

## Jail program's end hurts mothers, babies

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Any given year, close to 1,500 women come through provincial jails in British Columbia. In Alouette Correctional Centre for Women, B.C.'s only separate women's jail, 160 women serve sentences of less than two years, or are on remand awaiting trial. At the Prince George Regional Correctional Centre, nearly 30 women are housed in the men's jail, in a segregated unit. These women are taking responsibility for their wrongdoing and paying for their crimes.

But some are being additionally punished by the recent cancellation of a provincial program, which used to allow mothers to form close bonds by being with their newborns. Its cancellation is punishing not only to the mothers, but also to their babies. As B.C.'s representative for children and youth, I strongly believe that children of imprisoned parents shouldn't be discriminated against as a result of a parent being jailed.

A child's right to be breastfed and the acknowledged health benefits shouldn't be curtailed because of the imprisonment of the mother. In the early years, the baby has an intense need to be with his or her mother, which is as basic as the need for nourishment.

The World Health Organization recommends babies nurse on demand for up to two years. Nursing a baby on demand leads to strong mom-and-baby attachment. This experience of bonding and responding to mom has an enormous impact on the infant brain. It promotes resilience, allowing for remarkable gains, especially for low birth-weight babies or infants exposed to alcohol and drugs.

As well, prison parenting programs have beneficial impacts on mothering and mom's health, assisting moms to seek supports to prepare a better path for their children than they might have experienced. Participating mothers must enter into a parenting agreement, including an obligation to care for their child and to take parenting education. Mothers supported in prison are more likely to be positive influences in society when released.

I think it is fair to say that nobody, including me, believes prison is the best place to bring up children. But there are situations where this is a reasonable thing to do -- when life's circumstances mean a baby is to be born to a mom in jail, whether there on a mandatory sentence or on remand awaiting trial. A due date arrives. A woman comes in shackles to give birth. A baby is born, and then this mom is forced to leave without her child.



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Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, Representative for Children and Youth, Province of British Columbia.

Suffering is not new to many of these moms. Most women in jail have experienced challenges in their lives - abuse, neglect or addictions. Many have come through the child welfare system, are from backgrounds of poverty, and nearly a third are aboriginal. They are serving sentences in a jail often far from home, and mostly in isolation from loved ones. Then their suffering is compounded.

As moms tell me, being separated at birth from their children is a pain above all they've experienced. Sitting in a jail cell post-partum is something none of us would want to face. Anyone who has nurtured children cannot help but be moved by the torment suffered by mothers who suddenly find themselves without their babies, and have lost the opportunity to build the bond with the child.

As an advocate, I have scrambled to find solutions for individual women with newborns, and had to call upon the goodwill of many people in hospitals and elsewhere to please keep moms with their babies, for as long as possible.

B.C.'s mom-and-baby-program started in 2005 as a result of innovative partnerships with B.C. Corrections, the Ministry for Children and Family Development, B.C. Women's Hospital and leading prison health researchers and community support workers. It was a jewel in the women's correctional system. Thirteen babies were born to incarcerated moms and nine of these stayed in prison until mom's release, with remarkable outcomes for moms and babies.

This program was cancelled without any real evaluation. There were no security concerns, and certainly any institutional issues could be addressed -- if the will was there -- as they have been addressed for women incarcerated around the world.

A civil society must create equal opportunities to ensure that children born into poverty and exclusion do not face a certain fate of poor school achievement, unhealthiness, crime and addictions. One way to do this is through our work with vulnerable mothers, and our capacity and dedication to this is a test of the strength and the empathy of our society.

For these reasons, I want British Columbians to know that when B.C.'s only mom-and-baby-program was shut down this summer at Alouette, much was lost. We lost the chance to support these most vulnerable women. We lost the chance to ensure that babies had the best chance by being nursed, and having strong attachment to their mothers. Sadly, we lost the opportunity to change lives for the better.

In the best interest of children, I ask British Columbians to join me in calling loudly for this program to not only be re-established but expanded for women at Alouette, and in Prince George, too. The costs of not having these kinds of programs will eventually place a far greater burden on the criminal justice system and society.

It's too valuable to be left to disappear without the voices of child advocates, health professionals, lawyers and justice professionals, aboriginal and community leaders, educators and, most importantly, moms and dads across B.C. being heard.

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