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Incarcerated mothers' views of their children's experience: A qualitative study in French nurseries

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**ABSTRACT** 

Context

In France, young children of incarcerated women live with their mothers in prison in specific

units called nurseries, up to the age of 18 months. Only a few studies have examined the

impact of this environment on these children. This study sought to explore through mothers'

narratives how they perceive their children to experience this environment and how it

affects their development.

Method

1

We used semi-structured interviews to collect the perceptions of 25 mothers about their children's experience of daily life in 12 different prison nurseries in France. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to explore the data.

#### Results

According to mothers, prison is a sensorially aggressive environment for children that may impair the children's sensory abilities. The children's and mothers' emotional perceptions of anger, sadness, insecurity, and imprisonment intertwine. Prison is home for these children, which leads them to establish strong bonds with this inside world – prison staff, other inmates— but to develop reluctances and concern about exploring the outside world.

#### Conclusion

The prison's sensorial environment may overlay the sensorial environment created by the mother, interfering with early mother-child interactions and leading to emotional misattunement. The gap between what the mother and the child each feel to be their home, and the social group they feel they belong to, causes pain to the mothers. This could alter their mandate of being a protective shield that could reduce the traumatic potential of the carceral environment on their babies. These mothers' sentences must be reconsidered for the sake of their children.

## **Keywords:**

Incarcerated mothers, prison nursery, mother-child interactions, family relations, social adaptation, child development, psychological outcome, Qualitative research.

# Introduction

Every year in Europe, 10,000 children live with their mothers in prison (1), in accordance with the International Convention for Children's Rights, which notes that "a child benefits from living with his mother during his first months of life" (2). According to the latest data available from the French national prison administration, on average each month, 42 children were incarcerated along with their mothers in 31 different prisons from January through August 2019 (3). These children are not inmates from a legal perspective (4) and accordingly are not in custody (5). Rather, in France as in many other countries, young children up to the age of 18 months (24 months in exceptional circumstances) stay with their mothers in prison (6). These mothers and children reside in specific units called "nurseries", together with pregnant women from their 6<sup>th</sup> month of gestation. They are separated from the other women inmates.

The organization of these nurseries in France is defined by a ministerial circular (7) providing that the mother and her child must be kept in an individual cell, of 15 m2, usually open 8 hours a day. They are to have access to a kitchen, living room, and courtyard, shared with other mothers and children, if not for them alone. It also requires the prison to provide the mother with all appropriate supplies for the baby's care. Unfortunately, hosting conditions in nurseries can differ substantially between establishments and do not always comply with these guidelines (8).

The residence of these children is the object of many recommendations across Europe (9) and worldwide (10–12). Child psychiatrists agree that the evidence is clear that mothers and children should not be separated in the children's first years of life (13) Nevertheless, only a

few studies have explored the impact of this environment on these children (14), on the mother-child relationship (15) and motherhood.

We seek to explore this question through mothers' narratives of what they believe to be their children's experience of this environment and its impact on their development.

#### Method

This is an observational phenomenological study based on the analysis of interviews with mothers in French nurseries in different regions. This study was approved by the ethics committee CER-PARIS DESCARTES (CER 2018-108, 19/01/2019).

# **Participants**

Our population was composed of women incarcerated in French prisons with a nursery unit.

Among the 31 such prisons in France (3), authorizations were obtained for 19 of them, located in all 10 French prison interregional administrative areas (16) Unfortunately, mothers were incarcerated with children in only 12 of these establishments, representing only 8 interregional areas. They were recruited in the interregional areas of Bordeaux (1 prison), Lille (3 prisons), Lyon (1 prison), Paris (1 prison), Rennes (3 prisons), Strasbourg (1 prison), Toulouse (1 prison) and French oversea territories (1 prison).

The criteria for inclusion were: adult women, currently or within the past year incarcerated in a French prison nursery and living with her child there. Women with a psychiatric or physical disorder possibly disruptive for the interview were excluded.

#### Data collection

Participants were recruited from February 2019 through February 2020.

After obtaining administrative consents,<sup>1</sup> a visit by the principal investigator to the nursery was organized, and individual oral and written information about the study was provided to the mothers before requesting and receiving their written consent.

A semi-structured individual interview was then set up, based on questions developed by the research group (Table 1). The principal investigator began with a few open-ended questions that led to a dialogue with the mothers around the research themes. Each interview was around 60 to 90 minutes in length; they were audio recorded and fully transcribed.

#### **Analysis**

The study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (17), because of the access it enables to the mothers' feelings and perceptions of their experiences. The analytic process for this method involves the following steps: interviews are read and reread repeatedly by the researcher, who annotates the transcripts during each reading. The comments are then assembled into different themes that reflect the major ideas identified by them. Links are then identified and developed between the themes to produce a logical and fluid organization. Next, metaconnections are determined between these themes, and the themes then assembled into different metathemes that describe global aspects of the subjects' experiences. Therefore, each and every metatheme attracts different themes, themselves composed of the different comments to the interview transcript. At each step in analyzing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> From the research and health departments of the central prison administration, each interregional prison administration, and every director of every prison visited.

each interview, the researcher must pay attention to the consistency of the links made between the different themes, by a constant back-and-forth analysis of the different interviews.

Two researchers (AO and JM) conducted the analysis, using NVIVO 11 software as a tool. Sticking points were discussed during research staff meetings.

#### Results

Twenty five women were recruited in 12 detention centers: 20 women with children born during their incarceration in the nursery, 2 women with small children born outside of the nursery initially placed there with the baby at the outset of their incarceration, and 3 women still in the prison but whose children had been moved out of it in the past year. Table 2 describes the characteristics of both the mothers and the children. Four women refused to participate: two because of a language barrier, and two who did not specify their reason.

Our results are organized around 4 themes: Prison as a sensorially aggressive environment,
The children's emotional reaction to this specific environment, Children as prisoners, and
Prison as a home.

### Prison as a sensorially aggressive environment

Prison must be considered a fiercely aggressive **acoustic** environment. It exposes the children to constant, brutal, and high intensity noises that may, according to their mothers, interfere with their biological rhythms.

"The thing I am the most worried about for my child is the noise. The other inmates' music; the screaming, when they shout, the doors slamming; I think that it is not appropriate for children." C2

"We hear noise all the time, there is this inmate banging over there, this other woman who yells all the time." B1

"Every day is the same: fighting in the courtyard, yelling, shouting in the evening, so the babies cannot sleep, they keep on crying." F3

Habits of both prison guards and some inmates sometimes inflict **visual stimuli** on babies that they cannot handle. Mothers worry that living in the nursery might also affect their adult visual capacities.

"When you're sleeping, some guards turn on the light, which wakes him up. Then he doesn't sleep anymore." K3

"Some guards leave the lights on, which makes it difficult for us to sleep, so it wakes the baby up." I1

"Since I'm here, I have double vision because our visual field is so limited. It makes it hard for me to read. I hope it won't affect her eyes, or I'll feel even more quilty." E1

Discovering different **tastes** through dietary diversification is another important aspect of the child's exploration of the world. Mothers worry that prison might impair it.

"There aren't a lot of vegetables: there are zucchini, potatoes, but you can't find any turnips, or sweet potatoes... But he has to discover all kind of tastes!" B2

"I don't want to delay everything, so that when she leaves here, I have to say 'She doesn't eat this, she doesn't eat this either, she hasn't had the time to taste this and this and this'." G1

"Four to six months is the start of taste discovery, so she should be able to have access to all kind of tastes." F2

**Smell** is a highly developed sense in early childhood. Children use it to distinguish the different people around them, especially their mothers. Prison's brutal smells might impair these children's sense of smell and olfaction development.

"I really don't want her to smell the cigarette smoke, so sometimes I put her in her bouncing chair and put a scarf over it so that the smoke can't reach her." F2

"Some inmates smoke cigarettes at their cell window, and sometimes not very legal stuff...
with an even stronger smell. The smoke comes into the cell." H1

"If you go to the cell right next to mine ... You'll have an awful smell; an old, rotten, musty smell, because the flooring made out of wood is very humid and there's mold under it." E1

## The children's emotional reactions to this specific environment

Prison is inevitably permeated by a **feeling of insecurity** that, according to these mothers, puts their children into a state of constant altertness.

"I feel like she's very stressed, she's always on alert, she's much tenser than when we can go out of the prison for a temporary furlough. Here I can see it on her face, it's not the same face as outside." E1

"He cries for all of this: the anger, the sadness, the stress maybe also, because he can't speak, he can't explain." K5

"My baby is startled whenever he hears the key opening the cell door in the morning or opening the courtyard. He looks frightened. He is moved in some way." K5

"Every morning, they open the door, 'bang, slam, clack'. My daughter is always startled." M4

Several mothers also report that their children have **sleeping problems**, which they attribute to the prison environment, perceived as **threatening**.

"Sometimes, when he sleeps, he cries in his sleep, and I can see that he's not sleeping well because of the noise, the sadness... all of it... he also has nightmares." K3

#### "It looks like he sleeps very lightly." J1

"He can't sleep on his own. When we were at home he could, alone in his crib. But since we arrived here, he can't anymore. When I put him in the crib, he wakes up straight away..." K5

"I have to take him with me so that he can fall asleep." E4

Mothers say they can feel their children expressing **anger and sadness**, and they relate it to a **feeling of imprisonment**.

"He often wants to open the window, he holds on to the window bars, he likes to speak, yell, I can feel that he has this need to get out and take a big breath of fresh air." F1

"They have difficulties being locked in. My daughter, as soon as she sees the guards coming...
she cries whenever they lock the door, and she kicks the door." E2

"When she's outside, she looks fine... but when we're locked in, she cries a lot, she can feel that we're imprisoned." K4

"When it's time to lock the door, she knows. So when the guard comes to lock the door, she always runs, she runs far away. When she runs, I see, I know that she's not ok." C2

# Children as prisoners

Children kept with their mothers in prison are inevitably **kept away from the outside world**, which makes it difficult, even impossible, for them to explore it.

"I put her at the window to show her the sky, I do as I much as I can to show her the outside world." F2

"The child needs to go outside more often, to discover the outside world, because here, he can only see the wall and the birds, that's it." H1

"Here she can only see women; she's never seen a man." M1

"He's 17 months old, he's never been out of here, never." A1

While prisoners know it will be difficult to adapt back to their "normal" life once they are released, these mothers feel that it will be even harder for their children, when they are transferred out of prison, without their mother, to adapt to their new environment, so different from prison.

"Car horns, animals, trees, my [former] day-to-day life... I think it might be a long-lasting trauma for her, it might give her disabilities, or I don't know... maybe she'll be shocked, she'll be behind... I'm scared about it. Not mentally retarded but behind." F2

"I'm not used to hearing many people speak at the same time anymore. So, imagine for her!

It'll be so hard." F3

"When I'm out of here, how is she going to feel? It will be weird for her, because she hasn't experienced that kind of life before. Here in prison, life is very different from outside." C2

The children's social environment in prison is often limited to their mothers.

"He only sees a few people here, it might be a problem for him later." B2

"I'm basically the only person she sees." E1

"She needs to see other children. Seeing people is important, it helps them to grow up." C2

"She's always with me, only me." E3

#### Prison as a home

These children born in prison have never known any other living environment. Most children consider home to be the place where they were born and where they live. The mothers report that the children become used to their life in prison; **the prison's routine becomes their day-to-day life**, and this worries their mothers.

"She knows the opening hours of the cell. Sometimes, when guards are late, she kicks the door, and pushes it." G2

"My daughter has done everything here, she grew up here, she knows nothing else. To her it's her home, but it's not my home." L1

"She's getting used to it here, I can see that she's getting used to all this, and I don't like it."

M2

"I wanted to take him out, for a short day furlough but he wouldn't cross the line, he was crying." A1

The prison staff do appear to care for the children as if they were **part of their own family,** and the children seem to build strong relationships with both prison staff and other inmates.

"For his first birthday, the guards took everything in hand, one of the inmates made him a cake... they made a candle out of cardboard. He was really happy that day, he felt wonderful." A1

"He's in love with one of the guards!" A1

"She grew up here, so the guards have seen everything, her first words, her first laughs, her first steps, her first falls, her first mischief, ... as my family would have outside ... She calls some of the guards "daddy" ... everybody knows her here." L1

"Some of the guards are authorized to bring baby clothes, because the child's not in custody
... So he got presents from them." H1

"They gave everything to my son, for all his needs, everything, everything." K1

Some of the **bonds established in prison** can be sometimes even stronger than the ones with their biological family outside.

"When we go to the parlor, the children, the relatives come to see her. She kisses them because I ask her to, but otherwise she wouldn't even come close to them." G1

"We did all the administrative procedures so that his father could take him home, but my son cried a lot that day. He didn't want to go." A1

"My daughter sees her father 45 min, once a week. It is too short to build a proper relationship." G1

"He didn't know my sister-in-law, his cousin, he knew none of them, he cried, and didn't want to come near anyone." M3

#### **DISCUSSION**

In prison, mothers and children are kept together locked inside a very small cell most of the day, with rare contact with the outside world. Although this condition may appear to forecast a very close mother-child relationship, our results indicate that it may actually impede emotional and affective attunement between the mother and her child.

First, the children are exposed to a harsh living environment. This could affect the development of sensory abilities (18,19). Sensory abilities appears very early in the fetus development, during pregnancy (20). These abilities actually constitute the baby's prelanguage skills, that he uses to distinguish his mother (21) and to interact with her (22–24). The mother also uses hers to create a reassuring environment for her child's healthy development (25). But the grimness of the prison's sensory environment may overlay that created by the mother and interfere negatively with the emergence and evolution of early mother-child interactions (21,26) by impeding the mother's reassuring capacities toward her child (27).

As a result, the tonic-emotional dialogue which usually helps mother and child understand their mutual emotional states (28) seems unsettled. Emotional misattunement (29) may lead to communication misunderstandings between the mother and her baby.

Second, there is a gap between what the mother and the child each feel to be their home. The mothers emphasize their separation from the *outside world*, their home, their usual life outside the prison walls. On the contrary, their children, raised in prison, consider it their home. As mothers try desperately to introduce their children to their outside home and protect them from the prison environment, the children seem to turn away from that outside world, remaining attached to their inside prison home.

This gap is widened by the social organization in prison. Goffman defined prison as a totalitarian institution, in which all aspects of human life (work, hobbies, nighttime) take place in a single setting, under one single authority, exerted by the prison guards (30) As a result of the dichotomy between a limited number of powerful guards, and a large number of secluded and disempowered inmates, including the mothers of these children, conflictual relationships arise between these populations. But children do not fit into this organization: they build solid relationships with guards as well as with other prisoners, with no status distinctions. These bonds disrupt the well-established institutional "etiquette" of prisoners on one side, and guards on the other and create an unintentional connection between those two populations.

The children, innocent and free, but residing in prison, do not belong to any of these "clans", and form a population of their own, apart from their mothers.

This complex situation causes suffering among the mothers. Their description of their babies' negative emotions thus appears to us to reflect mainly their own negative perceptions of the prison environment and the intolerability of feeling that their children are attached to this prison environment that they reject.

The interviews showed the mothers' ambivalence about this environment: they consider it threatening, unsafe, stressful, and causing great sadness to their children, but in the meantime they allow their babies to build strong bonds with the staff and other inmates and to share moments of joy and peace. Prison is the only totalitarian institution in which residents are guilty rather than victims of their condition (30), and feelings of guilt and shame may arise for exposing their child to this environment, resulting in this ambivalence.

#### CONCLUSION

The mothering abilities of some of these women appear to be affected by their situation and their distress. Mentally healthy mothers can establish a protective shield meant to reduce the potential negative impact of the brutal sensory environment on their child (31), especially before the acquisition of intersubjectivity (29,32) But what happens when the mothers' skills are affected by distress? What will happen when the baby leaves the harsh environment that is its home and meets the real world?

The traumatic potential of the carceral environment on mothers and their babies should be considered when they are sentenced. Whenever possible, these mothers and babies should be kept out of prison, under non-custodial sentences. When prison is inevitable in some rare situations, some of their mothers' outside world should be introduced to these children: by bringing some of it inside the prison – through some familiar objects or furniture the woman is attached to, or sensorial vectors of her outside life (food or music) that she could bring inside her cell - but also by giving these children direct access to the outside world, though regular accommodation in outside children nurseries. So that the children can be raised in a setting that has some resemblance to their mothers' social, emotional, and affective environment. This could limit the potential psychological trauma of these children when

released from prison into the outside world (22) and, paradoxically, create an even closer bond between them than simply living physically very close to one another in prison can.

Incarceration of mothers and their child in prison nurseries creates an emotional, affective and social gap between them that could be difficult to close at their release. The suffering of these mothers, due in part to their guilt for their responsibility for this situation, reinforces the difficulties in attuning mother-child relationship. Alternatives to incarceration must be preferred for these mothers and their children whenever possible.

# **KEY MESSAGES**

- Only a few studies have examined the impact of prison environment on children kept with their mothers in prison nursery.
- This study explores how the mothers perceive their children to experience this environment and how it affects their development.
- Semi-structured interviews wereled, and Interpretative phenomenological analysis
   was used to explore the data.
- For these children, being raised in prison creates a gap between them and people
  from the outside world including their mothers which might interfere with early
  mother-child interactions and lead to emotional misattunement.
- These mothers' sentences must be reconsidered for the sake of their children.

### Data availability statement

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article and tables.

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