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# **A NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF INCARCERATED MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN**

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## **Executive Summary**

An analysis of the needs of incarcerated women and their children was conducted in 1999 for the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department in Boston, Massachusetts. This earlier study concluded that incarcerated mothers had a wide variety of challenges including lack of access to stable living arrangements, unsafe and inadequate housing, marginal education, limited job skills, poly-drug addiction, and family instability. It was argued, at that time, that ignoring the difficulties faced by these mothers and their children was setting the stage for increased risk for recidivism among the mothers and poor health, education, and behavioral outcomes for the children (Gabel & Johnston, 1995). The goal of this study is to determine the current educational, familial, economic, health, criminal justice and social conditions of sentenced or awaiting trial women at Suffolk County House of Corrections to provide an overview of the challenges faced by these women as they try to re-enter mainstream society.

### **Methodology**

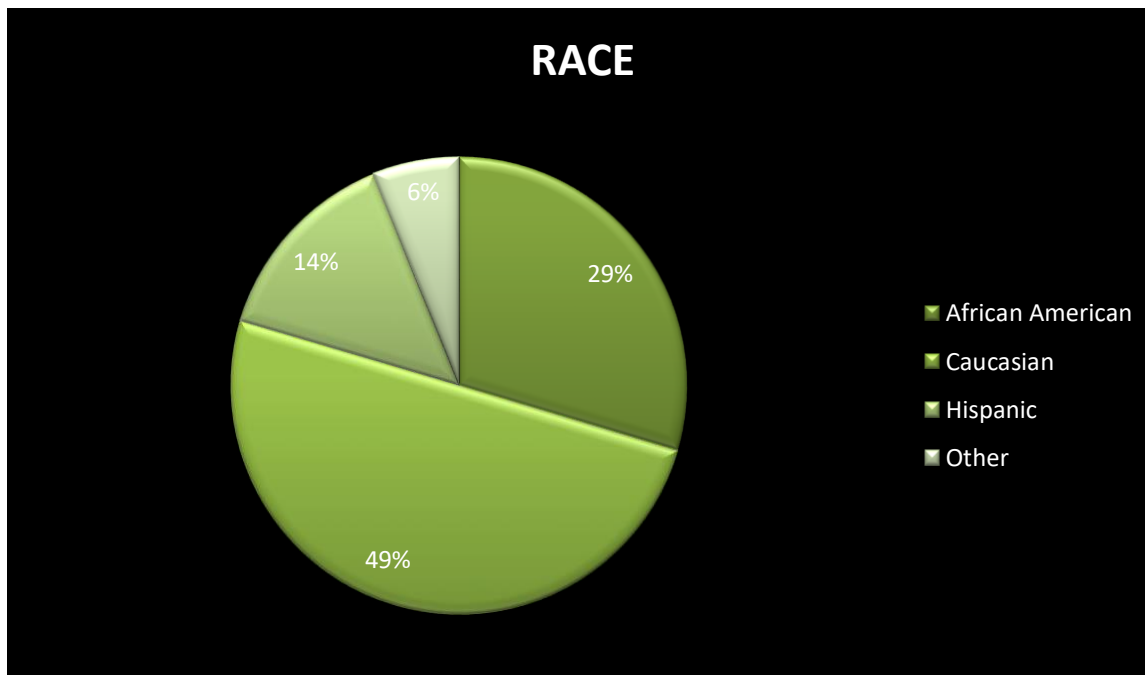
Two weeks before the administration of the survey a flyer was posted on the bulletin boards in the two women's units. The researchers visited the women's units to introduce themselves, explain the consent form, compensation and discuss the goals of survey. Over the next 15 weeks a survey was administered to 70 pre-trial or sentenced volunteers at Suffolk County House of Corrections – South Bay. A \$10.00 gift card was offered each woman to compensate for the anticipated one hour face survey.

There are two women's units housing approximately 100 sentenced and awaiting trial women. The racial distribution is mixed. The average age is 25 to 32 years. Many of the women residing at the House of Corrections are undereducated and underemployed. Approximately 70% are charged with committing drug offenses. Half are awaiting trial. We anticipate that our sample population will be reflective of the larger population of sentenced and awaiting trial females housed at the Suffolk County House of Corrections-South Bay. Permission for conducting this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board of Suffolk University and the Suffolk County House of Corrections.

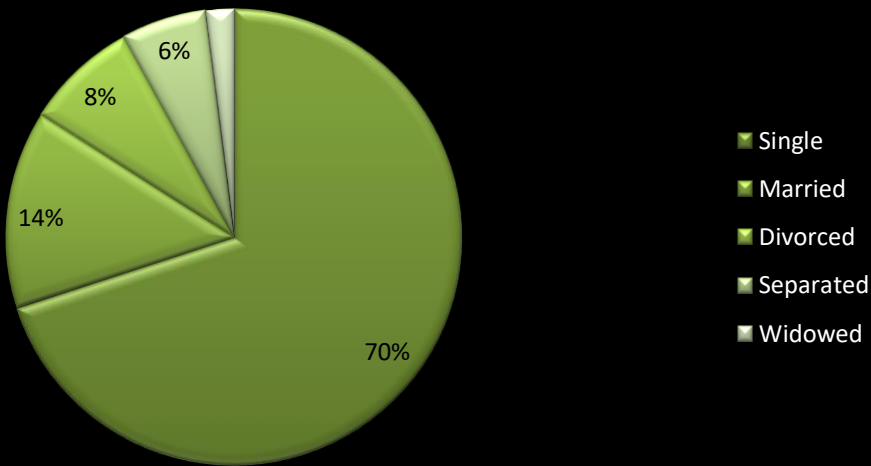
## Demographics

The median age is 31 years with the majority of the women between the age of 26 and 35 years. Almost half (49%) of the sample are Caucasian. The majority (70%) are single never married. As one would expect two-thirds of the women report their last residence as a town located in Suffolk County. Ten percent (9.6%) report they are homeless. Many of the women lived at their most recent living arrangement for 3 or more years. Almost half completed high school. Of those who did not complete the traditional high school curriculum, 18% completed a GED program and an additional 16% are working on it while they are at Suffolk County House of Corrections. Over one third (35%) of the women are employed mostly in service related industries. Thirty-two percent are dependent on social services, 16% admit that illegal activity is their primary source of income and 18% rely on other family members or friends.

Age	Percent
17-20	1.6%
21-25	15.9%
26-30	28.5%
31-35	23.8%
36-40	11.2%
41-45	11.2%
46+	7.9%
<b>Median Age 31</b>	

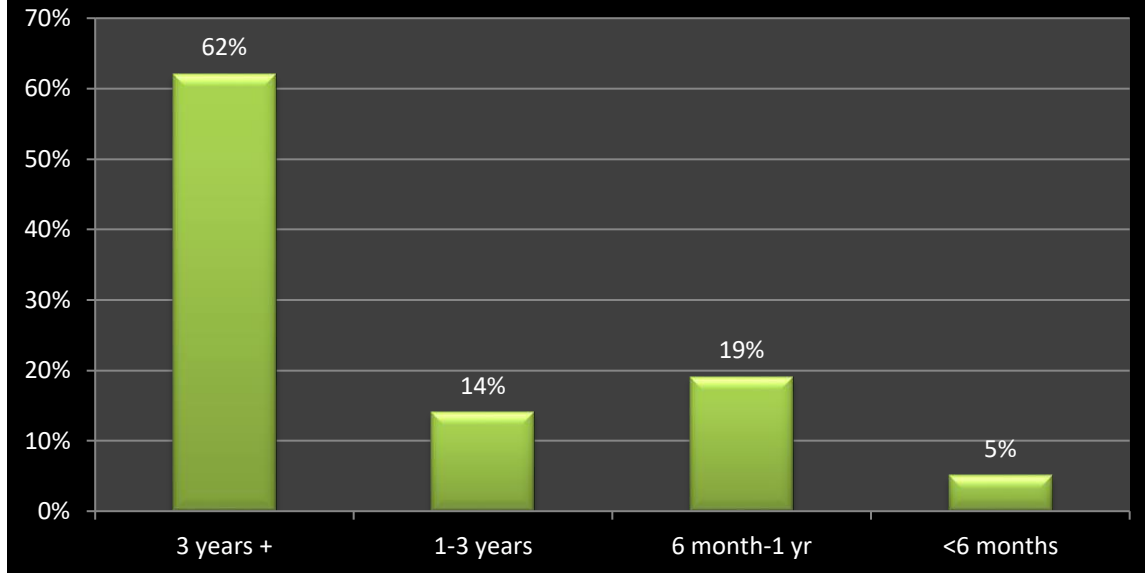


# Marital Status



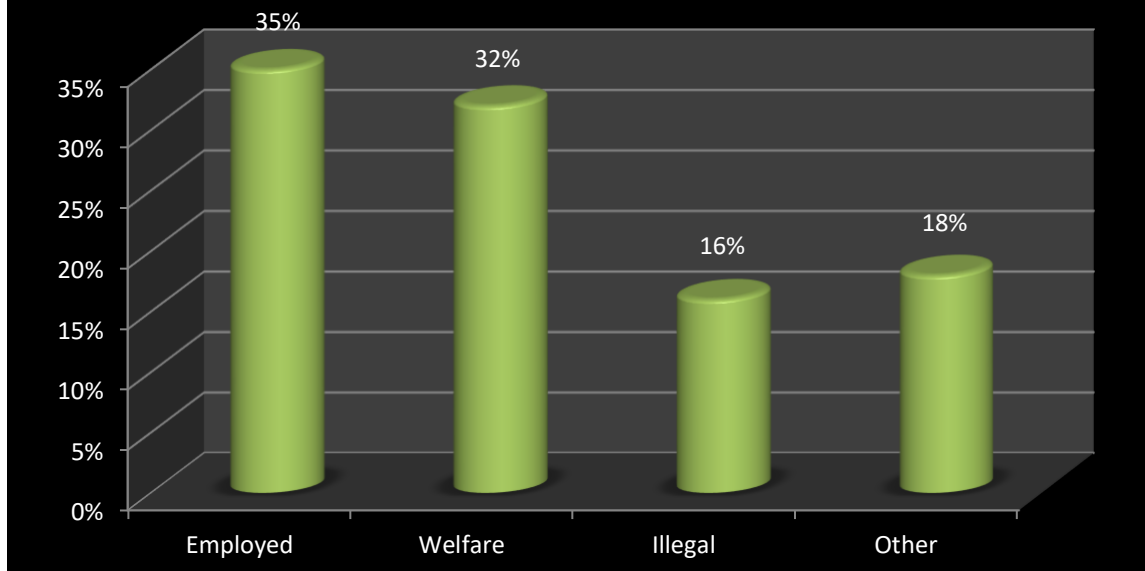
County of Residence	Percent
Suffolk	65.1%
Essex	4.8%
Norfolk	4.8%
Plymouth	3.2%
Middlesex	6.3%
Bristol	3.2%
Barnstable	1.6%
Worcester	1.6%
Homeless	9.6%

## Time at Residence



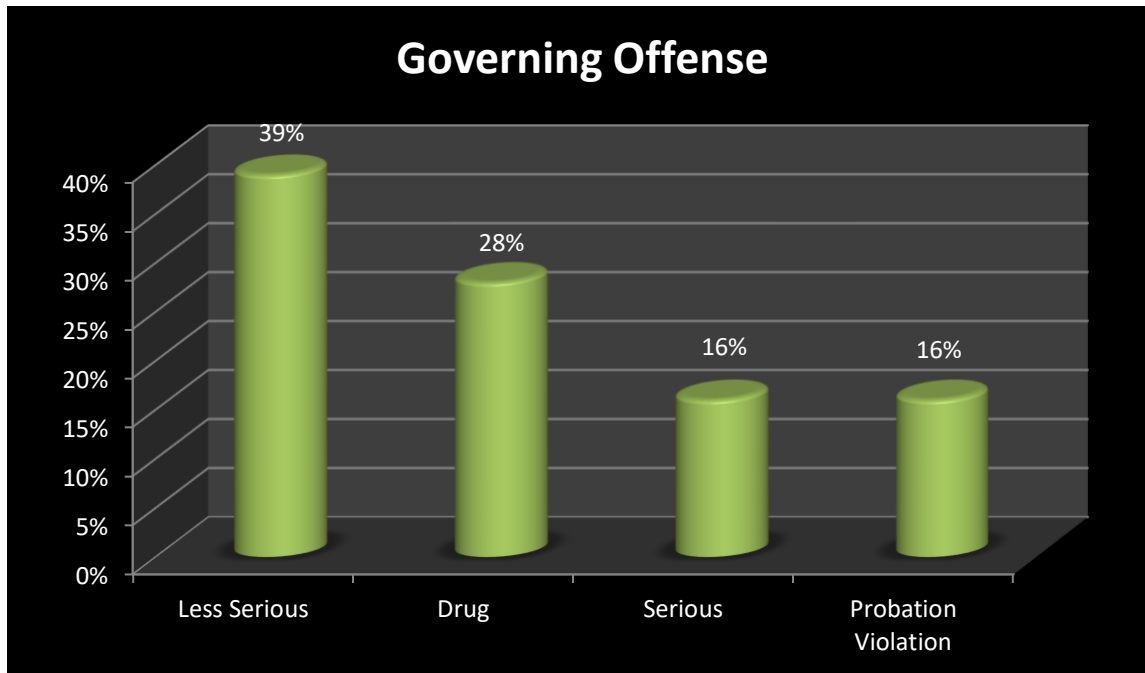
Education Level	Percent
Did Not Complete High School	19.0%
Received High School Diploma	47.6%
Completed GED	17.5%
Working on Diploma Currently	16.0%

## Main Income Source

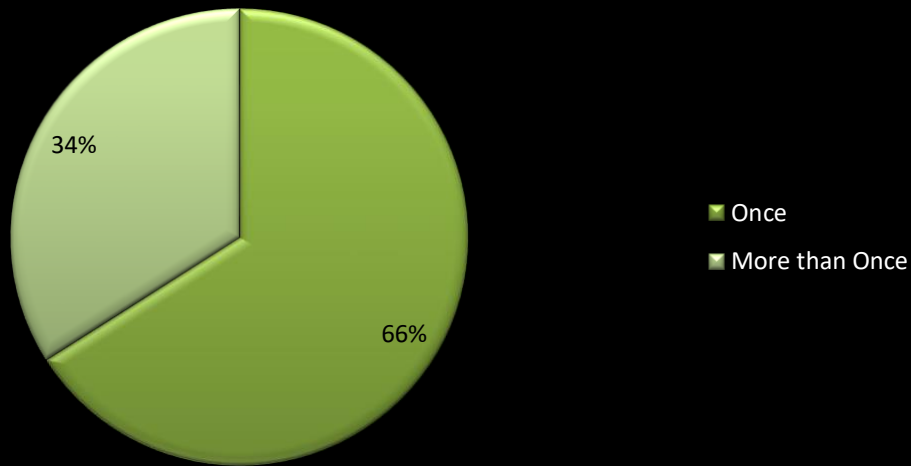


## Criminal History

Two-thirds of the women report that this is their first stay at the House of Corrections. The most likely charge is for non-violent offenses such as property crimes and misdemeanors. Twenty-eight percent are charged with a drug violation and 16% violated their probation. The remaining 16% are facing charges of violent crimes.



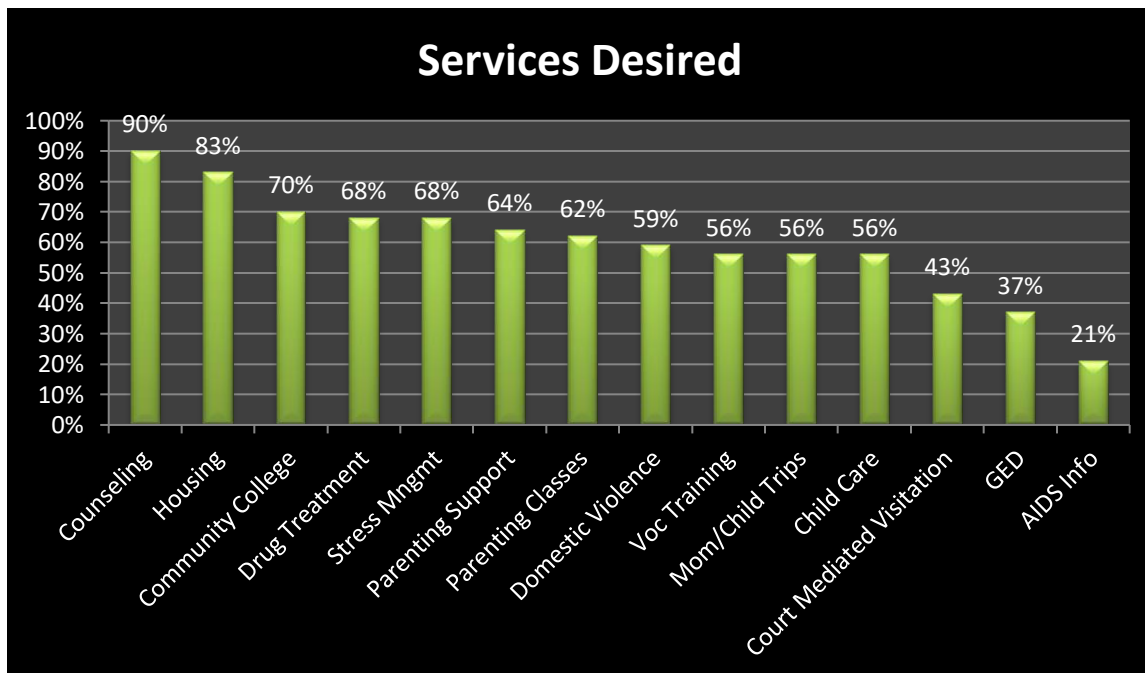
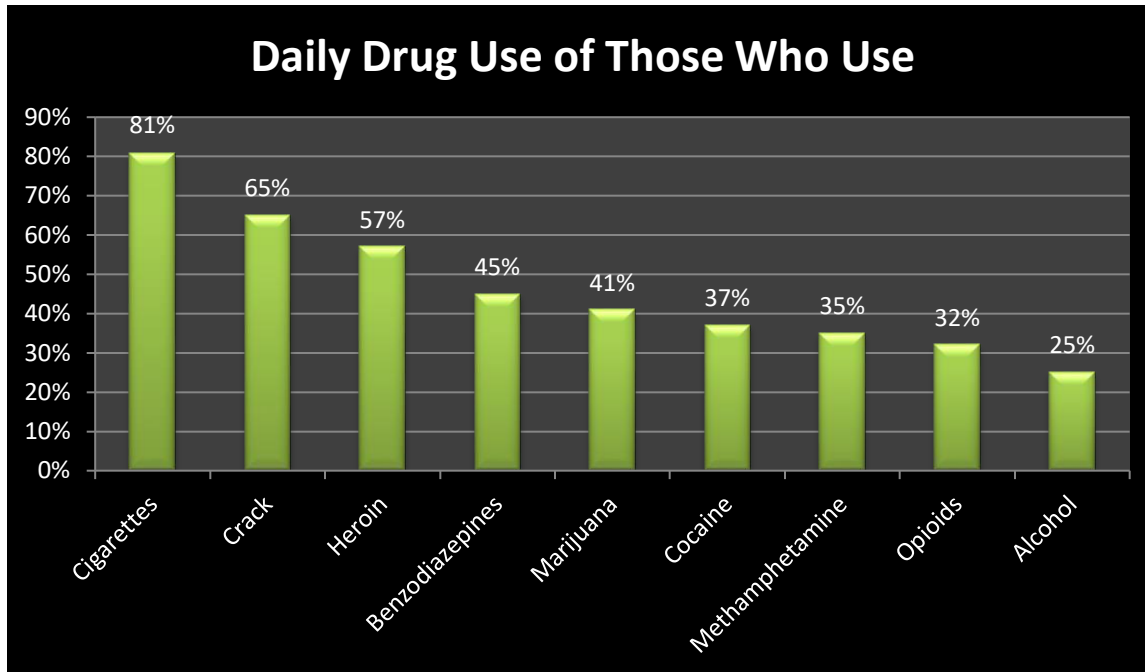
## Frequency of House of Corrections



### Drug Use History

The majority of the women report having used alcohol and cigarettes. The number of women who ever used marijuana, cocaine, crack and heroin range from 60% to 76%. Opioids are 51% ever used while benzodiazepines and prescriptions not prescribed were reported used by less than half. The gateway drugs for this group of women are the substances that are legal for adults or by prescription but illegal for young people or those without a prescription. The women drug use began with alcohol and cigarettes and moved to taking prescription drugs and opioids. The first illegal drug, marijuana, was not used until, on average, 17 years. Cocaine and crack soon followed. Finally the women moved on to heroin and for some eventually methamphetamine.

Drug	Ever Used	Age First Use
Alcohol	94%	13 (1)
Cigarettes	94%	13 (1)
Marijuana	76%	17 (4)
Cocaine	67%	18 (5)
Crack	60%	18 (5)
Heroin	60%	22 (6)
Opioids	51%	16 (3)
Methamphetamine	29%	23 (7)
Benzodiazepines	48%	18 (5)
Rx not Prescribed	44%	15 (2)
		Gateway Drug?



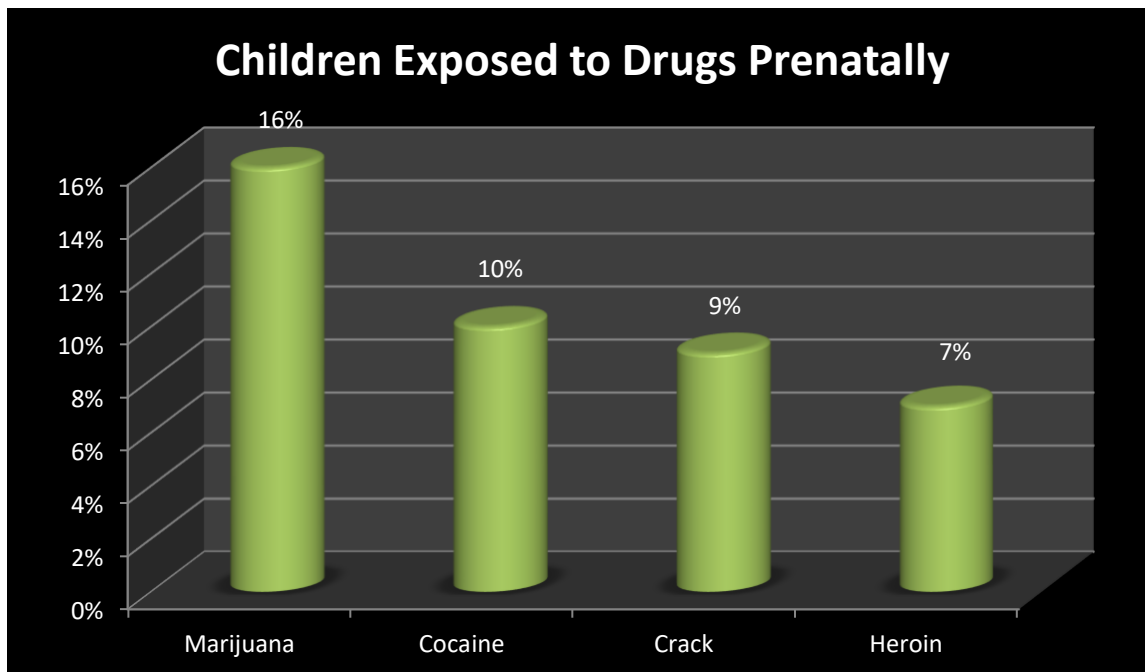
The top five services that the women thought would be helpful post-incarceration are counseling, housing, community college, drug treatment and stress management.

## Children

These 63 women have been pregnant a total of 217 times. The median number of pregnancies is 3. The total number of live births is 134 resulting in an average of 2 children. The median age of the women at the birth of their first child was 20 years old. Three quarters had at least one miscarriage and 57% had an abortion. The average age of the children is 10 years, excluding those aged 18 and over. Some of the women reported using drugs while pregnant. Sixteen percent of the children were exposed prenatally to marijuana, 10% to cocaine, 9% crack and 7% heroin.

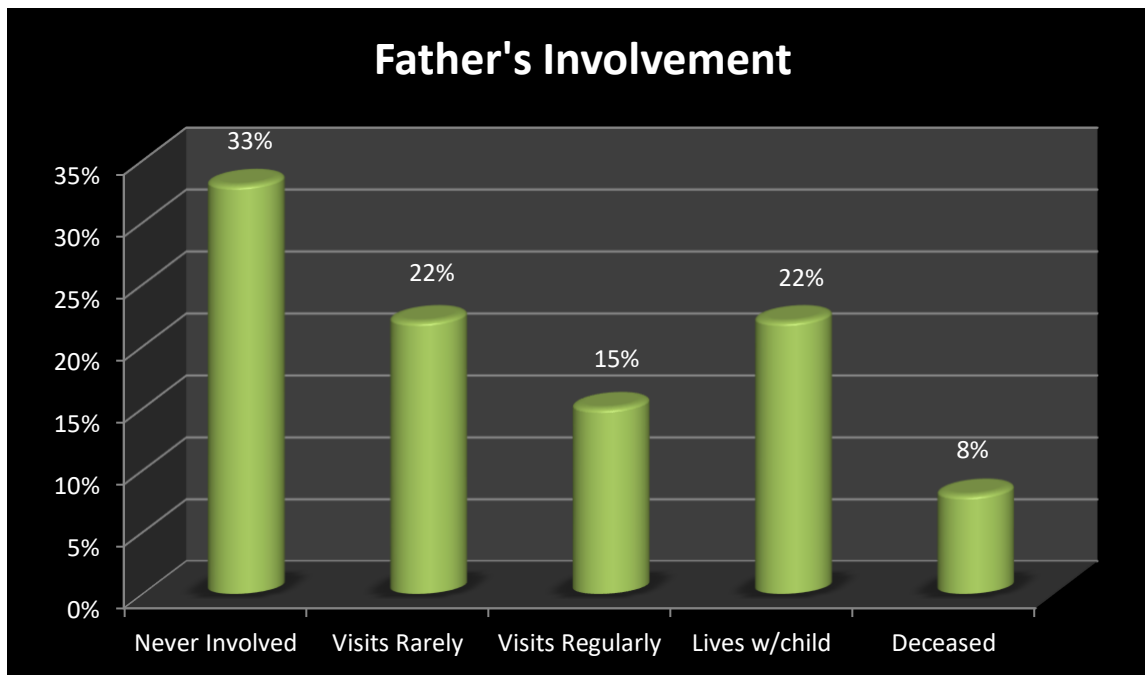
Pregnancy & Birth	
Total Pregnancies	217
Median Pregnancies	3
Total Live Births	134
Median Live Births	2
Median Age 1 <sup>st</sup> Birth	20
Miscarriages	75%
Abortions	57%
Children under 18	112 (83%)

Children Demographics	
Age (mean)	10 years
Gender	50% males
Enrolled in school	58%

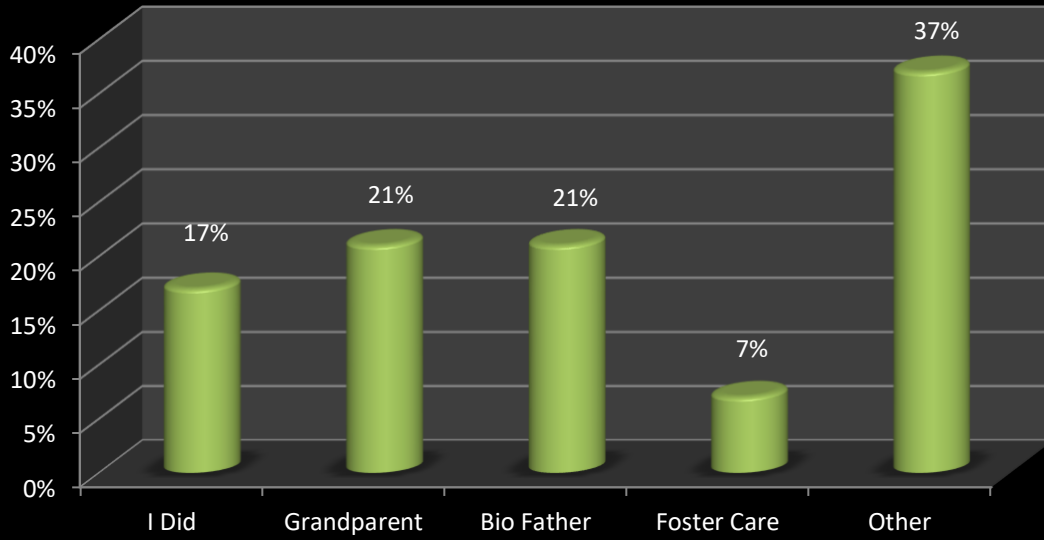


The father of the child is most likely an ex-boyfriend (60%). The current husband or current boyfriend is the biological father for 17%. Twelve percent of the births are the result of a relationship with a friend. Fifty-five percent of the fathers are never or rarely involved with their child.

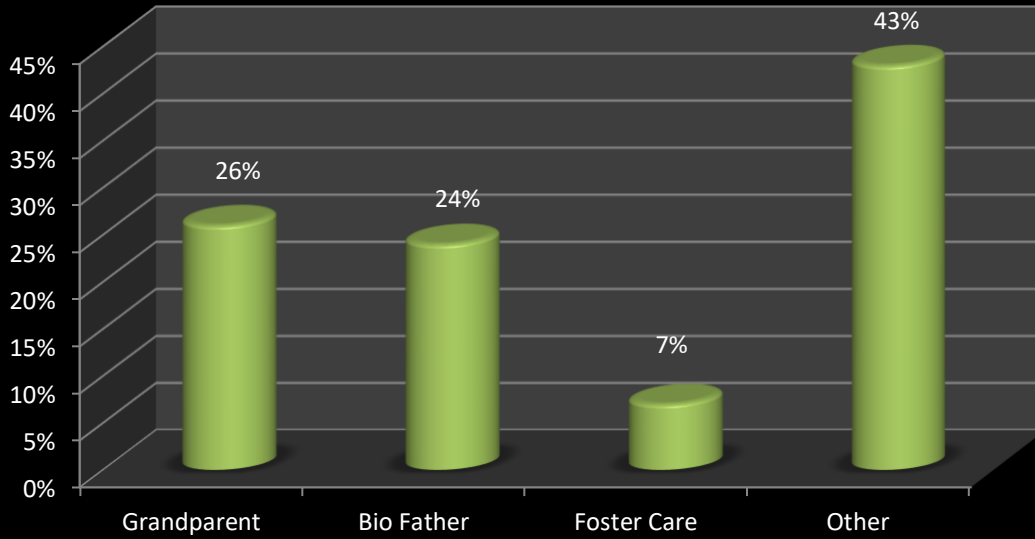
Mothers Relationship with Child's Father	
Ex-Boyfriend	60%
Ex-Husband	11%
Current Husband	11%
Current Boyfriend	6%
Friend	12%

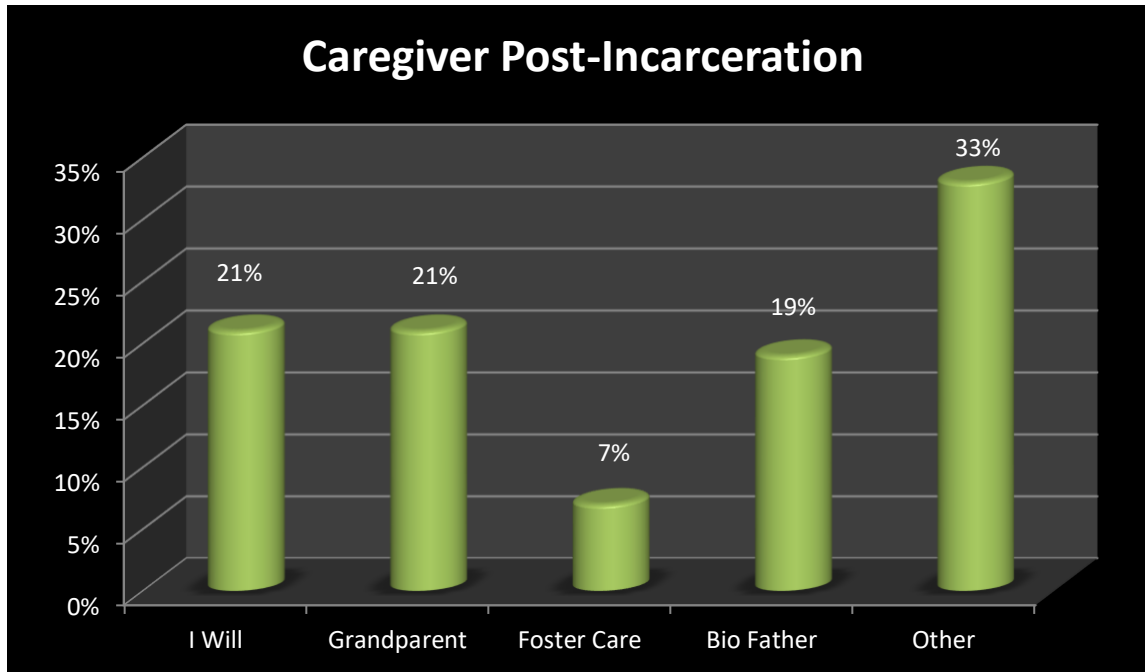


### Child Caregiver Pre-Incarceration

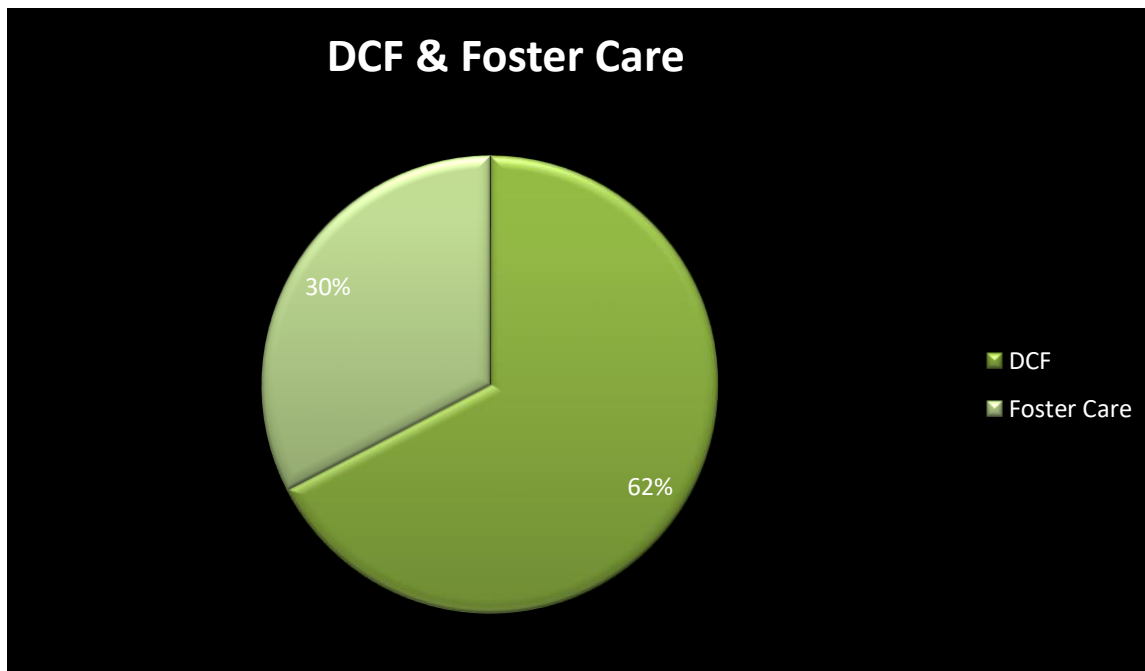


### Child Caregiver During Incarceration





While grandparents often take the role of parenting when the mother is unable to care for the child other family members or friends are far more likely to assume caregiving roles.



The mothers report a number of psychological issues exhibited by the children, the most likely is anxiety/depression (14.9%) with 10% being treated for a mental disorder. Almost 13% are reported to have problems with violent/aggressive behavior. About one third of the children are

enrolled in special education classes. Almost half of the mothers believe that their child would benefit most from counseling.

<b>Child's Psychological History</b>	
<b>Hyperactive</b>	13.4%
<b>Anxiety/Depression</b>	14.9%
<b>Violent/Aggressive Behavior</b>	12.6%
<b>Treated Mental D.O.</b>	10.4%
<b>Phobias</b>	4.5%

<b>Child's Life's Experiences</b>	
<b>Special Education</b>	31.0 %
<b>Neglect</b>	31.3%
<b>Death Someone Close</b>	28.4%
<b>Emotional Abuse</b>	15.7%
<b>Physical Abuse</b>	3.0%
<b>Sexual Abuse</b>	4.5%
<b>Rape</b>	2.2%
<b>Witness Violence</b>	31.3%
<b>Interventions for Children</b>	
<b>Counseling</b>	49.1%
<b>Day Care</b>	24.1%
<b>Stress Mngmt</b>	25.9%
<b>Anger Mngmt</b>	20.5%
<b>Drug Education</b>	14.3%
<b>Sex Education</b>	13.4%
<b>Dental</b>	37.5%
<b>Educational Assistance</b>	34.8%

## **Summary**

Some aspects of the women's lives indicate improvement compared to the earlier study. Women are more likely to have a high school diploma and employed full or part time. These improvements may be the result of the rehabilitative programs that have been introduced at the Suffolk County House of Corrections-South Bay. Programs include anger management, vocational training, educational courses, parenting skills, substance abuse treatment and reintegration programming.

Drug use and abuse continue to be a defining aspect in the lives of incarcerated mothers. Drug abuse may explain the increasing number of white women from outside of Suffolk County, increase reliance on welfare, unstable housing, dysfunctional family structure, numerous unwanted pregnancies and repeated arrests/incarcerations resulting from drug involvement. The

current study indicates that incarcerated mothers in 2016 are more likely to have ever used heroin and methamphetamine. These women are more likely to start using alcohol, cigarettes, crack and heroin at an early age as compared to the 1999 study participants.

The chaotic lives of the often drug-involved mothers are reflected in the emotional problems displayed by the children. Many children suffer from emotional problems and learning disabilities. These challenges are recognized by the mothers. The program that the women considered to be most beneficial for their children was counseling. By ignoring the problems of these children, we are setting the stage for much greater future troubles.

Based on these findings five recommendations can be made. (1) Continuation of the rehabilitative programs offered by Suffolk County House of Corrections-South Bay. (2) Continuation of an intensive substance abuse treatment program that includes traditional self-help programs, counseling and medically assisted drug treatment that should be arranged pre-release. (3) Interventions that are implemented must focus on the mother-child relationship if that relationship is still intact. (4) Pregnancy prevention is essential. As many of the women are drug involved the probability that they will have access or ability to take the prescribed daily birth control medication is low resulting in abortions, miscarriages and unwanted children. For women who are willing more permanent birth control arrangements need to be made prior to release. (5) Further study is needed. The study was limited in size and scope because of budgetary constraints. Many questions still need to be investigated.