

# Illinois Women's Prison Promotes Breastfeeding and Maternal and Infant Health

## Background

Since 1980, the number of women in jails and prisons in the United States has [increased](#) dramatically. Of women incarcerated in state prisons, more than 60 percent [have children under 18 years old](#) and 80 percent [are mothers](#), most of whom are the primary caretakers for their children. Over the past decade, the Decatur Correctional Center, a women's prison in Illinois, has implemented an innovative program to keep mothers and their infants together. Through education and support, women in the Moms and Babies program develop parenting skills and bond with their infants, including through breastfeeding.

Given the demographics and the specialized needs of pregnant and parenting women, some prisons offer a unique opportunity to keep eligible women and their infants or small children together. These programs offer parenting classes, support, and assistance using trauma-informed approaches. Generally, the goals of these programs are to [improve](#) parenting knowledge, increase bonding and improve relationships between mothers and infants, and to [reduce](#) psychological stress and recidivism. Research suggests that prison nursery programs meet these goals. One [study](#) showed these efforts can significantly reduce recidivism, citing a program where 86.3 percent of women remained in the community after release from prison.

In Illinois, approximately 2,558 women were [incarcerated](#) as of April 2017. In 2007, the Illinois Department of Corrections began the Moms and Babies program at the Decatur Correctional Center. The program is designed to meet the general goals of prison nursery programs described above, allowing non-violent offenders to keep their babies with them until age two. The Illinois Department of Public Health provides classes, such as health education, as well as lactation support and guidance. Eight eligible mothers and their babies live in a safe and supportive living environment within the prison, receiving specialized nutrition and nutrition counseling, medical monitoring, and family counseling.

## Steps Taken

- The Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) and the Illinois Department of Corrections developed Life Start for Women, a 10-week class at the Decatur Correctional Center with information on nutrition, physical activity, chronic disease prevention, stress management, and general health.
- The team added other classes, including Helping Women Recover, a trauma-based course to help women in recovery from substance use disorders. More than 500 have completed the course. A third class, Beyond Trauma, helps women work through their traumatic past and better understand their previous actions and future options.
- Through the Moms and Babies program, IDPH staff work with pregnant women to advocate for their unique needs, such as additional nutrition, and train prison staff on the needs of pregnant women. The health department also provided the women's prisons with "baby bags," which include a warming blanket, suction, baby hats, and other specific tools to ensure that these are on site for a delivery.
- IDPH provides lactation support through patient education materials for pregnant women, and has purchased refrigerators, breast pumps, and provided guidance on safe milk storage to staff and women.

## Next Steps

- Since 2007, more than 90 women have gone through the Moms and Babies program. Only two have returned to prison within three years of release and only two were discharged from the [program](#).
- IDPH is conducting a program evaluation on the effectiveness of breastfeeding support, though anecdotally, program staff have observed higher rates of initiation and duration compared to women not in the program. According to a staff member, some women are breastfeeding for the first time, even if the baby born at Decatur Correctional Center is their third child. [Other research](#) also suggests the importance of breastfeeding support for women in prison. For example, similar effects were [observed](#) among women in the Indiana Women’s Prison. Women who participated in the Indiana Women’s Prison nursery program were [significantly more likely](#) to breastfeed their infants compared to women who gave birth before the program was implemented (60% compared to 33%).
- The Moms and Babies program has a goal of housing up to 20 mothers and babies. The team would also like to increase lactation resources, particularly for low literacy participants.

## Lessons Learned

The team offers the following “lessons learned” to other states who have interest in developing or enhancing prison-based parenting support and nursery programs.

- *The needs of incarcerated women are great:* Incarcerated women have complex needs so it is impossible for staff to focus exclusively on one issue, such as breastfeeding, without additional focus on helping women identify and begin their recovery from trauma.
- *Cross-sector work builds bridges to support women and children:* Health department and corrections staff learn from one another on ways to support and benefit women and potentially interrupt intergenerational cycles of trauma.
- *Meet women where they are:* The health department team offers monthly presentations, recognizing that not all inmates will be willing or able to attend classes.

## For More Information

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