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**Does Time in Prison Affect a Mother's Chances
of Being Reunified With Her Children in Foster Care?
Evidence from Cook County, Illinois**

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Another result shown in the table that reinforces the foregoing point is that the reunification rates in overlap children's foster care spells are about 1.4 percentage points *greater* than the reunification rates for foster care spells that are completed before a mother's first prison spell. In other words, when we compare observationally similar mothers who spend time in prison and whose children's foster care spells lasted the same amount of time, we observe that the probability of reunification rates are similar no matter whether their children's foster care spells ended prior to prison or their children's foster spells overlapped with prison. Overlapping prison spells do not appear to affect the resolution of children's foster care spells other than to the extent that they may mechanically increase their foster care spells' durations.

D. Are Reunification Rates Affected by the Length of Ongoing Foster Care Spells

[To be revised] The finding that children's foster care spells rarely start around the time their mothers enter prison suggests that one reason why overlapping incarceration spells are associated with much lower reunification rates than the rates for the other incarceration spells is because when children's foster care spells overlap mothers' prison spells, these foster care spells have already been in progress for a long time. Long foster care spells are likely to end with the mother's loss of her parental rights. As shown by column 3 of Table 3, we find that this explanation may account for about 25 percent of the difference between the reunification rates for overlapping spells and the other incarceration spell types (i.e. $[0.18 - 0.13]/0.13$).

One way to interpret the estimated coefficient of 0.13 in column 3 of the table, is to say we predict that when foster care spells overlap mothers' prison spells and both spells start at the same time, reunification rates are about 13 percentage points lower than

for these mothers compared with the rates for mothers who experience just one short jail spell.

The estimated coefficient of 0.025 suggests that for every year that a child has spent in foster care prior to the year her mother enters prison, the probability that this child is reunified with her mother declines by an additional 2.5 percent points. However, this finding is very fragile. Turning to columns 4 and 8 of the table, we observe that this relationship vanishes after we control for the mother's observed attributes and the duration of the child's foster care spell (i.e., -0.0025 in column 4). In column 8 we observe that one-half of this finding results from our controls for mothers' observed attributes (i.e., -0.0126 in column 8). Overall the results in column 4 suggest that the completed duration of the child's foster care is a much more important determinant of reunification rates than how much of that spell was already completed prior to the start of the mother's prison spell.

E. Does Time in Prison Affect Reunification Rates?

The possibility that time in prison is associated lower rates of parental reunification has been raised by many commentators who have criticed the Adoption and Safe Families Act. To investigate this concern we explicitly examine the relationship between time in prison and reunification rates among overlapping incarceration spells. To do this we control for time in prison or jail using a step function: less than 1 week, 1 week to 6 months, 6 months to two years, and two or more years. (We also experimented with other specifications and found no differences in the inferences we drew from this analysis.) As explained in the previous section of the paper, these controls account for the possibility that time in prison is associated with unobserved individual attributes that in

turn are associated with either increased or lower reunification rates. For example, a mother who receives a longer prison sentence and therefore has a longer prison spells may have had more previous arrests that signal behaviors likely to be associated the loss of a child.

The variables of interest in this part of our analysis are those associated with the interactions between time in prison and whether a mother has an overlapping incarceration spell. As shown by columns 4 and 5 of Table 3, time in prison is not associated with lower rates of parental reunification, except possibly mothers whose first prison spell lasts two or more years. As shown by column 4, these woman reunification rates are about 9 percentage points lower (i.e. $-0.069 - 0.022$) than their counterparts who served less than 2 years in prison. However, the standard errors associated with these figures indicate that this estimated gap is not statistically significant at conventional levels of statistical significance. One reason for this finding is that in Illinois relatively few women serve more than two years in prison. (Recall above in Table 1, we observed that the first prison spell lasted an average of 9 months; the median spell was even shorter.) As a result, the standard errors associated with this estimate are relatively large.

Among women who served between 6 months and 2 years in prison, reunification rates were about 2.2 percentage points greater than their counterparts who served less than 6 months in prison and whose incarceration spell overlapped with their child's foster care spell. Turning to column 5 of the table, we observe that this result holds even after we control for observed individual attributes and the completed duration of children's foster care spells. To be sure, these counterintuitive estimated "effects" are not

statistically significant. But they underscore that time in prison for most of the sample of mothers does not appear to be associated with an increased risk of loss of parental rights.

F. Adjusted Differences in Reunification Rates among Incarceration Spells

As shown by column 6 of Table 3, once we control for a mother's observed attributes, the time spent incarcerated during her first jail or prison spell, and the completed duration of her child's foster care spell, overlapping spells and foster care spells associated with mothers with one short jail spell are about equally likely to be resolved with the mother being reunified with her child (i.e., the gap is -0.025). The same can be said for foster spells that were resolved prior to the mother's first prison spell (i.e., the gap is 0.019). Only foster care spells that begin after a mother has exited from prison for the first time appear to be associated with lower probabilities of reunification.

To the extent that the completed duration of foster care spells may be associated with longer prison stays we reestimate the foregoing relationships excluding this variable from the analysis. We find that after holding constant all other variables in the analysis overlapping spells are about 5 percentage points (i.e., -0.055) less likely to be resolved with the mother being reunified with her child than are the foster care spells of mothers who experienced only one short jail spell. If the foster care spell started prior to the date the mother entered prison this "effect" rises by about 1.5 percentage points for each year the child's foster care spell was in progress prior to the start of her mother's first prison spell.

In the appendix we also examine the relationship between incarceration spell types and reunification when the child in foster care is the mother's youngest child. As indicated above the unadjusted disparities between the resolution of the overlapping

spells and the other spells are larger. However, controls for mother's observed attributes and the completed durations of their children's foster care spells eliminates more than 80 percent of this gap. Still the figures in Appendix Table suggest that there is a stronger case to be made that overlapping spells in the case of a youngest child in foster care is less likely to be resolved with a mother being reunified with her youngest child than is the case for the other incarceration spell types.

VI. Discussion

Summarize findings:

- (a) Few foster care spells start around the time a mother is incarcerated. About 75 percent are in progress for more than one year prior to a mother's first prison stay.
- (b) Reunification unlikely if child's FC "overlaps" with mother's prison spell.
- (c) This finding holds in both Pre- & Post-ASFA, but the gaps are most pronounced *prior* to ASFA taking effect.
- (d) Lower reunification rates for "overlapping" foster care/prison spells can partly explained by other variables.
- (e) One factor is that FC spells have been ongoing for some time prior to entering prison for the first time and longer foster care spells are associated with lower reunification rates.
- (f) Time served in prison not strongly associated with reunification rates.
- (g) Time served in prison is very short for the median female prisoner.
- (h) Post-ASFA era developments not consistent with time in prison "causing" lower reunification rates.

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Table 1
Mean Characteristics of Incarcerated Mothers with Children in Foster Care,
by Prison and Short Jail Stays

Characteristic/Outcome	At Least One Prison Spell	Only One Short Jail Spell
Days in 1 st Incarceration Spell	322.2	2.6
Incarcerated less than 6 months (%)	48.0%	----
Days focal child in foster care	1,734	1,443
Child in FC while Mom incarcerated (%)	55.3%	44.0%
FC child reunified with mother	13.5%	25.6X%
African American (%)	80.7%	79.4%
Highest grade attended	11.31	11.52
High School Dropout (%)	48.1%	41.7%
Age of Mother	33.1	33.8
Number of Children	3.87	3.31
Only 1 Child (%)	23.3%	33.5%
Ever Received Food Stamps (%)	95.3%	90.3%
Employed in Illinois 1995:I – 2003:II	57.6%	65.6%
Holding Offense:		
Drug Law Violation – Sale	9.5%	2.9%
Drug Law Violation – Possession	27.3%	25.5%
Theft	12.0%	13.1%
Fraud	2.8%	3.1%
Domestic Battery	0.8%	10.6%
Other Battery	2.7%	6.2%
Child Endangerment	7.1%	5.9%
Sex Law Violation	7.2%	8.9%
Number of Incarcerated Women	1,328	1,241

Notes: See Section III and Appendix for details on the construction of the prison and short jail samples of mothers. Source: Authors calculations from merged IDOC/CCDOC/Chapin Hall IDB data base.

Table 2
Reunification Rates with Oldest Child in Foster Care,
By Timing of Prison and Short Jail Stays

Panel A – Includes Censored Foster Care Spells

Oldest Child’s Foster Care Stay:	Type of Incarceration:	
	Prison	Short Jail
Ended Prior to First Incarceration	28.8%	42.3%
Overlaps with First Incarceration	5.3%	11.4%
Starts During First Incarceration	16.0%	42.9%
Begins After First Incarceration Ends	14.0%	22.2%

Panel B - Excludes Censored Foster Care Spells

Oldest Child’s Foster Care Stay:	Type of Incarceration:	
	Prison	Short Jail
Ended Prior to First Incarceration	28.8%	42.3%
Overlaps with First Incarceration	8.3%	20.3%
Starts During First Incarceration	44.4%	66.7%
Begins After First Incarceration Ends	31.0%	54.5%

Notes: Censored foster care spells are spells that were still in progress when the sample frame ended in 2002. These spells are were yet unresolved. Panel B is limited to foster care spells that have resolved either by reunification with the mother, and adoption of subsidized guardianship, or some other outcome, such as the child turning 18 and leaving child welfare. Source: Authors’ calculations from merged IDOC/CCDOC/Chapin Hall IDB data base.

Table 3
Estimates of the Effect of Time in Prison on the Probability of an Incarcerated Women Being Reunified With Here Child after Prison
 (Percentage Point Differences with Women in Short Jail Spells; Right Censored Spells are Excluded)

Oldest Kid only								
Timing of Foster Care and Short Jail Spells and The Probability of Reunification								
Model		year >= 1999	year >= 1999	year < 1999	year < 1999	all years	all years	all years
Dependent Variable		Reunification	Reunification	Reunification	Reunification	Reunification	Reunification	Reunification
Independent Variables								
FC 1		-0.076	0.155	-0.315	-0.195	-0.139	0.019	-0.001
		(0.126)	(0.097)	(0.146)	(0.170)	(0.100)	(0.099)	(0.099)
FC 23		-0.161	0.165	-0.558	-0.273	-0.320	-0.025	-0.070
		(0.122)	(0.094)	(0.147)	(0.172)	(0.099)	(0.098)	(0.103)
FC 6		0.120	0.213	-0.033	-0.188	0.019	0.054	0.062
		(0.131)	(0.104)	(0.174)	(0.202)	(0.108)	(0.105)	(0.104)
Log FC Length			-0.115		-0.099		-0.104	-0.103
			(0.010)		(0.006)		(0.005)	(0.005)
year >= 1999						-0.094	-0.029	-0.069
						(0.022)	(0.019)	(0.032)
Interaction FC23 , year >= 1999								0.070
								(0.039)
Constant		0.286	0.880	0.700	0.786	0.513	0.753	0.772
		(0.121)	(0.144)	(0.145)	(0.197)	(0.099)	(0.120)	(0.120)
Controls		No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
# of Observations		776	772	1,076	1,076	1,852	1,848	1,848
R-Squared		0.07	0.36	0.07	0.34	0.09	0.35	0.35

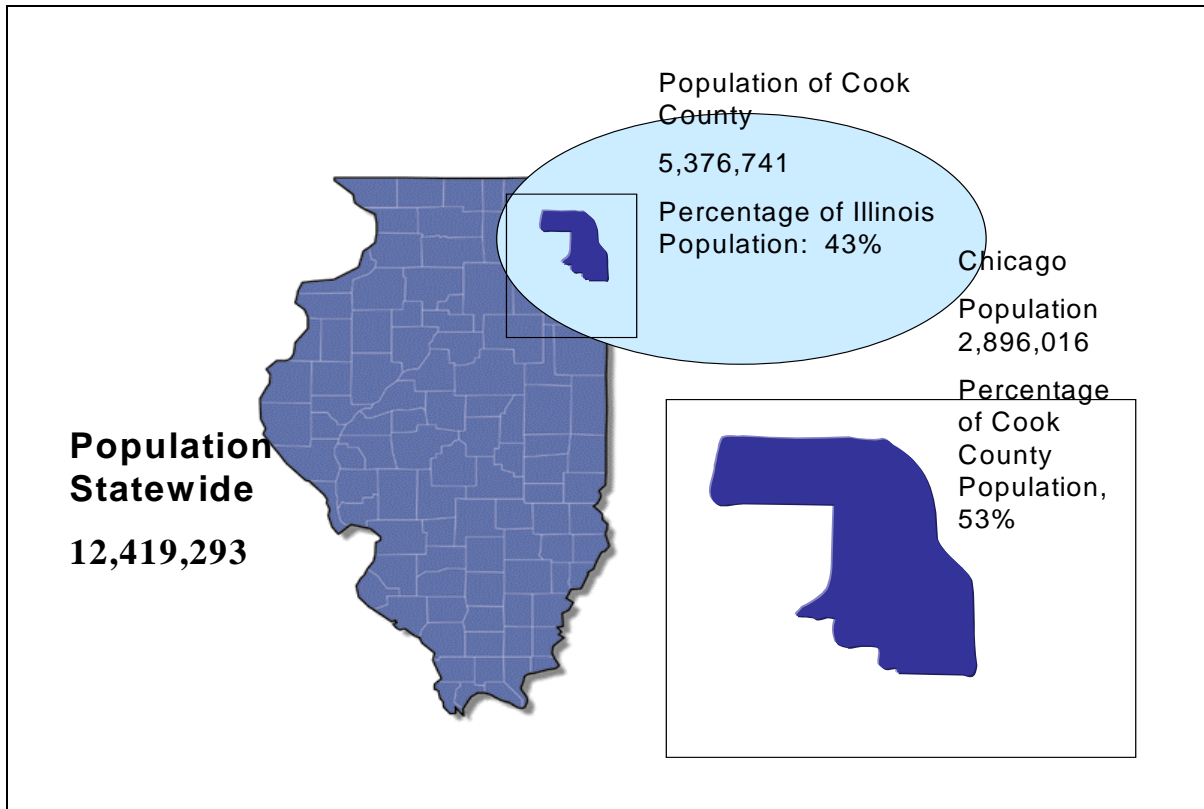
Notes: See Table 1 for a list of control variables.

Table 4
Estimates of the Effect of Time in Prison on the Probability of an Incarcerated Women Being Reunified With Here Child after Prison
 (Percentage Point Differences with Women in Short Jail Spells; Right Censored Spells are Included)

Oldest Kid only								
Timing of Foster Care and Short Jail Spells and The Probability of Reunification								
Model		A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Dependent Variable		year >= 1999	year >= 1999	year < 1999	year < 1999	all years	all years	all years
Independent Variables		Reunification	Reunification	Reunification	Reunification	Reunification	Reunification	Reunification
FC 1		-0.010	0.063	-0.315	-0.195	-0.008	0.044	-0.008
		(0.060)	(0.048)	(0.146)	(0.170)	(0.057)	(0.054)	(0.058)
FC 23		-0.066	0.070	-0.558	-0.273	-0.165	0.007	-0.093
		(0.045)	(0.038)	(0.147)	(0.172)	(0.052)	(0.050)	(0.064)
FC 6		0.046	0.031	-0.033	-0.188	-0.010	-0.032	-0.022
		(0.048)	(0.043)	(0.174)	(0.202)	(0.055)	(0.053)	(0.052)
Log FC Length			-0.094		-0.099		-0.101	-0.100
			(0.008)		(0.006)		(0.005)	(0.005)
year >= 1999						-0.086	-0.027	-0.098
						(0.022)	(0.019)	(0.032)
Interaction FC23 , year >= 1999								0.121
								(0.039)
Censored		-0.182	-0.176			-0.172	-0.166	-0.176
		(0.015)	(0.015)			(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.015)
Constant		0.219	0.677	0.700	0.786	0.381	0.678	0.730
		(0.047)	(0.078)	(0.145)	(0.197)	(0.056)	(0.076)	(0.080)
Controls		No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
# of Observations		1,493	1,489	1,076	1,076	2,569	2,565	2,565
R-Squared		0.12	0.32	0.07	0.34	0.15	0.38	0.38

Standard Errors in Parentheses

Figure 1
Cook County, Illinois



Source: George and LaLonde (2004). Stage Two: Women From Cook County Admitted To Jail Or State Prison And Their Children, p. 10.

Figure 2
Over lap Between Jail or Prison and Foster Care Spells

There are Six Types of Foster Care Spells Relative to the Timing of a Jail or Prison Spell among women incarcerated from Cook County, Illinois. As shown by Figure A, in foster care spell type “FC1” the spell starts and stops prior to a women’s first incarceration. Foster Care spell types “FC2” and “FC3” were in progress at the start of the incarceration spell. Foster care spell type “FC6” does not begin until after the woman has exited from her first incarceration spell. As shown by Figure B, only a very small percentage of spells start during the incarceration spell.

Figure A:

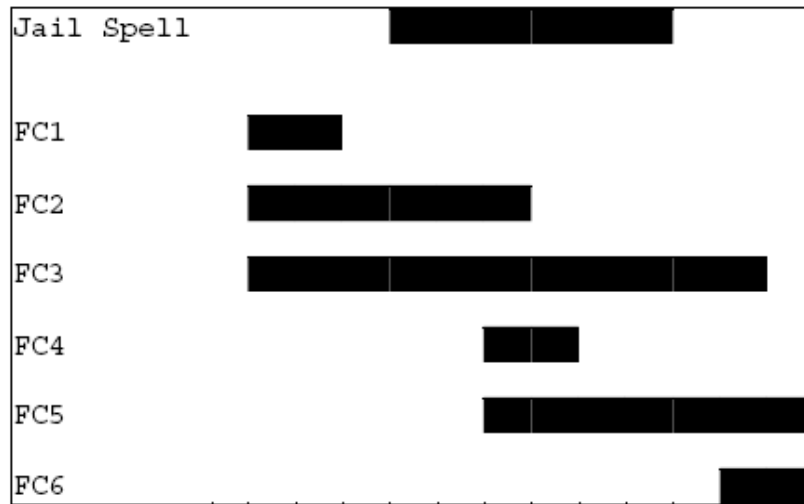


Figure B:

	Total	With Education Information
FC1	12805	8838
FC2	208	134
FC3	13286	9320
FC4	12	5
FC5	239	169
FC6	5893	3682

Figure 3

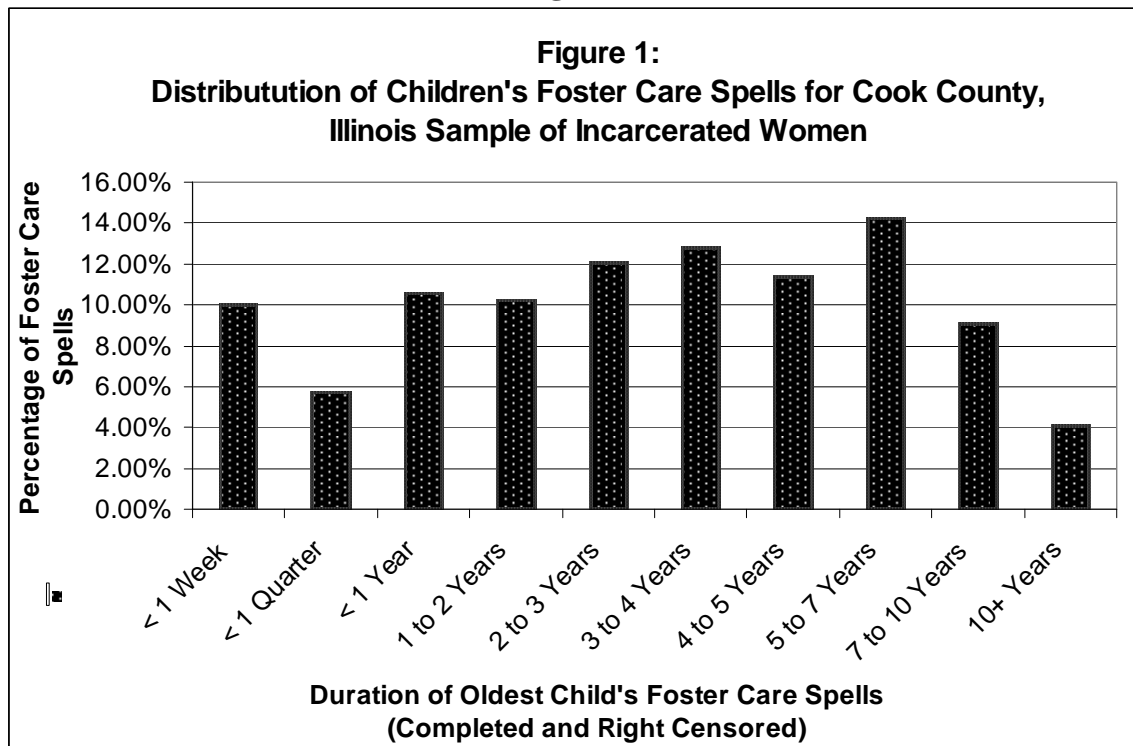


Figure 4
Empirical Probability Distribution of Completed Duration of Focal Child's Foster Care Spell (in days) When Spells Start Prior to First Prison Spell
(End Prior to First Prison Spell: FC1; and Overlap First Prison Spell FC23)

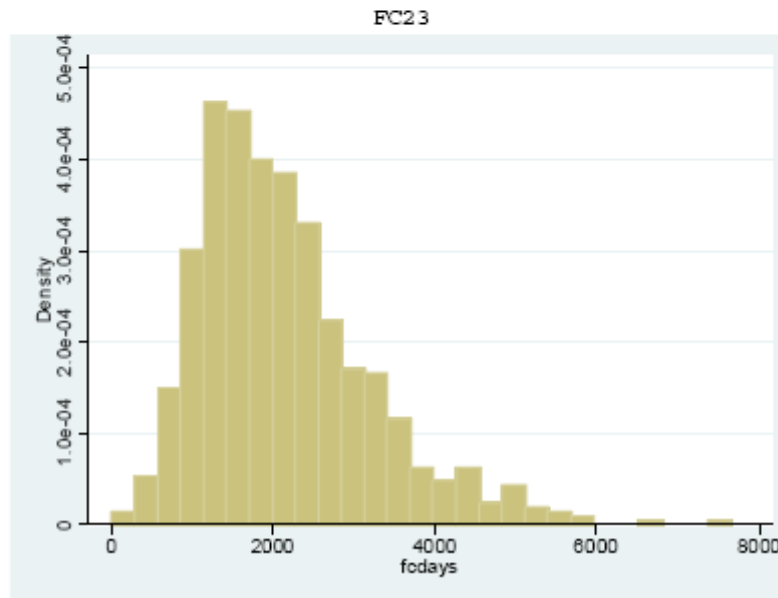
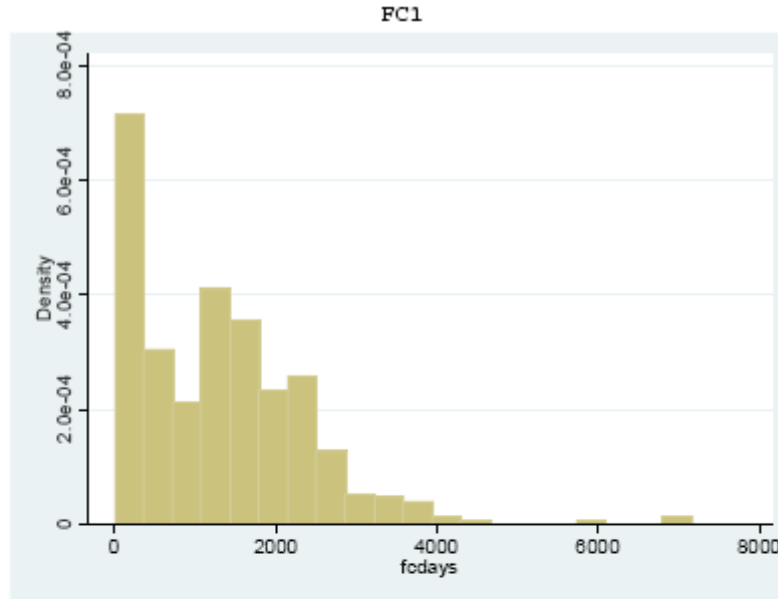


Table A
Construction of Sample for Analysis

Total Women Admitted to Cook County Jail Between 10/92 and 11/02	52,896
Number of Incarcerated Women with a Child Ever in Foster Care Prior to 12/02	7,281
<i><u>Number of Own Children Ever in Foster Care:</u></i>	
1 child	1,982 (27.2%)
2 children	1,622 (22.8%)
3 children	1,329 (18.3%)
4 children	959 (13.2%)
5 or more children	_____ (19.1%)
<i><u>Incarceration Experience of Women With Children in Foster Care:</u></i>	
Ever in prison	1,911
Only once in jail, no prison	2,776
More than once in jail, no prison	2,594
<i><u>Sample of Comparision Group Members:</u></i>	
Only once in jail, no prison	2,776
Incarcerated after 1/1/95	2,159
Jail spell lasted less than one week ..	1,241
<i><u>Sample of Ex-State Prisoners:</u></i>	
Ever in prison	1,911
Incarcerated after 1/1/95	1,403
Prison spell lasted at least 60 days ...	1,329

Table B
Estimates of the Effect of Time in Prison on the Probability of an Incarcerated Women Being Reunified With Here Child After Prison
 (Percentage Point Differences With Women in Short Jail Spells)

Youngest Kid only and less than 18 years old							
Timing of Foster Care and Short Jail Spells and The Probability of Reunification							
Model	A	B	C	D	E	F	F
Dependent Variable	Reunification	Reunification	Reunification	Reunification	Reunification	Reunification	Reunification
Independent Variables							
FC 1	-0.033 (0.026)	-0.073 (0.023)	-0.059 (0.027)	-0.075 (0.024)	-0.071 (0.030)	-0.085 (0.026)	-0.080 (0.025)
FC 23	-0.300 (0.018)	-0.048 (0.018)	-0.227 (0.018)	-0.046 (0.019)	-0.221 (0.022)	-0.042 (0.021)	-0.053 (0.020)
FC 6	-0.087 (0.028)	-0.050 (0.025)	-0.125 (0.028)	-0.051 (0.025)	-0.129 (0.029)	-0.056 (0.025)	-0.054 (0.025)
FC Ongoing (months)			-0.0448 (0.0041)	-0.0023 (0.0045)	-0.0449 (0.0042)	-0.0024 (0.0046)	-0.0022 (0.0045)
Prison Spell < 2 Years					0.017 (0.031)	0.018 (0.027)	0.010 (0.019)
Prison Spell > 2 Years					0.073 (0.052)	0.045 (0.045)	0.027 (0.035)
Interaction PS<2Y w FC23					-0.018 (0.041)	-0.023 (0.037)	
Interaction PS>2Y w FC23					-0.103 (0.072)	-0.047 (0.066)	
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
# of Observations	2,472	2,472	2,472	2,472	2,472	2,472	2,472
R-Squared	0.19	0.44	0.21	0.44	0.21	0.44	0.44
Standard Errors in Parentheses							

Table C
Regression coefficients for other variables.
[To be supplied]

Table D
The Distribution of Days in Jail for Mothers in the Short Jail Sample

And the final distribution of them is:

cjdays	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
0	93	7.49	7.49
1	374	30.14	37.63
2	248	19.98	57.61
3	177	14.26	71.88
4	120	9.67	81.55
5	92	7.41	88.96
6	73	5.88	94.84
7	64	5.16	100.00
Total	1,241	100.00	