



Children of Incarcerated Caregivers

The Baby and Mother Bonding Initiative

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In 2007, the state of Texas passed H.B. 199, authorizing the creation of the Baby and Mother Bonding Initiative (BAMBI), a pioneer for out-of-prison nursery programs. Since its inaugural class was admitted in 2010, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) has overseen the program in collaboration with the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB). The program strives to keep incarcerated mothers and their newborns together in a residential, community-based environment conducive to the healthy psychosocial development of mother and child. This Report provides an overview of BAMBI's history, implementation, and several policy implications derived from its outcomes and challenges.

I. Background

Texas currently leads the United States with the highest number of incarcerated women contained within its prisons.¹ In addition, the state holds over six times as many expectant mothers in its carceral system compared to the national average, with approximately 250 babies born each year at TDCJ facilities.² To develop “parenting and bonding skills . . . and [give the mother] and the infant the best chance at a productive life,” Representative Jerry Madden introduced H.B. 199 and Senator John Whitmire sponsored the legislation in the Senate.³ Notably, the statutory language is brief, a mere two sentences. It directs only that the TDCJ “shall implement a residential infant care and parenting program for mothers who are confined by the department. To the extent practicable, the department shall model the program after the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Mothers and Infants Together [MINT] program operated under contract in Fort Worth.”⁴

The legislation received tremendous bipartisan support, passing unanimously in the Senate and virtually unopposed in the House with 133 yeas and 3 nays.⁵ Although its legislative history is sparse, the statute’s legislative history underscores that legislators took seriously studies showing that young children of incarcerated mothers are more likely to experience a

¹ Carolyn Sufrin et al., *Pregnancy Outcomes in US Prisons, 2016–2017*, 109 AM. J. OF PUB. HEALTH 799, 802 (May 2019).

² *Id.*; *BAMBI Professional Development Tour: 2018 Winter Training Institute*, AM. PROB. & PAROLE ASS’N, https://www.appa-net.org/institutes/2018-Houston/files/Bambi_Prof_Dev_Tour.pdf (last visited May 13, 2025).

³ H.B. 199, 80th Leg., Reg. Sess. (Tex. 2007), <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/80R/billtext/pdf/HB00199E.pdf>.

⁴ *Id.*; TEX. GOV. CODE ANN. § 501.022 (West 2025).

⁵ H.J. of Tex., 80th Leg., Reg. Sess. 3565–66 (2007), https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/HouseJournals/80/05092007_72_3517.PDF.

range of social, emotional, and physical challenges from poor performance in school, to nighttime incontinence, to refusal to eat.⁶ Indeed, immense bipartisan support was likely guided by the expected downstream effects of parental incarceration where “[t]he effect on society is equally negative because children with imprisoned parents are at increased risk for poor academic performance, truancy, dropping out of school, gang involvement, early pregnancy, drug abuse, and delinquency.”⁷ To date, the statute has not been amended since its original enactment.

II. Implementation

Consistent with the enabling legislation, the TDCJ retains significant discretion over the design and administration of the BAMBI program. Prior to its implementation, infants born to incarcerated mothers were typically removed within 48 hours and placed either with a designated caregiver or, when no suitable caregiver was available, became wards of the state through the foster care system.⁸ As advocates of the bill articulated, not only did this deprive expectant mothers of a relationship with their child, but it also left them deprived of the skills necessary for parenthood upon release from custody.⁹

A. Eligibility

Since 2010, the program has maintained space for fifteen mothers at any given time, and more recently has expanded to accommodate at least 22 participants.¹⁰ Given the high female parental incarceration rates described above, demand for BAMBI’s resources remains high while space continues to be limited. Criteria for acceptance into the BAMBI program requires candidates to demonstrate:

- 1) A short prison sentence (i.e., ≤12 months, though case-by-case extensions are available);
- 2) Minimal security risk;
- 3) No history of assaultive offenses, arson or sex crimes;
- 4) No history of psychiatric disorders;
- 5) No previous history of causing injury to a child; and
- 6) No signs of mental or physical impairment in the newborn.¹¹

⁶ TEX. H.R. RESEARCH ORG., Bill Analysis, H.B. 199, 80th Leg., Reg. Sess. (2007), <https://hro.house.texas.gov/pdf/ba80R/HB0199.PDF>.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*; Diana Claitor, *Babysteps*, TEX. OBSERVER, Jan. 18, 2012, <https://www.texasobserver.org/babysteps/>.

¹⁰ TEX. DEP’T OF CRIM. JUST., 2022 FEMALE PROGRAMMING REPORT 26–27 (2022), https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/documents/rpd/RPD_Annual_Report_Female_Programming2022.pdf.

¹¹ Allison D. Crawford et al., *Policy Alternatives to Separating Women in Prison and Their Infants*, HANDBOOK ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN HEALTH, CRIME, AND PUNISHMENT 383 (Nathan W. Link et al. eds., Routledge 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003506867-26>; Kimberly D. Dodson & Nancy Belden, *Parenting from Prison: Gender Inequalities between Incarcerated Mothers and Fathers*, HANDBOOK ON PRISONS AND JAILS 278 (Danielle S. Rudes et al. eds., Routledge 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003374893>; Veronica Kwarteng-Amaning et al., *An Alternative to Mother and Infants Behind Bars: How One Prison Nursery Program Impacted Attachment and Nurturing for Mothers Who Gave Birth While Incarcerated*, 33 J. PERINAT. NEONAT. NURS. 116, 118 (2019).

Notably, “offenders cannot apply to participate in the program; rather, they must be referred by unit classification personnel and approved by the BAMBI Technical Assistance Team.”¹² Where these preliminary requirements are satisfied, TDCJ personnel will interview candidates before submitting their file to its Technical Assistance Team for extensive review and final approval.¹³ This includes medical and mental health screenings conducted by the University of Texas, Medical Branch (UTMB).¹⁴ Thereafter, “the mother, if in good health, may transfer to the BAMBI facility during the third trimester as she awaits her delivery date.”¹⁵ Following delivery, the mother and infant will be screened again for BAMBI medical appropriateness, and TDCJ and UTMB will arrange transportation for mother and infant into the secure residential facility.¹⁶ Infants cannot be transported by the TDCJ because the infant is not in custody, therefore only appropriate UTMB staff may transport infants to the facility.¹⁷

B. Program Features

The Santa Maria Hostel is a two-story red brick building and serves as one of the largest residential treatment and recovery facilities in the state. Mothers reside in shared bedrooms equipped with single beds and bassinets, surrounded by warm, personalized decor.¹⁸ The UTMB has described the facility as one that “feels and looks more like a college dormitory than a prison.”¹⁹ Living spaces also include communal areas for feeding, bonding, and group therapy, all in stark contrast to ordinary prison conditions. With access to outdoor space and supportive staff, BAMBI residents receive therapeutic intervention within a home-like setting designed to nurture maternal-infant bonding.²⁰

Although mothers are technically in TDCJ custody, the program aims to create an atmosphere that is not punitive. The program is designed to foster a supportive environment capable of allowing mothers to focus on the relationships with their children. Thus, while the unit is gated and staffed 24/7, there are no “bars or barbed wire” and only one headcount per day is conducted.²¹ Furthermore, the correctional officers are “chosen for their interest in the program and their willingness to support it in a nurturing way.”²² Accordingly, the program is designed to foster a supportive environment capable of allowing mothers to focus on the relationships with their children as opposed to many of the penological interests that the state might ordinarily entertain. The Texas Observer, a local newspaper, recorded participants’ reactions to the

¹² TEX. DEP’T OF CRIM. JUST., SELF-EVALUATION REPORT 46 (2011), <https://www.sunset.texas.gov/public/uploads/files/reports/Texas%20Department%20of%20Criminal%20Justice%20SER%202011%2083rd%20Leg.pdf>.

¹³ *Id.* at 66

¹⁴ TEX. DEP’T OF CRIM. JUST., *supra* note 10.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Claitor, *supra* note 9.

¹⁸ Claitor, *supra* note 9.

¹⁹ Shawn T. Livingston, *Breaking the Cycle: BAMBI Program Helps Female Offenders Bond with Their Newborns, Reduces Recidivism*, UNIV. OF TEX. MED. BRANCH IMPACT (June 20, 2017), <https://www.utmb.edu/impact/home/2017/06/20/breaking-the-cycle-bambi-program-helps-female-offenders-bond-with-their-newborns-reduces-recidivism>.

²⁰ *See* Claitor, *supra* note 9.

²¹ Claitor, *supra* note 9.

²² Claitor, *supra* note 9.

astoundingly free space at the Santa Maria Hostel, with many remarking immense satisfaction and surprise at pizza nights, flexible shower times, and the “over-the-top welcome[s] from the sisterhood of BAMBI,” at times bringing participants to tears.²³

In addition to bonding, BAMBI aims to ensure participants leave the program having developed skills for success through comprehensive programming. This includes roughly twenty hours of programming each week ranging from parenting skills, life skills, child development, infant care and first aid, bonding activities, reproductive health, nutrition and healthy living, substance abuse, identifiers of triggers and relapse prevention.²⁴ Programming may also include GED classes, peer recovery, cognitive skills, budgeting, anger management, and family reunification sessions.²⁵ Participants also receive reintegration support, including planning for college and future employment.²⁶ As of September 30, 2022, the latest available information at the time of this Report’s publication, “362 mothers and 364 infants have benefited from the program.”²⁷

III. Evaluations and Assessments

A. Formal Evaluation Results

Studies researching BAMBI highlight numerous successes including reduced recidivism rates, positive employment outcomes for participants, and strong maternal bonding.²⁸ One of the principal goals of the program, remains reduced recidivism. As one program coordinator remarked, the program witnessed “a dramatic drop in recidivism rates among participants,” a mere 9–16% compared to the 20.3–60.1% in other Texas carceral facilities, and a 58.5% recidivism rate for female offenders nationally.²⁹ At the time of this Report’s publication, no longitudinal studies concerning BAMBI’s impact on child participants are publicly available.

Participants also appear to have exited the program having developed significant parenting and life skills and significant bonding outcomes. For example, one study solicited answers through a formal questionnaire and survey of 41 BAMBI graduates to examine maternal child attachment and nurturing.³⁰ The study concluded that of the participants surveyed, BAMBI graduates perceived themselves as “very attached” to their children.³¹ Further, participants with more than one child reported “increased abilities or competencies to nurture their infants or

²³ See Claitor, *supra* note 9.

²⁴ Meeting Minutes, TEX. DEP’T OF CRIM. JUST. CORR. MANAGED HEALTH CARE COMMITTEE 8 (Dec. 4, 2019), https://tdcj.texas.gov/divisions/cmhc/docs/cmhcc_meetings/2019-04-12_CMHCC_Minutes.pdf.

²⁵ TEX. DEP’T OF CRIM. JUST., *supra* note 12, at 78–79.

²⁶ Livingston, *supra* note 19.

²⁷ TEX. DEP’T OF CRIM. JUST., *supra* note 10.

²⁸ Claitor, *supra* note 9.

²⁹ Claitor, *supra* note 9; Livingston, *supra* note 19; Kwarteng-Amaning et al., *supra* note 11, at 122.

³⁰ Veronica Kwarteng-Amaning, An Exploratory Study of the Impact of the Baby and Mother Bonding Initiative (BAMBI) in Previously Incarcerated Mothers (Apr. 2017) (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas Medical Branch) (ProQuest).

³¹ *Id.* at 90.

children.”³² Few studies about BAMBI’s results are publicly available, and many pertain to maternal attachment or mention BAMBI as a model but without reference to its outcomes.

B. Informal Assessments

BAMBI is recognized as successful by local advocacy groups and participants, but receives its greatest criticism for its general lack of access.³³ As mentioned above, with less than 500 mothers having participated in the program since its inaugural class, only 10-20% of expecting mothers incarcerated with the TDCJ are able to take advantage of the opportunity.³⁴ Accordingly, BAMBI’s chief criticism from local press is its inability to reach a broader set of women in Texas prisons.³⁵ Additionally, the internal referral process conducted by the TDCJ may also raise concerns about equity and access because the department does not accept applications and utilizes what appears to be black box procedures.³⁶ Finally, it appears that Texas has not implemented any similar programs to support parenting skills for mothers who do not arrive pregnant at the TDCJ, or who have older children.

Still, BAMBI’s greatest strength emerges from its compelling personal testimonials recorded by local press in interviews with participants, many of whom describe the program as transformative.³⁷ One mother reflected, “Being able to bond with my daughter and wake up with her every day, knowing she is right there with me, has made me realize how special every moment is.”³⁸ Another participant highlighted the practical skills gained, stating, “I got a lot out of the BAMBI program; I learned the responsibilities of having a child...this was a great experience for me.”³⁹ Beyond parenting skills, participants reported significant personal growth. For example, one mother shared, “Being at BAMBI helped me become the mother and woman I am today... I’ve learned to live again.”⁴⁰ Additionally, mentorship from staff and the peer relationships formed within the program were also pivotal. As one participant succinctly stated, “Having somebody in your corner makes a huge difference.”⁴¹

³² *Id.* at 89.

³³ *Motherhood and Pregnancy Behind Bars: Texas Must Rethink How It’s Treating Mothers and Families*, TEX. CTR. FOR JUST. AND EQUITY, 6–8 (May 2022), <https://www.texascje.org/system/files/publications/2022-05/motherhood-and-pregnancy-behind-bars-tcje.pdf>; Kwarteng-Amaning, *supra* note 30, at 91.

³⁴ Claitor, *supra* note 9; *see* TEX. DEP’T OF CRIM. JUST., *supra* note 14.

³⁵ Alexandra Hart, *In Texas, the Number of Women Inmates Is Growing, but Support Services Aren’t*, TEX. STANDARD (Feb. 13, 2018), <https://www.texasstandard.org/stories/in-texas-the-number-of-women-inmates-is-growing-but-support-services-arent/>.

³⁶ *See* TEX. DEP’T OF CRIM. JUST., *supra* note 12.

³⁷ *See* Livingston, *supra* note 19; *see* Claitor, *supra* note 9.

³⁸ Livingston, *supra* note 19.

³⁹ Kwarteng-Amaning et al., *supra* note 11, at 122.

⁴⁰ Kwarteng-Amaning et al., *supra* note 11, at 123.

⁴¹ Claitor, *supra* note 9.

IV. Conclusion

Since its inception, the Baby and Mother Bonding Initiative (BAMBI) has demonstrated substantial positive impacts, achieving markedly lower recidivism rates, promoting maternal-infant bonding, and fostering critical life and parenting skills among incarcerated mothers.

Despite these clear successes, BAMBI faces significant constraints that limit its broader effectiveness. Most notably, the program's limited capacity of 22 mother-infant pairs at a time prevents the program from serving a greater portion of Texas's substantial population of incarcerated, expectant mothers. Further, limited publicly available data and expansion nearly two decades after its establishment underscores a need for greater investment given BAMBI's overall rehabilitative effectiveness and substantial demand within the community.

Additionally, the stringent eligibility criteria and internal referral mechanism may unintentionally restrict equitable access to the program, potentially excluding many women who could otherwise benefit significantly from its rehabilitative approach. To fully realize BAMBI's potential, policymakers may consider prioritizing strategic program expansion, such as by increasing physical capacity and relaxing eligibility criteria. Equally important, ongoing research—including longitudinal studies on child development outcomes and comparative analyses with alternative sentencing models from other states—will be critical in continuously informing and optimizing the program.

Ultimately, BAMBI represents a compelling model for rehabilitation and family preservation for the entire nation. Its future success, however, hinges on addressing its present limitations through intentional, evidence-driven policy adjustments and sustained advocacy efforts.