

# Do Babies Belong in Prison?

UNIQUE RESEARCH SAYS ANSWER LIKELY IS YES, IF THAT'S WHERE THEIR MOTHERS ARE

At 17 months and about two feet tall, with soft wavy hair and big brown eyes, Carlos may not look like a typical ex-con – but he has spent time in prison. When Carlos's mother, Janet, who was pregnant with him at the time of her arrest for criminal possession of a controlled substance in 2004, gave birth to him at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, Carlos lived with her inside the prison nursery for the first five months of his life. Now, in a much-anticipated study, a School of Nursing professor, Mary Byrne, Ph.D., is trying to assess how – or whether – living in prison affects the development of children like Carlos.

Carlos's experience is highly unusual. Bedford Hills is one of only a few women's prisons in the United States that allow pregnant prisoners to keep a newborn with them for the first 12 to 18 months of the baby's life. Carlos is one of 86 babies taking part in the NIH-funded project of Dr. Byrne, professor of clinical nursing, to assess the success of the Bedford Hills nursery program.

The Bedford Hills nursery, which has existed in some form since 1901, was created to help foster a stronger attachment between mother and infant, improve parenting skills, and reduce a mother's chances of recidivism.

Until now, though, no outsider has evaluated the success of the programs. Dr. Byrne's research, expected to be completed next year, will answer the most pressing question – is the experience good for the child's cognitive, emotional and physical health? The project will have a big impact on the future of these nurseries; four other states in the United States are considering opening prison nurseries but are waiting until Dr. Byrne's findings are in.

The research began almost by accident. Dr. Byrne initially went to Bedford Hills as a liaison for the School of Nursing's master's degree students who provided clinical care at the prison. "I took a look around and noticed the nursery," Dr. Byrne says. "As a pediatric nurse practitioner interested in mother-infant attachment, I knew I wanted to research this."

By late 2000, she had started a small study with support from the Columbia University Institute for Child and Family Policy and the New York State Department of Health. In 2003, she began her current study, a much larger and ambitious project that will track about 100 prison nursery babies from birth, throughout their stay in the nursery, and through their first year outside of prison.

In her suite at the School of Nursing, and at Bedford Hills, Dr. Byrne and her colleagues assess the children's cognitive, motor, and behavioral development using Bayley Scales, well-validated measures of infant development that have been used for more than 35 years.



Mary Byrne observes a child at play during a one-year follow-up, post-prison.

During the assessment Carlos climbs a set of wooden stairs, plays with an assortment of toys and books, and responds to questions from a child neuropsychologist. He's particularly fascinated with the yellow pegboard – deftly inserting the pegs into the board – and keeps returning to it even when he's asked to point to pictures of dogs and cars. "He's pretty clear about what he wants to do and what he doesn't want to do," Dr. Byrne says.

The observation of play lasts about 45 minutes; the finding – Carlos is a sweet and curious child, developing at about the same pace as any other 17-month-old toddler. This observation is followed by a laboratory assessment of mother-child attachment, several questionnaires, and an interview with the mother. Though Dr. Byrne has so far completed her one-year post release follow-up of about a quarter of the 100 babies in the study – Carlos is fairly typical of what she has witnessed so far.

"The babies in the prison nursery program are developmentally the same as other babies," Dr. Byrne says. "To answer the real question 'do the babies belong in the prison with their mothers?' – the answer, so far, seems to be yes."

The alternative to keeping babies in prison with their mothers, may, in fact, be much more detrimental to the child's health. "If a baby isn't cared for by its mother, who else can function as the primary caregiver?" Dr. Byrne asks. "Sometimes the baby is passed around and nobody develops a strong attachment to the child."

In general, children who are suddenly or repeatedly separated from their primary caregivers are more likely to have difficulty learning and become cold and aggressive adults who, in turn, make poor parents. The few studies of children with incarcerated parents show that these children are at higher risk than children in the general population for emotional and behavioral disorders, school failure, and coming to the attention of the criminal justice system as juveniles and adults.

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MARY BYRNE

to benefit the children but also the mothers. None of the mothers in Dr. Byrne's study have committed any new crimes and only 5 percent have violated parole and returned to prison. Though Dr. Byrne was reluctant to include recidivism in her study because it seemed too onerous to pin the future of a valuable parenting program on just one parameter, she says, "recidivism is obviously an important factor in the child's well-being because if the mother returns to prison, her baby is separated from her again."

When Dr. Byrne's study ends next year, other prison systems will have enough information on child development to make decisions about opening their own nurseries. But as Dr. Byrne watches more of her research subjects leave prison, she realizes that a child's well-being may be at risk by transitioning from prison to home.

Carlos and his mother, Janet, have a stable home but many women find themselves in the position of constantly looking for places to live. "Most mothers and babies do well while they are in prison, but the transfer out is a vulnerable time," Dr. Byrne says. "Once they leave, it's up to them to find their own housing, pay for food, apply for health insurance. After the prison nursery research is done, we'll start looking into nursing interventions for this period that continue to promote the health and welfare of the child and mother."

—Susan Conova

The American Society for Cell Biology has given the Bruce Alberts Award for Excellence in Science to **SAMUEL C. SILVERSTEIN, M.D.**, John C. Dalton Professor of Physiology and Cellular Biophysics and professor of medicine. He accepted the award in December for his work with the Columbia Summer Research Program for Science Teachers, which allows science teachers to conduct full-time research at Columbia University laboratories under the mentorship of university faculty.

**WAYNE A. HENDRICKSON, PH.D.**, University Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biophysics, is a recipient of the Mayor's Award for Excellence in Science and Technology, administered by the New York Academy of Sciences. The award – given to those who live or work in New York City – recognizes Dr. Hendrickson for his innovations in the field of X-ray diffraction methods and his leadership in the field of structural biology.

**ALLAN ROSENFELD, M.D.**, dean of the Mailman School of Public Health, was honored for his 10 years of service to the New York State AIDS Advisory Council at its November meeting. The council helps to guide state policy and procedures regarding HIV and AIDS.

The Office of Minority Health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has awarded its first 21st Century Equity Award to **H. JACK GEIGER, M.D.**, visiting professor of epidemiology at the Mailman School of Public Health. Dr. Geiger was recognized for his contributions to the health of ethnic and racial minority populations and to the elimination of health disparities.

The American Stroke Association's Council on Stroke has awarded **RALPH SACCO, M.D.**, the 2006 William Feinberg Award for Excellence in Clinical Stroke. Dr. Sacco is professor of neurology and epidemiology in the Sergievsky Center; director of the Stroke and Critical Care Division and associate chair for clinical research and training at the Neurological Institute; and an attending neurologist at New York-Presbyterian Hospital. He will be honored for his work at the International Stroke Conference 2006.

(See a story about Dr. Sacco's work on page 1).