

## Prison Nursery Programs: Literature Review and Fact Sheet for CT

### Introduction

As of August 2010, nine states in the United States had prison nurseries: New York, Nebraska, California, Washington, Ohio, Indiana, South Dakota, Illinois, and West Virginia. These programs allow a mother to parent her infant for a finite period of time within a special housing unit at the prison. In most correctional institutions, the program is housed in a separate wing or unit away from the general prison population. All programs provide the mothers with educational training in child development and parenting skills<sup>1</sup>. The oldest prison nursery program in the U.S. is based at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women, a maximum-security women's prison in New York, which was established in 1901. Alternatives to prison-based nurseries can include community-based programs that allow mothers to live with their infants in smaller residential homes/facilities located in the community. While the National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC) and the American Correctional Association (ACA) both provide standards that include the prenatal care of female inmates, neither agency has issued standards regarding the health care and other needs for infants residing in correctional institutions (Villanueva, C.K., From, S., Lerner, G., 2009).

In recent years, there has been an increase in public and government support for the establishment of prison nursery programs and other programs for female prisoners and their children (Goshin & Byrne, 2009). This support is due, in part, to the eight-fold (832%) increase in the number of women in U.S. prisons since 1977 (Glaze & Marschak, 2008). According to data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), in 2004, 4% of women in state prisons and 3% of women in federal prisons were pregnant at the time of admittance. There is growing public awareness of the adverse impact that incarceration has on infants, children, and families in the U.S. Studies have shown prison nursery programs can strengthen parent-child attachment for women and their children. Another impetus for these programs is the urgent need to lower recidivism rates, which have led to prison overcrowding and have been driving up correctional costs. Quasi-experimental studies have consistently found a decline in recidivism rates for those women participating in prison nursery programs up to three-years after having been released from prison (Carlson, 2001).

### Brief Background & History of Prison Nursery Programs in CT

York Correctional Institution (YCI) currently serves as the state's only institution for female offenders. It serves all superior courts in Connecticut and manages all pretrial and sentenced female offenders, whatever their security level. It houses over 1,000 female inmates. Formerly known as Niantic Correctional Institution, YCI was originally a farmstead for wayward women in 1918 and eventually grew its facilities to include a maternity ward and several nurseries.

In 1937, at a time when its total prison population was under 150, there were forty-seven births at the institution and fifty-six additional infants admitted to the facility with their mothers. By 1948, the institution housed over 100 infants in its care and according to the recollection of the Warden at the time, Janet York, "an awful number of mothers weren't capable of taking care of the babies" and the expense and responsibility of taking care of the babies led the state to phase out the program over the

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<sup>1</sup> For a chart with information on nursery programs in each state see **Appendix I** (p. 26) of the WPA report "Mothers, Infants, and Imprisonment: A National Look at Prison Nurseries and Community-Based Alternatives"

next several decades. From then on, inmates who gave birth while at prison had their children placed into foster care or with relatives (Reirdan, 1997).

More recent evidence from existing prison nursery programs suggests that the costs of running a program need not be excessive and states will actually save money in the long-run due to reduced recidivism (Carlson 2009, p. 77).<sup>2</sup>

Today, one federal correctional institution in Danbury CT, which houses female offenders, runs a residential program for mothers and their infants. Inmates are medically screened for pregnancy upon admission and are instructed to inform medical staff as soon as they suspect they are pregnant. Newborn children are not permitted to reside at the institution with their mothers. However, the BOP offers a community residential program called Mothers and Infants Nurturing Together (MINT) at the Hartford House, for low-risk female inmates who are pregnant at the time of admission and meet other qualifications ([http://www.bop.gov/inmate\\_programs/female.jsp](http://www.bop.gov/inmate_programs/female.jsp)).

### **Attachment Theory and Parental Incarceration**

Goshin & Byrne (2009) reported that research studies on parental incarceration have found that it is essential for incarcerated women to maintain long-lasting contact with their infants while they are in jail or prison. Much of the rationale for prison nursery programs stems from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982). Less attention in the literature on nursery programs has been given to the health benefits that can accrue to both the mother and the child from breastfeeding, nor is there much discussion on the costs and/or risks associated with infant care within the prison system.

According to Benoit (2004), "Attachment theory is one of the most popular and empirically grounded theories relating to parenting." Attachment theory states that whether children will have a secure or insecure attachment style depends on how stable their interactions are with their main caregiver, who is usually the child's mother (Bowlby 1985). It is important for infants to develop a stable secure attachment early in life, since this leads to greater likelihood of healthy development in childhood and can also possibly strengthen resiliency later on in life to help them deal with all sorts of obstacles (Sroufe et al. 2005). One attachment theory states that the insecure attachment style of mothers gets passed down to their children, unless there is an influential intervention, which disrupts the intergenerational transmission of this attachment style and results in the children having a secure attachment style instead of an insecure one (Makariev et al. 2010).

The National Institute of Child Health and Development Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD 1997) found that child-care experience and maternal behavior combine to affect attachment. Specifically, poor quality alternate care, increased hours of care, and changes in care arrangements are associated with insecure attachment when the mother is rated as low in sensitivity and responsiveness to her infant. Longitudinal studies have shown that infants and children who have a 'loving' primary caregiver and are able to develop 'organized and secure' attachment to a primary caregiver are less likely to experience social and emotional maladjustments later in life (Benoit 2004).

This and other research lends support to the argument that improved attachment for incarcerated mothers and children leads to better mental health outcomes for both and better longer-term developmental outcomes—including reduced criminal justice involvement—for children (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper & Shear 2010).

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<sup>2</sup> Carlson (2009) provides a breakdown of the salary and other related expenses of running a Nebraska Prison Nursery Program for twenty-four substance-using mothers and their infants in 1993.

### **Prison Nursery Programs, Misconduct and Recidivism**

One of the reasons why these programs work to improve inmates disciplinary conduct in the prison in the short-term is that mothers are often required to remain in good-standing at the facility— e.g. clean urine tests, no disciplinary tickets etc., in order to remain in the nursery program (Carlson 2001). This provides a strong incentive for them to follow prison rules and regulations and may enable them to be eligible for early release programs.

There is considerable research evidence to show that Prison Nursery Programs reduce recidivism rates for incarcerated mothers that are released (NYDOCS 1999, Rowland & Watts 2007, Carlson 2009). Once released, the mothers participating in prison nursery programs are more likely to regain custody of their child(ren) and to maintain and continue to grow their relationship with their child(ren) due to having formed a stronger attachment with them and having developed better parenting skills (Boudin 2005, Carlson 2001, Carlson 2009). Thus, they are also less likely to commit crimes that they know will land them back in prison and separate them again from their child(ren).

Other evidence suggests that the mental health of female inmates also improves as a result of their participation in the prison nursery program in conjunction with the parenting classes. It is commonly found that incarcerated mothers were the primary caregivers of their children, prior to incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak 2008). Having her newborn taken away can contribute to psychological distress and a number of adverse mental health conditions, including major depression, anxiety, as well as disciplinary issues while incarcerated (Boudin 2005). Parenting and nursery programs, as well as more intensive visiting programs that allow mothers to care for their children while incarcerated, can have a positive benefit to both the mothers and the child(ren)'s mental health (Boudin 2005, Poehlmann 2010). This also reduces the likelihood that they will land up back in prison due to addiction or other mental health problems.

Although there is less research, there is indirect evidence to suggest that prison nursery programs may also reduce criminal justice involvement of children with incarcerated mothers in the long-term.

## FACT SHEET

### Prison Nursery Programs and Attachment Theory

- A study at Bedford Hills Prison in New York showed that prison nurseries help incarcerated mothers develop secure attachments with their infants. As measured using the Ainsworth Strange Situation Procedure (1978), **71%** of infants who lived with their mothers in a prison nursery, developed secure attachment even though their mothers had not internalized secure attachment styles from their own childhoods. The mother-infant attachment was stronger for this group than a comparison group of non-criminally involved mothers of similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds (Byrne et al. 2010).
- Incarcerated women who have been in prison nursery programs reported having stronger bonds with their children because of the program (Carlson 2001).

### Prison Nursery Programs and Misconduct

- In the Nebraska Correctional Institution, twenty-four women went through the nursery program from **1994** through **1996**. Prior to entering the program, **10** of the women had accumulated a total of **47** misconduct reports; however, after entering the program, these same ten women accumulated only **17** misconduct reports for a **13%** reduction (Carlson 2001).

### Prison Nursery Programs and Recidivism

- According to a three-year study of the New York State Department of Correction Services in 1997, nursery participants had a lower recidivism rate (**13%**) compared with the recidivism rate of non-participating mothers (**26%**) at three years post release (NYDOCS 1999).
- Washington State reported lower three-year recidivism rates for mothers who participated in their prison nursery program (**15%** versus **38%**) (Rowland & Watts 2007).
- The recidivism rate for women in the Nebraska State prison nursery program, which has been active for ten years, is **16.8** percent as compared with a recidivism rate of **50%** for women who were not in the program (Carlson 2009).

### Prison Nurseries and Mental Health

- An intervention like a prison nursery can improve the mental health of incarcerated mothers, which in turn can positively affect their relationships with their children (Bick & Dozier, 2008).

### Prison Nurseries and Children's Wellbeing

- Children who are not able to maintain contact or a close relationship with their incarcerated mothers are at a greater risk of abusing drugs and/or alcohol later on in life. They are also at a greater risk for committing crimes and for underachieving in school (Margolies & Kraft-Stolar 2006).
- Prison nurseries help keep children and their mothers together and decrease the likelihood of children entering the foster care system (Goshin & Byrne 2009).

### Prison Nurseries and Parenting Attitudes

- In a study where mothers had recurrent contact with their children, whose age range was between infancy and adulthood, these mothers stated that their level of empathy and their parenting attitudes improved as a result of the recurrent contact and visiting with their children (Thompson & Harm 2000).

**Prison Nursery Programs Limitations & Challenges**

- The programs generally only admit low-risk incarcerated women and thus are not available to many incarcerated women and their infants, who could benefit (Goshin & Byrne 2009).
- Often, there is a limited amount of physical space available in prison-based nursery programs (Women's Prison Association, 2009).
- Concerns related to security, nursery program management, liability, the potential adverse effects of the prison on child health and development, and the difficulty of eventual separation of mother and child in women with long sentences were cited as the primary reasons for the closure of several U.S. prison nursery programs in the 1970s (Brodie 1982; Radosh 1988).
- Groups such as the Women's Prison Association along with many national experts argue that "women in prison nursery programs present little risk to public safety. The issues that bring most women in contact with the criminal justice system – drug addiction, lack of education, poverty – are better addressed in a community setting than in prison." (Villanueva et. al. 2009, p. 6).

**Prison Nursery Program Recommendations**

- In order to be able to offer the program to a wider group of incarcerated mothers, program developers should consider taking a more therapeutic approach when it comes to establishing prison nurseries. A therapeutic approach would entail providing supervision and guidance for the higher-risk mothers so they improve their parenting skills in a supportive environment (Goshin & Byrne 2009).
- The average maximum allowable length of stay for a child at most facilities is between 12 to 18 months (The longer the prison nursery programs allow incarcerated women to be with their infants, the better the outcomes for the program and the women and their children will be (Kauffman 2006).
- In addition to parenting and child development classes, the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women requires those women who do not have a high school diploma to attend GED courses (Villanueva et. al. 2009, p. 10).
- The Washington Correctional Center for Women allows children to stay in the facility with their mothers for up to three years and offers Early HeadStart to all of these children (Villanueva et. al. 2009, p. 10).
- Community aftercare programs could provide additional support to mothers being released to ensure they transition successfully back into the community (Carlson 2009).

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