

**Babies behind bars: the influence of the environment on the occupational participation of infants living with their incarcerated mothers**

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**Introduction:** Infants residing in prison with their incarcerated mothers, have a unique environment within which they learn, play and interact. Previous studies indicated that typical South African prison cells do not provide optimal living environments for these infants, and policy changes lead to the implementation of designated Mother Baby Units, allowing infants to live with their incarcerated mothers up to two years of age.

**Objectives:** The objectives of this study were to describe the correctional environment as context for occupational participation of the infant; and to describe the mothers' perceptions of the effect of this environment on the health, well-being and normal development of their infants.

**Methodology:** A descriptive, qualitative study was done, with data gathered by means of observational assessment of the environments using an environmental checklist, and by semi-structured interviews with 13 mothers in three facilities in South Africa. Through content analysis, four themes were abstracted.

**Findings:** Themes pointed to the supporting and hindering factors inherent to the correctional environments as physical and social contexts for the occupational participation of infants. Although these environments offer a variety of physical and social resources, many restrictions are also posed in terms of optimal opportunity for infants' learning, playing and interaction.

**Conclusion:** The MBU environments influence the infants' occupational participation, depending on the degree to which the environment supports different domains of infant development. Recommendations are made in terms of further development of South African Mother Baby, to improve circumstances for infant development; and highlight opportunities for occupational therapy involvement.