

Mothers in Prison:

Restoring Maternal Bonds and Mental Health

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Abstract

In 2016, the number of women in American prisons was 213,722 (Incarcerated Women and Girls, 2018). This is a 700% increase since 1980, when a total of 26,378 women were incarcerated. Of these prisoners, over 60% have at least one child under the age of 18. Incarceration is a dramatic turning point for the entire family, especially in the case of single mothers who are forced to separate from their children. These mothers lose connections with their children, further increasing recidivism rates. Children without a stable homelife or children living around criminal lifestyles are less likely to escape their environment's unlawful behavior, further advancing cycles of deviancy. Changing the succession of recidivism and inherited crime habits comes in the form of redesigning our criminal justice programs. One newly emerging option for incarcerated mothers is prison nursery programs. A limited number of institutions in the United States today will accept women along with their children and, if they do, many stipulations restrict the woman's full ability to create a healthy attachment, as well as a successful integration back into society. In this work, I will explore how the criminal justice system can improve upon the female prisoner's rehabilitation process by creating more mother-and-child bonding programs, as well as adding a mental-health curriculum. With these additions, I believe that recidivism rates will likely decrease due to prison nurseries and mental rehabilitation programs organized for female prisoners.

Keywords: Prison nursery, female recidivism, maternal incarceration and rehabilitation

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Motherhood in America is often equated with folding a load of fresh sheets, an encouraging note slipped into a lunchbox, or baking warm chocolate chip cookies on a Sunday afternoon. For the majority of American families, pleasant realities like this are the experiences that normal children receive. However, for over 200 thousand children living in the United States today, this is not the same reality. Instead, these children live without a mother in the home because she is serving time in a state or federal prison. In Jennifer Warner's article titled "Infants In Orange", she reveals that "at least seventy percent of incarcerated women have at least one child under eighteen, and most have two or three children," (2015, pg 69). Of the mothers who are imprisoned, the majority report that they are the principal caretaker for their child. The lack of maternal guardianship generates an unstable homelife, increasing the risk of childhood and teenage deviancy, often leading to imprisonment later in life.

Of the mothers in state and federal confinement, 6% have children under the age of 2 (Byrne et al., 2012, pg 2). These years of an infant's life are critical to their development, especially when it comes to social attachments and overall behavior. Separation from the mother in these primary years can lead to gaps in general growth and development areas, increased depressive, anxious, and aggressive tendencies, as well as an insecure relationship ability that affects a child throughout their entire life (Byrne et al., 2012, pg 9). Little can be done to prevent the consequences of an incarcerated mother's separation from her infant. However, there are nine states that provide a prison nursery for children born to non-violent women during their incarceration period. Prison nurseries are a mother-and-child bonding program that houses the infant in custody with the mother. Nurseries vary from state to state, but generally the child is

allowed to live for 12 to 18 months with the mother while she receives parenting classes, fundamental baby items, and the ability to give love and attention to her infant.

The combination of a prison nursery and a mental health program can bring reconciliation for incarcerated mothers to their children, to their own state of mind, and to society. However, few programs like this exist for incarcerated mothers and children today, and if they do, strict regulations prevent the child from spending the recommended full 18 months in the mother's care. Additionally, many of the classes offered within the nursery are related to parental duties, not mental health. A specialized female-orientated program, complete with counseling and community encouragement, will promote recovery in mental health and in life outside bars, lowering the recidivism rate. In order to decrease recidivism rates, the U.S. Criminal Justice system should consider adding more mother-and-child bonding programs and a mental-health curriculum to female correctional institutions.

Common Reasons for Female Incarceration

The number of incarcerated women has gone up year after year. The latest demographics show that from 1980 to 2016, the rate of growth percentage has increased by over 700%, which is twice as high as men's rates (Incarcerated Women and Girls, 2018). To understand the increase in the female imprisonment rate, it is vital to look at the most common offenses of women, this being a drug or property crime (Warner, 2015, pg 69). This increase can be traced to the implementation of the War on Drugs campaign, created in the 1970s. The campaign particularly influenced the female incarceration rate, earning it a new nickname: The War on Women (Sharp, 2003, pg 8). The policies of President Nixon placed more minor offenders into prisons due to "harsher drug laws, mandatory minimum sentences, and repeat offender statuses," (Warner, 2015, pg 68). Developments in technology, like drug tests, have also increased imprisonment

rates as well as recidivism rates. If a woman on parole tests positive on a random drug test, she can find herself back in prison. Of the women who do return to prison, most do so on a parole violation over committing a new crime (Goshin, 2014, pg 6). Violation of parole may include moving without letting their parole officer know, refusing to obtain a job, missing a mandatory appointment, or failing a drug test.

The struggle with repeat female offenders is that prison is not the ideal place for their rehabilitation. This is due to the high percentage of incarcerated women who have a mental health issue. This percentage is up to 73-75%, with the largest disorders being depression, PTSD, anxiety, and phobias (Zust, 2009, pg 247; Bebbington et al., 2016, pg 224). Success after release from prison is inhibited by mental illness, leaving women extremely susceptible to returning. Recidivism for women is commonly caused by their depression, which reinforces the abuse of chemicals like alcohol or drugs as a form of self-medication (Zust, 2009, pg 246). Drugs and alcohol are the number one reason for recidivism; "41% of first time offenders use chemicals compared with 63% of second time offenders and 81% of those with repeated convictions," (Zust, 2009, pg 248). Female abuses differ from substance-abusing men who more often exploit chemicals as the means to an adventure or challenge (Sharp, 2003, pg 12). Therefore, an approach to chemical dependency as a mental health problem is imperative if there is to be any rehabilitation for female substance abusers.

How Imprisonment Affects Children

Depression in incarcerated women affects their behavior and actions, making them turn to chemical use as a means to subdue the pain. These poor coping skills are more or less a result of impoverished conditions, where the woman doesn't have the money or resources nearby to manage her problems in an appropriate way. Drug and alcohol dependence, along with short or

long-term imprisonment, affects not just her, but her whole family as well. More specifically, the children of an incarcerated woman experience severe repercussions as a result of their mother's prolonged absence. The younger the child is, the more they are affected by her separation. The early stages of infancy and childhood are most critical for mental and social development in relationships and personality. Specific skills gained during this time include trust, bonding, autonomy, and respect to authority (Carlson, 2001, pg 77). These abilities are developed in conjunction with the mother present and without her, young children "learn that they cannot depend on others to care for them and that the world is an unpredictable and frightening place," (Byrne et al., 2012, pg 11).

Incarcerated women overwhelmingly report that they are the primary caretaker of their child at the time of their imprisonment (Byrne et al., 2012, pg 6). The father is normally absent in these situations, making it hard to determine where the child should go. In cases like these, 53% of children in these cases are given over to their maternal grandparents and 26% go with a different relative (Sharp, 2003, pg 153). Women attempt to place their children with family in order to best preserve their parental rights and their relationship with their kids. However, placing children with unprepared relatives often leads to instability in the child's life. Relatives may be burdened financially and emotionally with the sudden onset of a child living in their home. For a mother who is desperately trying to maintain her parental rights after her release, any relative, no matter their reliability, can look like the best option. In the book, *The Incarcerated Woman*, Susan F. Sharp discusses the issue saying that "this may result in placement choices that are not safe for children. An alternative would be policies that work toward reunification of mother and children, regardless of where the children lived during the mother's imprisonment," (2003, pg 154). For mothers who do not have the ability to leave their

kids with family members, adoption and foster care are the only other options. The children of imprisoned mothers are five times more likely to enter into the foster care system than that of a male prisoner's child (Warner, 2015, pg 71). Whether the child is placed with relatives or with foster parents, it is vital that they stay "with one caregiver for an extended period" and that their environment produces the least amount of danger (Goshin et al., 2014, pg 2). A stable homelife where the child is not exposed or vulnerable to criminal involvement is the most important factor to consider.

Placing children with appropriate guardians and keeping mothers out of prison are significant measures that will lower the current cycles of deviancy that exist in family structures today. Children of incarcerated mothers are "more likely to have criminal justice contact," due to early childhood separation-induced behaviors like depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Goshin et al., 2014, pg 2). The succession of incarceration from generation to generation is a real problem. In a survey conducted in a prison program of 44 women, 59% reported that their mothers have been imprisoned in their lifetime (Carlson, 2001, pg 95). Preventative measures aimed at the children of incarcerated mothers in order to stop the continuation of deviancy. Doing so will bring rewards in the long run with lower incarceration in children and lower recidivism rates in their mothers.

Prison Nurseries

An emerging program that stresses the importance of keeping mother and child together, despite incarceration circumstances, is the prison nursery. These programs, although few in existence, seek to combat the consequences of early insecure attachment in young children. The program is a separate space in the prison where mothers are able to serve out their sentence with their child in custody. Nine states currently offer a nursery and all of them differ on the length of

stay (Warner, 2015, pg 72). The majority offer a time frame of 12 to 18 months, while a few will offer as little as one month or up to 36 months (Recidivism after..., 2014, pg 2). The general criteria for acceptance into these programs include the child's birth during the mother's incarceration, no histories of violent offenses, and a positive behavioral record while in prison. The most current study on graduates of a prison nursery, conducted by Lorie S. Goshin, Mary W. Byrne, and Barbara Blanchard-Lewis in 2014, shows promising results. These children displayed lower "anxious/depressed and withdrawn behavior scores" than children not in the program (Preschool Outcomes..., 2014, pg 7). For many incarcerated women, a prison nursery would be the most beneficial option because it provides a safer environment than that of a relative and it promotes the welfare of a child's future mental health.

The benefits of a prison nursery extend beyond that of a child's health. Prison nurseries prevent recidivism in participants due to the existing "supportive environment and the subsequent secure attachment created during this experience," (Recidivism after..., 2014, pg 7). Traditional prisons have a 30-45% return rate while one state's prison nursery reported theirs at 14% (Recidivism after..., 2014, pg 8). Many nurseries offer and/or require courses like parenting education, work preparation, life skill groups, and possibly even a GED class if the mother did not graduate high school (Carlson, 2001, pg 84). However, the connection between a mother and her child is the most constructive tool for breaking habits of prison relapse. Women are able to learn and practice how to parent within a safe boundary and with staff who are dedicated to their rehabilitation. After completing a sentence at the prison nursery, women are more inclined to "want to continue the bond with their child" and "avoid crimes that could separate them" in order to fully maintain the relationship they have created (Warner, 2015, pg 72). A desirable future

with a child is reason enough for a mother to change her behavior and buy into the rehabilitative program.

Backlash against prison nursery programs is often centered around cost. The most current estimation for a nursery's cost is between \$13,980 to \$24,000 per year for one infant (Warner, 2015, pg 88). This does not include the start-up costs associated with creating a nursery inside a prison, which by nature, are not originally built to be conducive for young children. Expenses for creating a prison nursery include training and paying staff, the remodeling of a section of the prison, and purchasing educational and nursery supplies, all of which can add up to over \$25,000 (Carlson, 2001, pg 80). Despite these seemingly expensive costs, prison nurseries are proven to lower recidivism rates in its participants, which over time, will greatly defray the current price tag (Warner, 2015, pg 88). Furthermore, prison nurseries are not the most expensive option for incarcerated mothers. "Depending on the state, it may be cheaper to house an infant in a prison nursery with their mother instead of resorting to the alternatives that tend to be more expensive and unpredictable," one of which is the foster care system that includes an annual cost of \$21,902 per child (Warner, 2015, pg 89). If a state government is looking for the cheapest and safest option for child placement, as well as a program that aids in the rehabilitation of their incarcerated mothers, prison nurseries are a suitable alternative that satisfies both goals.

Examples of Prison Nurseries

The Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York is considered the epitome of prison nurseries in America and is also the longest-running prison nursery since its opening in 1901 (Yager, 2015, para 12). Superintendent Larry Wayne, of Nebraska's Correctional Center for Women, specifically modeled their new prison nursery, built in 1994, after Bedford Hills' (Yager, 2015, para 32). This specific nursery provides counseling on drug abuses and anger

management problems for mothers, as well as parenting and child classes. The sectioned-off area of the prison looks more like a real daycare and nursery versus an actual prison, in that the rooms are colorful and always unlocked, there are no bars to keep participants confined, and plenty of baby materials, toys, and comfortable furniture are available for widespread use (Warner, 2015, pg 72). The normal limit of stay is 12 months with 18 months being the maximum allowance in cases where the mother is about to be released from prison.

Although Bedford Hills is an exemplary program in America, it does not quite equate to other designs across international borders. Germany's prison nurseries are extremely progressive in comparison, one reason being that they consider "motherhood as a bona fide job" (Warner, 2015, pg 76). Women can keep their children in a prison nursery up until the child's 3rd to 5th year of age. In cases where the child is too old for the nursery, imprisoned mothers can apply for eligibility day-leave. In these situations, the mothers may return home to take care of the child during the day and then arrive back at the prison once her household duties have been accomplished. Mexico's prison system requires that all children born in incarceration must stay with their mother until her sentence is finished, or until the child is 6 years old. This has created an overwhelming population of young children living inside women's prisons, approximately two thousand to be exact, where the government has actually "founded a school and hired three teachers to work with the children," (Warner, 2015, pg 78-79). These examples of prison childcare in other countries are extremely unconventional compared to America's and may seem too radical for our use. However, one takeaway from looking at international approaches should be that keeping the mother and the child together is of utmost importance. The standing that currently holds in normal women's prisons is that the child shall be removed from its mother within 48 hours of birth (Recidivism after..., 2014, pg 2). While keeping the child in prison until

5 or 6 years of age is extreme in comparison to America's average of one year in prison nurseries exclusively, there should at least be some type of middle ground that our country can adopt in accordance with international models.

The Effects of Incarceration on Families

Alternatively, American women who are not fortunate enough to live in one of the nine states with a prison nursery, or have their child born within their incarceration period, have much more limited communication and connection with their offspring. This is notably true for parents of younger children who are unable to write or hold a conversation over the phone, which are the most common forms of communication for families affected by incarceration. Prison visits are another option; however, over 50% of women in state prisons have reported receiving no physical visits from their children during their imprisonment (Sharp, 2003, pg 155). The family's distance from the prison itself play a large part in this figure, as well as poverty, in that relatives cannot afford or take time out of their busy schedules to drive the possible 4+ hours to visit. These women who do not receive continued contact with their children may suffer from increased symptoms of depression (Zust, 2009, pg 248). The sudden loss of the maternal role can produce "negative consequences on the woman's emotional stability" (Sharp, 2003, pg 154). Having regular face-to-face contact during imprisonment is a strong positive influence in the mother's rehabilitation process and overall protector of family relationship bonds. In this way, mothers can "work through the grief surrounding separation" and kids can "express their feelings about separation" and "see the reality of their parents' incarceration," (Sharp, 2003, pg 156). Unfortunately, as stated above, regular visitation is not always feasible.

Prison nurseries are the best approach to immediately eliminate the effects of decreased contact, yet they are exclusively for children born at the time of incarceration. However, there

are plenty of additional mother-and-child bonding programs that can be implemented in a prison setting that can accommodate children of all ages. The Mabel Bassett Correctional Center in Oklahoma offers multiple visits per week, and even an overnight visit, with a playroom for mothers and children featuring toys, books, and other child-orientated activities (Sharp, 2003, pg 160). Buses are a promising option for families that live an extensive distance away from the mother's prison. The Center for Restorative Justice Works, a non-profit organization based out of California, features a program called "Get On The Bus" where kids of varies ages are transported on large charter buses to at least 13 different prisons in the state of California (Get On The Bus, n.d.). The available dates are placed near Mother's Day or Father's Day, with meals, gifts, and counseling provided along with the transportation (Get On The Bus, n.d.). Services like "Get On The Bus" make an effort to provide all children and all parents the opportunity to keep up family relationships despite distance and wealth.

The Inclusion of Mental Health Programs in Prisons

Programs that facilitate mother-and-child visitation are constructive, but they are reactionary in their nature. The best arrangement for a child is for their mother to be at home and stay out of the criminal justice system for good. Another useful way to cut down on recidivism, besides bonding programs, are increased mental health curricula's in the prison. Services to combat depression, anxiety, and PTSD are proactive in their approach, focusing on addressing the very reason why most women find themselves incarcerated: substance abuse. Therapeutic communities have proven to be the most valuable resource since prisons themselves "do not conduce to effective treatment delivery," (Jakobowitz et al., 2016, pg 238). These communities are typically defined by the participant's and staff's efforts to serve as therapists for one another in a separated area from the general prison sector. The therapy is conducted between members

verbally and on paper, either in journals or workbooks. Various aspects of psychological wellness are encouraged in these therapeutic communities including awareness, interpersonal and intrapersonal affirmation, and empowerment (Zust, 2009, pg 248). Therapeutic communities monitor daily attitudes and behaviors, use positive peer pressure, role modeling, house meetings, and classes to all involve members in the rehabilitative process. The normal atmosphere a women's prison creates is "a culture of violence" in which "women feel helplessly trapped and hopeless," (Zust, 2009, pg 247). INSIGHT, created by Verona Gordon of the University of Minnesota, is an example of a model therapeutic community program that has been proven to work "effective[ly] in reducing recidivism and relapse for women," (Sharp, 2003, pg 138). The program is 20 weeks long; the first half addresses the reframing of the conscious and subconscious self and the second half focuses on female empowerment and setting attainable goals (Zust, 2009, 248). INSIGHT and other therapeutic communities combat mental illness as a means to stop substance abuse in women. Reducing depression and increasing self-esteem have made all the difference in the rehabilitation of female prisoners. Moreso, women in the INSIGHT program even "talked about raising their children differently in order to stop the cycle of violence," which is an effective outcome that supports both mothers and their children (Zust, 2009, pg 249).

Family Foundations Program

In 1999, the Los Angeles Centers for Alcohol and Drug Abuse (LA CADA) opened a new alternative sentencing program for substance-abusing mothers called the Family Foundation Program (FFP) (Wiewel and Mosely, 2006, pg 66). The project is directed towards mothers of young children who have a history of substance abuse as well as a non-violent criminal record. The FFP combines a prison nursery with the concept of a therapeutic community in that women

can receive the desperate mental health services they need while also having the opportunity to live and bond with their child. The assistance women receive in the FFP include "parenting skills development, health services, substance abuse and mental health counseling, child development services, and vocational training," (Wiewel and Mosely, 2006, pg 66). The six different strategies popularized in the FFP, created with the goals for full rehabilitation, include reframing her thinking, empowering her self-esteem through positive relationships with other women, using celebratory visual and emotional tools – like ceremonies and rituals – and performing a thorough assessment of every woman (Wiewel and Mosley, 2006, pg 77-85). The FFP goes above and beyond any other prison reform program in order to successfully reintegrate women to society as well as provide their children with a dependable maternal parent. Addressing the common complications of incarcerated women, including mental illness and family separation, is the best chance prisons have at reducing the recidivism rate as well as keeping future convicts out of the system.

Conclusion

The Family Foundations Program proves that prison nurseries, with the inclusion of a therapeutic community approach, are extremely beneficial in the lives of incarcerated women and their children. However, the program is an alternative sentencing program, meaning that the woman must receive a special order from a court judge in order to serve out her sentence in the FFP. The FFP is also directed out of California and isn't available or large enough to provide for substance-abusing mothers across the nation. Therefore, respective state prison systems should consider using the FFP as a model for properly rehabilitating female prisoners in their separate states. Considering the high number of women in prison who have children, mental illnesses, and drug and alcohol dependences, state and federal prisons should deliberately provide

programming that addresses these most common conditions of inmates. This equates to adding a prison nursery and incorporating communal mental welfare principles into the prison atmosphere.

Prison nursery experts across the board advocate for additional nursery placement in America's correctional facilities, as well as an age extension to the current allowance for infants in prisons. Though 12 months is the normal age of release, Mary W. Byrne, of Columbia University School of Nursing emphasizes that separation "before 18 months of age has lifelong effects on a person's ability to establish healthy relationships and interact in a positive way with the world," (Byrne et al., 2012, pg 11). If current prison nurseries are looking to improve their structure, adding an extension of stay is one way to accomplish this. Another suggested improvement for existing prison nurseries is to include "counseling services, parenting support, and substance abuse programs," all of which are included in the FFP's model of a therapeutic community (Byrne et al., 2012, pg 12). This way, the principal reason for female incarceration, drug-related crimes, can be proactively addressed while also focusing on children affected by their incarcerated mother's separation.

Beyond prison nurseries, other mother-and-child bonding programs devote concern specifically for the older children of incarcerated women. Playrooms and bus transportation are just two of the expanding available options for mothers and their children to preserve their relationship. One of the impediments in starting up beneficial bonding programs is the lack of understanding and acknowledgement. More informative measures should be taken by prison advocacy groups and their liaisons in order to bring public attention to simple family-relational projects. This can be executed in the form of increased news coverage as well as new videos and pictures. Another barrier for creating more visitation programs is money. Prison budgets are

already pressed as it is, but if state-wide, county-wide, and community-wide efforts are put together, a large enough support system can round up plenty of donations to get these programs off the ground. Local businesses, churches, and non-profit organizations are the primary influencers with the ability to provide volunteers to drive buses, donations of baby cribs and rocking chairs, or even something as simple as money, on behalf of our women's prisons and the children associated with them. Helping female prisoners and their children is paramount if we are to create a safer and more enjoyable life for one of America's most forgotten and outcast populations. If prisons were to focus on rehabilitation over incarceration, recidivism rates and the cycle of generational deviancy would decrease, meaning the dream of a society with fewer mothers and children in prison would become our reality.

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