



# Establishing Lactation Policies in Correctional Facilities

New Mexico Breastfeeding Task Force  
[www.breastfeedingnewmexico.org](http://www.breastfeedingnewmexico.org)

## The Need

Between 1980 and 2014, the number of incarcerated women in the US increased by more than 700%, rising from a total of 26,378 in 1980 to 215,332 in 2014. Though many more men are in prison than women, the rate of growth for female imprisonment has outpaced men by more than 50% between 1980 and 2014. **New Mexico incarcerates more women per capita than the national average** (63 per 100,000). (The Sentencing Project, 2015).

In 2014, the imprisonment rate for African American women (109 per 100,000) was more than twice the rate of imprisonment for white women (53 per 100,000). Hispanic women were incarcerated at 1.2 times the rate of white women (64 vs. 53 per 100,000) (The Sentencing Project, 2015).

Primarily designed for male offenders, the U. S. correctional system is struggling to meet the specialized needs of its female inmates. On average, **6–10% of incarcerated women (~10,000) are pregnant, with the highest rates in local jails** (ACOG, 2011).



Every major health organization strongly supports breastfeeding as the preferred method of feeding for newborns and infants.

Given the benefits of breastfeeding to both the mother and the infant, **“incarcerated mothers wishing to breastfeed should be allowed to either breastfeed their infants or express milk for delivery to the infant.** If the mother is to express her milk, accommodations should be made for freezing, storing, and transporting the milk.” This can be difficult to facilitate and is another argument for prison nurseries or alternative sentencing of women to community-based non-institutional settings (ACOG, 2011).

***“The fact that the mother has made a serious error should not condemn children to lose their rights to the benefits breastmilk and breastfeeding provides. To inhibit the bonding process and restrict access to the immunity boosting and nutritional benefits of breastmilk during the mother’s imprisonment is to sentence the children to possible life-long injury.”*** – Lissa Knudsen, MPH, Chair New Mexico Breastfeeding Task Force, 2017

In addition to the numerous health benefits, breastfeeding is correlated with increased bonding and attachment between mother and child. “Non-breastfed children have a 2.6 times higher chance of experiencing abuse than breastfed children” (Strathearn et al, 2009).

We know rates of substance abuse are high among women who are incarcerated. The AAP, ACOG, and AAFP all support breastfeeding by women “who are enrolled in a supervised methadone [or buprenorphine] maintenance program and have negative screening for HIV infection and illicit drugs.” Moreover, **breastfeeding has been shown to reduce the symptoms of neonates**

**experiencing neonatal abstinence syndrome as a result of in utero opioid exposure.**

## The Solutions

- 1) Alternative sentencing options that allow non-violent lactating offenders to be coupled with or near their child,
- 2) Visitation policies that allow caregivers to bring infants to their mothers for daily breastfeeding sessions,
- 3) Lactation policies that allow mothers to both express milk that can be later fed to her off site child and to maintain milk supply while the mother/child dyad is separated.

Lactation support programs across the country include: California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation, Ohio Prison System, Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, OR, Travis County Jail, TX, and Washington County Jail, NY.

In New Mexico, the following facilities have provided lactation support to inmates in the past:

Youth Diagnostic and Development Center  
Santa Fe County Jail  
Taos County Jail

## Advantages

**Human milk should be standard of nutrition care for vulnerable babies born to mothers who are incarcerated.**

- Decreases incidences of life threatening infections, and lengths of hospital stays, thus lowering healthcare costs.
- Results in improved long term health and well-being for both the child and mother, thus lowering healthcare costs.
- Results in improved mother/child bonding and reduces child abuse rates.
- Improves discrepancies between affluent and low income patients.

- Resolves ethical issue of not punishing the innocent child for the mother's crimes.

"As we provide health care to incarcerated inmates, we should, "as a basic health issue," allow incarcerated women to breastfeed or provide breast milk to their infants" (New Mexico Pediatric Society, 2015).



## Endorsing Organizations:

American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists,  
New Mexico Section  
Gordon Bernell Charter School  
New Mexico Academy of Family Physicians  
New Mexico Breastfeeding Task Force  
New Mexico Pediatric Society  
New Mexico Public Health Association  
New Mexico Voices for Children  
PB&J Family Services, Inc.  
Southwest Women's Law Center  
Wings for LIFE International