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Prisons Shackle Women Inmates in Labor

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Shackling prisoners in labor continues to be a common practice, the *New York Times* reported back in March 2006. There are only two states that have laws forbidding the practice: California and Illinois. The California law was prompted after discovering this as a nationwide problem. “We found this was going on in some institutions in California and all over the United States,” said Sally J. Lieber, a Democratic assemblywoman from Mountain View. The law in Illinois, which was enacted in 2000, states that the legs and waist of a pregnant female prisoner cannot be shackled. According to Amnesty International, 23 state corrections departments, along with the federal Bureau of Prisons, have regulations that allow restraints during labor. Arkansas is now using flexible nylon restraints for pregnant prisoners in labor after the case of Shawanna Nelson. Nelson, a prisoner at the McPherson Unit in Newport, Ark., was in labor 12 hours with her legs shackled together when she arrived at Newport Hospital on Sept. 20, 2003. Her guard, according to court papers, refused to remove them, even at the requests of doctors and nurses. They were finally removed at the very end of the delivery. Nelson, who weighed 100 pounds at the time, gave birth to a nine and a half pound baby. Her lawsuit states that the experience has left her with lasting back pain and damage to her sciatic nerve. Many states claim the restraints are necessary in order to deter escapes and are well within their rights because prison rules are also enforced when prisoners are still in custody outside the institution. “This is a perfect example of rule-following at the expense of common sense. It’s almost as stupid as shackling someone in a coma,” William F. Schulz, the former executive director of Amnesty International U.S.A told the *Times*.