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Prison’s Children

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Prison’s Children: La Paz Bolivia

If a group of tourists were to walk into the San Pedros Prison in La Paz, Bolivia, what they would see would not be what one would expect to find in a prison for incarcerated men and women. They would find a thriving community beyond the high walls and guarded gates; a marketplace, a soccer field, men and women bustling about, and most strikingly, children playing throughout the entire place. Bolivia’s capital city is filled with these prisons that house children along with their incarcerated parents. These prisons are unlike any in the United States. They are like small towns contained within the secured prison walls. Inside the walls there are no guards; inmates are expected to elect representatives, create laws, and enforce the laws themselves. Individual cells can be bought and sold. In larger prisons, such as San Pedros, there are even different sections of the prison; the section you live in determines your socio-economic status within the prison. Soccer tournaments between different sections of the prison are as important to the inmates as national soccer. Some inmates even create tour guides and prison histories for the illegal tours that are often given to curious tourists. Other inmates start restaurants to sell food that is better than the prison food. Among all this, children contribute even more to the “unprison-like” atmosphere in these jails. There are mixed reactions to the presence of children living with their parents in prison. In her article entitled “In Bolivia, Keeping Kids and Moms Together – in Prison”, Jean Friedman-Rudovsky focuses on children living with their mothers in detention centers for women only. She argues that the environment is a better alternative for children to live in. On the other hand, an article in the BBC News, entitled "Bolivia's prison children", focuses on children living in prisons, like San Pedros, where both convicted men and women are housed. This article argues that even though most males in prison are convicted of drug-related charges, the male presence still increases the dangerousness of the children’s situation. Furthermore, the presence of children and the overall atmosphere inside these prisons reveal deep-rooted aspects of Latin American culture.

Humanitarian organizations across the globe have become increasingly more aware and more informed about children living in prisons in Latin America. These organizations pose an important question: can prison really be an environment for children? Those who believe that it can be argue that the communities are elaborate and well thought out. In jail, an inmate can purchase a better cell and food if they have the money; they can also create markets and restaurants to sell items. Kindergartens as well as day cares are attached to many of the prisons and older children are allowed to leave to go to school and come back. Most inmates have small, cramped cells to share with their children; and some prisoners have over three children living with them. However, for most of the children the situation in the jails might be better than the alternative. If they did not live there many of the children would be on the streets fending for themselves, most likely living in worse conditions. Also, officials in Bolivia believe that the presence of children softens the inmates and creates an environment in which they can repent and truly learn from their mistakes. Many children living in the Obrajes Women’s Detention Center in La Paz are completely unaware that they live in a prison; those who are aware prefer to stay with their mothers in jail. Most women are incarcerated for drug violations, and very few have violence charges against them; creating a seemingly safer environment for children. Of course, not all prisons are for women alone, and this is where a larger problem surfaces.

Despite the benefits of children living in prison, there are far more pressing costs to having innocent kids live among convicts. Most of the problems occur in prisons like San Pedros, where both incarcerated men and women are imprisoned. These prisons are almost always overcrowded. The presence of male inmates increases the amount of violence in prisons, and even though violence is not as prevalent, it still occurs. The men are also mostly there because of drug-related charges, but in Latin America (and the world in general), drugs often lead to violence. Children may also witness prostitution and the ever-prevailing drug trade (even within the prison the drug-trade still thrives). Perhaps the worst problem is that some children are even abused sexually and physically by violent inmates. Though the prison is an enclosed space, parents are not always able to keep an eye on their children at all times. In one rare case, a girl was raped and strangled in a man’s cell. These problems have spurred humanitarian effort to improve conditions for the children. However, these humanitarian organizations understand that getting children out of prison may not be feasible and also may not be the best idea. Their main goal is to improve the conditions in prisons and to give prison children opportunities to excel in the world outside the prison gates.

Prison life in the capital city of Bolivia effectively models the world outside the prison, so the children are still highly exposed to Bolivian culture. Aspects of Latin American culture and society are still extremely prevalent and pervasive within these prisons, and yet prison-life creates a unique identity for the men, women and children living there. These prisons give another insight into the certain aspects that hold high importance in Latin American culture, and how those features affect the surrounding youth.

One key feature of having children live with their parents in jail is to keep families together. A sense of family is very important in Latin American culture. Social activities and livelihoods revolve around the bonds that are kept with family. The maintenance of familial bonds in prison are said to have a good effect on the adults as well as the children. As mentioned previously having children in the prison has a softening effect on parents. Some families all go to jail together even if only one parent is actually incarcerated. This really shows the strong importance of family is in the culture.

Latin American gender roles and the obligations to fulfill marianismo and machisimo still exist in prison. Most research that has been done on Latin American prisons shows that there is a huge difference between life in female penitentiaries and life in penitentiaries for both genders. In penitentiaries with males there is far more violence and an increased amount of illicit activities. This all ties back to gender roles in society. Women are responsible for raising children and must still follow some of their roles of marianismo within prison; this is a large reason that children are sent to prison with their mothers in the first place. Women are still very submissive and for the women who have children in prison their main goal is to better the life of their child or children. Men must also uphold machisimo; though they are in prison they still show dominance over women and often it is the men who set the rules and govern the prisons. Though they live in prison, children are taught their gender roles by their surrounding environment.

As in most of Latin America, the drug-trade is ever-pervasive in Bolivian society, even within prisons, where most of the inmates are incarcerated due to drug-related charges. Drug-trading and repercussive violence still occurs. It is even said that the finest cocaine can be found within the prisons. This shows how persistent the drug trade is in the culture, society, and economy of Bolivia. However, violence is not as much of an issue in the prisons because the prisoners are allowed to govern themselves and access to highly dangerous weapons is limited (inmates still have them though). The drug-trade is essentially safer in prison than anywhere else in the city.

Modernization and globalization have had an impact on the lives of children in prison as well. As mentioned before, humanitarian organizations have become increasingly aware of children living in prisons in Bolivia. With globalization and the spread of information, increased humanitarian aid was sent to these prisons. Technology resources for the children such as computers were provided to some prisons to increase the academic opportunities to which the children had access. A humanitarian organization called Save the Children considers the prison system for children to be a “success story”. The organization has donated services and money dedicated to improving medical educational conditions for children living in prisons. However, Bolivia has a long way to go to make the conditions truly fit for children.

Identity is a concept that every person in the world questions, especially during childhood and adolescence. Living in prison often creates more identity issues for the children there. The children who attend school (outside of the prisons) are often ostracized for their living situation, and often they do not feel at home in the jails. On the other hand, many children who were born in jail do not know any other way of life. However, as previously stated the jails effectively model the world outside their walls, so prison life is very similar to life in the slums of La Paz, with possibly less violence. One aspect of Latin American identity that is overwhelmingly apparent in these prisons is the Latin American idea of happiness. It seems that these communities all follow the ideal that no matter what situation you are in, you can express happiness. Many of the men and women have yet to be convicted and are still being held in prison. The conditions are poor and unfavorable, yet from a tourist’s perspective the people in prison are happy.

Children are one of the most important groups of people to study for anthropologists. In all societies and cultures they are the future and they will sustain and pass on the cultural traditions that they were taught. This is why there are so many humanitarian organizations devoted to the plight of children. The issue of children in prisons in Bolivia is one that needs to be researched more and from an anthropological perspective. This research will help humanitarian organizations understand the reasons behind having children living in prisons and what they can do to help the children but not remove them from their culture. More and more, countries of Latin America are adapting the prison system of Bolivia. The main reason behind this is not only because it seems to be effective, but also because the prison system reflects Latin American culture and ideals.