

Caged Beginnings:

The Mexican Prison Infrastructure's Influence on the Early Development of Children with Incarcerated Mothers

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Cover photo: Barbed wire steel wall of prison in Mexico (iStock)





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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Executive Summary | 1 |
| Young Children Incarcerated with Their Mothers | 1 |
| Context: Childhood Development | 3 |
| International and National Legal Frameworks for Children’s Rights | 5 |
| Hardly Reached: Children in Penitentiaries | 6 |
| About Our Research | 9 |
| Invisible Children and Barriers to Learning About Them..... | 16 |
| Gender | 17 |
| Lessons Learned and Remaining Questions | 18 |

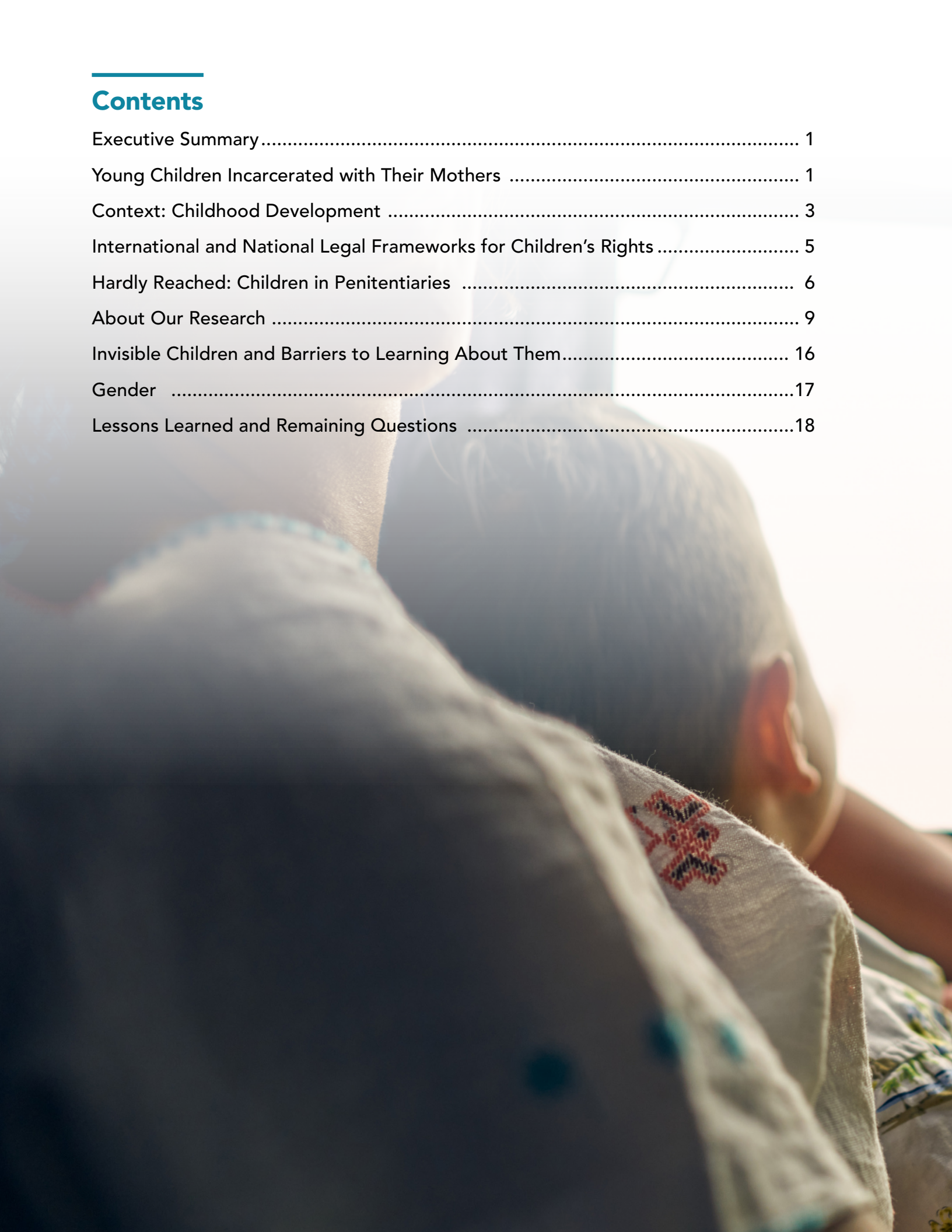




Figure 1. Reach team in RENACE's headquarters

Executive Summary

In Mexico, women deprived of liberty who have children under three years old are allowed to keep them inside penitentiary centres to preserve the mother-child bond, as established by the National Law on Criminal Enforcement. Early childhood is a critical period for human development and children's brains are especially sensitive to a variety of influences during this time, both positive and negative. Healthy development during these early years lays the foundation for lifelong well-being, while adverse experiences can lead to negative health outcomes and behaviours in adulthood, exacerbating social inequalities.

Mexican law mandates that penitentiary centres must provide the conditions necessary to uphold the rights of children living with their incarcerated mothers. However, despite the importance of the physical environment in which children develop, there is limited information on how well penitentiary centres in Mexico meet these

requirements and on the actual living conditions of these children.

We explore how the infrastructure of Mexican penitentiary centres affects the socio-emotional development of young children living with their mothers. We consider early childhood development, adverse childhood experiences, and the legal frameworks that protect these children's rights, both nationally and internationally. The study highlights why these children are considered marginalized and provides insights into the efforts made to fill the information gap on their living conditions.

Young Children Incarcerated with Their Mothers

According to 2022 measures, 96 per cent of crimes go unpunished in Mexico.¹ This environment of impunity fosters public opinion that increasingly leans toward punitive measures

1 "Hallazgos 2022: evaluación de la justicia penal" [Findings 2022: Criminal Justice Assessment], México Evalúa, 10 October 2023. [↗](#)

when a crime is actually punished because the lack of accountability shapes attitudes that support harsh responses.² This tendency is further compounded by the collective idea of the “good woman,” which leads to a penal system that is notably harsher on women who commit crimes — they are judged against societal expectations of idealized femininity.³ Women have traditionally been assigned the full responsibility for childcare, while the basic caregiving activities performed by men are seen as occasional help. This unequal distribution of caregiving labour, combined with the multiple forms of violence women face, also affects children, whose care is largely dependent on their mothers.

The penitentiary system serves as a microcosm of the larger society’s gender norms. Despite being deprived of their freedom, women continue to bear the primary responsibility for their children’s care, which has a profound impact on these minors. Incarcerated men don’t have such responsibilities because the National Law on Criminal Enforcement (LNEP — *Ley Nacional de Ejecución Penal*) does not mention any rights or obligations for fathers deprived of their liberty.

In 2023, 344 children were living with their mothers inside penitentiary centres in Mexico, as reported by the National Diagnosis of Penitentiary Supervision from the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH — *Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos*).⁴ Within the Mexican federal government, children and adolescents with a close relative or guardian — not necessarily a parent — deprived of liberty are referred to as NNAPES (*Niños, niñas y adolescentes con*

familiares privados de libertad — children and adolescents with family members deprived of liberty). This category includes not only those living inside the prisons with their mothers, but also those outside.

Article 10 of the LNEP states that women deprived of liberty have the right to retain custody of their children under three years old. If no family member can take responsibility for the child, the penitentiary authority will establish the criteria to guarantee the child’s admission in the penitentiary where they will receive appropriate food, education, and healthcare according to their age and their developmental requirements.

The first three years of a person’s life are among the most critical for development because children’s brains are highly sensitive to environmental influences during this period. These influences can include the amount and quality of intellectual stimulation, nutrition, the formation of social relationships, stressful situations, and opportunities for self-expression — all of which have a long-lasting impact.⁵

For this reason, the conditions in which children spend their early years inside a penitentiary are crucial. However, given the decentralized nature of Mexico’s penitentiary system, its secrecy, and the relatively small number of children living with incarcerated mothers, there is limited information on the conditions they experience.

We aim to address this gap by exploring the effects of the penitentiaries’ infrastructure on the socio-emotional development of young children in Mexican penitentiaries.

2 Hernández Morales and Alan Salvador, “Populismo punitivo y opinión pública: confianza en las instituciones mexicanas de seguridad” [Punitive populism and public opinion: trust in Mexican security institutions], *Revista Mexicana de Opinión Pública* no. 35 (2023): 75–97.

3 Alba Contreras Aguilar, Gimol Pinto, Amaya Renobales Barbier, and Sonia Del Valle, eds., *Niños y niñas invisibles: hijos e hijas de mujeres reclusas* [Invisible boys and girls: sons and daughters of female prisoners] (Distrito Federal, México: Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres, 2002).

4 “Diagnóstico Nacional de Supervisión Penitenciaria,” Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, 2023. [↗](#)

5 Karin A.L. Hyde and Margaret N. Kabiru, *Early Childhood Development as an Important Strategy to Improve Learning Outcomes* (Paris: Association for the Development of Education in Africa [ADEA], 2006). [↗](#)

Context: Childhood Development

Early childhood, which spans from the birth of a child up to the age of eight years, is one of the most critical periods for a person's development. Experiences during this time can have a profound and lasting impact on health and well-being, as well as emotional, intellectual, and social growth. Missed opportunities for healthy development during this stage are very difficult to recover in later stages of life. During this stage, a person experiences rapid physical and psychological growth, which makes it a period of great relevance for cognitive, emotional, and psychological development.⁶

It is also in this stage that, through play and social interactions, children learn how to navigate the world, socialize with other children, and develop decision-making, leadership, and creativity skills. They also start to discover and explore their interests and the passions they wish to pursue.⁷

The social and emotional development that a child experiences during these early years will be the foundation for the person's educational achievement, responsible citizenship, lifelong health, community, and eventual parenting.⁸ Given that at this early age children still don't have the adequate tools to cope with stressful situations, the early years are also a period of special vulnerability.⁹

The consequences of exposure to adverse situations in this period can manifest during adulthood in the form of diseases such as obesity, diabetes, depression, and post-traumatic stress, among others. Therefore, healthy development during early childhood creates the foundations for later academic performance, economic productivity, stronger communities, and lifelong health.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

The challenges of early childhood are often intensified by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which can be defined as a compound of negative events experienced during the early stages of life that are prejudicial, especially for someone who does not have the emotional resources to face them adequately. Different researchers categorize these negative experiences differently, but the most common ACEs include emotional and physical abuse, sexual abuse, witnessing violence, substance abuse in the household, mental illness in the household, and having an incarcerated family member.¹⁰

One study conducted in the United States found that about two-thirds of the population studied had suffered from at least one adverse childhood experience and, on average, the first ACE occurs within the first year of a person's life.¹¹ To compound matters, experiencing one ACE makes it more likely to experience others. Each additional ACE increases the chance of

6 Ibid.

7 Kenneth R. Ginsburg, American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Communications, and American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, "The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds," *Pediatrics* 119, no. 1 (2007): 182–91.

8 "What Is Early Childhood Development? A Guide to Brain Development," Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. [↗](#)

9 M. Vega-Arce and G. Nuñez-Ulloa, "Experiencias Adversas en la Infancia: Revisión de su impacto en niños de 0 a 5 años" [Adverse childhood experiences: A review of their impact on children aged 0 to 5 years], *Enfermería Universitaria* 14, no. 2 (2017): 124–130.

10 Ibid.

11 Vincent J. Felitti, Robert F. Anda, Dale Nordenberg, et al., "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14, no. 4 (1998): 245–58.

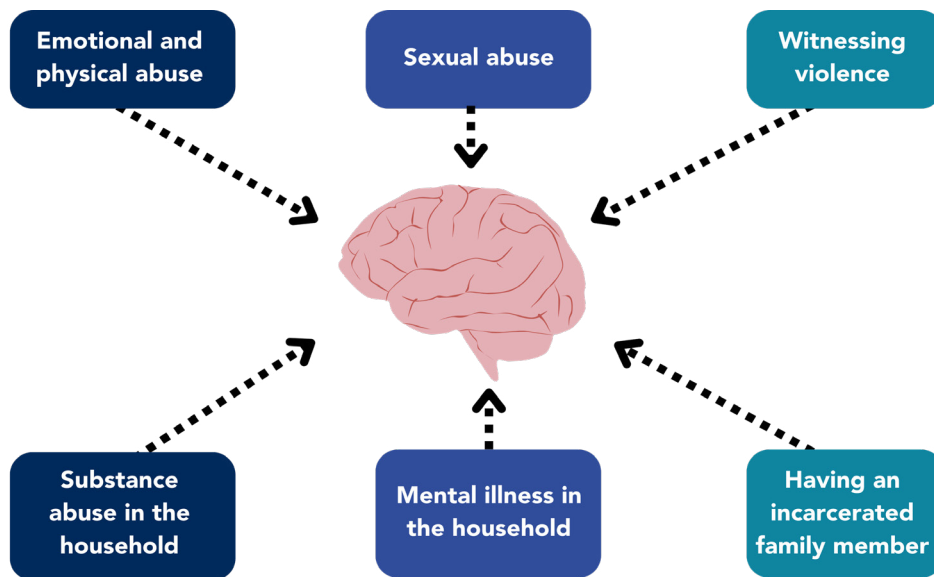


Figure 2. The effects of adverse childhood experiences on children’s brains.

facing behaviour and emotional challenges, like externalization and internalization problems, by 32 per cent.¹²

Externalization problems include behaviours like aggression, defiance, or impulsiveness — actions that are directed outward and can cause conflicts with others. Internalization problems, on the other hand, involve turning distress inward, leading to issues like anxiety, sadness, or withdrawal from others. Caregivers who have suffered four or more ACEs tend to have difficulties interacting sensitively and appropriately with children, which can contribute to transmitting intergenerational trauma.¹³

Although residing in a penitentiary is not explicitly recognized as an adverse childhood experience, likely due to its infrequent occurrence, children in such environments are often subjected to other forms of ACEs, which can profoundly impact their development and well-being. They might witness violence, mental illnesses, physical and emotional

neglect, and isolation. Even the mere fact of being locked up is an adverse experience. This puts them in a particularly vulnerable position. If children are already vulnerable to experience ACEs that may cause a negative impact on their lives, being incarcerated makes them even more likely to suffer from the negative effects of ACEs during their first three crucial years of life.

Optimal Infrastructure for Childhood

In early childhood, it is essential for children to reach important developmental milestones in which their physical and emotional environments play a key role. For healthy development, children need spaces that allow them to move freely, explore, and engage in activities that promote their motor skills.

In addition to physical space, the presence of green areas offers significant health benefits for children, such as improved self-esteem and

12 Vega-Arce and Nuñez-Ulloa, “Experiencias Adversas en la Infancia.”

13 Ibid.

reduced levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.¹⁴ This enhanced self-esteem can help reduce health-related inequalities, while a lack of access to green spaces may further exacerbate these disparities.¹⁵

Infrastructure for children should include access to medical care, proper nutrition, and a dignified and stimulating physical environment. Key elements of such environments include good ventilation and lighting, safe spaces for play, accessible green areas, and overall calm surroundings. Providing secure spaces for breastfeeding, sleep, and mobility is also essential for fostering a child's healthy growth.

However, penitentiary centres (which typically are not specifically designed to house children so young) don't often meet these minimum requirements. Although some have made significant efforts to improve children's experiences living with their mothers deprived of liberty, they still face difficulties to fulfill all of the amenities, spaces, and liberties a child would be able to get living outside, such as the liberty to freely move, run, and play.

According to both the Mandela and the Bangkok Rules, children living with their mothers in prison should never be treated as prisoners, and during their stay, their best interest must always be prioritized.

International and National Legal Frameworks for Children's Rights

International

Internationally, the Bangkok Rules and the Nelson Mandela Rules are supposed to safeguard the human rights and well-being of individuals deprived of liberty. The Nelson Mandela Rules are based on the obligation to treat all individuals deprived of liberty with respect and dignity, eliminating any form of torture or mistreatment. Their most recent version was adopted in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly. The Bangkok Rules establish minimum standards specifically for women deprived of liberty, focusing on their unique needs and experiences. These rules, adopted by the United Nations in 2010, also include guidelines to ensure the well-being and comprehensive development of children living with their mothers in prison. These rules are significant for their recognition and understanding of the different needs of women and men in detention, and the insurance of gender-sensitive treatment through appropriate laws and policies. According to both the Mandela and the Bangkok Rules, children living with their mothers in prison should never be treated as prisoners, and during their stay, their best interest must always be prioritized.

Efforts to guarantee the best interest of the child must include the availability of properly equipped areas designated for the child's development. This includes, among others, recreational, play, and educational spaces to ensure their healthy physical, mental, and emotional growth. These areas should

14 "Suchitra Sugar, "The Necessity of Urban Green Space for Children's Optimal Development," UNICEF. 

15 Rachel McCormick, "Does Access to Green Space Impact the Mental Well-Being of Children: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Pediatric Nursing* 37 (2017): 3–7.

be equipped with age-appropriate toys and educational materials.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child ensures key protections for children, particularly in adverse environments. It highlights the right to rest, play, and participate in cultural activities (Article 31), access to healthcare, disease prevention, and prenatal/postnatal care (Article 24), and free education that respects children's dignity (Article 28). The Nelson Mandela Rules further protect children in prison settings, mandating health screenings, birth outside the prison when possible, and prohibiting punitive measures like isolation. Overall, the focus is on safeguarding children's health, dignity, and development, even in challenging circumstances.

National Arena

The legal framework in Mexico includes several provisions aimed at protecting the rights of children living with their incarcerated mothers. These laws set standards that penitentiaries must apply in their facilities to ensure children's well-being. Their focus is to provide access to necessary services and facilities, such as healthcare, education, and a safe living environment, while maintaining the best interest of the child as a priority. This includes the right to appropriate spaces for recreation, education, and development within the constraints of the penitentiary system.

According to Article 4 of the Mexican constitution, no person can be deprived of their liberty, property, possessions, or rights except through a trial conducted before previously established courts. This process must adhere to essential procedural formalities and comply with the laws in force at the time of the events. However, children who live with their mothers deprived of liberty are not guaranteed this right — they reside in penitentiary centres without committing any crime.

The General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescents emphasizes the protection and promotion of children's rights, explicitly recognizing them as rights holders, especially in vulnerable environments. It highlights the necessity of implementing policies and international agreements aimed at safeguarding these rights, ensuring children receive priority in matters of protection and access to essential services. The law stresses the collective responsibility of families, communities, and the state to create and maintain an environment that supports children's physical, emotional, and social development.

Key provisions include the obligation to report violations of children's rights, to promote a healthy and sustainable environment for their growth, and to ensure access to education, health, and an adequate standard of living. In challenging spaces such as prisons the law aims to protect children from harm while ensuring their development is supported through positive parenting practices and the state's proactive role in promoting well-being.

Hardly Reached: Children in Penitentiaries

Children live inside Mexican penitentiary centres with their mothers under specific conditions. When a mother is incarcerated and chooses to retain custody of her child, she may decide to keep the child with her inside the centre. This decision can be influenced by various factors, such as:

- the absence of family members outside who can care for the child, and the lack of a group home or shelter provided by an NGO.

- the belief that staying together is the best way to preserve the mother-child bond, given her family's situation.
- financial limitations that make other arrangements impossible.

Ultimately, children remain in penitentiary centres primarily to prevent the mother from losing custody, since institutionalization could result in the state assuming guardianship.

Before the establishment of the 2016 LNEP — which currently states the rights of women deprived of their liberty and their children — the few articles written about this population regarded them as invisible children, referring to the absence of public policies and regulations that take them into consideration. Young, incarcerated children are at constant risk of being harmed, mistreated, persecuted, discriminated against, belittled, or negatively influenced by hostile actors. And legally, the state has recognized their rights for only 12 years. Being inside a heavily secured and difficult-to-access facility made to keep people inside, and being a population that, despite being right holders, are still unable to speak for themselves, makes them very vulnerable and hard to reach.

Children living inside prisons have their rights established within the General Law on the Rights of Girls, Boys, and Adolescents (LGDNNA — *Ley General de los Derechos de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes*), promoting their comprehensive protection and ensuring the state's responsibility to safeguard their well-being, development, and participation in society. This law not only

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represents a declaration of rights but also a commitment by the state to ensure that these rights are respected in all contexts, including within penitentiary centres. In this way, it reinforces the importance of treating children as full rights-holders, regardless of their mothers' circumstances.

Additionally, the National Law on Criminal Enforcement (*Ley Nacional de Ejecución Penal* — LNEP) specifically establishes that all rights covered under the LGDNNA must be fulfilled even when children reside in the penitentiary with their mothers from birth until three years of age. This underscores the responsibility of penitentiary authorities to protect the child's best interests

and creates a framework of state accountability.

The specific rights that the LNEP provides for this population include: the right to remain with their mother until the age of three (extendable in certain cases);

access to healthcare services and support for their developmental needs; the right to education, recreational activities, and proper nutrition; and the protection of their well-being. These provisions ensure that decisions affecting these children are always based on the principle of the child's best interests, which means the penitentiary system must be prepared to fulfill these conditions and provide an environment that supports their holistic development.

In summary, these rights and obligations reflect the state's vision that children in vulnerable situations, such as those living in prisons, deserve the same levels of protection and access to opportunities as any other child in society. This presents a challenge for penitentiary centres, but

it also highlights the country's commitment to child protection in all contexts.

NNAPES (*niños, niñas y adolescentes con familiares privados de libertad* — children and adolescents with family members deprived of liberty) are protected by the SIPINNA *Sistema Nacional de Protección de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes*, which consists of the health, education, and sports systems. According to the General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescents, there should even be a SIPINNA at the municipal level. However, this is not always the case.

The Executive Secretariat of SIPINNA has the following programs to benefit NNAPES:

- One of its key efforts is a virtual course for public officials who work with NNAPES, both inside and outside penitentiary centres. This course aims to strengthen the intervention skills of different actors, including judges, custodial staff, centre workers, civil associations, and child protection agencies, equipping them to better understand and address the specific needs of this population.
- In collaboration with the Secretariat of Public Security, (SSP) and the General Directorate of Open Institutions for Prevention and Social Reintegration, SIPINNA coordinates a program focused on strengthening family bonds with the Family Bond Program. Through this program, a questionnaire is used to identify the needs of incarcerated women and their children, followed by a targeted support to ensure their rights. These initiatives reflect SIPINNA's commitment

to providing comprehensive support and protecting the rights of NNAPES, promoting their well-being both in the penitentiary environment and in their communities.

As of 2022 the CNDH documented that:

- 11 per cent of mothers declared they had children inside the penitentiary centre;
- only 12.5 per cent of penitentiaries that house women confirmed that they had carried out actions with a focus on children in the last four years;
- only 3.57 per cent of penitentiaries that house women have a Child Development Centre¹⁶ (*Centros de Desarrollo Infantil* or CENDI as the Spanish acronym) inside, which focuses on the cognitive, emotional, and physical development of children, especially in the early stages.
- only 9 per cent of the penitentiaries that house women have cribs, daycare centres, and outdoor playgrounds.¹⁷

The infrastructure necessary for children is present in less than 9 per cent of the 112 penitentiaries in Mexico, highlighting a limited provision for protecting children's rights in these facilities.

In the interviews we conducted, we learned there is a lack of standardized processes between the penitentiary systems in each state, despite all of them falling under the same Criminal Enforcement Law (LNEP). This results in differences in budgets and structures and other inconsistencies.

16 CENDI centres are spaces intended to foster interaction, providing young children with the means for comprehensive development through organized and systematic educational activities, guided by appropriate pedagogical programs. The service provided is organized to promote basic competencies in children under six years of age, grouped into infant, toddler, and preschool sections. Currently, each centre operates with a multi- and interdisciplinary team dedicated to specific aspects of the service, raising awareness among parents and the community about the importance of their involvement in the development and education of children. A. Díaz and A. Sánchez, "¿Qué es un Centro de Desarrollo Infantil?" CENDI, Secretaría de Educación Pública (2002): 7–12.

17 "Diagnóstico Nacional de Supervisión Penitenciaria."



Figure 3. Rooms inside the Nuevo León Female Penitentiary Centre for women who have their children living with them

It is uncommon for minors to have spaces designed for them within the prison housing. In the Nezahualcóyotl Sur penitentiary, located on the outskirts of Mexico City, mothers have their own cell with an individual bed for themselves and one for the child. In the Santa Martha penitentiary, mothers also live in a separate unit from the general population. The separation is to ensure mothers have a controlled and more welcoming environment that ensures their child's safety. However, there is still a deficiency of specialized infrastructure. The lack of lactation rooms is a significant issue, causing many women to stop breastfeeding.

Physical closeness aside from breastfeeding is crucial for bonding and the establishment of a secure attachment.¹⁸ Healthy attachment between infants and their mothers is certainly a

relevant issue in penitentiary centres. Another attachment issue that deeply affects the child is the lack of an adequate separation protocol when minors must leave the penitentiary.

About Our Research

For us to understand what impacts living inside a penitentiary centre may have on a child under three years old, we conducted our research in two different stages: desk and field research. First, we explored the importance of early childhood for a person's development and how adverse experiences during this stage can affect long-term outcomes and contribute to inequality. We reviewed existing literature on early childhood development, as well as studies on adverse

18 Enhanced bonding and attachment refer to the physical closeness that breastfeeding entails, including skin-to-skin contact, which triggers the release of oxytocin — often referred to as the “love hormone” or “bonding hormone.” Oxytocin fosters emotional connection, trust, and attachment between the mother and the infant. This bond is crucial for developing a secure and healthy attachment-based relationship. Secure attachment is a foundation for the child's emotional and psychological development, influencing their future relationships and well-being. Diane Benoit, “Infant-Parent Attachment: Definition, Types, Antecedents, Measurement and Outcome,” *Paediatrics and Child Health* 9, no. 8 (2004): 541–45.



Figure 4. Reach team meetings with nongovernmental organizations that work with incarcerated populations

childhood experiences and their impact on health and the widening of social inequalities.

We also researched the situation and functioning of the Mexican penitentiary system, with a special focus on children living inside penitentiary centres.

For the second part of the research, we shifted to field work, which consisted of interviews with NGOs, public institutions and authorities, and specialists on early childhood infrastructure. We also visited the Female Social Reintegration Centre in Escobedo, Nuevo León. We reached out to nongovernmental organizations, foundations, and government officials who work with women deprived of their liberty and with their children. Over the course of one month, we worked alongside representatives from civil organizations and academia to develop research frameworks regarding criminal justice with a focus on the rights of people deprived of their liberty. This collaboration facilitated a deeper understanding of these issues, as well as some of the procedures of the penitentiary system in the state of Nuevo León.

Interviews with Stakeholders

We interviewed representatives from civil organizations, public institutions and authorities, and specialists in early childhood infrastructure. We discussed the environment in which children live within penitentiary centres, including the specific facilities they are housed in, and the extent to which their rights to recreation, education, health, and nutrition are upheld. They described their experiences in several penitentiary centres, mainly in the state of Nuevo León and the Mexico City metropolitan area. Some centres that house a children population include:

- *Santa Martha Acatitla Female Social Reintegration Centre in Iztapalapa, Mexico City.* This is the penitentiary centre with the highest number of children in the country. At the time of the interview (October 2024), 19 girls and 22 boys lived inside the centre.
- *Nuevo León Female Social Reintegration Centre in Escobedo, Nuevo León.* As the only female penitentiary centre in the state, it is also

the only one able to house children. At the time of our visit, there were two boys and two girls living inside.

- *Tepozanes Female Social Reintegration Centre in Nezahualcóyotl, Estado de Mexico.*
- *Santiaguito Female Prevention and Social Reintegration Centre in Santiaguito Tlalcilcalli, Estado de México.*

Other women's penitentiary centres that do not house children include:

- Tepepan Female Social Reintegration Centre in Tlalpan, Mexico City.
- Federal Social Reintegration Centre in Coatlán del Río, Morelos.
- Barrientos Female Social Reintegration Centre in Tlanepantla, Estado de México.

The lack of populations of children in these centres is attributed to the lack of children-oriented conditions. There have been cases where women deprived of their liberty give birth and decide to relocate their children to prevent them from living in centres with conditions that don't accommodate children. This has been the case in Tlanepantla Female Social Reintegration Centre. The lack of a population of children in centres does not mean there are no mothers or pregnancies in the centre, but that they are immediately relocated.

Physical Health

According to a representative from FUNFAI (*Fundación Familiar Infantil* — Children's Family Foundation), there is no pediatrician or nutritionist available at Santa Martha Acatitla; only a general practitioner attends both children and incarcerated women. A spokesperson from the Mexico City Penitentiary System Undersecretariat notes that, while health check-ups for children are available, mothers

must request them. To promote awareness, the undersecretariat's office implements a motherhood program that educates mothers on health-related issues for their children.

However, many mothers in these facilities remain uninformed about the importance of these check-ups. This lack of awareness, alongside the absence of specialized healthcare, underscores the need for a more proactive penitentiary health system to ensure consistent, specialized care for all children, regardless of mothers' requests.

Education

According to the FUNFAI interview, the quality of education for children in penitentiary centres is inadequate. Despite being established as a right of children and an obligation of the state, this requirement is not fully met. In the Santa Martha Acatitla penitentiary centre, there is a Child Development Centre or CENDI endorsed by the Secretariat of Public Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública* or SEP) that offers preschool education. However, according to the Mexico City Penitentiary System Undersecretariat, this is provided solely as an available service for mothers, who ultimately decide whether to enroll their children in early stimulation and preschool education programs at the CENDI.

Several of our interviewees considered the CENDI in Santa Martha Acatitla penitentiary centre to be one of the most well-equipped children-oriented environments. By contrast, according to the interview conducted with former UNODC specialist Martha Orozco, the CENDI at the state of Tabasco social reintegration centre has deplorable conditions. It was described as a small room next to a storage room full of fabric scraps that are a fire hazard.

Emotional and Psychological Well-being

In our interview the FUNFAI representative said the organization recognizes the importance of the maternal bond. They offer courses and workshops at the penitentiary centres of Santa Martha Acatitla, Santiaguito, and Nezahualcóyotl. The courses include themes on parenting and promotion of their group home as a housing possibility for their children once they turn two years old, as they believe this is a better alternative than for the children to stay living inside the penitentiary centre. While these parenting courses are aimed at helping the children, it's unclear how helpful they are.

According to the interviewee, children who enter the group home after having lived in the penitentiary centre for their first three years typically have low self-esteem, low respect for their personal belongings (throwing and breaking them when they experience anger), and poor sphincter control. We learned that four out of ten children who arrive at the FUNFAI group home who lived in a penitentiary centre have suffered some sort of sexual violence from their mothers or other family member. They take time to disclose it but through psychological or psychiatric processes, they eventually tell. This suggests that, despite efforts to provide a safe environment, these children continue to face significant traumas that impact their emotional and social development.

Recreation

Although both international and national standards exist for the healthy development of children, these standards are not always met in practice, or guaranteed by the state, despite its legal obligation. Instead, civil organizations take responsibility for supporting children not just by providing items to meet their basic needs, but also by providing enriching and growth-oriented experiences for children. RENACE and

FUNFAI organize recreational activities for still-incarcerated mothers and their children who live outside the penitentiary centres such as Mother's Day celebration, Children's Day, Christmas, among other various gatherings with recreational activities such as dancing, physical exercises, or crafts. This proactive engagement not only addresses immediate needs but also fosters resilience and a sense of community, highlighting the essential role of civil organizations in promoting the holistic development of vulnerable children in the absence of adequate state support.

Separation Process

According to the LNEP, when children turn three years old, they must leave the penitentiary unless evaluated otherwise by the authorities. The process conducted by FUNFAI when children leave the penitentiary centre and enter their group home includes a six-month adjustment period, followed by a three-year period of living in the group home. This period is characterized by an education based on constant structure to provide them with a routine every day. After this period, they enter a final six-month transition or preparation period before being channelled to another institution, reintegrated with their family, or entering the adoption system. However, despite these efforts, women consider this process to be one of their greatest challenges because it psychologically affects both them and their children, causing confusion and a sense of uprooting. This emotional challenge can hinder their ability to adapt and thrive in a new environment, impacting their overall well-being and development.

Life After the Penitentiary

In different interviews during field research there was no consensus on a specific behaviour that children adopt after living with their mothers for the first three years of their life in prison. However, all interviewees agreed that children

who leave the penitentiary have an immense curiosity for the unknown. They described how things we often take for granted, like a barking dog, the texture of fruits, or the colours of some flowers, are completely unknown to children who lived in custody their whole lives. An incarcerated mother whose child now lives outside told us that when her child got out of the centre he was always running and touching everything he could.

On the other hand, personnel from civil organizations also told us that these children often struggle with developing a sense of caution and may not recognize signs of danger, a common issue for those who grew up in confined environments with limited exposure to the world. They

may also fear new experiences, such as darkness, and develop behaviours associated with deprivation. For example, some children hoard or overeat when food is available, as they experienced unpredictable access to necessities while in the centres.

Many children from penitentiary environments struggle with basic social norms and often display heightened aggression. Behavioural issues often persist because they may not yet comprehend how to communicate respectfully without resorting to aggression. Exposure to violence in these settings means they sometimes normalize aggressive communication and may struggle with self-regulation.

The Social Reintegration Centre in Nuevo León

For the second part of our field research, we visited the Female Social Reintegration Centre

(*Centro de Reinserción Social, CERESO*), located in the municipality of General Escobedo, Nuevo León, which is part of the Monterrey Metropolitan Area — Mexico's second-largest urban area. At the time of our visit (October 2024), 562 women were residing in this centre, some of whom are sentenced, while others are awaiting trial. There were four children and four pregnant women. During the visit we sought to learn about women's experience during their pregnancy at the CERESO, and their experience raising their children inside the penitentiary centre.

We toured the centre and observed several CERESO facilities, including a chapel, dining hall, kitchen, convenience stores, playground,

a visiting area (which also had a playground), a daycare, a library, and a central courtyard where sports activities are held. Our visit was guided by the deputy director and primary pediatrician

of the centre, who were also key interview participants.

Although women in the penitentiary centre mostly perceived their pregnancy experiences as hostile, there were significant differences in the treatment of current mothers and pregnant women compared to those who were pregnant or gave birth in the centre a year ago. The experiences from the women who were pregnant a year ago are perceived as better than those who are pregnant now as a result of the decrease in the number of medical checkups the centre offers compared to a year ago. These differences were largely attributed to changes in the CERESO's administration. However, the centre's deputy director mentioned that these changes

Many children from penitentiary environments struggle with basic social norms and often display heightened aggression.

had already started being implemented before she assumed her position.

Regarding nutrition, the CERESO provides a different diet for pregnant inmates compared to the rest of the incarcerated population, but the difference is only in food's seasoning — no salt, seasonings, or spices. During pregnancy, women also receive supplements like folic acid and vitamins. The women disliked the lack of seasoning in the food, but it was apparently for health reasons. According to the developmental origins of health and disease hypothesis, many health conditions that manifest in adulthood can trace their roots back to fetal development.¹⁹ The restricted dietary approach at the CERESO, which lacks the necessary caloric increase and nutrient diversity for pregnant women, may have implications for both maternal and fetal health. While limiting salts is beneficial, it falls short of addressing the full nutritional needs required to support healthy fetal growth. A balanced intake of around 300 additional calories per day, incorporating proteins, fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, is essential to meet the increased demands of pregnancy.²⁰ Without these adjustments, infants may face a higher risk of developmental complications that could later predispose them to chronic health conditions. A more comprehensive dietary program for pregnant inmates is therefore crucial.

In terms of healthcare, the previous administration treated pregnant women better than the current one. Previously, pregnant women had frequent medical checkups with gynecologists, but currently pregnant women don't have the same frequency of gynecological checkups.

One experience that seems universal is childbirth as an adverse experience. Women in labour are

transferred to hospitals outside the CERESO to give birth. During these transfers, they are accompanied by police officers, which can be an uncomfortable situation because of the officers' hostile behaviours that have been reported by the inmates and healthcare workers. Because of security protocols, women remain handcuffed to their hospital bed during childbirth. The police officers who accompany mothers to give birth at the hospital have denied pregnant women access to a telephone to notify a family member that they are about to give birth, even though it is within their rights for their family to accompany them during this process. Despite these difficulties women often experience a contrasting treatment from the hospital's personnel as humanizing.

During our conversation the deputy director and the pediatrician each emphasized that incarcerated women do, in fact, have access to specialized medical care for pregnancy inside the penitentiary. Despite this, the officials noted that many of these women repeatedly refuse to attend their scheduled checkups. Additionally, while the institution provides a specific diet, the women often purchase unhealthy food from the internal convenience store for them and their children, despite being consistently advised against doing so. Several of the NGOs and the director of the CERESO confirmed that this happens due to the guilt incarcerated mothers face by having their child inside the centres. They find it difficult to deny their children of a treat if they ask for one given that the children are in the centres as a result of the mothers' actions. This eventually leads to the children having health problems since early childhood, such as insulin resistance, diabetes, and obesity.

19 H. Danielewicz, G. Myszczyzyn, A. Dębińska, et al. "Diet in Pregnancy — More Than Food," *European Journal of Pediatrics* 176 (2017): 1573–79.

20 "Nutrition During Pregnancy," John Hopkins Medicine, June 2024. [🔗](#)

Experience Raising Children within the CERESO

The women at the CERESO currently have one-and-a-half hours of recreation time per day. However, this is the only time they have to leave their cells with their children, so they often use it for other essential tasks such as doing laundry, visiting the convenience store, or visiting their inmate friends. We were told that the mothers felt like they had very little time left to engage in meaningful recreational activities with their children, whether in the outside playground area or daycare. They were frustrated about this situation, which began with recent administrative changes. A year ago, mothers with children had less restrictive schedules for recreation and could spend more time with their children outside their cells. The authorities recalled that they were able to “move freely from place to place.”

The women also expressed their concern about the negative effects this change has had on their children, including increased frustration among them. They believe that the current system, which limits all incarcerated individuals to the same one-and-a-half-hour recreation period, should not apply to mothers with young children. One of the interviewees stated, “When they are punished for bad behaviour, since they must always stay with their children, they also have to remain in the cell with them, unable to go outside.” They recognized that most of the time, incarcerated mothers with children inside the penitentiary try to maintain good behaviour because they know that if they are punished, their children are punished as well.

In terms of education, the children participate in workshops provided by NGOs where they engage in activities such as crafting, drawing, cutting, and using crayons, coloured pencils, and other materials. Additionally, they attend sensory stimulation workshops that focus on sound, movement, and tactile recognition. The

authorities explained that “the main workshops are about exposing the children to different sounds and their reactions to them, as well as touching various textures to identify them.” The interviewees also highlighted the role of NGOs in providing these workshops, citing ReInserta as an example. This organization conducts annual evaluations of the children to assess their motor skills, speech, writing abilities, and sensory development. While these evaluations are not public, the authorities claimed that all the children passed the evaluations and had developed to the expected milestones according to their age.

Regarding healthcare, while we were told the mothers mentioned that their children do not receive regular medical attention, the deputy director and the pediatrician presented a contrasting view, stating that the children do have access to medical care within the penitentiary, supported by the presence of nine nurses providing 24-hour care every day. This contradiction could signal a lack of awareness from the mothers on the importance of periodical medical checkups, or a lack of communication of the amenities available to them in the penitentiary centre. Additionally, the mothers can request permission to take their children outside the facility for medical treatment if needed.

Another issue discussed was how mothers obtain the financial resources necessary to meet their children’s needs. Some mothers reported that they receive external support from family members who provide items such as diapers, wet wipes, and formula. However, not all mothers benefit from this type of support network. Previously, they would leave their children in the care of fellow inmates so they could work in the kitchen or store, where they earned approximately MXN 350 per week (about CAD 24). This income, while limited, allowed them to buy basic necessities such as low-priced diapers and formula. However, since the strengthening of

the policy that requires mothers to remain with their children at all times, they are no longer able to work and thus cannot generate this additional income. The mothers have expressed feelings of frustration, because they now rely solely on donations from various NGOs to meet their children's needs.

According to the deputy director the reason behind this 24/7 mother-child policy is primarily related to the children's safety. The policy aims to reduce the risks associated with placing children in the care of incarcerated individuals who should not be around children, given their serious offences. It also seeks to prevent the spread of infectious diseases and avoid situations where, in the event of an accident, a non-mother caretaker might refuse to take responsibility by stating, "that is not my child," which was a common occurrence before the 24/7 policy. While this policy did reduce the occurrence of diseases in children such as hand, foot, and mouth disease, it presented a new challenge for the mothers: they are not able to take a job opportunity inside the penitentiary, limiting their purchasing power for supplies for the child. This presents a challenge specially to those mothers who do not have the support of their family within the state they are incarcerated in. They have to bear the full financial load of having to take care of a child for their first three years of life. Furthermore, this policy also completely eliminated the possibility for the mothers to rest, even for a couple of hours, from having to take care of their child and get other hygiene tasks done, such as having a shower, washing their clothes, and cleaning their cell.

Mothers and their children are separated when the children leave the penitentiary centre after their third birthday. The authorities said that the mothers previously had "detachment workshops," which included activities to anticipate and support their release, to prepare their children and themselves for the minor's

departure, however after the administrative change, those workshops ceased. Now there is no professional assistance to carry out the detachment process. Mothers prepare their children on their own to the best of their ability for their departure from the centre.

The authorities share that most of the mothers recognize that it is in the child's best interest to leave the centre and live new experiences. After leaving the centre, children have a phase of astonishment in their new environment, being easily impressed and wanting to try out all the food they didn't know. However, the separation process is as devastating on the children as it is on their mothers. They can't fully comprehend why they cannot accompany their mothers after family visitations to their dormitory, as they did when they lived there. The pediatrician mentioned that children do not comprehend why their mother stays in jail when they visit them, and even forgets about the time they lived there as well.

Invisible Children and Barriers to Learning About Them

The last census about the children's population in the penitentiary centres that included Nuevo León took place in 2022 and was published in 2023 by INEGI. The census counts children within the permitted age range by law, up to three years old, and until the age of six. Nonetheless there is no further breakdown information about how many children are older than the permitted age range. The last census dated in 2024 shows considerable changes. It no longer includes the state of Nuevo Leon — as if there were no children in the penitentiaries. This contradicts the information gathered in our field visit, where we saw children living there.

Children born and raised in penitentiary centres are practically invisible to the outside world. This lack of knowledge about them makes it hard to find civil associations who work with these children. Because they are scarce, the problem is often overlooked. We aimed to encounter associations involved with these children either to interview them or to gain their assistance as insiders for our planned field research. We hoped they would guide us through the administrative process of requesting access to the centres, allowing us a walk-through of the facilities to gather information. Unfortunately, several NGOs either did not respond or stopped communicating, creating a significant challenge in securing the support we needed.

In particular the Mexican presidential elections of 2024 and the country's recent judicial reform along with administrative changes were detractors in our process. Even though we collaborated with various NGOs that have frequent access to the penitentiary centre, administrative barriers postponed our visit on various occasions.

While convicted felons are restricted from the right to vote, as of 2023, 37.3 per cent of the people deprived of their liberty were not convicted.²¹ The 2024 election process was the first time that nonconvicted people deprived of their liberty were allowed to vote. This meant that the elections also had to be held in the

Although several mothers choose to keep their children with them in the centre, access to diapers and other essential items for babies and children often depends on donations from civil organizations and not the state.

penitentiary centres, requiring coordination and the support of the NGOs we were also contacting for support of our research who were now swamped with the logistical challenges of helping hold the elections in penitentiary centres, as well as their routine tasks.

Protests against the 2024 judicial reform, which limited the independence of the judiciary and modified its administrative structure, indirectly affected the penitentiary system by further straining institutional capacity to manage human rights resources and policies. Demonstrations and strikes by judiciary workers, including protests by judges and magistrates, generated temporary disruptions in the judicial system that affected

the pace of case resolution, impacting the capacity to process individuals awaiting trial, and increasing prison overcrowding. Amid these outbursts, the authorities deprioritized our requests to visit the premises,

delaying our research timeline.

Gender

By focusing on the experiences of incarcerated mothers and their children, this study exposes how the penal system disproportionately affects women, not just as individuals but also as caregivers. The majority of caregivers who step in to care for children of incarcerated parents

21 "Censos Nacionales de Sistemas Penitenciarios en Los Ámbitos Estatal Y Federal (CNSIPEE-F) 2024," Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), Press release, 8 March 2024. [🔗](#)

are maternal grandmothers, who often feel a deep sense of guilt and fear of failure. This dynamic reflects the emotional burden placed on women as both primary caregivers and those expected to compensate for institutional failures. By advocating for better state support systems for these grandmothers, the research implicitly supports the empowerment of older women, acknowledging their crucial role and the need for resources to alleviate the pressure they face.

This case study also highlights the importance of adopting a gender perspective while building infrastructure and devising public policy. For example, the absence of basic necessities like formula, diapers, or breastfeeding support highlights the systemic neglect of incarcerated mothers' rights and their children's well-being. Addressing these issues would benefit the health and dignity of both mothers and their children, thus advancing gender equality by pushing for reforms that consider women's unique experiences in the penal system.

In addition to the many vulnerabilities faced by incarcerated women, many of them live with their children in penitentiaries. In the two cities analyzed in this field research, only women's penitentiaries have children living inside. We do not advocate for relocating children of incarcerated women to male penitentiaries to achieve equal treatment for men and women, because such a move would heighten the risk of sexual violence against the children. Instead, our research aims to understand and address the unique needs of these children within the current context. Not all mothers have support networks. Although several mothers choose to keep their children with them in the centre, access to diapers and other essential items for babies and children often depends on donations from civil organizations and not the state. In other cases, women themselves must work to cover not only their own needs but also those of their

children, creating a significant disparity between incarcerated men and women.

Our work highlights the need for systemic reform when it comes to incarcerated mothers and their children. The emotional and psychological trauma from abrupt separations speaks to a larger societal issue: the disregard for the maternal bond and the empowerment of women as caregivers. Advocating for more humane separation processes that prioritize the emotional well-being of the children over institutional requirements, and supporting the right of incarcerated women to maintain relationships with their children in dignified conditions would empower women, reinforcing their roles as mothers even within the confines of the penal system.

Lessons Learned and Remaining Questions

The poor conditions of penitentiaries affect the early development of the children living in those spaces. In Nuevo León, the situation is particularly alarming. For example, children and mothers in these facilities have lived in shared cells with other incarcerated women when the penitentiary has been at capacity, and their daily reality becomes indistinguishable from the penitentiary system itself. They mimic activities such as roll call and wonder why the lights don't turn off when they go to sleep once they leave the facilities when they reach three years of age. These environmental factors can lead to significant developmental delays.

Organizations such as RENACE and Comparte Más, A.C. highlighted numerous challenges. Children frequently exhibit disrupted sleep patterns due to noise, fear of men, and difficulty forming relationships with men. There is also a noticeable delay in language development due

to their lack of interaction with other children their age, which becomes apparent after children leave the facility. The poor infrastructure also extends to a lack of adequate nutritional support and healthcare, with no provisions for formula, medicine, or early childhood stimulation facilities. Emotional damage, anxiety, and mistrust are common among children, particularly when authorities, such as the National System for the Integral Development of the Family, abruptly separate them from their mothers, sometimes even during significant moments like their third birthday celebrations.

In cases where relatives outside the penal system become caregivers, particularly maternal grandmothers, a unique set of challenges arise. These women often experience guilt, fearing they may fail with their grandchildren just as they feel they did with their own now-incarcerated children. Additionally, there is no state program to support the children of incarcerated individuals once they leave the penitentiary system, leading to further neglect and developmental delays.

In Mexico City, FUNFAI has observed similar trends. Children often arrive at shelters with severe delays in language development, high sugar consumption due to poor diets in the penitentiaries, and deeply ingrained behavioural issues stemming from cycles of violence they witnessed with their incarcerated mothers. Emotional attachment problems, issues with trust, and low self-esteem are prevalent among these children, some of whom have suffered physical and sexual abuse from their mothers or other family members as they replicate the violence cycles they experienced themselves.

In the only centre in Mexico City where children live (Santa Martha Acatitla), there are mechanisms and services available for children and their mothers in health and education, but the mothers must request pediatric check-ups or early stimulation in the offered programs from the authorities. However, mothers aren't always aware

of the importance of these check-ups. The same situation occurs regarding nutrition: meals are not specifically tailored for children; they are the same meals provided to the women in custody at these centres.

Taking into consideration the information gathered in this research, there are some pertinent recommendations that could be implemented to better the development of children living with their mothers in incarceration:

- 1. Differentiated dietary plan for pregnant inmates.** Supplying incarcerated pregnant women with a specific dietary plan designed for them to reach their daily caloric goals is crucial for the prevention of children's health issues that could arise from an inadequate diet.
- 2. Daycare facilities in the centres.** Providing women with the option of leaving their child with social workers during some hours of the day is crucial for them to be able to acquire a job inside the penitentiary centre and be able to provide formula, diapers, and clothes to their child without compromising their child's safety. Additionally, the mothers would be able to have some down time to rest from the constant duty they now face with the implementation of the 24/7 child-mother policy.
- 3. Increase in pricing of unhealthy food and increase the offer of healthy food in in-centre convenience stores.** Raising prices on unhealthy snacks — often given by mothers without restrictions due to feelings of guilt — and offering more affordable, nutritious alternatives, would encourage healthier choices, improve children's health, and reduce obesity-related risks.
- 4. Change in schedule of parenting workshops.** The parenting workshops currently provided by NGOs are held during

the recreation time the inmates are given per day, which in turn, leaves the mothers to decide between taking the workshops, spending quality time with their friends, exercising, or washing their clothes. The majority of the time the first choice is the last activity on their list. If parenting workshops were scheduled outside their recreation time, mothers would be able to take them without having to decide to skip them.

- 5. Effective communication of inmates' rights and available amenities.** Implementing an initiative to raise inmates' awareness of the centre's amenities could bridge the information gap between administration and inmates, enhancing both the effectiveness of services and inmates' sense of support from the administration. This improved understanding could also foster a more positive social environment within the centre.
- 6. Establishment of a direct complaint channel from the inmates to the centres' administration.** Currently, complaints regarding unmet rights or instances of hostile behaviour by staff often go unaddressed due to the lack of a formal reporting mechanism for inmates. Establishing a dedicated complaint channel to connect inmates with the administration could enhance accountability for those responsible and help prevent human rights violations.
- 7. Child-centred, instead of institution-centred, separation process.** Currently, the separation process when a child turns three is focused on institutional protocols, often leading to abrupt transitions, such as removing a child from the centre even during their birthday celebration. Implementing a smooth separation process that includes pre-emptive counselling for both the mother and the child — prioritizing the child's best interests — could help mitigate potential

trauma associated with this significant change.

By addressing the limitations in nutrition, healthcare, early education, and emotional well-being, institutions could create a more supportive environment that prioritizes the unique needs of these children. Implementing targeted recommendations — such as improved dietary plans, childcare facilities, access to parenting workshops, clear communication of rights, a robust complaint mechanism, and a more humane separation process — could mitigate developmental delays and emotional trauma. A child-centred approach within these facilities would not only aid in breaking cycles of trauma but also offer these young lives a more stable foundation, impacting them positively long after they leave these environments.

Research Team



Abigail Contreras Hernández is studying for a double BA in international relations and government and public transformation at Tecnológico de Monterrey. She has collaborated on research projects and policy proposals with organizations such as the UNHCR, CEMEX, COPARMEX, ¿Cómo Vamos Nuevo León?, the State Executive Commission for Attention to Victims (CEEAVNL), FEMSA, Poligrama, Nuevo León's Department of Equality and Inclusion, Inter-American Development Bank, and Nuevo León's police department. She was vice president of the student association of the Bachelor's Degree in Government and Public Transformation during 2023, organizing debates, and creating a network for sharing formative and internship opportunities for student members.

"This research showed me how much our public opinions about the justice system affect the most vulnerable. Even when we feel angry about the injustices and impunity within the system, we must remember that punitive measures are never the solution."



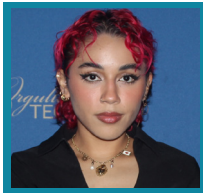
Yamileth Luna Torres is studying government and public transformation at Tecnológico de Monterrey, focusing on inequality, gender equity, sustainability, and children's rights. She founded Tree For Me, an environmental education project recognized at the 2020 Latin America Green Awards, and is certified by the UN Environment Programme. Recognized by the state government for her social projects, she earned a scholarship to visit international organizations in Panama. As a leader in Hambre Cero Tec, she raised over MXN 93,000 and 10 tons of food in collaboration with public and private sectors. She has also collaborated with organizations like COPARMEX, ¿Cómo Vamos Nuevo León?, and CEEAV, focusing on data analysis and public policy. Her experience spans youth empowerment, reforestation, labour rights, and sustainability.

"Acknowledging this issue calls us to act responsibly, using available spaces to bring attention to it. Sharing this knowledge is not just about awareness but an ethical obligation to advocate for changes that uphold the dignity and well-being of children with incarcerated parents. Their rights and development must become a collective priority, reminding us of our shared duty to demand fair policies and create supportive conditions."



José de Jesús Rivera Martínez is currently pursuing a BA in urbanism at Tecnológico de Monterrey. He is passionate about sustainability, public participation, social justice, and the role of public spaces in fostering community connections. His studies have included courses on leadership, governance, geographic information systems, sociology, sustainability, and design. José's experience includes working in DistritoTec, an urban regeneration initiative in Monterrey that aims to create an innovation district. He has also collaborated with local NGOs dedicated to community and data-driven urban development, and currently works as an environmental consultant at a sustainability firm that incorporates best practices in sustainable architecture, including guiding projects through LEED and other sustainability certifications.

"Through my research, I have gained a deeper understanding of the injustices and inequalities faced by individuals deprived of their liberty within the Mexican penitentiary system. This experience has also emphasized the vital role of nongovernmental organizations in securing access to fundamental human rights. It has reinforced the importance of active and participatory citizenship as a means to address and reduce inequalities."



Danna Lariss Chávez Rodríguez is an undergraduate student in international relations at Tecnológico de Monterrey. Her interest in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and social justice led to her involvement in environmental activism on Fridays for Future Mexico. This experience inclined her to focus on research in social studies. She has published research with Tecnológico de Monterrey Government School on the use of virtual assets for money laundering in electoral campaigns.

"While the living conditions of children in penitentiary centres are concerning, the most inhumane aspect is the lack of attention to their emotions during separation. Our research highlights the absence of protocols in detachment processes as an opportunity for policy reform. Children's emotions matter."



Iza María Sánchez Siller is a professor at the School of Humanities and Education at Tecnológico de Monterrey. She graduated in law from the Tecnológico de Monterrey and holds a PhD in social sciences, with a specialization in migration and public health, having completed research stays at Mississippi State University and University of Trento in Italy. Her current work on social development focuses on gender and violence from a sociological and legal perspective, especially with domestic migrants, through projects with Indigenous communities within the Monterrey Metropolitan Area. Sánchez Siller is co-founder of the program "Promoting Gender Equity in Adolescents and Young Women in Rural Areas" in Mitunguu, Kenya — a program that works with local high schools to reinforce the importance of higher education and decision making.

"This has been one of the most impactful case studies I've encountered as a mentor over the years. Highlighting the importance of ECD (early childhood development) in contexts with significant challenges sheds light on its profound influence, not only on children's futures but on society as a whole. I am deeply grateful to the team of researchers who delivered exceptional work — it was an honour to witness their growth, empowered by the tools and support provided by the Reach Alliance."



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