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In Mexican prison, kids serve time with Mommy

By **JAMES C. MCKINLEY JR.**, New York Times

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MEXICO CITY

Beyond the high concrete walls and menacing guard towers of the Santa Martha Acatitla Prison, past the barbed wire, past the iron gates, past the armed guards in black commando garb, sits a nursery school with brightly painted walls, piles of toys and a jungle gym.

Fifty-three children under the age of 6 live inside the prison with their mothers, who are serving sentences for crimes from drug dealing to kidnapping to homicide. Mothers dressed in prison blue, many with tattoos, carry babies on their hips around the exercise yard. Others lead toddlers and kindergartners by the hand, play with them in the dust or bounce them on their knees on prison benches.

Karina Rendon, a 23-year-old serving time for drug dealing, said her 2-year-old daughter considered the 144-square-foot cell she shared with two other mothers and their children as home. "She doesn't know it is a prison," she said. "She thinks it's her house."

While a prison may seem an unhealthy place for a child, in the early 1990s, the Mexico City government decided it was better for children born in prison to stay with their mothers until they were 6 rather than to be turned over to relatives or foster parents. The children are allowed to leave on weekends and holidays to visit relatives.

A debate continues among Mexican academics over whether spending one's early years in a jail causes mental problems later in life, but for the moment the law says babies must stay with their mothers. So the prison has a school with three teachers.

The warden, Margarita Malo, said the children had a calming effect on the rest of the inmates. The presence of children also inspires the mothers to learn skills or, in many cases, to kick the drug habits that landed them in trouble in the first place.

And even though the prison is full of women capable of violence, the children walk safely among them, as if protected by an invisible shield. It is as though they tap the collective maternal instinct of the 1,680 women locked up here.

"The minors are highly respected by the population," Malo said. "The fact we have children here creates a mind-set of solidarity. I have never seen aggression on the part of the inmates toward the children. Everyone acts as if they could be their children, and they don't want anything to happen to them."

Still, raising a child in prison presents a tough set of problems, mothers said in recent interviews. Those serving long sentences dread the day when they must be separated from their child because he or she has turned 6.

Others who lack financial help from relatives struggle to earn enough money in prison to care for a child. Several said they waged a constant struggle to keep their children from getting sick in the damp, drafty cells. They often have no money for the prescriptions the prison doctor gives them.

Yet, few want to give up their offspring to relatives on the outside. They say the children are like a breath of normal life inside the stuffy, deadening confines of the prison. "It's beautiful," said Victoria Jaramillo, as she held her 3-month-old daughter on her lap. "It keeps one busy."

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