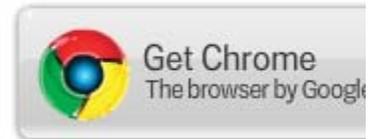


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The important stuff. Chrome fast.



Mara Schiavocampo

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Digital Correspondent, NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams

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Prison Moms

Imagine awaiting the birth of your child from a jail cell. That's a reality for countless women around the country, sentenced for a crime while pregnant. Another reality: once they deliver, chances are they'll be separated from their child within hours as the baby is taken to relatives or foster care. When you're a pregnant inmate, you can't exactly keep your baby with you in prison. Or can you?

Sharlene Henry, 29, was pregnant when sentenced to seven-years for criminal possession of a controlled substance. The thought of having her baby in prison was so devastating that she almost decided not to. She scheduled an appointment to end the pregnancy, but ultimately couldn't do it. As fate would have it, Henry was sentenced to New York's Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women. The prison houses the country's oldest prison nursery, a program allowing non-violent offenders with relatively short sentences to keep their babies for up to 18 months. Now, Henry is raising seven-month old Delilah with her in prison, a crib right there in the cell.

Prison nurseries are a new trend emerging in the criminal justice system. There are nine nurseries nationwide and more than half have opened in the last 15 years. They're partly a result of a new sense of social responsibility and the Department of Corrections' desire to keep families intact. But they are also the result of sheer numbers: there are more women in prison than ever before, and more need for programs like these.

I visited two nurseries for my special report "Mara Schiavocampo Reports: Mothers Behind Bars." At Bedford Hills, where I met Sharlene and Delilah Henry, there are nine babies, as well as a few women waiting to give birth. The wing where the infants live looks typically institutional; fluorescent lights, linoleum flooring, mint green walls.

Courtesy: Mara Schiavocampo

I also visited the Ohio Reformatory for Women, the state's largest female prison. Their nursery also has nine babies, but a completely different vibe. It is set up to feel like a home, and features a large living room with couches, stuffed animals and television. Years ago the inmates painted the walls with Sesame Street characters like Big Bird and Cookie Monster.

Though the two facilities are vastly different, their goal is the same. Both seek to keep babies with their mothers so they're not deprived of a parent. The programs may be beneficial for the mother too; studies have shown that women who go through prison nursery programs have lower re-offense rates than other inmates.

But critics argue the Department of Corrections shouldn't be in the childcare business, given that their primary role is for punishment and rehabilitation. Plus, the programs are expensive, about \$24,000 a year per infant. That's taxpayer money, though in some cases the programs are covered by government grants.

Courtesy: Victor Limjoco

But proponents, like the Warden in Ohio, argue that if you don't spend the money now, you'll spend it when the moms commit another crime and come back to prison, or the babies - deprived of the mother-child bond in infancy - come back as adult inmates. And while taking the babies away may save money, ultimately it could have a much greater emotional cost, for both mom and baby.

*Check out video and other multimedia elements for this story at www.TheGrio.com. More can also be found in the May issue of *Essence Magazine*, on newsstands now.*

