

Raising an Infant in a Jumpsuit: Analyzing the Benefits of Prison Nurseries from a Sociological Perspective

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Abstract:

Raising an Infant in a Jumpsuit: Canada's need for a more contemporary approach to prison nurseries

The purpose of my paper, "Raising an infant in a jumpsuit: Prison Nurseries," is to address the complex problem of pregnant incarcerated women and what to do with their newborns. The rate of women imprisoned has risen substantially in recent decades, and with the increase has arisen the question: What to do when a woman gives birth while incarcerated? Although Canadian research would have been optimal for this paper, I found a huge gap in that very little research had been done on prison nurseries within Canada. Prison nurseries vary around the world; each country has its own criteria for participants; for the purpose of this paper, I focused on the United States' system and its statistics. The research that I found on prison nurseries is very positive: lower rates of reincarnation for the mothers, stronger attachment between mother and baby, and relatively low risk to the baby's physical health while in the nursery. This paper argues that prison nurseries are beneficial and that, although there are valid critiques, the benefits far outweigh them. Further research could be done on differing prison policies on nurseries in order to implement the most constructive prison nursery system in Canada.

The incarceration of women has increased in the last decade, and their particular needs have brought attention to this issue. As of 2009, 20% of individuals charged with crimes were female, making up 11% of the inmates in provincial admissions (Mahony, 2015). With the rise in female inmates a more thorough understanding of the unique issues women face in the corrections system is necessary. The topic of this paper will focus on one such of these issues: women who are pregnant upon incarceration or conceive while serving their sentence. This subject has come to the forefront in recent years because of female inmates conceiving during conjugal visits (Bolan, 2017). Regardless of when or how inmates conceive, the question arises: What will be done with the infant when it is born?

For many pregnant inmates, the only options for their infants are: foster care and Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) involvement; care by a family member; or adoption. However, in a few select correctional facilities, women have another option available: prison nurseries, alternatively called Mother-Child programs (Warner, 2015). Canadian prison nurseries fall under provincial and federal legislation, depending on the prison, and because of this, slight variations are visible in each province on the rules and regulations to participate (Gandhi, 2008). These mother-child units are segregated sections of the facility that have been updated into nurseries, providing amenities for child health and development, including toy rooms, bright walls, and outside play areas (Quan, 2017). Children can live with their mothers up until the age of five on a full-time basis, as long as the inmate initially meets the criteria and continues to follow strict guidelines while in the nursery (Quan, 2017). Criteria for these mothers will be addressed later on in this paper. Prison nurseries are not a new phenomenon and have been available in Canada for the past forty years; however, there is still a gap in Canadian studies and understanding of prison nurseries (Gandhi, 2008). The gap is evident in a lack of peer-reviewed articles on Canadian prison nurseries, with most knowledge being developed from news articles when controversial cases arise. For this reason, the research from this point on in the paper will be primarily American. Although Canadian and American prison systems are strikingly different, the experience of a mother and child in prison would arguably be similar.

American researchers have conflicting opinions on whether prison nurseries are beneficial to both mother and child. This paper will attempt to educate on the prison nursery system through analysis of American data, which arguably largely corresponds with Canadian data. To begin, it will dismantle the regulations that govern prison nurseries and the resources

offered in prison nurseries. The paper will also examine at recidivism rates among women who have participated in the prison nursery programs. The term recidivism refers to a return to prison due to the reoccurrence of a criminal act or breach of bail terms after an inmate is released (Goshin et al, 2014b). Furthermore, analysis of the infant's physical safety and the importance of infant attachment will be explored. The article will seek to develop a better understanding of prison nurseries through a balanced analysis of the current regulations, resources available in the nurseries, recidivism rates, and physical safety and attachment of the child involved.

Prison nurseries are unique institutions and, as such, each nursery has their own criteria for involvement. The most consistent policies for eligibility of mothers are that they cannot be in jail for a violent crime, nor can they have any child-related offenses on their criminal record (Goshin et al., 2014b). However, because of different state laws, other policies vary deeply, such as the length infants can stay in the nurseries (anywhere from 30 days to 36 months), and mothers being only eligible depending on their remaining sentence and how many beds are available in the nursery (Kanaboshi, Anderson, & Sira, 2017). The policies on age of the infant and length of the mother's sentence coincide in many states because the goal is to release the mother and infant at the same time. In order to do this, the mother's sentence must end within the time that the infant would be removed from the nursery (Kanaboshi et al, 2017). In addition to meeting the criteria to enter the prison nurseries, the mothers also have to compete for limited beds and must be imprisoned in one of the ten states that have prison nurseries (Kanaboshi, 2017). If they do not meet all previously mentioned criteria, their infants will likely be placed in foster care and, after 15 months, the state will petition for termination of parental rights (Kanaboshi, 2017).

Once the mothers have entered the prison nursery program they must participate in certain programming in order to maintain their eligibility. These programs are developed to help the mothers work through the issues that brought them into the system, as well as improve their parenting abilities. In many nurseries, there is mandatory attendance for all programs offered to the mothers and, if they have not completed their GED, they are expected to be working toward completion (Carlson, 2009). When the mothers are not in programming, they have part-time jobs within the prison and take turns watching other inmates' infants while they complete their programming (Carlson, 2009). Nurseries offer “parenting classes, substance abuse treatment, counselling, life-skills training and general education” to help the mother work on herself and

decrease her risk of recidivism (Warner, 2015, p. 67). The mother's days are scheduled out in order for them to spend maximum time in programming and with their infants (Gabel & Girard, 1995). Each meal is taken together, bonding time is scheduled, and the mothers and infants sleep in the same cell at night (Gabel & Girard, 1995). The resources offered in the prison nurseries are meant to help the mother holistically so that when she leaves the system she has a strong attachment to her child, has gained new skills, and is less likely to reoffend.

While in prison the mothers have a regimented schedule of programming, work, or school, and spend time with their child. However, what happens when the mother and child are released and those safeguards are no longer present? One of the confounding criticisms of the system is that, if a mother returns to jail, the prison nursery system is moot, and the child who had spent their infancy in a prison nursery could have been placed in a stable home sooner (Byrne, Goshin, & Blanchard- Lewis, 2012). The topic of recidivism is discussed in Goshin et al. (2014b) when the researchers analyzed a recent study that followed 139 women from the New York prison nursery three years after they were released. The results offer praise to the prison nursery system. Three years after release, 86.3% of mothers were still living in the community, compared to a mere 55% of female inmates that did not go through the prison nursery wing (Goshin et al., 2014b). Of the women that were returned to prison, a majority were because of parole violations rather than committing a crime (Goshin et al., 2014b). Researchers believe that the drop in recidivism can be attributed to the mother creating a safe, secure, and sober attachment to her infant (Goshin et al., 2014b). The resources that are made available, along with the mother's attachment to her child, arguably have a significant effect on the decrease in recidivism.

Although the rates of re-offence have been shown to decrease, some opponents of prison nurseries still have an issue with children being raised in a prison because they feel it is unsafe for the child's psychological and physical health (Pojman, 2002). This criticism is especially evident in nurseries that are overcrowded, where, at times, personalities clash between inmates (Gabel & Girard, 1995). In regards to physical health, according to Gilad & Gat (2013), as of 2009, in the United States there has never been an incident of a child's safety being at risk reported in any of the nurseries. This is of substantial importance as it removes any criticism of physical safety within the nursery. However, physical safety in the nurseries should remain a primary concern in order to continue to keep the infants and mothers protected. Further

preventative precautions could be taken to alleviate overcrowding. In regards to the child's psychological health, prison nurseries are renovated to be bright open spaces, the children share a room with their mother, and stimulating toys are provided, along with the opportunity to play with other children (Goshin, Byrne & Blanchard-Lewis, 2014a). The infants have outdoor play areas and are regularly taken out of the prison by family members or prison staff (Quan, 2017). The environment is developed to be as comfortable as possible and, other than the fences, appears to be much like a home (Quan, 2017). The prison nurseries, although inside of a prison, have been adjusted to be as safe and child-friendly as possible.

A child's physical and psychological safety in a prison nursery is crucial; however, what also needs to be considered is their secure attachment. Psychologist John Bowlby (2008) defines attachment as an emotional bond that formulates a relationship and deeply affects future relationships. Secure attachment occurs when a child is confident in exploring, but uses their caregiver as a safe base – parental trust is foundational (Boyd & Bee, 2006). This is in contrast to avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganized attachment styles, all of which involve a disconnect between the caregiver and infant, resulting in distrust (Boyd, Bee & Johnson, 2006). Building a secure attachment between mother and baby is a large focus for the prison nursery system and, in many cases, it has succeeded. Researchers believe that as many as seventy-five percent of prison nursery infants have a strong attachment to their mothers (Byrne et al., 2012). This surprised some, because many of these mothers have insecure attachments to their own caregivers (Goshin et al., 2014a). With the high percentage of secure attachments, the prison nurseries have accomplished one of their objectives; however, what happens to the child if the mother reoffends? Research from a Nebraska prison nursery reported as many as one third of children did not live with their mothers after release (Byrne et al., 2012). Some infants did not complete the prison nursery program because their mothers did not follow the prison nursery rules and were taken out of the program (Byrne et al., 2012), while others did not reside with their mothers due to incarceration, being placed instead in ministry care or in care of family (Byrne et al., 2012). Arguments have been made that keeping a child with its mother is of the utmost importance and that the attachment they build is crucial to both mother and child's psychological health (Elmalak, 2015).

Most of the arguments against prison nurseries involve mental, emotional and physical safety. A child's safety is of the utmost importance while in the nursery, and, with no reported

incidents in the United States of suspected danger or threat, this argument seems to be of little consequence. However, the strongest argument, damage to attachment, is still controversial. Is it more important to give the mother a chance to build attachment and rebuild her life, or should the priority be allowing the child to build a secure attachment with another caretaker? The opposition to this argument is the fact that even if a child is put in foster care or with a relative, once the mother is released she could still get custody and interrupt that attachment. The argument about attachment, although valid, is a difficult situation. Arguably, regardless of valid criticisms, the benefit of both mother and child in the prison nursery outweighs potential negative effects of separation. The reality is that the infant would have been separated from its mother at birth if the prison nursery system was not available, and, therefore, potential separation should not be a deterrent for the system. After analyzing numerous articles and not finding legitimate arguments against the use of prison nurseries, I draw the conclusion that they can be an incredible benefit to mother, child, recidivism rates, and future generations.

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