



## New Zealand: Dr. Jacqui Johnson on the Spatial, Temporal, and Social Contradictions within Mothers with Babies Units

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Joining Barbara Frey is Doctor Jacqui Johnson, a family response violence specialist at Oranga Tamariki—New Zealand’s Ministry for Children. In this episode, Dr. Johnson discusses her Ph.D. research on “Monitored Mothering,” an ethnographic study on the experiences of mothers who parent in New Zealand’s Mothers with Babies Units, or MBUs. She describes the social, temporal, and spatial environment of the unit with a focus on impacts on the child and on the mother-child relationship. Exploring the dual roles held by prison custodial staff, mothers, and the unit itself, Dr. Johnson outlines the nuances and contradictions that arise when nursery programs take place in correctional facilities.

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Transcript:

[00:01] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: They were told that the children were not the prisoners. They were told that they were there to mother the children... While on the other hand, children were used as a means of discipline in their removal.

[00:21] Barbara Frey: Hello and welcome to the International Prison Nursery Podcast. My name is Barbara Frey and I'm a board member of the organization Children of Incarcerated Caregivers, and I am also the former director of the University of Minnesota’s Human Rights Program. This is part of our podcast series looking at some of the international experiences related to children of incarcerated caregivers. Today, we are traveling all the way to the other side of the planet from where we sit in our home base in Minnesota to the country of New Zealand.

We’re thrilled that joining us today is Dr. Jacqui Johnson. Dr. Jacqui Johnson received her Ph.D. in social work from the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. She focused her dissertation on the very important issue of monitored mothering; the experiences of mothers who parent within New Zealand's women's prisons. Her research looked into New Zealand's correctional facilities' Mothers with Babies Units or MBUs. Dr. Jacqui Johnson currently is based in

Christchurch, where she works with the Oranga Tamariki, which is the New Zealand Ministry for Children, as a social worker and a family violence response specialist.

[01:49] Barbara Frey: Welcome!

[01:50] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: Thank you. Thank you very much for that lovely introduction.

[01:53] Barbara Frey: We're so happy to learn about what you learned in your very interesting research in Mothers with Babies Units in the New Zealand prison system. But before we dive into that topic, why don't you tell us a little bit about the work that you do now, this really interesting work with family violence response?

[02:15] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: Yes, sure. So I work, as you say, thank you, I work for Oranga Tamariki, and I am a family violence response specialist there. And what we have going here is that we all work as part of a multi-agency team, and we focus on a real collaborative approach to make sure that our families, or our whānau get the help that they need from both government and community organizations.<sup>1</sup> So we sit at a round table—daily we meet with other organizations, so the New Zealand Police, the Department of Corrections, the Christchurch Department of Health Board, and also some other non-government organizations feed in.

And every day, we go over and collaboratively discuss the family violence referrals that come through the police, and so these are the reports that are made by police when they visit a domestic violence dispute or domestic dispute. So what we do as a team is we identify the high-risk family violence victims and we task out to family violence response specialists. So it really brings us together as a group of organizations and really pulls on that collaborative space where we all bring out information that are relevant to our own organizations to this table. And together, we make decisions about this family, and together, we pull on all of our information to make the best decisions and put the right responses in for the families that we are managing and working with. So yeah, that's a really great approach.

[03:53] Barbara Frey: That sounds like a really terrific approach, and something where you need to bring those multidisciplinary responses to these very complex problems like family violence, so it sounds very interesting.

[04:08] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: Yeah, it was so much more of a strength when we are approaching this topic together rather than working in solos. And the statistics show an impressive, positive response.

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<sup>1</sup> Whānau is the Māori language word for the basic extended family group, encompassing three or four generations.



[04:20] Barbara Frey: So it's fascinating that the kind of work that you do now, and also interesting to us is, of course, your Ph.D. work on this experience of mothers who parent within the New Zealand women's prisons—New Zealand has Mothers with Babies Units, I understand. And first of all, tell us what led you to choose that topic for your Ph.D. work, and then we'll learn about it.

[04:50] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: The birth of this idea was right back when I was completing my Masters at the University of Canterbury, and I was on a placement that took me into the Christchurch Women's Prison here. And I was fortunate enough to be shown around the different areas of the prison, and part of this extended to the outdoor self-care area that was just adjoining to the main prison—still within the prison grounds, but just adjoining into the main prison wings.

This area was made up of sort of smaller-type housing, where [the] women had a lot more independence, and they lived in little unit-type houses that they shared with other women, and they could—in those units, they could do a lot of activities like cooking, shopping, some of them had the ability to leave the prison to go on work placements. But they lived together in a family-type scenario where they had a lot more independence and could cater to themselves a lot more. So within the self-care area was another area that was toddler-fenced-off, and that was allocated to the Mothers with Babies Unit. So there were two standalone units within this toddler-fenced area, and this was where mothers with their children were housed.

And it just sparked my interest from there as it was obvious that when a mother was imprisoned, inevitably her children were involved in that as well. And so I was really interested in just, you know, exploring into the importance of keeping the mother and child together and that development of secure attachment and everything that went along with that. So I left the unit with a brain that was bubbling with interest and I looked a wee bit into the background of the Mothers with Babies program that we have here in New Zealand. And I found that it was—legislation was changed in 2008, and that meant that mothers could bring their children into prison with them until they were at the age of two years. Prior to this, they were only able to bring them into the ages of six to nine months for the purposes of breastfeeding.

So in around 2010 New Zealand developed the capacity to actually physically hold the toddlers in the units because obviously, holding a six to nine-month-old baby is quite different to a two-year-old toddler, so they developed spaces that were able to cater to this. And in 2010 was when the first toddlers were able to be housed in the units with the mothers. So yeah, I sort of got talking with the university and one thing led to another, and I really got interested in research that had the ability to raise the awareness of this cohort of women who were able to have their child live with them within the prison. I wanted to look at strengthening those relationships of all of those involved, who provided the care that was within these units, and look at all how the



dynamics of that set within the others and babies unit was a fascinating little entity on its own. And my interest was just yeah, just went from there.

[08:08] Barbara Frey: So Jacqui, could you tell us, what are the demographics in general of women in prisons in New Zealand, and specifically in these MBUs [Mothers with Babies Units]?

[08:20] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: As part of my research, the age range of the women were between 22 and 44 years of age. Convictions were predominantly for drug crimes and assault. One participant referred to fraud. Three women indicated that their partner at the time was also involved in their crimes. Five mothers out of my research disclosed that they had been in prison on previous sentences, one admitted to this being her 10th period of incarceration. Six out of the 12 women identified as New Zealand European, five as Māori, and one as Pacifica.

And so this over-representation of Māori I do refer to in my writing. And I refer to a report released by the Waitangi Tribunal in 2017 which illustrated this disparity of Māori rates of incarceration. And so, this report makes it really clear that Māori men make up 50.4% of the total population—prison population. Māori women make up 56.9% of the female sentenced prisoners. However, Māori constitute only 15% of the national population. So the numbers of Māori in my research kind of reflected on this disparity also, as is found within the general population of prisoners as well.

[09:49] Barbara Frey: What kind of numbers are we talking about? First of all, I'm just curious, these are not just for mothers who give birth while they're in prison—if you're in prison while you have a child less than two, can you still bring the child into the Mothers with Babies Unit? And what kind of numbers are we talking about in terms of the mother baby pairs?

[10:10] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: So at the time of my research, yes, there were women that were imprisoned, or the child that they currently had, who was below two.<sup>2</sup> And they were able to apply to the Mothers with Babies Unit and to serve their sentence within the Mothers with Babies unit with their child with them. So they didn't necessarily give birth while in prison, although a lot of the mothers did. On occasion, there were mothers that I knew of that brought their child in with them.

So the numbers in New Zealand are relatively small. We don't have the capacity to cater for large amounts of mothers with their children, there's plenty more mothers with children that are in prison without their children, unfortunately. But in Christchurch we have, at the time of the research, we had the Mothers with Babies Unit that, as I said before, with the two standalone units, and they could house two women each, sharing each unit with the child. So that was four

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Johnson conducted fieldwork in Auckland Region Women's Correctional Facility, Christchurch Women's Prison, and within participant's communities between 2012 and 2015.



women in Christchurch, and in Auckland were the only other units that we had here in New Zealand, and they too had two standalone units within the toddler fencing. And each of those units could house up to three women with their child, so that was a number of six.

So in these units, as I said before, they resembled small houses and the women were expected to take on all the parenting responsibilities that they would be doing on the outside. So they needed to do all the laundry, they needed to do all the cooking. They had their own bathroom, it was sort of an open plan kind of layout, and each woman had a room—a bedroom that they shared with the child. So there were outdoor spaces in front of the unit that had sort of toddler toys and foam mat-place with a little playground on it.

Interestingly enough, these units were staffed by Department of Corrections officers who were in charge of the daily running of the unit. But mothers had the ability to, in Auckland and in Christchurch, had the ability to take their children out to swimming lessons that were organized for them. They did go out to community playgroups that they could be involved in. In Christchurch, they had the ability to use some daycare facilities that were in the community. And at both sites, there were some special outings that were organized around the kids for some fun activities and stuff for them to do, which was outside of the prison. So you know, the aim of the units was to provide a really independent sort of lifestyle that may reflect how a mother might live with her child more on the outside of the prison. So the aim of that was to try and keep mother and child together and develop that attachment and build on that relationship together.

So an answer to your question with my research, numbers, as you know, numbers are small. But during my research, I worked closely with 12 women who had their babies with them in Christchurch Women's Prison or Auckland Region Women's Corrections Facility, and that was an interesting course because [it] sort of marked the staggering of my research. My involvement with the woman was sort of played out over a two to three year span, while they were incarcerated, because they were able to be within the facility for up to two years. And so I—as part of my research, it was very important that I kept in close contact with them.

So I was always in and out of the prison. I always—I made some time to spend some lengthy day after day time in the prison where I spent many hours just being with them. It was really important that I worked on that relationship basis with these women. I had the intention of working with them as they released out into the community. So if I didn't take that important step to create that relationship to start with, it was pretty clear that we were never going to be able to move forward outside of the prison. That they wouldn't have the desire to or didn't feel any attachment to the research or anything because they were under no obligation to stick with me as we entered into the community space.



[14:25] Barbara Frey: Yeah, no I mean, you really had a firsthand view, and [it] sounds like you spent a lot of time there and got a sense for what were the impacts of this kind of lifestyle.

[14:36] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: It was really important that, really the nuts and bolts of my research, that I made time to spend in the unit to just be. It was nothing to do with the research, it was just being, it was being alongside these women, it was spending the days with them. We went to swimming classes together, I helped out with the children. I wasn't sitting there with a computer and a microphone, I was hands-on just working alongside doing what they did. It was a really deliberate and valuable feature of the research that I did. And so spending time I felt was the most important resource that I could offer these women. And it paid off because we really got a sense of each other. We shared, you know, we just grew to know each other. And we built quite a trust and developed quite a relationship as we went on. It was clear that this was absolutely pivotal to any research success that was going to happen, or any really in-depth and true picture of what these mothers were experiencing with [their] children in prison.

[15:51] Barbara Frey: So tell me, Jacqui, I'm interested to know, what you saw in this sense? How did this environment affect the children? What kind of impact do you think it had on the children themselves, and then on the mother-child relationship in broad terms?

[16:05] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: Yeah, yeah. This is so dynamic and there's so much involved. I wrote about this in my thesis in terms of child-centeredness, and it was looking at the impact of the environment on the child and the mother-child relationship. And although participants were really grateful and they really appreciated spending time together, being in the unit together, breastfeeding, being able to have the chance to bond and all of that, there was clear things about the environment of the Mothers with Babies Unit that really did impact on the development of the relationship, socialization, and all of that.

So I spoke about this in three different areas. I spoke about it in—well, I wrote about it, excuse me, in the spatial, temporal, and social concepts of the environment that had an impact on the mothers and children. And when I wrote about the spatial influence, I kind of wrote about things like the fact that the confinement of the Mothers with Babies Unit sort of limited children and restricted their movements in the sense of exploring and their exposure to stimulating and diverse environments. And that did somewhat have an impact on the development of their relationship. Mothers often spoke about being a bit bored with nothing to do, and that they were sitting round and they would say, 'the hours went slow.' They found that it was difficult as the children got a bit older, and they were limited in being free-range. They couldn't just run off wherever they wanted to, they were confined to the fenced area of their Mothers with Babies Unit.



In Auckland, when they went out into the main area of the prison they had the ability to walk down what they called a spine. But the children were never allowed free to run around these areas, they had to be in their buggy, strapped into the buggies to venture out to that area. So there was always this kind of discussion about the environment not sort of catering with new stimuli or just that confinement on the older children that was kind of having a bit of an impact on them.

Another interesting one that I thought was the close confinement of the mother and the child impacted on the ability to create that healthy detachment, that starts—and I've never really thought about this before, but sort of that healthy detachment that starts at around 18 months of age when these toddlers start to leave the secure space of the mother, and they venture out, and then they come back, and they learn to know that mother is—they develop that trust and that relationship, and they feel solid in their return so that their departure can be, you know, or become stress-free.

But in the close proximity of the Mothers with Babies Unit, mother was always around baby. And so I thought—I didn't explore this too much—but I thought there was an interesting dynamic that could have had an influence on the development of that relationship of trust where the children, you know, where naturally children get up, go, leave the space of the mother and then return. But in the Mothers with Babies Unit, mothers and babies were always around each other. So I thought that was really interesting.

[19:21] Barbara Frey: Yeah, that is interesting. Do you know if these kinds of behaviors, I mean, in general, carried on after the release [from the MBU]?

[19:30] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: No. The children I think at two years were at such an age that they were pretty resilient and pretty, you know, one day in the life of the child can change in the next day. And I think that I didn't see any long-term sort of detrimental impacts on the kids. I mean there were certainly things that the mothers were telling me that the children became fascinated with certain items when they ventured back home. One was fascinated with a mobile phone. Another child was said to be very fearful of both cats and dogs and had quite a bad reaction to them, but nothing that they didn't work through.

One thing was the release environments, across the board, mothers spoke about their release environments being really overwhelming for the children. They would often say that the children had too many people in their face, and yeah, they did speak of the children being a bit overwhelmed with everybody in their space. Wasn't anything that they didn't work through, but it certainly was noticeable on release. Actually, one of the mothers said that upon meeting their father that they hadn't seen prior—I believe he was serving time at the same time—the child was like, you know, 'I don't like you, this big tall guy, I don't like you.' But hadn't really probably had



much exposure to people of that stature. And so, you know, that was sort of, yeah, that was interesting.

[20:58] Barbara Frey: Right. So do they get any help with these kinds of readjustment issues? Is there any sense that women and as mothers who've gone through this are—that they have a better relationship with their child than those who might not have been with their child?

[21:15] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: Yeah, well, I would say here in New Zealand, we're very limited on research that has come to any conclusions for any sorts of outcomes like that.

[21:25] Barbara Frey: So Jacqui, one quote from your thesis encapsulates a key point in this conversation surrounding prison nurseries. You say, 'Ambiguity arises when rehabilitative programs are introduced into what are arguably traditional retributive prison systems.' Can you speak about that a little bit? I'd love to understand some of those ambiguities.

[21:51] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: Mmm yeah. So this was a really interesting dynamic that I found fascinating in the writing of my thesis, and it was all about all of the contradictory aspects of the MBU [Mothers with Babies Unit] and the dual demands that are placed on mothers, that are placed on the prison, and that are also placed on the prison officers. And it's a quite fascinating dynamic, and I think it starts with number one is the dual role that the officer holds within the Mothers with Babies Unit here in New Zealand. I know that this can be managed differently in other jurisdictions internationally who have early childhood professionals within the prison setting who manage the daily running of the Mothers with Babies Units or the prison nurseries.

But here in New Zealand, the MBU officer holds this dual role. On the one hand, they provide the support to mothers in their daily role of parenting, and on the other hand, they are the person that is monitoring, that is disciplining, and that is all part of their role as custodial staff. So this role of the officer who is so involved in the daily running of the units, meant that some mothers found this really tricky. And they felt that the officers' role in terms of their surveillance and their control often extended beyond the prisoners' behavior to monitoring and also instructing in their role of mothering, which they believe was not the role of the prison officer. So it created this really interesting tension that was consistent in the daily running of the unit, and mothers did find this very challenging.

They often said that officers were telling them things that had to do with their parenting. They [the mothers] were like, 'Well, we need somebody who has some kind of paper to say that they know these things.' So they were looking for someone that was qualified in this area of instructing. There's always tension between prisoners and prison officers, but this took on another level of instruction, of oversight. And it had to do with them as parents, them as mothers. So they often found that this was critical, they often took it as critical from officers when they





were telling them something to do with their parenting if they felt like it undermined them as parents. And they often felt like there were conflicting opinions from different officers, so they had to manage that as well.

[24:23] Barbara Frey: Were there opportunities, Jacqui, for the mothers to kind of raise these personnel issues since they had an impact on their parenting? Were there any outlets for them to be able to raise their concerns?

[24:38] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: Um, I can't say that there wasn't. But there weren't any that were very obvious to me when I was part of the unit or in this research. So nothing to me that was an obvious channel or outlet that mothers can raise these concerns to. And they were all-encompassing because they did really sort of predict the environment or even the success of the program. So these core fundamental relationships between officers and mothers really had an impact on whether it was going to be successful or not that particular day. You know, like that whole dynamic, that was just a really fascinating one.

But also equally fascinating was the dual role that the mother held, and another contradiction that the mother held in terms of being a mother, or in terms of being an inmate. And these were often conflicting and contradictory roles to hold. So mothers constantly struggled to be that socially-constructed 'good mother,' where they felt like they needed to make decisions for the children, or they believed that they knew what was best, and on the other hand, they still were an inmate within a restricted institution, and they had to live by certain rules and regulations that governed the way they could do what they wanted to do with their child. So there was constant tension to try and parent autonomously. That was a big one that shone through. So having the autonomy to parent while doing so within this correctional institution was a big contradiction that came through in my research and was difficult for mothers to navigate.

And they often judged themselves in terms of whether they felt like they were being a good mother. We all know what makes us feel like we're being a good mother. And often, it was challenged within the environment of the Mothers with Babies Unit because it was a persistent struggle. They were told that the children were not the prisoners, they were told that they were there to mother the children, but in some ways, that's great and they were, but they had to do so within the confines, the rules, regulations, the restrictions that was the Mothers with Babies Unit.

The simple things of being told when to sleep, or how you're allowed to sleep with your child, or when to wake, or when you can be inside or when you can be outside, or when you go to walk around the prison, how this needs to look, or when you need to leave the prison—leave the Mothers with Babies Unit or come into—what certain things you had to do to make this happen. So that was a constant negotiation. One mother even said that she—I've just got a wee bit here, I could just read it. This is her quote, 'Just recently, I had meat crossed off my baby shop. I wanted



to get lamb, fish, and beef and I think it was the whole lot [that] was crossed off my list. I was not allowed to buy meat for her, but she was coming up to seven months. Well, she needs that meat.’ So it was certain things like that. That was just, you know, they were coming across constant negotiations where they had to make decisions where they were being a mother, but it was just a constant negotiation. So that wore some mothers down quite a bit.

And the little things you wouldn't think about, like, you know, punctuality. To be a—I use my fingers to do, quote-unquote, but punctuality to be that quote, ‘good mother’ means that mothers liked to be on time, and they liked to, you know, feel like they had the control to present themselves as a ‘good mother.’ So this was difficult—sorry, outside arrangements were made for mothers by the prison, so a lot of this they had little control over. Heading to swimming lessons, it was kind of done—I mean, I saw it—was kind of done at the time of the prison. And they had appointments to make and swimming lessons to get to, but I even saw on one occasion, swimming lesson was missed because for one reason or another, they arrived late.

Or another mother said about the fact that she was called up at preschool when she was dropping her child off to say that there was a late payment, and she felt that they reflected on her badly when that payment was supposed to have been made by the prison. Or that the prison guards, prison officers that day, had to drop her child—her and her child off to preschool 40 minutes early, and that wasn't the scheduled time. But she's the one that seemed like a quote, ‘asshole,’ because she had to go in and take the child in 40 minutes early, and just expect that to be okay. But it was that these things were not under their control and they thought that reflected on them as being—they were trying to put their best foot forward—and it reflected on them, and they thought people would look at them as being not good mothers.

Another area that I just like to say was really important was the ability to take photos of their developing child, and to also capture those spontaneous baby shots that happen immediately. And most of us have the ability to capture that and make an album of our child's development, and we've all sat down and, you know, shown these albums and shown these photos of birth through early stages. And that was one thing that I thought was really interesting, that the mothers didn't have the ability to do that, and they really felt that.

But no one would get that they really felt that unless they asked them [the mothers]. But it was something that they [the mothers] raised that because they were unable to do these spontaneous baby shots, that they were failing in their ‘good mothering’ because they're never going to have the album for the children to look back on. They were able to secure the use of a camera but it was quite a rigmarole. They had to go to the officer in charge on the day and get the camera, and obviously the spontaneous shot is far from still there.



But to just sum that up, one of the mothers did say, ‘She's going to go through her baby photos when she is older, and there is like none. I still worry that she is going to think she was adopted, because there are no photos of her in the hospital, and no photos of her with me until she is four days old. I'm still worried that she is never going to believe me. And then there are no photos till she is five weeks and then five months. It is just like that, because I love seeing my—looking at my baby photos, my mum went crazy, she missed nothing, whereas I missed everything with her.’ So, you know, that really had an impact on the mothers, and not something that I would have probably even thought about before I spent time and sat with these women and listened. But these multitude of contradictions that they face in terms of just their mothering role was very evident.

So another contradiction was where they [the Mothers with Babies Unit] provided an environment to nurture and bond and attach, while on the other hand, children were used as a means of discipline in their removal. So glaringly obvious contradiction there is that the Mothers with Babies Unit is ethos, it's about connection, relationship, bonding, attachment, nurturing. And on the other hand of that, it's a correctional institution where children were removed for the purposes of discipline, which was in stark contrast to the ethos of why the unit was sort of set up in the first place. So I mean, on the one hand, mothers did sign a parenting agreement prior to entering the Mothers with Babies Unit so they did understand the obligations in terms of their parenting role and what was acceptable behavior and what wasn't. So that was never in question.

What could have been in question was that the—sort of the imposed consequences quite often seemed unrelated to the actual offending. So one mother, for example, was asked to hand over a tongue stud that she had and she was threatened that if she didn't, her child's first birthday would be canceled and that her family would be refused entry into the MBU for that party. So, sure it's a disciplinary, you know, issue—there was something that needed to be corrected. But, you know, women in the Mothers with Babies Unit did talk about living in this state of anxiety, where they felt that due to their own misconduct, their babies could be removed. One of the mothers did say, ‘You've got to abide by the rules. If you step out of those rules once, they can just come and take your baby, and that's it.’ So it was sort of, ‘I don't want to mess up’ otherwise, your kid's gonna go, and having that tension behind your child is quite a bit. It's really hard to live with.

And it was a very, very real fear. Because I saw it myself, and the stats that I was presented with was that out of the 12 women that I was involved with, five of that research group had their child removed at one point in time. That's not to say that they didn't apply and get them back. But five out of the 12 women that I was working with had their child removed. And just that raw trauma and devastation that was experienced by those mothers on those occasions was something that I will never, ever forget seeing.



[34:07] Barbara Frey: Wow, that is such a powerful story. To use the presence of your child as leverage over disciplinary issues, it's just devastating. I wonder, you know, given these experiences, the Mother Baby Units have been around since 2010, I understand, from what you were saying? Are there efforts to improve based on the kind of observations that you were able to make? Have there been improvements? Do you think there will continue to be improvements?

[34:49] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: So I was aware at the time of my research, and as I completed my research, that there was a Women's Strategy that was a big focus of the Department of Corrections, and it was being released in 2021. And I briefly had a look at that, and I must say, I found it very hard to find references to the Mothers with Babies Unit within that Women's Strategy. So personally, I was quite disappointed at that. I can't really say much more than that; I wasn't part of that Women's Strategy, but I've briefly looked at that report and have found very little reference to the Mothers with Babies Unit.

[35:29] Barbara Frey: And the Women's Strategy was for women in the criminal justice system as a whole?

[34:34] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: Correct. It wasn't just a sole focus on mothers with babies, not at all. But I would have thought that mothers and babies could be a significant focus of women in prison or the Women's Strategy. Yeah.

[35:47] Barbara Frey: Right. Because undoubtedly, New Zealand sees this practice as a progressive practice and something that it's proud of by comparison with other international criminal systems and their relationships with women.

[36:03] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: Hmm, I would think so, yes, I would think that they are incredibly proud of it. And, yes, I think it's a great unit. And look, out of all of this research, and in reading my thesis, the bottom line is women were hugely appreciative of being there, they wanted to be there with their children. They were grateful that they had the space. I think it's just that no one had really looked into the finer runnings of an incarcerated facility that merges a prison nursery in New Zealand, and so women had never really had the chance to speak on this level of actually the daily difficulties that they experience.

But they were all appreciative of being there. Well, no, that's not quite true [Dr. Johnson laughs]. Because I, you know, if I do think about it, one of the women in particular who did lose her child and actually did make that quote about living in a state of anxiety—when you slip up on the rules, she was the one that actually made that quote—she ended up having her child removed. And she was quite glad that she was within the unit without her child because she just found the whole trying to live on a daily basis with the child in there too difficult. So, you know, it's a real



mix of experiences, it really is. I don't think there's any hard line as to what works. I do think there should be further consideration as to what could work better foremost.

There was just another important contradiction, if you don't mind me just touching on that. And it was about the fact that we give these women exclusive time to be a mother. So this one-on-one parenting scenario, which they relish, and on the other other hand, they actually do suffer significantly [from] the demands of parenting and isolation and parenting alone. So they are charged with 24-hour care of their child, and within the Mothers with Babies Unit they had—they were free from the demands and stress that were part of their lives on the outside, but they also, when they were parenting solely on the inside, there were a lot of pressures to being inside and parenting on their own.

On the one hand, the mothers made the comment that spending this focused and quality time with their child where they had the opportunity to take them swimming and take them to playgroups—which is something that they couldn't have afforded on the outside and wouldn't have had the time to do on the outside—they got to do this on the inside, and they loved that. They did also make the comments that these children were able to have all the attention with no outside distractions, and that their whole focus was around their children, and that it was a really amazing place for them to experience.

However, on the flip side of this, they found parenting alone incredibly tricky, and that some of them described it as a lonely and an isolating experience, where they're expected to be responsible for the child the whole time that they were in the unit. And so they made the comments about just little things like they just had no one to hand their baby to when they were teething or when they were upset. One mother felt frustrated because she did have a partner on the outside and she felt like she was a solo mother on the inside. And she felt that it was really unfair, that it shouldn't be the way she should be feeling. They didn't want to ask officers for help because that was perceived as that whole officer-prisoner dynamic. They were under the impression that they would be perceived as incapable if they asked officers for help. And that they also geographically didn't have the ability to separate from the child when they needed to walk away, when they needed to have some space.

[40:17] Barbara Frey: Yeah, mothering is not easy under any circumstances. But to 24/7, I mean, we've all learned it in the pandemic situation—not to not to equate these two but you know—but when you're taken out of your larger social setting, and you don't get any help or support from other family members it must make it extraordinarily stressful.

[40:40] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: Yeah, it was amplified for them in there. The last contradiction that I'd just like to touch on is that we developed the mothers and babies prison, in my research I talked about that as the 'mother prison,' and for some women, this almost created what I think I



referred to in my thesis as well as a false paradise. So through the comfort and the safety of the prison environment, through the routine and the structured nature of being in the Mothers with Babies Unit, from the security that they found being in a safer place than they may find on the outside, and from the provision of having goods that meet both their physical needs, which would be in terms of food and shelter, and both their emotional needs in terms of—many women found a prison family through being in prison. So all of these structures, support, and security that were provided to the mother, the contradiction in that was that some mothers appeared to become quite dependent on this. And so the idea that we were developing mothers that would have self-determination and autonomy to be able to release into the community and having learned, you know, things to move them forward and support them forward. It ended up being kind of like a false paradise for some.

So in my writing, I refer to this as the ‘mother prison,’ where the prison has essentially removed many of the adult responsibilities from inmates, and mothers often commented on the ease of life that they found within the unit. So this feeling was found through such things as, you know, mothers just simply made the comment that there was always food because budgeting was taken care of, the prison had control of their finances. They made the comment that there were no bills to pay, they made the comment that appointments were made for them, and that transport was provided. And one mother actually referred to days on her release and I quote, “Days when you’re just wanting to go back to jail, because you just want to know that your rent is paid, your power is paid, there’s food, and you go shopping on Sunday.”

Also mothers really created their own prison—some mothers created their own prison families when they’re on the inside, and really felt a strong connection to them also, and this gave them something that they didn’t have on the outside either. And I quote here, of the research participants said, ‘I’ve found my family in this jail, I went and picked my own family because I feel my real family have let me down. I’ve actually made two aunts in here and two sisters, people I can just talk to and talk to about anything.’ So they ended up sort of really being in the bubble of the institution. And they really felt that in the provision of the structure, the shelter, and the security this was in stark contrast to many of the struggles that they faced in their own communities.

I know on at least two occasions, the mothers of this research actually breached parole to return to the Mothers with Babies Unit because as they said, they just could not cope on the outside, they wanted to return. Actually, this is a good quote from one of these participants, she says, ‘Number 10, this is my 10th time, I felt that I needed to come back in to sort my head out, sort myself out. Yeah, yeah, this place is a safe haven. It’s like my safe spot.’ She had been in and out, but she had actually been two times into the Mothers with Babies Unit and just really felt that it was a place that she needed to go to is, as she says, it became her safe spot. So there is a lot of provision in the Mothers with Babies Unit, there’s a lot of, you know, ‘structure, security,



and shelter' is how I term it in my writing. And not for all, but for some, in at least two occasions in my research, mothers became quite dependent on this environment. So it was a bit of a contradiction in terms of what the Mothers with Babies Unit was set up to provide and the effect that it actually had on at least two participants in my research that I can talk of.

[45:10] Barbara Frey: Well, Jacqui Johnson, I just want to say thank you so much for sharing all of these amazing insights. What a fascinating study, and even if it was small numbers, it feels like you understood a lot of the complexity of the experience in the population as a whole. And I think we're learning quite a bit from your insights that can help us as we think through this issue on global terms. So, on behalf of Children of Incarcerated Caregivers, I just want to thank you so much for your time, and I look forward to staying in touch as we work on these issues together.

[45:46] Dr. Jacqui Johnson: Thank you, thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to talk about it. It's wonderful.

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[45:55] Barbara Frey: Thank you for listening to the Children of Incarcerated Caregivers International Prison Nursery Podcast. We're your hosts, Barbara Frey and Paul Dosh, advisory board members of Children of Incarcerated Caregivers. To learn more about our organization and view additional materials, documents, and research from this episode, please visit our website at [cicmn.org](http://cicmn.org).

This episode was recorded in December 2021 in collaboration with the University of Minnesota's Human Rights Program. This podcast was created with research from our student collaborators McKenna Haas, Olivia Hudson, and Jessy Rehmman. Episodes contain original music by David Smith and production by Brian Carnell. Don't forget to tune into the next episode! We hope to see you there.

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