

Case 7: Babies Behind Bars

“The only thing that bothers me is I will have to lose her,” said Ms. Jaramillo.¹

Jaramillo lives in Santa Martha Acatitla prison with her child. In the 1990s, Mexico City determined that young children could spend the first six years of their lives in prison with their mothers rather than outside the prison with relatives or foster parents. As of December, fifty-three children lived at the prison.

The city government believes that giving the children’s biological mothers the option to raise them is more of a benefit to the children than keeping them out of prison with relatives or foster parents.

For the inmates, the benefits are clear: time passes more quickly on one’s sentence when one is attending to a loved one. The children present in the prison brighten up the place and break the monotony of prison life with momentous events like first words, first steps, learning to read, and so on. Having the responsibilities of a parent is also a powerful motive for self-improvement, leading to more productive planning for what one will do after being released.

The children receive education, as all children in Mexico City are eligible for public education, as well as checkups from the prison psychologist. They also have the opportunity to significantly bond with their biological mothers, an opportunity they would not have if staying with relatives or foster parents. There have been no reports of violence from inmates towards the children except in isolated cases of abuse by mothers with drug problems. These children were removed from their mothers’ care.

However, being raised in a prison can’t help but have its disadvantages. Prisons are drab, dreary places, and children are kept in this environment for many years. They are allowed to leave for weekends to spend time with relatives, but some women do not have a social support system outside the prison, so some children have nowhere to go. And despite the fact that, as one inmate says, “[My child] doesn’t know it is a prison...she thinks it’s her house,”² the house is a cold, drafty place. Children get sick. The city and state provide no extra support for children living with their mothers in prison, so mothers must pay for everything out of personal funds. If they lack needed funds, the children suffer.

When children turn six years of age, they are sent to live with relatives or foster parents outside the prison. Children lose daily contact with their mothers and must adjust to a life outside of prison that is very different from the one they have known. Mothers must somehow come to terms with seeing their children only during weekend visits.

¹ McKinley, James C., Jr., “In Prison, Toddlers Serve Time with Mom,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 31, 2007. Sec. International. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/31/world/americas/31mexico.html>.

² Ibid.