

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/gender-and-justice-in-america/keeping-families-whole-in-german-prisons>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

People visit the Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania region of northeastern Germany to see its sparkling lakes, sweeping fields, and charming coastal towns that flood with tourists in the summer. Most people do not go there to visit the incarcerated youth at its juvenile detention facility, Neustrelitz Prison. But I did.

A Baltic Sea getaway was far from my mind when I joined a delegation of 26 Americans this past June as part of the Vera Institute of Justices [International Sentencing and Corrections Exchange](#).

During our weeklong tour of five German prisons, I met many incarcerated men willing to discuss the conditions of their confinement, as well as corrections officers and administrators men and women eager to share information about the German philosophy and practice of incarceration. And at Neustrelitz Prison, I met the lone incarcerated woman I encountered on the whole trip: a shy young mother with a five-month-old baby boy.

Her name is Carmelina and she was a year into her three-year sentence when we met. She gave birth while in custody and her son, Jaden, is able to stay with her for the remainder of her sentence. When we met, Carmelina was eating dinner in the mother-child unit, her pink-cheeked son sitting in a highchair, slapping his hands around on his tray.

According to our German hosts, it is the norm that incarcerated mothers have the option to serve time with their young children. Mothers like Carmelina are able to serve their sentences while still being present for the crucial early stages of parent-infant bonding. Though thankful for the opportunity to care for her son in his infancy, Carmelina was adamant that Jaden would not see his first birthday in this prison even if it meant having to separate from him for a period. She balked at the idea of a child having any memories of prison. Her hope, upon release, is to find a good job and move in with Jaden's father so they can be together as a family.

In the U.S., the vast majority of children born to incarcerated women are separated from their mothers almost immediately after birth. They are sent to be cared for by relatives or are funneled into foster care. Though a growing number of states have created [prison nursery programs](#) which research suggests lead to lower rates of recidivism for mothers and more promising outcomes for children, this practice is far from ubiquitous.

Before we said goodbye, I asked Carmelina what she thought about so many American mothers being separated from their infants while serving prison sentences. She seemed shocked to hear that this was the rule rather than the exception. I don't like this at all, she said, glancing at Jaden. It's very tough for a baby to be taken away from its mother, especially right after birth.

Laura Macomber joined the delegation to conduct research and gather stories for the upcoming [American Justice Summit](#), an event produced by Tina Brown Live Media in conjunction with the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. This event seeks to explore the personal, social, and financial inequities plaguing America's criminal justice system today.

Through the [Gender & Justice in America](#) blog series, Vera will explore issues facing justice-involved women and girls in the fields of adult corrections, youth justice, immigration, victimization, substance use, and mental health.

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