The following activities are designed to stimulate a current events discussion. Generative in nature, these questions can be a launching point for additional assignments or research projects. Teachers are encouraged to adapt these activities to meet the contextual needs of their classroom.

In some cases, reading the article with students may be appropriate, coupled with reviewing the information sheet to further explore the concepts and contexts being discussed. From here, teachers can select from the questions provided below. The activity is structured to introduce students to the issues, then allow them to explore and apply their learnings. Students are encouraged to further reflect on the issues.

Core Skill Sets:
These icons identify the most relevant core skills students will develop using this resource. Learn more about the WE Learning Framework at www.WE.org/we-at-school/we-schools/learning-framework/.

NOTE TO EDUCATORS

CRADLES IN PRISON CELLS: MOTHERS BEHIND BARS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
• Separation through incarceration negatively affects the health of mothers and their infants.
  › Pregnancy and children are one of the most compelling motivators for incarcerated women. (Vanier Institute)
  › Researchers at Columbia University School of Nursing found that children who grew up in mother-child prisons showed a 60 percent secure attachment rate to their mothers, on par with children who grow up in stable middle-class families; this is a strong indicator that growing up in prison nurseries is preferable to growing up within the foster care system. (The Atlantic)
  › Research also shows that babies benefit from the structure of the prison system, especially the restriction on drugs and alcohol. (The Atlantic)
  › One study showed 33 percent of women who are separated from their children reoffend, going back to prison while only 10 percent of women who kept their babies returned to prison. (ABC News)
  › Conversely, mothers who return to prison without their babies often fall into depression resulting from profound grief; in a population with high rates of substance abuse, this guilt and hopelessness often leads back to drugs as a coping strategy. (Vanier Institute)
  › All six federal correctional facilities for women have mother-child units, but only one provincial facility has such a unit. (The Globe and Mail)
  › The Collaborating Centre for Prison Health and Education published guidelines calling for the implementation of mother-child units in all correctional facilities. (University of British Columbia)
  › The Office of the Correctional Investigator recommended increasing participation in mother-child units in federal prisons, particularly minimum to medium security prisons, where 70 percent of inmates are mothers to children. (Toronto Star)
  › A 2013 British Columbia Supreme Court ruling found it unconstitutional to keep babies and mothers apart even in instances of incarceration after a former prisoner challenged the removal of her newborn. (CBC)
  › Indigenous women now make up more than 35 percent of the female prison population. (CBC)

KEY TERMS
Bonding—The early establishment of a healthy relationship between mother and infant contributes to an infant’s physical and psychological development.

Incarceration—The state of being confined in prison; imprisonment.

Mother-child unit—A division within federal or provincial correctional facilities that allows incarcerated women to raise their children until age four full-time, then part-time until age seven. They have state-of-the-art nurseries and are under full supervision. All women living in the units must apply and are thoroughly screened to ensure safety.

Recidivism—The tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend.
THEMES AND COURSE CONNECTIONS

- Themes: Women’s rights, Indigenous Peoples of Canada, local issues, values and ethics
- Course Connections: Canadian and World Studies

MATERIALS

- Front board
- Paper and writing utensils
- Computer/tablet with Internet access

SPECIFIC EXPECTATIONS AND LEARNING GOALS

Students will:

- Develop an understanding of how the policies of correctional facilities affect the health and wellbeing of women and children
- Engage in a debate to explore opposing sides of an issue
- Examine issues from multiple perspectives

DISCUSS

1. What are the benefits of a correctional facility having a nursery? What could the potential risks be?
2. Why is keeping a newborn baby with their incarcerated mother considered better for the health of the baby?
3. Why would a woman have to go through a screening process before they could be considered eligible to participate?
4. What does Dr. Ruth Elwood Martin mean when she says “We judge these women. We say, you’re a bad woman, you must be a bad mother, so we punish the child as well”?
5. The article states “Our prison system is meant for rehabilitation, not punishing Canada’s most vulnerable families.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Justify your opinion.
6. Why are prisons being labelled “the new residential schools”?

DIVE DEEPER

Before students enter the room, place the words “strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” “somewhat disagree,” “strongly disagree” in the four corners of the classroom.

Pose the following statement to students: “All prisons and correction facilities should have a nursery or childcare facilities.” Ask students to move to the corner of the room that corresponds to their opinion of the statement. Choose one or two students from each corner to justify their opinion. Encourage students to move to a different corner if their opinions change as new ideas are presented.

As a class, read the Global Voices article “Cradles in prison cells: Mothers behind bars” and discuss the questions in the Discuss section. Ask students to write a reflective paragraph about whether the first activity or the article has confirmed or challenged their original opinion on this topic.

Tell students they will hold a debate on whether all Canadian correctional facilities should provide nurseries or childcare facilities for incarcerated mothers. Divide students into groups for and against the topic. Encourage students to use the links in the article as well as other research sources to prepare for the debate.

Remind students of the structure and etiquette of an effective debate to ensure that all sides of the issue can be explored.

To conclude, have students write a follow-up paragraph to describe their reflections on the debate, and how their opinion on the topic changed or didn’t change throughout the lesson.

Extension

Using a cause and effect graphic organizer, have students investigate why there has been a disproportionate increase in the incarceration rates of Indigenous women in the last decade. What factors have contributed to it? What are the potential effects on these women’s children, families and communities? Could mother-child units in correctional facilities have a positive impact on this issue?