



OSTARA
INITIATIVE
Reimagining Health & Justice

PRISON BIRTH STORYTELLING PROJECT

CREATED BY

*Hamline University
Public Health
Senior Seminar*



HAMLIN
UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

This project is a collaboration between The Ostara Initiative, Minnesota Prison Doula Project, Alabama Prison Birth Project and Hamline University's Public Health Senior Seminar and Center for Justice and Law. Over Fall of 2021, we engaged in humanizing research practices including meeting with people who gave birth while incarcerated. Thirteen college seniors spent 15 weeks with their professor, Susi Keefe, connecting with and listening to prison birth stories. This project represents the experiences of our participants with a goal to assist the Ostara Initiative and contribute to end prison birth within the next ten years.

Thank You

Our Special Thanks to all our wonderful participants.

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CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

The participants described their struggles with judicial processes and the conditions they endured while in jail or prison. They shared their struggles with lack of care, unmet basic human needs, lack of privacy, limited access to nutritious food, and the poor quality of their living environment while incarcerated. They also emphasized how their pregnancy, birth, and postpartum care suffered. As a result of the function of the system, their physical, mental, and emotional health were disturbed. This made their relationships with their friends, families, and children difficult to cultivate and maintain.

“ I mean, when they do the examination, you have two guards at least two guards next to you, they do not leave the room, I mean, they're doing an exam, like that should be private, you've got two people who you don't even know that are sitting here eating chips, drinking their pops like they may be on their cell phones, and then you're in here, and here's this doctor you know examining you. It's humiliating.
-Emma

“ The baby was already with family and stuff like that, I was suffering postpartum depression and then having to go back to court. So I was an emotional mess and everything. And once I went back to Ramsey County to get sentenced, I went back to Shakopee to put in a telecom application to my case immediately. From then on, 22 months in Shakopee, I'm away from my children, and away from the baby. [I had to go] on about the daily life of being incarcerated while also still fighting my case.
-Natalie



Criminal Justice System

The Criminal Justice System was created with the intention of rehabilitating and deterring people from committing crimes. It does exactly the opposite – including disproportionately impacting communities of color and those living in poverty, as well those who experience mental illness and addiction. When people enter the carceral system, it creates a cycle of trauma that affects future generations. This is especially true for children that are born in prison. The people we talked to described their struggles with both the judicial process and the conditions they endured while in jail or prison. Throughout this project we were told about the conditions and struggles that the participants endured during their incarceration. Although this was primarily a conversation about pregnancy, birthing, and parenting, we also heard stories about the lack of privacy, unmet basic needs, and knowledge of their rights that accompanies incarceration. Because of the isolation that comes with incarceration, people in jails and prisons often don't have enough information to maintain a consistent understanding of their standings in the judicial process. Beyond this, they're also not told how often or when they'll have access to basic needs like eating, privacy, and space to move.

Silenced

Incarcerated people experience a lot of trauma in incidents that happen before they even enter prison. Some of these individuals seek help, but are denied support, even when it is what they need most. They are cut off from being able to heal, which only adds more to the stress that they already have.

“The baby was already with the family. I was suffering postpartum depression and then having to go back to court. So I was an emotional mess and everything. And once I went back to Ramsey


County to get sentenced, I went back to Shakopee to put in a telecom application to my case immediately. From then on, 22 months in Shakopee, I'm away from my children, and away from the baby. [I had to go] on about the daily life of being incarcerated while also still fighting my case. - Natalie

“Well you know it has to do with when you're in there they kind of beat you down to know that you don't have any rights. You have no privacy, they tell you that there's no privacy in prison and you have no rights and you get that in your head. - Sarah

Mistreatment:

Bringing to light the mistreatment of people who have given birth in prison is one way we can provide evidence as to why change is necessary.

“I really didn't have a point of reference in terms of how someone should be treated. The rules were the rules. If you were poor, Black, uneducated, and unmarried, the odds were not in your favor. That was my point of reference; in a sense that I had no expectations on how I should be treated as that category of person in the justice system. So, I never knew anything was wrong. I did have an internal feeling that something wasn't right. But externally, you know, it's justified why I should be here or the treatment should be what it is. I gave birth in April 1996. I was handcuffed to the bed, giving birth. The feeling was very introspective. Even though I knew what was going on outside of me, I was more in tuned on what was going on inside of me. My point of reference is not. 'Oh wow, I'm in prison and I'm pregnant,' this is my expectation of how to be treated or I should get extra food which you didn't. On the back end I am just really grateful that people are picking up the torch and saying 'Hey! Let's try this a whole 'nother way.' I think it really kinda dawned on me that something was wrong. - Chernell



“I really do believe that our prison system is really, really screwed up. - Amanda

Abuse of Power:

Those that have a badge have the power to say and do what they want, regardless of the consequences for incarcerated people. Some correctional officers take advantage of the role and choose to reject the critical needs that the pregnant individuals request. This puts the incarcerated folks at a huge disadvantage, and the treatment is humiliating.

“Some of the guards would screw with you. They would use their power of being a guard, by saying ‘No you can’t have any.’ They’d literally try to fuck with us all the time about it. ‘No, we’re not gonna let you have any.’ Are you kidding me?! Like Why? You’re really gonna play that with me? Who’s the boss here? Because, it’s not you. Okay. So you know I’m still human. I have my own rights. You’re not gonna stop me. But yeah, some guards really fuck with people bad on that cause we’re crying.
- Amanda

“I had to go and talk to one of the guards and ask them if I could see a nurse because umm during this time, it was Covid. They weren’t letting us shower everyday, we were showering every like, 2-3 days. We were locked in our rooms basically on like a 22 hour lockdown because of Covid. So, when I had to go to the correctional officer and ask him, which was a male, ask him if I could see the nurse because I had an infection happening down there. Then I had to explain to him, and that was something that was super humiliating. Then he wouldn’t even allow me to see the nurse. - Jennifer

“It’s like a power trip really. You know a lot of guards get that job because of the power that they have over all of us. If you piss one of the guards off, or you don’t do something that they want you to do. Why [do they] have to make up some fake incident

that happened, and then now you get in trouble. Now you get more days added on, so it’s like why would you fuck with my life like that, like I’m trying to go back to my kids, why would you fuck with me.
-Amanda

The Ostara Initiative intends to end prison birth within the next 10 years and our goal with this project is to contribute with these stories to this reform within the criminal justice system.



PREGNANCY AND PARENTING EXPERIENCE

The theme of Pregnancy and Parenting Experience focuses on the moments of pre-birth, birth, and post-birth that were impactful for participants while they were incarcerated. Having disrupted parent-child bonds while incarcerated greatly impacted our participants. A healthy birth outcome and ability to parent are essential to the well-being of the child and to the reintegration of the parent back into society. Many of our participants were able to compare the experiences of pregnancy, birth, post-partum, and parenting while in and out of prison, and were able to discuss what was missing from their personal experience of birth and parenting while incarcerated. Our participants shared how going through these experiences while incarcerated stripped them of their humanity.

“ Separation and everything from my children, also not being able to do the motherly functionality of being with the baby. I missed all of it. So, basically I had a baby but he was a stranger. Not knowing who he was, not knowing his personality, not knowing what kind of baby he was because he was raised by my family.
-Natalie



Pregnant While in Prison:

Being denied access to information and knowledge is a common experience while incarcerated and pregnancy is no exception. In prison, you have no autonomy over your body or pregnancy. Fritz' study on prison nurseries finds that "many women aren't notified beforehand when it comes to the time they would be delivering. Mothers are not notified in advance when they will be induced, nor are their birth coaches, although most are aware of the standard operating procedure for scheduling inductions" (1). This lack of transparent notification creates much unneeded stress and anxiety for those who are pregnant while incarcerated.

“I was overdue by 10 days. The way they do it in Shakopee is if you're overdue they automatically set up an appointment to have you induced but they cannot tell you when that is. I told him 'listen, I'm not ready to have my baby. I know you have me scheduled for this but don't get comfortable at the hospital because I don't plan on having this baby today. I'm not ready.' He proceeded to chastise me, that I was a bad mom, that I wasn't doing what the doctor said, and [that] I was hurting my baby.
-Sarah

“When I went into prison, they had just changed the laws on the shackling and cuffing of pregnant women. However, when they transported me from county to Shakopee prison, they still shackled me which was I guess breaking the law but they still did it anyway. -Autumn

“I know that the doctor at the time had an intern. They had faulty equipment and told me that my baby had a heart condition. Really, they just needed to change the batteries in the equipment. So for a week, I went on thinking that my baby had a heart condition. -Sarah

During Birth:

Our participants described the conditions they faced during their time at the hospital. While some of our participants had already experienced pregnancy and birth prior to their incarceration, they still had no idea what to expect when giving birth while being incarcerated.

“You really don't know what to expect. If I were to go into labor. Soon, I mean, am I gonna die? Is my baby gonna die? I don't know things like that I suppose. Just, you know, not really knowing where my daughter is gonna end up after I have her. Is she going to go into foster care? Is somebody in my family going to take her? What's going to happen?
-Emma

“I was shackled to the bed the whole time. If I had to go to the bathroom, one of the guards had to follow me. So there was really no privacy, no nothing. When I had my C-section, the guard actually had to come in with me too, to make sure nothing could happen. -Amanda

Post Birth:

Due to our participants' incarcerated status, they aren't allowed much time with their child after birth. This lack of time to create that critical bond between parent and child, can greatly impact their relationship going forward. Many of our participants discussed the challenges they faced with postpartum depression, how they depended on programs and groups to get through it.

“You only have 24 hours to hold your baby, to love your baby. It makes you not want to sleep. It makes you not want to eat. It makes you not want to take care of yourself because you want to use all those 48 hours to focus solely on your baby that you know you can't see. -Emma

“In this time period you can't call your family member and tell them that you're in labor or that you've delivered or anything. You're having to [hope] somebody else will find me. It's devastating to leave the hospital with your baby there and nobody there with them, not knowing for sure that someone would safely guide them. It's literally like your, your heart has been ripped out. -Megan

“And they also had a group. It was [for] if you were pregnant or you had just given birth. We were sitting in this room and we would just talk about our birthing experience. They would also provide a little class on what to do, what could be done during labor. It was basically a mixture of when labor begins and then postpartum. I was in this group, just to be apart of something, just to help deal with, and also cope with my postpartum depression. -Natalie

“After Elijah was born, I did go through a postpartum, almost anxiety attack breakdown, kind of. Because one; I didn't know who the family was that had my son. I just knew that it was a family that had him. Two; there were a lot of medical issues going on with me. The people who I reached out to were the program Together for Good. I spoke with the director all the time. She was one of my biggest support systems, to help calm me down. There was also another worker, an old children protection worker from 2010, that had been involved in my life. -Emma

Parenting in Prison:

Many of our participants relied on family to care their children while incarcerated. Visiting was a challenge for numerous reasons, including new limitations due to Covid or guards lacking compassion and exerting unnecessary barriers. What is clear is that visitation programs that support healthy parent-child bonds and center the child's experience are necessary.


“My son was born on March 9th, 2020, and Covid happened on March 11th. So basically they took visiting away from the prison. I was not able to see my son the whole time I was there. My first time seeing my son since the hospital was on October 1st of 2020. -Jennifer

“A family member would come to the facility and drop [my] child off. Once we [were done checking in], [I] remember [feeling a sense of] relief. We would do everything together. We would have lunch together. There's an area where we go with little toys set down, or we watched a movie. We also had to go to the gym and there were different activities in there. We could all be together, supervised of course, spending time with our child, with our children. I got an opportunity to do that before I was released from prison. One time with each one of my children. I got four hours with each child. -Natalie

“By four to five months, it got really complicated so that anytime that the baby would cry, (the visiting room did not appreciate this) the visit would be ended. They were also very particular with me about how often I kiss my baby or my other two children. It was just not a family friendly environment at all. And it was hard for me to even spend any time trying to adjust and adapt [to the fact] that this is my baby. -Autumn

Parenting after Prison:

Separation from children leaves a lasting impact on parent-child relationships. If they still have contact with their children, they must work to rebuild those damaged bonds. Many of our participants described having to relearn everything about their child. Oftentimes the trauma of separation leaves children and parents experiencing lasting mental health repercussions.



“The lasting impact is [the] establishing of the relationship with my children. When I went in, they were little. I would go over the time that they got a little bit bigger and their attitudes and behavior kind of changed. [I] still wanted to reassure them that I still loved them, even though I was away, that nothing had changed. -Natalie

“Even after five and a half years, [I’m] still trying to get a better understanding of who this child is. I just want him to know that I’m mom. The subtle difference between I’m a ‘guest’ parent and [mom]. Considering [the fact that] my parents have been taking care of him since [he was born], I wouldn’t want to take that away from them, the bond that they’ve had. I give them all the credit. -Natalie

“When he first came home, he cried for my mom. I had to tell him I was mom. He knew I was his mom but he wanted Granny. He never called my mom, ‘Mom.’ He knew my mom was granny and he knew I was mom, and he understands [that] relationship now. But that companion[ship] and what they built, is still there. It’s gonna always be there. That was something from birth. With my daughter, it’s like that with me. With her and him, I don’t treat [either] of them differently. -Charletta

“[I went to] rehab because my charges were drug charges. The Adullam House is in Alabama, as a place to live if you qualify, not everybody qualifies. But if you qualify, you can choose to still have custody of your baby. You [give] the medical rights over to the Adullam house so they can take [your child] to doctor’s appointments. And then, upon your release, you get your baby back. That way you don’t have to worry about a lawyer or things like that. [With] my husband and his work hours and everything, that was the best option for us. He would have had a hard time with working and trying to take care of the baby with the hours that he worked.

“So that was what we had decided to do. And because of that, I signed a contract with them that I would go to a rehab upon my release. -Megan

“I got Malia when she was three months old. I hadn’t been in mom mode for almost a year so it was an adjustment for me, getting back into that. Now I had her, I had her with me at the rehab. I completed a year of rehab, and I graduated from there in March. I didn’t leave there until like June. When I first got her back, it was a learning experience just getting in that mode. But today, she’s my sidekick. She’s been through so much with me. She was locked up with me. I mean really, it’s a great bond. She’s my best friend, my everything. She never wants to leave my side. We spent a year together in rehab living in one little room. She’s gotta learn a little independence but that’s okay, I love her. She can sit next to me as long as she wants. -Emma

Our participants showed that being incarcerated while pregnant and parenting negatively affects those experiences greatly. The parent-child bonds of those we interviewed were damaged.




MEDICAL TREATMENT

The consistent mistreatment and negligence, which resulted in myriad dehumanizing practices, was a primary source of frustration throughout our interviews. We learned how often basic prenatal care is not provided and pregnancy needs are being ignored. Even when there are rules, policies, and legislation in place, people who are incarcerated are not able to easily advocate for the protection of their rights. Further, those policies which are in place to protect them are inconsistently applied, contributing to confusion, harm, and lack of trust.

“ I had a very bad infection, like a yeast infection, and I kept telling them ‘something is wrong, something is wrong’ and I didn’t mean to be [um] like you know, graphic but but you know women, feminine things they go through like that stuff like that and, I kept telling them I said “I need to go to the nurse, I need to go to the nurse.” I went on with this for about a month before they finally decided to get me to the nurse so I could receive treatment. -Natalie

“ I don’t even remember going to the doctors but only one time in prison. I spoke with the nurse for maybe ten to fifteen minutes. I don’t remember having an ultrasound, or any of that stuff. And I’m not sure how that even happened. -Chernell



Outside of the carceral system, birth and pregnancy each have a long list of best practices and standards of medical care. In many respects, within the carceral system, pregnancy and birth are experienced in ways that appear to be the exact opposite of what is typically recommended by the medical community (2). There are unnecessary barriers in place that prevent access to quality medical care and sufficient support in pregnancy and birth. Our participants described devastating, long-term challenges and implications for those who experience incarceration while pregnant.

Lack of Medical Care and Trust

Most prisons are not equipped to meet the medical needs of the people who are incarcerated, especially those who are pregnant (3). All of our participants experienced mistreatment and the denial of their basic human rights in relation to medical care during their pregnancy, birth, postpartum, or parenting experience(s) while incarcerated. Many had little to no access to medical care until it became an emergency or the conditions were critical.

“The medical there is not the greatest by any means. Don’t ever let them touch you. - Amanda

“Once I got into Shakopee I was given very minimal medical care. And luckily I had a very healthy pregnancy so it didn’t really affect me as it might have affected other high risk women in prison at the same time as me. I do recall a few instances where their equipment failed them and they had told me that my child had heart conditions or heart failures. Once I got tested by a real technician coming in, and they had told me ‘No. That’s not the case. Their equipment failed.’ So, I guess there were a few scares while I was in there but they were just operator error from the prison staff; the medical prison staff in there, which was a little traumatizing. - Sarah

“I got to have my son, I had a C-section. I opted for that so I could spend more time with him. Medical care sucks in prison. I had the same thing happen to me; about being called for meds that were not even yours. I actually had someone with the same last name as me and they were trying to force me to take meds because they had called my name up to the desk and said, ‘Here’s your meds’. And I said, ‘Those aren’t mine, I’m not taking them.’ And they said ‘So, you’re denying taking them.’ And I said ‘I’m not taking these, they aren’t mine.’ And they were like ‘You’re going to psych then.’ I was like what? It’s not me, it’s not even my name!’ I don’t get it, what do you guys not get? They were trying to force me to take somebody else’s meds. It’s pretty bad. I don’t trust the medical care there at all, ever. I never will. I think I saw the doctor at Shakopee maybe twice. - Amanda


“I think I was there for about three and a half, almost four weeks, and I still haven’t had any medical care. My kite, which was an internal messaging system, was going unanswered. - Autumn

“When they sent me back to the infirmary, one of the scary things was with the hospital being so far away. If something were to happen, and I were to start bleeding, and they couldn’t get the ambulance there fast enough to get me to the hospital, I could actually die, or lose my baby. - Emma

“I was really concerned that they weren’t acknowledging that I needed to be seen. Two weeks went by, so I asked, ‘How do I get to see a doctor?’ [they said] ‘You gotta put in a medical request.’ So, I paid the five dollar copay, put in a medical request, went to the doctor, and they said ‘Oh you can’t see our medical staff, you have to wait till the OB comes on a particular day.’ So, I wait another week, all of a sudden I realize six-weeks have gone by and I haven’t seen anybody. At this point, I’m over eight

2. Roth, R. (2011). Abortion access for imprisoned women: Marginalized Medical Care for a marginalized group. *Women's Health Issues*, 21(3).

3. Cross, J. N. (2019). Incarcerating pregnant and parenting women, the new witch hunt: A policy analysis. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 23(4), 431–434.



months pregnant. They finally brought me into medical to have my first OB visit and the doctor was asking me questions about medications I've never heard of; just kinda making comments that didn't really make sense or pertain to me. Come to find out, he had someone else's chart. - Autumn

Poor Quality of Care

Medical treatment plays a critical role in pregnancy and the birthing experience. All pregnant individuals deserve access to equitable healthcare. Our participants shared the numerous ways they experienced poor quality of care.

“You have to get a prescription from a doctor. I asked him to put me on depo because I was on it a long time ago. They [said] ‘no, you're fine, it'll go away.’ Okay. It's been like six months. I go back and I'm like [‘it's] still happening, nine months now.’ He doesn't do anything at all. I would not let that one doctor that did that one thing to me touch me again. - Amanda

“I was in a wheelchair due to complications of not having that medication. It was rough and very traumatic. I had several close calls of losing him [baby]. - Megan

“Before I had given birth, I had preeclampsia. I had a lot of swelling in my ankles and my feet. My blood pressure was really high. When I would try to go to the nurse, I could not. I had to fill out some kind of little slip to wait for them to come and see me. - Jennifer

Mistreatment

The ways that incarcerated pregnant individuals are treated when trying to request medical care heavily impact them, both physically and mentally. Self-advocacy is an extremely stressful and painful process not only for the parent but the child as well because physical health requests are being

neglected and disregarded. All of our participants experienced mistreatment and the denial of basic human rights in relation to their medical care.

“I went to get a medical check up numerous times and they're like ‘oh no you're fine, maybe going through menopause’. I highly doubt it. I waited to [get] my blood [drawn] and they're like ‘Oh no, you're fine.’ You guys gonna dig into it? Figure it out? Like what's going on? No. After a little over two years they finally put me on birth control to regulate it. Can you imagine two years? Oh my god. - Amanda

“If you're overdue they automatically set up an appointment to have you induced. I said 'listen I'm not ready to have my baby. I know you have me scheduled for this, but don't get comfortable at the hospital. I don't plan on having this baby today. I'm not ready.' He proceeded to chastise me that I was a bad mom, that I wasn't doing what the doctor said and I was hurting my baby. I just felt like this wasn't his place to say. He's just an intake surgeon, not a medical professional. I had no intention of going against doctor's orders. I was just really traumatized by that specific event. Once I got to the hospital, the doctor agreed with me that I wasn't ready to have my baby. - Sarah

“I don't think we should have any male doctors in a women's prison. There. Men are very rough like they always don't understand I guess. - Amanda

Our goal is to share the inadequate medical treatment that our participants endured while pregnant and birthing within jails and prisons. We hope these first hand accounts will inspire you to think about the lack of humanity inside the carceral system and where the opportunities for advocacy and change lay.



RELATIONSHIPS

Our participants shared how relationships encompass the negative and positive connections they had while in prison, through re-entry, and beyond. All participants talked about the impact these relationships had, and how they have affected them to this day. The relationships that were described include those with themselves, spirituality, family members, other inmates, correctional officers, and medical staff. The connections and communities that our participants built while in and out of prison were described as vital.

“The only support that I was given was from other inmates that had gone through my experience. To me, those women were very, very important to get me through what I had to go through as a pregnant woman in prison.
-Sarah

“In Tutwiler, [Alabama's women's prison], I can't speak for other prisons, but the only support that you have, the option to have, is the doulas or inmates. Even when you go into labor, your family can't come to the hospital. You can't even call them and let them know that you're in the hospital. And if [a] family member does ever show up, then they put [an] Escape Charge on you, that you're trying to escape.
-Megan

Relationships

Creating, maintaining, and managing relationships while in the prison system is not easy. Our participants shared how disorienting the rules and policies within the system are. Adjusting to life in prison and the rules governing relationships felt dehumanizing, and it's difficult to build meaningful relationships and support systems in prisons. Minnesota Correctional Facility - Shakopee, was labeled a no touch facility until the summer of 2019. This policy deprived people in the prison of a basic human right: touch. Although the rule was modified recently to allow for some forms of touch, it is inconsistently enforced, much like the anti-shackling law.

Our participants, like Sarah above, highlighted how the relationships they made with other incarcerated individuals were of utmost importance to their journey.

“One thing you should know [is that] Shakopee is a no touch facility. To even show any kind of physical consoling, you will be possibly penalized or put in segregation. For giving a woman a hug or patting them on her back, or some kind of physical embrace. I come from a family that is very physically connected. We do hugs. Hugs [are] therapeutic for us. I just remember wanting to hug so badly. I just was so desperate to have a hug. One night, I just turned to my roommate who was still pregnant, and I was like, ‘Missy I just need a hug and I don't want to get you in trouble, but can you just give me a hug?’ And she hugged me. I just broke down crying. I just needed that. - Autumn.

“I was able to be a support person for women that came in after me that were pregnant. And it was very important to me to let them know that they needed to advocate for their own behalf. - Autumn

“A lot of the women in the parenting program that I lived amongst, I formed relationships with and I don't think that I could have gotten through the whole experience without their support and their friendship. And just them being there for me. - Sarah

Support:


Within the prison, there were few positive relationships besides those formed with other incarcerated individuals. The majority of participants mentioned that their positive support systems had to do with prison programs that they were able to join. The doula programs represent a rare opportunity to create positive and supportive relationships around pregnancy, birth, and parenting.

“They [doulas] were a huge support for me during that time. After I had my baby and even up till this point till today I still remain in contact with them so if I hadn't had the doulas, I don't think I could have been emotionally prepared as well as I did and I mean, it was still tough but it was a lot easier. - Emma

“There's not much that they could do while inside the prison because it was a no touch policy. Just setting up meetings where I can meet with my doula, and talk to her [about] how it's going, as far as how I was feeling. They're like a support person. As far as my doula, to this day she's been my friend for 5 and half years. She was at my birth a couple of weeks ago, when I gave birth to my son. [She was] right there with me, just like she was when I had my son in Shakopee. - Natalie

Parent-Child Bond:

In most prisons, when a woman gives birth, her baby is taken away within 48 to 72 hours and sent to either a relative or foster care. This destroys any opportunity to form a healthy parent-child bond (4). Incarcerated parents are not able to form



relationships with their newborns until after prison, if at all. The first two years are a crucial developmental time period for a parent and their infant to develop a parent-child bond. One of our participants shared how when they came home their child was more attached to their grandma than their own parent.

“He was born in prison, he spent two years with my mom, the first two years of his life he built a relationship with her first instead of mommy.”
- Charletta

“My daughter who was born while I was in prison. She had a lot of anxieties. As a child, she didn't even know me. She has a fear of strangers, super bad so she didn't want me nowhere around her, or to even touch her, so it took about six months of living with them with my mom for her to get familiar with me, with a lot of reminders from other kids.” - Autumn

“I didn't get out of prison until he was almost five. Not having the interaction with him in the very beginning. I think it's so important for mothers, that bond, and we don't really have a bond now. My son's going to be fifteen in two weeks, so that's really hard. I eat myself up everyday for it. I took a lot away from my child going to prison. My son actually lives with my mother now cause they have such a better bond. So I let him go. I still talk to him all the time. I still talk to my mom all the time. I ended up having another child, she's four, and we have the greatest bond ever.” - Amanda

Faith:

Not only were our participants forming relationships with other incarcerated folks, they also had those intangible spiritual relationships, such as with their God. Some of our participants found that keeping faith was vital to their survival because it gave them hope.

“The only thing that I had to lean on was my faith because I just had to believe that God would protect me and my situation and my daughter, and make sure that we would all end together and that we would all be safe.” - Sarah

“I will tell you. I pray to God every day. Honestly, um, I thank him for the things that he's provided for me for the lessons that he's let me learn because I will never make that same mistake ever again. I mean, I never will, I won't do drugs again period but I definitely won't ever do them being pregnant.”
- Heather

Criminal Justice System:

Not all relationships inside the prisons were positive, however, and our participants also shared stories about their negative relationships with the facility staff, administration, and the criminal justice system as a whole.

“Not at one point was the care of my children, or the nature of our relationship, considered at all by anyone in that facility or administration ... nor was it supported.” - Autumn

“I was sentenced to forty-eight months, which I had to sit and serve thirty-two months. My family, I had told the week before, that I was pregnant. So here I am thinking I'm gonna get house arrest, a turn-in date. You know, a turn-in after your delivery and all this stuff, and I was literally just snatched from the courtroom. I had a five-year old son and a two-year old daughter who I had dropped off at daycare that day, who also didn't realize they were gonna have a sibling. I'm just trying to kinda illustrate how emotionally distraught I was for that experience.”
- Autumn



Participants shared a lot about the positive relationships they developed with other incarcerated folks. Often, these relationships were the only form of emotional support available while inside. These relationships were also a source of mentoring and guidance as those with prison birth experience shared knowledge and comforted others going through similar hardships. Our participants emphasized how these relationships helped prepare them for what was to come, as a real challenge of incarceration is limited access to knowledge and information. The positive relationships were vital while the negative relationships dehumanized their pregnancy and birthing experience.



EMOTIONAL RESPONSES AND MENTAL HEALTH

Our participants reflected on their emotional, mental, and physical reactions to experiences before, during, and after the incarceration period and pregnancy/birthing experience. All of the people we interviewed discussed prison negatively impacting their mental health in many ways. Throughout every story, one thing was clear: these women did not have adequate access to mental health resources.

“

I think that a lot of the anxieties and stress and trauma from everything that I had with [my birth in prison], they [transferred to my most recent] pregnancy and delivery. I think I stressed so much about it, that maybe, maybe it [would] become a reality [again]. I don't know. I was not able to relax and go with the flow. [I was having] not like flashbacks, but like something very similar, just kind of reliving the trauma, at the same time, of trying to deliver.
-Megan

“

There were times where I was really upset or something and you know how maybe somebody just needs a hug. There were times like that where it was hard because you don't get that comfort from somebody else in fear of going to segregation because someone gave you a hug.
-Jennifer



Difficult Choices:

Pregnancy, birth, and parenting while in prison leads to many hard decisions. Our participants shared the various ways they faced difficult choices.

“We have choices to make. We may not have made the right one, but the children have not. They're just impacted by the choices that other people have made for them, and it's not fair. - Autumn

“I was 10.5 weeks pregnant by my abuser. I was in an abusive relationship. At that time I was indecisive, to be honest, if I was going to carry out that pregnancy. I was just that tired in my life. You know, abortion is somebody's choice, but for me, I loved the blessing that God blessed me with, that I was able to have a child. But I was really indecisive in going forth with the pregnancy. - Natalie

“In treatment, I found out I was pregnant with my first child, at [the] age [of] 41. I didn't know if it was because of my age or what, but I decided that I was definitely going to keep my child. Despite facing a prison sentence, I was determined to have and keep my child. - Sarah

“I'm hesitant to share my story with people I work with. The people here don't know my story because they are judgmental and they don't understand. You just don't know what's going on in somebody's life that causes them to get to a dark place, and suffer consequences. So rather than judging someone, take a moment to listen to their story to understand. - Emma

Guilt:

Guilt was a common recurring feeling our participants discussed, centering mostly on their children and how their choices affected their growth, relationships, and mental health.


“I felt guilty [like] I was poisoning my baby. I felt guilty because I was bringing life into this world at a time that was the worst point in my life. - Autumn

“When you're in the free world, and you have your baby, there are hard things about it, in itself. When you're in prison, and you don't know the next time you're going to get to see your baby, on top of all of the emotional, hormonal things that's going on, it's heartbreaking. When I was separated from my daughter Malia, I got to stay with her for 48 hours in the hospital, which is longer than most do. But I only got that because I had a C section. So, most who do a vaginal delivery only get 24 hours. So I was blessed in that aspect. But when you're driving, and you're leaving the hospital, and you have to leave your baby in that little bin that they have, it's so heartbreaking. When you go back, all you can think about is whoever's gonna have her, are they gonna love her? You miss out on the first bathing, you miss out on so many firsts. Just dealing with all that and those hormonal things, literally all I could do was cry for the first week. I didn't want to eat, I couldn't sleep. You crave your baby, you crave that closeness and that feeling that you don't get and you know you can't have it, so it's hard. It's really hard to deal with. - Emma

Overwhelming:

A complete list of what our participants endured and navigated is impossible to capture here. Below are some of the challenges they coped with and the overwhelming range of emotions that followed:

“In order for me to cope, I had to suppress a lot of things. What was going on with me was so overwhelming emotionally that I had to suppress a lot of things, and forced myself not to feel or remember some stuff. - Chernell



“I just really don't know because it's depressing and emotional in there. There's nothing to know. You just need to get out of there and get to your kids, that's how you're feeling. The whole time you're there, you just feel like you need to get home to your kids. You messed up, it's something that you did, and you just need to get out. -Charletta

“I was so **numb** in prison and somewhat **pretty detached**, because of the dynamics of a **women's prison**. -Chernell

“I actually hit a very low point about a year and a half, two years after getting out. I developed severe anxiety. So instead of depression, that gave me the opposite because I was always ultra sensitive to getting everything right, not making any mistakes, not going through any trouble. I think that stress, and then the unhealed trauma from prison. -Autumn

“The vision of saying goodbye to my kids after every visit, [when] those visits finished. [It] was such a double-[edged] sword. It was such a good feeling to see them but it was [also] the worst feeling to see them go, to see them cry and not be able to come back for another hug. -Autumn.

Grateful:

Despite all the hardships our participants experienced, many expressed and felt a sense of gratitude.

“When I say ‘be thankful’ I mean that in the most literal way possible. Be thankful for your family. Be thankful for what you have. Be thankful if you have children, nieces or nephews or anything. [Be thankful] of [the] well being of a child. Be thankful, be appreciative, be grateful for your life, because you never know the surface of someone else, or what they have [gone] through, or what they're going through. -Natalie

“Even though it was hard for me to go through, and [a] very, very emotional rollercoaster and a lot of fears came up in me because I was scared I was going to lose my son like I did my daughters..I feel like today, I'm just grateful that I've been able to be a part of this ... this changing journey that's happening here today in Minnesota. -Jennifer

“I feel like I don't really struggle with [the trauma] as much anymore. I feel like I have a lot of support networks. I actually feel, even though it was something that was a hardship I had gone through, what's come from my experience has brought a lot of positive things into our community. -Jennifer

Our participants shared their experiences involving difficult choices, guilt, and being overwhelmed and grateful and how being incarcerated influenced their mental health.



BARRIERS

Barriers” refers to anything that restrains or obstructs progress and access, with regard to prison birth. In particular, barriers include anything that impedes the processes of safe childbirth for both the mother and child. Barriers also refers to limiting experiences within the postpartum period, parenting while in prison, re-entry, and life after incarceration while parenting. Participants highlighted an extensive range of barriers they encountered while incarcerated and beyond, ranging from challenges with inaccessible medical treatment, lack of support for housing, financial concerns, and privacy issues with prison staff. Other barriers included addiction, lack of familial or community support, and nutritional neglect.

“ I remember the first month I was in Shakopee. They did give me a pregnancy bag, but their version of pregnancy bag is like 2 milks, 2 pieces of white bread, some processed cheese, and a packet of peanut butter. That's all you get in addition to your regular meal that everybody else gets.
- Sarah

“ I wanted to breastfeed my child as much as possible. I was able to get through the colostrum part of the milk while I was with her and that's it. It's because I was facing five more years in prison and they wouldn't allow me to pump or to get my daughter my breast milk. It was just cut off at that point and put on a formula. If I would have had her in the free world, I would've breast fed her as much as possible.
- Sarah

Nutrition:

Prison diets lack nourishing foods such as fruits and vegetables. Access to a second helping of food is also routinely denied. Pregnant women in prison, despite needing additional calories while pregnant. 31 states currently lack any policy on nutrition for incarcerated pregnant women (5). The states which do have policies in place are weak, vague, and can be abused by anyone who holds power over those prison cells.

“I was trading all my nasty processed meat for people's vegetables because I just wanted more vegetables. The food wasn't where it needed to be. I was taking people's meals and things like that.
- Charletta

“I remember I was losing weight. I signed up to see the nutritionist, which I was advised to do, and the nutritionist told me ‘Well you're already so far along in your pregnancy it doesn't really matter at this point.’ And I just thought that that was a ridiculous answer. -Sarah

“Pregnant women are given extra supplements; so you get two milks, I believe it's two milks, one orange and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. So, those would be what they would consider extras.
- Autumn

“They try to give you fruit. I'm thinking that it's supposed to be supplementary health wise. But, they give you a fruit that's rotten, or they give you a fruit that's just beginning to get ready to rot, or when they've had it for a while, and so I would reject it. And they're like ‘if you don't eat this then we aren't going to provide you with a pregnancy snack bag.’ - Natalie

Shackling:

The shackling of pregnant women who are incarcerated is permitted in thirty two states; only

thirteen ban it broadly throughout pregnancy, labor, postpartum, and during transport; and only twenty states allow the physician to immediately remove restraints if necessary. This creates further problems for incarcerated pregnant people who often have high-risk pregnancies and “are particularly vulnerable to pregnancy complications related to substance use disorders, poor nutrition, and sexually transmitted infections because they often come from precarious social and economic environments that exacerbate these risk factors (6).

“When I had my daughter, it was fifteen days after the Minnesota legislation ended the shackling law and so I wasn't shackled...After the shift change, the on-coming guards then decided, “Why isn't she shackled?” I tried to explain to them that the law had changed recently and they refused to accept that and shackled me to the bed anyway. - Autumn

“There's no one to catch my fall and I'm like 7 months pregnant. I don't have anything to hold on to, you guys have my hands in handcuffs, and women are a little bit clumsier when they're pregnant and stuff like that. I got told: 'Well pick your feet up', or 'Maybe you could walk a little slower.' It's rude and just very disrespectful.
- Natalie

“They took us to Wetumpka Hospital, which is the local hospital. I do remember being chained of course, or handcuffed to the bed. - Chernell

Re-entry:

Once our participants were no longer incarcerated, they had to begin to navigate the challenges with re-entry.

“I'll say this, there were no re-entry services like there wasn't any service that was really on the forefront during those days that I knew of. When you leave prison, they don't give you a package of

5. Daniel, R. (2019, December 5). *Prisons neglect pregnant women in their healthcare policies*. Prison Policy Initiative. Retrieved December 12, 2021, from <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2019/12/05/pregnancy/>.

6. Daniel, R. (2019, December 5). *Prisons neglect pregnant women in their healthcare policies*. Prison Policy Initiative. Retrieved December 12, 2021, from <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2019/12/05/pregnancy/>.



resources for the county that you're going back to, so you don't know what's out there. - Chernell

“So they do anything and everything they can to try to keep you in the system, it's like a never-ending hole, it's very hard to get out of and thankfully I finally did Eos, my, my Sentence, and, and I am completely free and clear of everything now but it took a long time to get there. - Megan

Our participants experienced an array of barriers including a lack of information, nutrition, mental and medical healthcare access. They also shared further concerns about the lack of re-entry services and limited visits with their children. These barriers demonstrate the extent to which the criminal justice system does not work, and how the system not only ignores the needs of people experiencing prison birth, but makes the entire birthing process significantly more difficult. It is important to understand how these barriers negatively affected our participants and the far reaching impact they have on other aspects of their lives, such as Pregnancy and Parenting Experiences and Post-incarceration.



POST-INCARCERATION

While our participants mainly focused on the time they were incarcerated, the challenges associated with the period of time immediately following their incarceration and the adjustments and barriers outside of the carceral system profoundly impacted them, their children, and their families. Some mentioned lasting trauma from their time in prison, and told of the long term consequences of being separated from their babies. Others detailed the unrealistic expectations of people adjusting to life on the outside with little or no support or resources while juggling new responsibilities as parents and providers.


“

Yes, I made mistakes, and I've done things that I shouldn't. I'm out here trying my best to reenter society and earn my second chance. My opportunities now are a little different because I have felonies and I've never had felonies before. I would like for people to know that some people do try and some people do learn.

- Emma

“

My daughter was two and half when I got out. My mother had her and she was very attached to my mom, where my mom was like her mom. Which is fine, I'd rather have it that way than a stranger. It was very hard because I felt a lot of shame and guilt that I couldn't be there for her. She was my only biological child and I wanted to have a connection with her and I didn't when I got out. She didn't want to sleep with me, she didn't want to do anything with me. She always wanted grandma. I had to have patience and I had to slowly just try. I knew over time she would forget that I wasn't there, but it would take time. Now that I've been out for a little over a year, we have that connection. - Sarah



The process of returning to one's community post incarceration is known as the re-entry process. Currently, there is little to no support for people once they leave prison. When parents get out of prison, they are either immediately thrown into the role of a parent with no transitional support or left to contend with negotiating limited custody and visitation rights from the state or regaining custody from family members. For most of them, they haven't been given the chance to create a relationship with their child. As with all incarcerated individuals, the process of finding both a job and a place to live are two large aspects of the re-entry process that also prove to be challenging.

Absent

For individuals with children, the process of re-entry can be even more difficult to navigate. Our participants shared heartbreaking moments, such as their kids preferring to interact with the family members who cared for them during their incarceration. There are a lot of unnecessary barriers that are put in place after incarceration. Specifically, job and housing opportunities can be scarce because employers and landlords are hesitant to employ and rent to previously incarcerated folks, especially those with felony convictions. Our participants discussed the toll of their struggles and their mental health after getting out of prison.

“Whenever she's hurt, she would run to grandma. Whenever she was scared, she would run to grandma and she didn't want anything to do with me. It was a horrible feeling because I know that it's my fault. It's my fault that I had to be in that situation. It's very easy to shame yourself and ya I had to get over that. That was tough. - Sarah

“My mom is the person that had my son when he was delivered. I didn't feel any type of way but that's something that I had no control over, as far as me being where I am and he had to go with my mom. I had control over that, and I was okay with him and my mom being how they are because he's more close to her. - Chernell

Re-connecting

The relationship between a parent and their child is a special attachment bond. It takes time for children to attach and get comfortable in the presence of the parent after being separated for a period of time. It also takes time and patience for the parent to keep trying to bond with the children.

“I'm reconnecting with my children. I think we were able to form a very unique and special bond to this experience that a lot of people don't understand and can't infer a good reason to have. I find myself being a little bit overly protective sometimes of my kids because of the trauma of our separation. But I think that is what allows us to have a type of relationship where we can talk to almost anything and work through things together - Autumn

“She still has her connection with grandma, but we now have a bond and she comes to me and I'm her mommy now. But it was very hard to connect with her. What helped, I did have to figure out what she would do with me. Relaxing bath time was one of those things that she didn't care about, she was ok with me giving her bath time. So I just made sure that I gave her bath time every day and then that built from there. So you just have to find whatever your child is willing to do and that you can connect with them on and then build on that. Know that time heals. And these children's brains, they don't remember so you just have to build your relationship, but it was very hard. - Sarah



Rebuilding Self Worth

It's powerful to see people pick themselves up after their incarceration experience. It takes self discipline and a lot of commitment to make the future a better place not only for themselves, but also their children.

“I had to work from ground zero to where I am. As far as being able to have an apartment, my reliable transportation, and being able to be with my kids now. I couldn't get support from being released when my appeal came through. I had to figure it out. - Natalie

“I have a job now and I rent my own house. I don't own it yet, but it's mine. I don't have to ask anybody permission. I've got a vehicle and you know those are all barriers and obstacles for people who have been in trouble. When you leave the correctional facility, you don't know where you're going to live. Also, if you have a baby, where's your baby going to live? With you, you know, there's just so many things that you face as an incarcerated mom. - Emma

“When I left and went to Oakland, that was one of the best choices that I ever made in my life. I went back to school and got my GED. I hadn't finished the eighth grade. Right. I never made it out of eighth grade, I never went to high school. So I was able to study for my GED for two weeks and passed on the first time. - Chernell

Despite the hardships associated with the re-entry process, most of our participants shared that they are now doing well.

“I am completely free and clear of everything now. But it took a long time to get there. - Megan

“Hey, just because we're in prison, does not mean that we are not decent human beings. You know, we do make mistakes, things do happen. And I do believe that everybody has a skeleton in their closet. Let me know whether or not it doesn't matter. You know, stop treating people like basically the plague, when you get out, you're supposed to be like, you do your time, it's done and over with, don't have to worry about anymore. It's not true. It follows you everywhere you go. - Amanda

This project highlights the perspective of people who are no longer incarcerated. We learned that the significant barriers they face post-incarceration weigh profoundly on them. This is largely due to unfair stereotypes against people who have been incarcerated and the numerous barriers for a successful re-entry, especially the lack of available resources. The challenges associated with transitioning to life outside immediately after being released are overwhelming for any person experiencing re-entry after incarceration. The incredibly high recidivism rates for formerly incarcerated people serve as further evidence of the lack of support for people upon their re-entry into the community. The challenges are compounded for those who are navigating post-incarceration after experiencing pregnancy and/or birth while incarcerated.




ADVOCACY

Advocacy appeared in our interview conversations in two different forms: participants discussed benefiting from the advocacy provided by others as well as engaging in acts of self-advocacy. Self-advocacy manifested in several ways, including expressing one's rights, needs, and desires during the incarceration process. Participants discussed advocating for access to medical care during a pregnancy, protecting their rights during the birthing process, and securing visitation with their newborns.

“ I'm the doula client. The doulas are the only ones who can actually actively attend your birth to support you during labor and birth. That was something that I found to be very instrumental because I'd never had that experience. They often do a good job of advocating for their clients, what your birth plan is, what your goals are, what your preferences are, the things that you dislike, and just honoring and holding the space even with the guards in the room.
- Autumn

“ We were being treated in ways that were just inhumane and people were going through struggles and not being helped. And if people on the outside knew how it was for us, things would change.
- Sarah



As this project began, we knew that advocating for the issues we learned about would be a part of our experience. What we didn't know was how much we would hear about incarcerated people having to push and advocate for themselves during their time inside. There were several instances where the individuals we spoke to told us stories about advocating for themselves while incarcerated because there was no one else to stand up for them.

Unheard Voices

During the interviews, many people shared how they felt unheard or that their voice did not matter in prison. Some pregnant women were forced to do things they did not give consent for. Ultimately, this was a barrier for many people in prison, not being able to advocate for yourself.

“They would buy some pregnancy apples. I can't eat apples. So I was trying to tell them that I can't eat apples and I was allergic to apples. They kept giving me apples. I had to keep requesting different types of fruit. - Natalie

“When you're in there, it's so crazy that nobody knows this is happening. We all stand around and nobody knows this is what is happening to us. There is no way to get this information out of here. It's just sad because once a lot of women get out they either want to forget it or they want it to go away and move on with their lives. As soon as I got out of here, wherever anybody would listen I would tell my story because I had no voice in there and it felt so isolating. If people knew that this was happening, people would be raging over this, it's so crazy here. - Sarah

“When I was in prison, I had no voice and everybody on the outside couldn't see how it was. - Sarah

“I actually had someone with the same last name as me and they were trying to force me to take meds.

The desk said, 'Here's your meds.' And I said, 'those aren't mine, I'm not taking them.' And they said, 'so you're denying taking them.' And I said, 'I'm not taking these, they aren't mine.' And they were like, 'you're going to psych then' and I said, 'It's not me, it's not even my name.' - Autumn

“I just wish that there were more options for pregnant women. Instead of throwing them in prison they could go to a rehab or they could go to an alternative of some sort. They should look at each person's situation, individually, and go from there. Because everybody shouldn't be treated the same, everybody's situation isn't the same. - Emma

Self Advocacy:

Individuals who experience pregnancy, birth, or postpartum while incarcerated have to find ways to advocate for themselves and their children while inside an oppressive system lacking humanity.

“I need to take care of myself [so] that I can take care of my children. Because if I don't, everything that I worked so hard for just falls apart. And to just have patience with myself. Sometimes things are very difficult, and I don't think I can get through it and then I have to think back on my experience and the fact that I got through that whole experience means that I can do anything, I can go through anything. - Sarah

“I realized that I had to first make sure that I was good. I noticed that the whole prison scenario because of my choices, and me not being good, that I couldn't set up a good scenario for my children. And so one thing, up until this day and I do lots of talk about self care, particularly self care for women, women [um] who are, you know, counselors, social workers, doctors, etc, that, that care for me, had to come first. Because if I didn't take care of myself, nobody was going to be alright. I have invested tremendously over the last 20 plus



years, making sure that I'm good on the inside and on the outside. When I say inside, I'm talking about all aspects of self, mentally, spiritually, emotionally, physically, all those things that make up who I am. - Chernell

“I was fortunate that I was consistent with her after coming home. I was patient with her, and I had many nights where I just cried, cried, cried, cause I never thought we would attach that way. But again, just being consistent and being diligent about it, we were able to. We have gone to therapy together, and we continue to go through therapy as a family. It's just about growing. - Autumn

“I'm in this position now that I'm able to overcome what I was. I have a responsibility to support those who are still going through it, and who don't know how they're going to get through it. So having the opportunity to do this work is almost more therapeutic for me. - Autumn

Doulas Support

Doulas are external advocates who are trained to help individuals with childbirth and pre and post-natal needs. Doulas are important to pregnant people in prison who are not able to advocate for their birthing options.

“It's not at all that what is supposed to be, you know, pregnancy, and birthing is stressful enough. You want to be home and introduce your baby into a calm and anxiety free environment, and that's pretty impossible when you've got a male and a female guard that you don't know, no family, the doulas were the only saving grace. - Megan

“I learned that in the doula class you need to advocate on behalf of yourself because you're the only one there to protect yourself, and you do have rights in there even if they do get violated. -Sarah

“I relied on Chantel [a doula] a lot. I talked to her about things, and when she came to the infirmary to visit me to make sure things were okay. - Emma

“I was able to connect with the doula around three weeks of being there. So I met with my doula the week after, I finally went to the doctor for my OB visit. - Autumn

Additional Sources of Advocacy

Participants shared the impact and power of other advocates outside the doula program whose hard work benefited our participants.

“The only reason I did get that postpartum visit in October, was because a volunteer came in to interview me. It was Dr. Rebecca Schalfer, and she informed the administration that I had not had a follow up, and that she was going to report it. Then all of a sudden, me and maybe five other women who also did not receive visits, were all given postpartum visits months down the line. It's a huge gap and she also told me later on, that when she reported that, that they told her she was lying. There can be no possible way that these women are going without treatment, and Dr. Rebecca Schlafer requested our charts, and before she could request our medical charts they caught us all in for those follow up. So really, what I realized is that unless there's some kind of a community accountability or outside accountability, they won't make those changes. Things like these programs and opportunities are really necessary to make people aware. - Autumn

“I was not able to see my daughter for six weeks after I gave birth to her. The parenting coordinator was appalled and she corrected it as soon as she could. - Sarah

“A correctional officer, her name was Amanda, she would come in, and I loved it when she came in. I knew when I got my snack bag, she'd put extra goodies in there. She'd put some cookies in there. She'd put a bag of chips in there, and she'd put a piece of candy in there. She'd put a pear or an orange in there, knowing that I wasn't supposed to eat apples. It was an officer there that knew my circumstances, and knew my situation, and she was like “I just can't believe that they're treating you like this” so when she came in, I felt a sense of relief, knowing that I was going to provide for me. I remember she'd put a sandwich or she'd put a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. It's the little stuff. I appreciate when someone actually cares about doing their job, and understands that I'm not being treated the way that I should be and she made sure that when she came in that she'd hook my snack bag up. - Natalie

Advocates for Change

According to the ACLU of Alabama, 80% of women in jails are mothers, and most of them are the primary caretakers of their children. It's important to remember that the people who go to prison are human. The majority of people in women's facilities are there because of non-violent offenses (7). Some of the individuals we spoke to working to help others understand that. They are using their stories to advocate for change within the carceral system.

“I was on the phone with her for an hour sharing my story to help change the policy for the Healthy Start Act that's coming out [umm] and then, now with you guys, so it's... I think when I say, what I was trying to say: be a voice for change, I guess that's what I was trying to say because [umm] when people speak up and share their stories and their lives and their experiences, that's where... that's how things change in life and that's how [umm] programs like this happen. - Jennifer

“I really enjoy being an advocate, I had spoke for Ashley and Chauntel for the Oklahoma Senate. A couple of weeks ago, they had that same meeting with me. Share my experience trying to get a lactation program started there. If it wasn't for the lactation program I really don't know what I would have done. - Megan

“I talk with different people wherever I can to make sure that people know how it works in there and my story, to get changes made. Since I have been out, the healthy start act has been approved which to me is very important because I was always advocating the entire time I was in there wherever I could, to make changes. There were only at any given time 10 women that were pregnant and even less than that were actually going to have their baby in prison. It felt like why is this even a thing? There were only 10 or less of us here doing this. There should be a different place for this. It shouldn't be happening here. - Sarah

“What stays with me is the fact that now that I'm in this position, that I'm able to overcome what I was, what I've been able to overcome. I have a responsibility to support those who are still going through it, and who don't have, don't know how they're going to get through it. Having the opportunity to do this work is almost more therapeutic for me than it is a profession, but it stays with me every day. - Autumn

Opportunities for any type of advocacy within the criminal justice system are limited, and prior to organizations like the Minnesota Prison Doula Project or Alabama Prison Birth Project, programs for folks needing pregnancy, birth, postpartum, or parenting support while incarcerated were essentially non-existent. Having access to doulas gave these women hope and a little bit of control during their childbirth.

Conclusion

These stories represent experiences of people from Minnesota and Alabama who went through pregnancy, birth, and parenting while incarcerated. It's important to mention that there are thousands more similar untold stories. We encourage those who want to get involved to look to the Ostara Initiative website for more information – www.ostarainitiative.org

It is our hope that this booklet will help people understand what happens to people who are incarcerated while pregnant, birthing, and parenting. They deserve equitable access to resources, care, and treatment, not to be forgotten and forsaken.

Our call to action for you is to share this booklet and Ostara Initiative resources. The only way to change these injustices is to continue the conversation. There is a lack of humanity inside the carceral system and it's important that we talk about what happens inside and think about the ways we can change it for the people still in there.

For more resources, information on the topic of prison birth, and ways to support individuals who are currently experiencing pregnancy in prison, please visit the Ostara Initiative website (www.ostarainitiative.org). Also, Follow their instagram, @endprisonbirth, and facebook page, @prisondouglas, for access to more from the Prison Birth Storytelling Project.



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