Cell blocks

By Angela Caputo
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Standing near a corner of Adams Street just off Cicero Avenue, you’d never guess it’s one of the priciest blocks in the city. The street is jammed with aging brick buildings. A handful are boarded up; some have been that way for years. Others were torn down, leaving vacant lots to people who have hauled in lawn chairs, turning them into public spaces.

“This block doesn’t seem different than any other,” said Elce Redmond, a community organizer who began working in the South Austin neighborhood nearly three decades ago. Back then, the blocks were filled with more middle-class families. Now, Redmond said, it’s “filled with mass unemployment” and “mass poverty.”

Redmond is standing at the east end of an area considered a “block” by the U.S. Census Bureau—a geographic area similar in size to a city block. It’s the incarceration capital of Chicago. In 2011, more residents were sentenced to time behind bars from this one block on Chicago’s impoverished West Side than any other, The Chicago Reporter found.

The Reporter analyzed all criminal cases originating in Chicago using the Cook County Clerk of the Circuit Court records and found that more than 147,000 prison sentences were handed out from 2000 through 2011. That’s putting the state on tap for an estimated $5.3 billion in incarceration costs. A disproportionate number of these sentences has come from areas like this Austin block, which alone is costing an estimated $4 million. For all of Austin, the cost rises to $644 million. Meanwhile, the neighborhood is starved for jobs and other resources that could keep its residents out of prison.

Throughout the city, there are 968 other census blocks where more than $1 million worth of prison sentences were handed out from 2000 through 2011. Back in 2004, Eric Cadora, director of the New York-based Justice Mapping Center, coined the phrase, “million-dollar blocks,” for areas like these. When you start to add up the costs of incarceration in these places, there’s a cumulative effect.

The cost was calculated based on an estimate that average inmates serve out 50 percent of their sentences before they are released. The estimate comes from David Olson, a professor of criminal justice at Loyola University Chicago. Inmates convicted of serious crimes are required to serve out most of their sentences, but the vast majority are incarcerated for lower-level, nonviolent crimes, making them eligible to be released for day-for-day good credit, said Olson, a former researcher with the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority.
The actual costs are likely higher, said Juliana Stratton, executive director of the Cook County Justice Advisory Council, an agency revamped by Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle to strengthen criminal justice reform initiatives. That’s because thousands of inmates sit in Cook County’s jails for months as their cases wind through the courts. On average, it costs $143 a day to house an inmate in the county jails, compared with more than $58 in state prisons. “It saves the state millions of dollars when someone can have time-served in the county,” she said.

Stratton’s office has been working on reforms in the Cook County criminal courts that would make it easier to release people charged with nonviolent crimes on bond, so they aren’t sitting in the local jail while their cases are working their way through the courts. The long-term goal, she said, is to curb costs so that money can be diverted to community development that “speaks to the broader question on community stabilization” in areas where a disproportionate number of inmates tend to come from.

Few are studying the costs of incarceration in Illinois as closely as Kathryn Saltmarsh, the executive director of the Illinois Sentencing Policy Advisory Council, an agency created by the Illinois General Assembly to make recommendations for bringing down corrections costs. In her eyes, researchers have yet to really untangle the long-term effects that mass incarceration, through the “war on drugs” and other tough-on-crime laws adopted during the past three decades, have had on places like Austin.

She predicts that the next wave of research and analysis by academics and government agencies will start to ask an important, and often overlooked, question: What is the impact on communities and society when you choose incarceration?

“We need to ask ourselves,” Saltmarsh added. “Do we want to spend our resources on corrections or do we want to spend them on making sure that people have the resources that will help them not to commit crime?”

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Austin didn’t have as many problems with poverty, drugs or violence back when Redmond started organizing in the neighborhood in 1987. Within two years, crack cocaine hit the West Side neighborhood.

All of a sudden, Redmond said, he was seeing “people I never expected to see selling drugs.” The fast money was the hook, he said. “You saw kids who had two working parents go into the drug business.”

The response was more tough-on-crime laws—which were adopted by local, state and federal officials—and the number of people incarcerated in blocks like this stretch of West Adams Street shot up. “This war on drugs became a war on this community,” Redmond said.

The double whammy was that, as the neighborhood was flooded with drugs, local factories were shuttered in the 1980s and 1990s. First, Sunbeam Corp. closed, followed by Schwinn Bicycle
Co. and Playskool. Thousands of people, many West Side residents, lost their jobs. “It started going down fast,” Redmond recalls.

At 33, Michael Flowers doesn’t remember the “old Austin” he’s heard about from his mother and grandparents, who were one of the first black couples to move to Austin.

“When I talked to my mom, she said, ‘Can you believe Austin high school? Back in the day—they had a horse training program where you could learn how to ride horses,’” Flowers said.

Flowers is bright-eyed, charismatic and doesn’t mince words. He grew up in a fairly middle-class household just off of South Cicero Avenue and spent most of his adult life in and out of prison.

Flowers’ older brother got into drug dealing first. “That lifestyle was so glamorous—to be a young black man with a new car,” he said. At 17, he dropped out of Austin Community Academy High School and was selling—and using—drugs. Heavily.

It caught up with him quickly. Right around the time Flowers turned 17, he was booked in the Cook County Jail on gun possession charges.

Within two years, he was back behind bars, this time nearly 300 miles downstate from his home in the Centralia Correctional Center. He received a robbery conviction after one of his friends pulled a gun on a group of guys at a local liquor store.

During the next decade, he’d go back to the penitentiary five more times on drug and gun charges. It wasn’t until Flowers was nearly 30 that he “started connecting the dots” between the heroin and cocaine he was using and his back-to-back prison stints.

“I was selling to feed my addiction. But this is something that guys do from the neighborhood anyway. It’s more than just selling to support your habit. It’s a lifestyle,” he said. “And I look at it nowadays and I understand. You don’t get a, what do you call it, a … a 401K out here.”

Across Cook County, the number of prison and jail sentences handed out in 2011 was down by 30 percent, compared with a decade ago. But on this block, the numbers went up—by 111 percent during that time.

In all, 120 felony cases ended up with a prison or jail sentence on the Austin census block during those years. A third went to defendants who were 25 years old or younger. If they served out their full time, they would have spent a collective 375 years behind bars.

Most were convicted on a drug charge, which came with an estimated $2.3 million cost to the state taxpayers. Most were Class 1 convictions—for dealing between 1 and 15 grams of cocaine or heroin—that, according to sentencing guidelines, carry between four and 15 years of prison time.
That doesn’t surprise Reginald Bachus, the pastor of Friendship Baptist Church in Austin. He’s seen how his congregants keep their curtains drawn because they’re afraid to see what’s happening outside their front doors.

Police have tried to get a handle on the drug dealing. At the end of last summer, they shut down an open-air market at the corner of Adams Street and Laramie Avenue. “They were just blatantly openly selling,” Bachus said. “The cops were over there making buys and recording sales.” By his estimate, 20 to 30 people were ultimately arrested.

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“We have to start looking at using that money in another way,” said Bachus who is working with Austin Coming Together, an emerging community development organization, to figure out how to jump-start the local economy and put more locals to work.

“If you paid these guys $10 an hour, eight hours a day, you’d come out ahead of what you’re spending on locking them up” in the community jail, Bachus said.

Bachus isn’t from Austin. He lived in Kansas City for most of his life and only moved to Chicago after he got the job at Friendship Baptist in 2006.

In 2010, he saw firsthand how eager some of the young men from the neighborhood were for work when he was scouting people to conduct census interviews. Bachus walked from block to block looking for people to hire. “When they heard it paid $17 an hour, their eyes would light up,” he said. “Then their second question was, ‘Can you have a [criminal] record?’”

The answer was no. By his count, none of them got a job.

“It’s a domino effect,” Bachus said. “We’re arresting young men, but there’s nothing in our community for them to do.”

As far as state Sen. Patricia Van Pelt, a Democrat from Chicago’s West Side, is concerned, chronic unemployment is the neighborhood’s No. 1 problem.

It’s not that there aren’t jobs in Austin. A Reporter analysis of federal labor department data found that there’s roughly one job for every three adults who are 25 or older in the community. The problem is that people from Austin hold less than one of every 10 jobs.

“We have to remove barriers [to employment]. Otherwise we’re setting ourselves up for a downward spiral,” Van Pelt said.

In February, she introduced a bill that would give employers a 10 percent rebate on wages paid to ex-offenders. Van Pelt estimates that roughly 25,000 ex-offenders returned to Chicago last year. “These people need to have some sense of worth to contribute to their families,” she said. “Without it, that creates a certain level of anxiety across our community.”
Flowers said he’s not the only guy in the neighborhood looking to make a break with the past. Many turn back to the corners because it’s the one source of local jobs they can count on.

“If you have a community that won’t allow you to work at the Walgreens or the Wal-Mart, what are you going to do?” he said.

Flowers is hoping to improve his prospects by getting the basics. He’s in night school studying for a GED certificate.

It’s a common barrier. In the census tract Flowers hails from, less than 30 percent of adults older than 25 were lacking a high school education in 2010, according to census figures. That was an improvement over 2000, when it stood at 38 percent.

But he thinks the jobs problem is just the beginning. He was in prison when the housing market collapsed, and foreclosures piled up in Austin faster than any other Chicago neighborhood.

“When I came back and seen the community this time, I was so shocked,” Flowers said. “Abandoned buildings everywhere. Vacant lots. In other neighborhoods, a building becomes vacant, and they bulldoze it. [In Austin], the banks take a home, put a family out and it becomes a drug house.”

“There’s a better way,” he said. “We need to do a rebuilding program. We have all of these abandoned buildings. You have ex-cons with fabulous skills. Give them a job by rebuilding their own communities.”

“If you do that, if you give ex-cons jobs to help rebuild their community, they start to care about it. They’d say, ‘Hey man, you ain’t fittin’ to be selling those drugs right here. We fixing this. We doing this,’” Flowers said. “You know, give them the power back to their community. Give them the keys back to their community.”