

## **On Mothering in Prison**

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Much media attention covered the recent 2008 closure of the Mother and Baby Initiative at British Columbia's Alouette Correctional Centre for Women (ACCW), a program where infants born to mothers in custody were allowed to remain with their mothers. To contextualize this program and its closure, this paper draws on academic, media and grey literature sources, as well as a conversation with the Warden who was responsible for overseeing ACCW at the time. This paper argues that much of the public's reaction to the program's closure is due in part to a moral panic, with little regard for what is in the best interest of the affected infants and women, nor the best interest of society. We argue that prison can be the ideal time to break the cycles of abject poverty, abuse and violence in both childhood and adulthood, substance use issues, and social dislocation experienced by women (Martin and Jansen, 2008); therefore, possibly helping reduce recidivism. Finally, the paper will argue for the reinstatement of the mother child initiative in ACCW and for similar programs in other prisons for women in Canada.

The first mother and baby program in Canada began operating in a B.C. jail, the Twin Maple institution program, began during the 1970's and operated until the institution's closure in 1991 (Maclean, 1997, p. 32). Maclean estimates roughly 80 mother and baby pairs were part of the Twin Maples program during its fifteen years of operation (ibid, p. 33). The goal of this program was to allow mothers who were willing and able to care for their children while incarcerated. In order to offer more privacy, the women and children were housed in a separate building in Twin Maples. The program attempted to instil these mothers with the skills and work ethic needed to reintegrate successfully into the community by allowing these mothers to work in a B.C. correctional system run and operated community daycare for outside community members (Buddhadasa, 1991, p. 56-57; Maclean, 1997, p. 32).

After the closure of the Twin Maples institution and despite the rather interesting fact that corrections did not have policy or procedures in its branch regarding the programs, another similar mother and baby program began following the opening of the Open Living Unit (OLU) in Burnaby Correctional Centre for Women (BCCW). BCCW is a provincial correctional facility that has held contracts with Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) that allowed them to house local federally sentenced women,

rather than sending them out of province. According to Maclean (1997, p. 33-35), roughly 35 infants and toddlers spent short periods of time while visiting their mothers in this program, while less than 10 resided with their mothers in the OLU for any substantial period of time. Theoretically, this program was open to all mothers. Although, women wanting to take part in the program were screened and subject to reference checks, as well as checks for prior social services involvement (ibid, p. 35-36). Criteria for acceptance to this program included, but was not limited to: (1) the child being less than two years of age; (2) the mother being abstinent of drugs and alcohol, and working towards addressing those “criminogenic issues” identified by correctional authorities; (3) the child being physically and emotionally suited for the program; and (4) the mother having no prior history of engaging in the physical and/or sexually abuse of children. The mothers at BCCW also ran a daycare that was open to their children, as well as the children of staff members (Martin, 2007).

After the closure of BCCW in 2004, another similar mother and baby program began operating in ACCW. Ruth Martin (2007), one of the prison physicians working in the facility states in a report that during the time this program was in operation, 13 babies were born to mothers incarcerated in Alouette, 8 of whom returned to the institution with their mothers and left the institution in their mother’s care. Brenda Tole, the Warden responsible for ACCW at the time, reveals that because there was never any specific mandate, this program was not in fact a “program” but an “initiative” because BC Corrections branch never had any program specific policies in place regarding its operation (personal communication, 2009). Interestingly, at the time of our conversation, Brenda Tole was certain that the Alouette project was merely an initiative, meaning it was not a mandated program and could be removed by BC Corrections. Tole indicated that the onus of caring for these children should not be the responsibility of the corrections branch, but of the mothers and of other ministries. In her view, BC Corrections was there to help facilitate the process while other better suited ministries were expected to run the initiative. Most importantly, Tole stated that no matter what part BC Corrections plays, the Ministry of Children and Families would have to be involved. Following the conversation with former warden Brenda Tole, I concluded that these “non-program initiatives” functioned in a rather unusual way in comparison to other prison programs and appeared to be a way for those working in BC Corrections to remedy a gap in service.

Like so many other newspaper editorials printed at the time, the short editorial published in the *Vancouver Sun*, entitled “Posted by J.” well summarizes the public’s support for the closure of the mother-child initiative (Anonymous, 2008, p. A21). In this article, “J.” vilifies women in prison, contending that prison is an unsafe place for infants and that criminalized women who are mothers gave away their parental rights when they committed crimes. The editorial closes with the author expressing that she is ashamed of the fact that these women are seeking attention in this matter. Eventually, BC Corrections spokeswoman and Director of Programs, Lisa Lapointe, stated in an interview that the Alouette program was discontinued in 2008 because of security concerns (Stark Raven News, 2008), while Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond (2008), BC’s Representative for Children and Youth, strongly disputed the closing of this program because of perceived security concerns, stating that this decision was harmful to the infants and mothers involved. Staff and prisoners also generally viewed the Alouette initiative, as well as previous incarnations of the initiative, as successful (Maclean, 1997; Martin, 2007; personal communication with Brenda Tole, 2009). Despite the general view that these programs were safe and successful, there is a paucity of information regarding the long-term trajectories of any of the roughly 100 mother and baby pairs from any of the three programs/initiatives that have operated in British Columbia jails and prisons, leaving such initiatives open for criticism.

## **MOTHER CHILD INITIATIVES IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT**

The fact that women constitute a mere 10 percent of Canada’s prison population (Statistics Canada, 2006), and because of this population’s own unique needs and challenges, it is often difficult to determine what is in the best interest of the children of incarcerated women (Maclean, 1997, pp. iii-iv). However, it is worth noting that there has been a long worldwide history of infants remaining with their incarcerated mothers and that there are specific recommendations from well respected international organizations for such circumstances.

A 1957’s United Nations document outlining the minimum standard treatment for prisoners recommended that all women’s prisons provide special accommodations for women’s pre- and post-natal care, allow nursing infants to remain with their mothers, and provide crèches (childcare facilities)

staffed by adequately trained personnel where infants would remain when not in the care of their mothers (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2003). Much more recently, the World Health Organization stated that prison should be viewed as a time of opportunity to improve health outcomes for prisoners through increased health interventions (Møller *et al.*, 2007). Health interventions should quite feasibly include opportunities for mothers who, due to substance abuse issues and accompanying chaotic lifestyles, have lacked pre-natal care. In more extreme cases, some women are unaware that they are pregnant until they are incarcerated and have the opportunity to meet with a doctor (Campbell, 2008). In highlighting the benefit of allowing infants to remain with their mothers while incarcerated, one World Health Organization (2002, p. 7) report states:

*Breastfeeding* is an unequalled way of providing ideal food for the healthy growth and development of infants; it is also an integral part of the reproductive process with important implications for the health of mothers. As a global public health recommendation, infants should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life to achieve optimal growth, development and health. Thereafter, to meet their evolving nutritional requirements, infants should receive nutritionally adequate and safe complementary foods while breastfeeding continues for up to two years of age or beyond... Wherever possible, mothers and babies should remain together and be provided the support they need to exercise the most appropriate feeding option under the circumstances... Children living in *special circumstances* also require extra attention – for example... children born to adolescent mothers, mothers suffering from physical or mental disabilities, drug- or alcohol-dependence, or mothers who are imprisoned or part of disadvantaged or otherwise marginalized populations... Breast milk is particularly important for preterm infants and the small proportion of term infants with very low birth weight; they are at increased risk of infection, long-term ill-health and death.

Feminist criminologists have used this information regarding the important health outcomes for women and their children to argue that the Canadian correctional system should allow infants to remain with their incarcerated mothers in order to help improve the infant's, as well as the mother's, emotional and physical well-being, which consequently may help mitigate

the all too often cyclical nature of inter-generational family dysfunction and incarceration (Finateri, 1999; Hayman, 2007). According to Shawn Bayes (2008) of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver, over three-quarters of youth in local youth custody centres report histories of parental arrest and incarceration.

While it would be inaccurate to argue that allowing mothers in custody to keep their infants would end all aspects of familial dysfunction or recidivism, it is reasonable to argue that allowing women to retain custody of their children and supporting them after the mother's release will help to build and maintain strong family relations that may improve long-term outcomes for both the mother and child. Interestingly, the United States, a country well known for its punitive correctional systems, now has six states operating mother and baby programs. Ohio, Indiana, California, Nebraska and Washington state correctional systems have all followed New York's 108 year old lead by opening their own mother and baby programs (Gormsen, 2008, Anonymous 2002; Gabel and Johnston, 1995). These programs appear to be quite similar to British Columbia's correctional mother and baby initiatives, less one major difference – the mother's trajectories post-imprisonment have been examined. The recidivism rates of mothers involved in the New York mother and baby program were greatly decreased to one-fifth that of the general prisoner population (Gabel and Johnston, 1995). Similarly, the recidivism rates of those mothers who participated in the Ohio prison nursery were also reduced (Anonymous, 2002; Gormsen, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

Although very few scholars would say that prisons are an ideal environment to rear infants, it is easy to view the importance of allowing them to remain with their mothers when considering the health benefits and potential positive impact on recidivism for both. Therefore, it is quite reasonable to request that BC Corrections reopen the mother and baby initiative. It is also important to remember that "one-size-fits-all" policies do not work and do not ensure equal outcomes for Canadian citizens, particularly in sectors where citizens have been excluded, marginalized, and ignored. Consequently, rectifying the lives of marginalized persons and groups often requires unorthodox remedies because "substantive equality is much more complex and difficult to achieve" (Treasury Board of Canada, 2003).

The evidence that supports the importance of keeping a baby born either in or just prior to a mother's incarceration with that parent for at least the first two or three years of growth and development is substantial and growing. Since the early 1950s, John Bowlby has researched the process of attachment and the importance of supporting "affectional bonds" (see Bowlby, 1953; 1964; 1988; 1998). It has been a privilege to observe mother-child bonding first-hand in a number of mother baby pairs in a provincial custody setting. One case in particular stands out as confirmation of the importance of the program. A pregnant woman charged in connection with the death of her partner gave birth just prior to her trial. She was able to keep her baby while on remand and eventually transferred to the federal institution for women with her baby girl. Both have grown and developed well, have caused no security issues and neither have been the victim of any unsafe circumstances. The little girl now in her third year is absolutely on schedule developmentally, and the mother has grown and changed in ways I do not believe would have been possible had she not been so focussed on working hard to care for her child. By allowing this woman to parent her child, she has learned the necessary emotional and social skills required to be a good parent and citizen of our community.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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