They emphasized the need for parents and other caregivers to be actively involved in the daily lives of children and the negative consequences of the lack of such involvement. When asked about what she thought might have helped her in the past, one woman said: “I needed someone to counsel me about drugs and domestic violence. I needed to know how to deal with the pressure. I’m the only one in my family that used drugs. I didn’t know about drugs. No one in my family knew about drugs.” She added that she thought young people today were better informed about drugs than she was, but that they need interesting and fun programs to keep them off the streets and out of trouble.

In reflecting on what might have helped him as a teen, one man said: “When I was a kid, I didn’t know I had another choice, a better choice. My mom told me but I thought she didn’t know.” In order to reach at-risk youth, he believes that “kids need to hear from people who have been there. You have to give it to them raw. Tell young people about the dangers and what you know based on your own experience. Tell them that friends aren’t what they appear. You are going to pay. You need to be honest. They need to learn that for the wrong things you do, you’re going to receive consequences.”

One woman thought that she might have been helped if she were better informed about heroin and crack cocaine. She also considered the possibility that “it would have helped me if my mother had been there showing us, guiding us.” She paused for a moment and then added: “But who’s to say?” One of the men felt that the unavailability of parents and particularly fathers, increased the risk of drug use by children and teens: “They need someone to provide guidance

and tell them the consequences of using drugs. A lot of kids don’t have support, there are no parents at home. Boys need father figures and mentors.”

A third woman speculated: “Maybe kids are more educated now about drugs. I didn’t know nothing. Prevention starts at home and needs to follow up at school. Programs should be required because the kids need to know what drugs do. If I knew what the drugs did to you and the toll they take, it might have stopped me.” She emphasized: “Parents need to talk to kids. My mother never talked to me about nothing. I talk to my kids about drugs. I have to—my 7-year-old thinks the gangbangers are cool.” She thought that it might also be possible to warn children and teens about the dangers of drugs through “good films.”

...more resources must be directed toward services for at-risk children.

Follow-up with Participants

EESN continues to provide services to participants after they complete the program. However, as participants frequently move and may not have working telephones, it can be difficult for staff to maintain contact after they complete or leave the program. After completing the class and the initial job placement period, it is up to the participant to maintain the contact necessary for receiving additional services. Participants are eligible to continue to receive transportation passes during their first 90 days of employment, which also encourages them to maintain contact with project staff. Others contact the staff for advice about resolving on-the-job difficulties and for employment leads.

Two months after their interviews with CIR, two participants had completed the EESN class. Three were still employed at the same job, and two of them had completed 90 days. The two men who were unemployed had since found jobs; one as a night watchman in North Lawndale and the other as a factory worker at a plant on the South side.

One participant, who had never worked before in his life and was working part-time at the time of his interview, had since started a second job at a factory. However, he did not

know about a past arrest warrant, which had been issued in another state before his incarceration in Illinois. As a result, on a recent visit to that state to see his children, he was arrested, put in jail, and has lost both of his jobs. An EESN staff member commented that this arrest for a past offense was particularly unfortunate since the participant was working so hard to turn his life around and was staying out of trouble. He also commented that more information is needed about the issue of unresolved past arrest warrants, speculating that they might contribute to the numbers of EESN participants who drop out during the class or suddenly discontinue with placement services.

CONCLUSION

It has been widely recognized that low-income communities have high rates of involvement in the criminal justice system. The magnitude of this involvement is clearly delineated by the data in this report: nearly one-quarter of North Lawndale's adult population became involved in the criminal justice system in 2001, and nearly three-fifths of all North Lawndale adults in 2001 were on probation, parole, sentenced to prison, or incarcerated. In order to address this issue through policy changes on sentencing and by increasing the resources and services for ex-offenders, NLEN plans to continue and expand its efforts directed at:

- Increasing public awareness about the interconnected problems of substance abuse, crime, unemployment, and poverty.
- Increasing awareness among government and community agencies of the need for pre- and post-release services.
- Advocating for basic reforms within the Illinois Department of Corrections in order to improve the employment prospects of ex-offenders.
- Advocating for increasing transitional services for the incarcerated and post-incarcerated.
- Advocating for wider implementation and ongoing improvements in community-based employment services for ex-offenders, with continued participation of NLEN in the Best Practices subcommittee of the State Workforce Board's Taskforce on Ex-offender Employability.
- Advocating for alternatives to incarceration for non-violent, drug-related crimes.

Further research needs to be conducted to assess the complex consequences of so many adults being involved in the criminal justice system and of the large numbers of ex-offenders returning to the community from prison. Effective advocacy for alternatives to incarceration for non-violent offenses requires accurate information not only on the need for alternatives, but also on the forms these alternatives might take, and the resources necessary to support them.

Authorization of sentencing alternatives is the first step; however implementation requires allocation of adequate resources. For example, Illinois HB 1961 provides Cook County judges with the authority to sentence women detained in Cook County Jail for certain nonviolent felony offenses to a pilot Residential Treatment and Transition Center rather than state prison. As yet, no funds have been allocated to support the pilot Center. NLEN is planning to work with the police, courts, the Department of Corrections, legislators, community organizations, and funders to build support for a demonstration project in North Lawndale that offers an alternative to incarceration for non-violent offenses.

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