

**Child Family Health International**  
**Children Living in Jails**

Providing educational and social services support for children living in jails with their parents in Bolivia



Journal by Alanna Henneberry

## Children Living in Jails

October 20, 2008

In Dr. Mar's Prison course, I learned that there are children living in prisons with their inmate-mothers all over the world. This concept gave me mixed feelings. I think it is cruel for a child to be taken away from a mother, unless she is truly unfit to care for the child. I can also imagine how hard it would be to grow up in a prison, especially one with inadequate facilities. In Dr. Mar's class, we watched a Lisa Ling special on children living in jails in India. It was shocking to learn that these children will grow up without their freedom to be a child. At some point the child might feel that it is their fault that they are there; they may feel that they too are a criminal. On the other hand, if a woman must be imprisoned (which I personally believe that the majority of them do not and that there are other ways to deal with most criminal behavior other than jail, but that is a whole other topic) then it only makes sense to allow a child to go with her and experience the crucial mother-child bond. After all, there is no one else to care for the child. In the U.S., the child would be taken away from the parent by Child Protective Services and placed in a foster home or left with the father or other family members to raise. In some other societies, the lack of these programs and people to care for the child leave no other choice than to place the child with their mother. What I wondered was, which system is better? Which system is most beneficial to the child?

This topic interested me greatly. I began researching children living in prison and which organizations are out there to help. I found a program called *Children Living in Jails* which is sponsored by *Child Family Health International*. This program provides medical, psychological and social support to the 80 children living at the Centro de Orientacion Feminina de Obrajes,

the only female prison in La Paz, the capital of Bolivia. In 2005, Cecilia Uribe de Chavez and Inge Von Alvensleben, Pediatricians working in the Bolivian prison system, along with Psychologist Sussy Portugal and Social Worker Miralge Oporto founded the program. Besides the medical, psychological and social support that is offered, the founders teach the children games and have reading circles and coloring time. They present seminars to the mothers on proper nutrition. Over the past two years, the program has helped around 150 children of the 1,500 children living in the Bolivian prison systems. Von Alvensleben says, "The mothers feel our commitment to their children. Because of the genuine interest we take in their lives, they feel more committed to changing their attitudes with respect and caring for their children positively." Child Family Health International is the financial partner to Children Living in Jails. Their job is to inform the public on the issue and to collect money and medical supplies for the children living in the jail. I decided to contact them to let them know that I would like to help. I explained that I could hold bake sales at my college to raise money and collect medical supplies. They were thrilled with my interest and accepted my help.

October 28, 2008

I explained the project to Dr. Mar's class and was really excited to see that there were so many others who wanted to help. Two of the people have already gone around to dorm rooms collecting change for the fund. We will be having a few bake sales soon and will hopefully raise a good amount of money before Christmas.

November 1, 2008

I started collecting money from family and friends. The other night I was out to dinner with a bunch of friends and I told them about the project. The restaurant where we were eating had delicious desserts and we were all really excited about ordering some after dinner. After hearing about the project, one of my friends suggested that instead of us ordering dessert, we should donate that money to the fund. Everyone thought it was a great idea so they all gave me \$5 (a total of \$25.) I also put together an information sheet that explained the issue and the organization and sent it to nearly everyone in my address book. I gave a stack of sheets to my mother, a social worker in Poughkeepsie, to hand out at work. I'm not sure what kind of response it will get. Even though it may not raise very much money, I figured that it would at least inform the public on the issue.

November 6, 2008

The *Save the Children* foundation and the *Ministerial Department of the Penitentiary System of Bolivia* are together working to better the lives of the children living in jails in Bolivia. They are helping the children get an education, food and adequate health care. *Save the Children* developed a technology center in the San Pedro prison in La Paz. The center has computers and training sessions. They have had a lot of success with the program. The children are thrilled with all of the new skills that they are learning; it gives them a focus to their day. In the evenings, the adults are allowed to participate in the program.



*Inside the San Pedro Prison  
(Image copied from [www.marchingpowder.com/img/img13.jpg](http://www.marchingpowder.com/img/img13.jpg))*

November 8, 2008

I spoke again to the Director's Assistant of the program today. She told me that since I am so interested in medicine and this project I could perhaps go to Bolivia and intern with one of the doctors there and help out with the children. That would be amazing. Michael, from the prison class, told me that the political situation is too dangerous in Bolivia for traveling right now so I will hold off until I feel that it is a little safer. What an experience that would be. This class actually got me thinking that maybe I should practice medicine in a prison when I am a doctor. Even the prisons here are in need of caring, competent doctors.



***Humanitarians working with children in a jail in Bolivia  
(Image copied from [picasaweb.google.com](https://www.picasaweb.google.com))***

I would like to eventually build upon this program and get more Marist students involved. I would like for this project to not end when the semester ends. Perhaps I can get it going enough so that someone else can take over when I graduate. If it is successful, maybe we can expand the project so that it helps care for children in other jails around the world.

November 10, 2008

I read an article today from *"Prison Watch" Public Association* called *Bolivia's Prison Children*. The most populated male prison in La Paz, called San Pedro, holds 200 children. The director of the prison, Ramiro Ulloa, says that there are no problems with the male inmates harming the children. They know not to go there or else there will be trouble with the other inmates and the prison guards. The children are supervised by humanitarian groups and receive food and education provided by a government sponsored program. I googled this prison and came upon a short untitled documentary on the jail. It showed dirty, malnourished children kicking around a filthy plastic bag from the garbage for fun. A man who worked there said that ideally, the children should not live there. He told a story of a young girl who was raped and strangled at the prison by an inmate. He said that they are trying to get the children out of the jail. An inmate-father was interviewed as well. He said that although he would be lonely, he wished that his children would be taken out of the jail and given an education and hope for the future. He said that he wants his children to have a better life than he does.



*A family serving time at the La Paz Prison*  
(Image Copied from [news.bbc.co.uk/.../hi/newsid\\_4415000/4415294.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/.../hi/newsid_4415000/4415294.stm))



*A father with his child living in a prison in Bolivia  
(Image copied from <http://www.towardfreedom.com/home/content/view/666/54/>)*

The article also describes the most overcrowded prison in Bolivia, the Palmalosa Prison, which holds entire families and is described as being like a town. One family even took their pet dog and parrot to prison with them because they did not want to abandon them. This prison is thought to be the most dangerous prison in Bolivia. I think it is a good idea to allow pets to live there. Otherwise they would be left to fend for themselves, and that is not fair.



*La Paz Prison.  
(Image copied from [deputydog.files.wordpress.com/.../bolivia2.jpg](http://deputydog.files.wordpress.com/.../bolivia2.jpg))*

A psychologist who works in a day care center which is attached to the San Sebastian prison in Cochabamba, Bolivia, says that the children are often exposed to violence and prostitution in the cells.



**Daycare center inside of the Cochabamba Prison**  
(Image copied from [flickr.com/photos/rabble/1508159200/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/rabble/1508159200/))



**Cochabamba Prison**

The number of children living in prisons in Bolivia has increased since the 80's when the government cracked down on drug trafficking. I think that we, as a global society, must think about the children first, before anything else. Is it more important to cut down on drug

trafficking or more important to keep children from having to spend their youth living in prisons? The answer seems unbelievably clear to me.

This article also mentions the prison which our project focuses on. It says that around 70 children live there along with 260 female inmates.



*Children living along side their parents in prison in Bolivia  
(Image copied from [www.yannone.org/BlogPics/BolivianPrison.jpg](http://www.yannone.org/BlogPics/BolivianPrison.jpg))*

November 20, 2008

I applied for a grant from *Do Something.org* to help expand the project. They offer weekly grants of \$500 to people under 25 who are trying to start projects that would help better the world. I have started collecting medical supplies such as children's pain/fever reducing medicine, hydrogen peroxide and rubbing alcohol. For now, I am only collecting over the

counter medications until I can figure out how to collect prescription medications for the children.

November 24, 2008

Today I spoke with Fred and Alice Bunnell, a couple who volunteer for a project which offers support groups for women who are recently released from prison in our area. The project focuses on helping the women get back on their feet. This could involve bringing the women to court dates, job interviews or just letting them know that there is someone out there who cares. They asked me if I would like to join a support group for a woman that will hopefully be released from prison soon. I am eager to know more about her. I wonder if she has children and if she would have liked them to live with her in jail if she had the choice.

December 1, 2008

Over Thanksgiving Break, I visited the Island of St. Vincent to do Biology research for my university. Right next to where we were collecting samples was a prison. The prison is currently under construction; a huge addition is being added on to it in order to hold more prisoners. I got to interview a few of the locals who live beside the prison. They were very angry that the country was "wasting" money on expanding the size of the prison. One man said that they should be spending the money on helping the youth go to college. He said that only 1 percent of the population on the island goes to college. He thinks that educating the youth could help cut down on the crime on the island. I asked the locals if the children live in any of the prisons

on the island, and they looked at me as if I were crazy. "Why would a child live in prison?" one local asked. I explained to them that in some countries children live with their inmate-parents. They did not agree with that system. They also believed that the government should spend the money on fixing the roads on the islands (they are very dangerous) and creating advertisement to attract tourists in order to bring money into the country.

We have our first bake sale on Friday. We will also have a box out to collect medical supplies. Next week we will have two more bake sales. Some of the people in the group are making a poster for the event and others are making different information sheets to hand out. I have already started sending and handing out information sheets to my friends, students at Marist College, and students at Boces, a trade school that I go to for Emergency Medical Training. My mother also handed some out at work. So far, I have collect around \$45. Many of the people said that they would donate when they come to the bake sale. I wrote an article that I want to submit to the *The Circle*, the Marist newspaper. I am hoping that it will inform the students on the issue and attract more members to the group.

I feel odd ending this journal when I feel that I have just started the project. There is so much more to do. There is so much planning that goes into starting a project, and I feel that I have learned so much about the process. I really hope to get more Marist students involved in the cause. Perhaps in the near future we can plan a trip for some students to go to Bolivia and work with the children. Although the bake sales will determine whether or not we have been successful in raising money, I still feel that this project was a great success. So many people did not know of children living in jail, and now they know. They also know that there are people out

there who are trying to better the lives of these children, and hopefully this will inspire them to help out as well.

December 20, 2008

Our group raised over \$400.00 for the project! I'd say that is a good start. Now I am even more motivated to build upon this project.

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