



Mothers in Prison

For the majority of mothers in prison coping with separation from their children is the most painful aspect of imprisonment. Families left with the responsibility of caring for the children also find themselves placed under enormous emotional and practical strain.

Most mothers in prison are the primary carers of their children. At least a third are lone parents¹, which makes their imprisonment particularly traumatic and disruptive to family life. Home Office research carried out in 2000 found that 66% of women in prison were mothers to children under 18, and these children were dependent on them.

Although information regarding dependants is not routinely recorded by the Prison Service, it is estimated that more than 17,700 children are separated from their mothers by imprisonment each year.

Only a small number of prisons (17 across England and Wales in 2008) hold women. This means that women are more likely than men to be imprisoned a long way from home. As of September 2006, the average distance of female prisoners from their home was 58 miles.

Despite falling crime rates since the mid-1990s, the number of women sent to prison has nearly doubled in the last decade: there were 2,629 women in prison in 1997 and 4,512 by November 2007. However, there has been no equivalent increase in the number of women committing offences.

¹ Social Exclusion Unit, *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners* 2002

The majority of offences for which women are sentenced to prison are non-violent and relatively minor, mostly theft and handling stolen goods. Over a third of women in prison in 2005 had no previous convictions². Most women serve short sentences of six months or less.

Many women in prison are vulnerable and have multiple social and personal needs. About 25% have been in local authority care. Many have experienced abuse and suffer from mental health problems. About half of the women in prison are on prescribed medications, such as anti-depressants. Many self-harm. Seventy-three female inmates killed themselves in prison between 1998 and 2007.

Over 20% of women in prison are foreign nationals. They face particularly acute problems with keeping in contact with their children and families.

Looking after children when a mother is in prison

In 2004 the Home Office found that only 25% of mothers in prison had their child or children looked after by their father, compared to 92% of fathers in prison whose children were looked after at home by their mother³.

Where the children were living with their mother only prior to imprisonment, women in prison have to rely on temporary carers to look after their children, usually grandparents, female relations and friends. Those children without family and friends able or willing to care for them are placed in local authority or foster care. The children of 12% of women prisoners are fostered, taken into care or adopted, compared to the children of 2% of male prisoners. It is estimated that just 5% of women prisoners' children remain in their own home once their mother has been sentenced.

Pregnant women or mothers with babies may decide to apply to keep their child with them in prison. Seven prisons currently have Mother and Baby Units, which are reserved for mothers who have children under the age of 18 months. A small minority of mothers are able to stay with their infants in these specialised units as spaces are limited (84 overall in 2005). However, these units tend to be under subscribed. Prisoners who want to apply for a place can get help and advice from Mother and Baby Liaison Officers, who work in every women's prison⁴.

² Home Office, *Offender Management Caseload Statistics 2005*

³ Home Office *Women's Offending Reduction Programme Action Plan 2004*

⁴ http://www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk/adviceandsupport/prison_life/femaleprisoners/

Visiting in prison

Only a minority of women decide to receive visits, and most are not visited by their children. This could be for a number of reasons. Many mothers in prison say that they simply couldn't bear to see their child whilst in jail and would find parting at the end of a visit too traumatic. Some do not want to put their children through the visiting and search procedures. For many families, the practical and financial implications of visiting are impossible to meet.

Fathers or relatives who are left to look after the children of an imprisoned mother may be reluctant to tell employers about their situation, and as most visits take place during work and school hours, and the prison is likely to be far from home, it can be very difficult for children to be able to visit their mother.

Some women have lost contact with their children or are reliant on Social Services arranging a contact visit. For the increasing number of foreign national women in prison, a visit from their children is simply an impossibility.

Children's experiences of their mother's imprisonment

A particular stigma is associated with a mother being in prison. A child experiencing the imprisonment of a mother can feel the separation as a bereavement; they may feel a sense of loss, shame, isolation, anger, and a fear that others in their life may also be taken away. If their relationship with their mother had been a difficult one, they may have to struggle with feelings of guilt and relief. Behavioural problems may include aggressive behaviour, particularly with figures in authority, bed-wetting and tantrums. Some children may become withdrawn.

Whether or not to tell a child that their mother is in prison is one of the most difficult decisions both mothers and their families have to make. Families have very real fears about telling children the truth, but concealing what has happened can be extremely damaging, and what a child imagines may be worse than the truth. Children from a surprisingly young age know that they are visiting a prison, but go along with the pretence that they are visiting a hospital, or workplace, because they want to protect their carers and parents and not cause further stress. If children know the truth, it does enable them to discuss their fears and emotions.

Action for Prisoners' Families produces a range of publications designed to make the process of telling children easier: please go to our web site for further details: www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk

Should children visit their mothers in prison?

Visiting a prison, particularly for the first time, can be a stressful and intimidating experience for adults and children. Although the decision whether or not to bring children to visit their mother is a personal matter, children generally find it reassuring to see their mothers. The Ormiston Children and Families Trust produce leaflets to help children and carers prepare for the visit, entitled 'My Mum's in Prison', 'My Dad's in Prison' and 'Visiting Prison with your Child'- see www.ormiston.org for more information.

If the prison has a visitors' centre, families can contact staff there for information and support, before bringing children on a visit. Some prisons run special visits for children; these may be longer than a normal visit, are designed to be child friendly and may include the opportunity to play and eat with the mother. For details of visitors' centres and information about children's visits please contact the Prisoners' Families Helpline on Freephone 0808 808 2003 - www.prisonersfamilieshelpline.org.uk

Is there an alternative to jailing mothers?

The public is overwhelmingly in favour of alternatives to prison for female offenders who are mothers: recent surveys also show that most people are in favour of providing more treatment centres for those with mental health and drug problems and would like greater use to be made of community sentences.

The Corston Review, commissioned by the Home Secretary in 2007, recommended that women should be held locally, in units where contact with their children, irrespective of their age, is made easier. The review also recommended that community sentences should be the norm for non-violent women offenders who pose no risk to the public. The Government has set up a project looking at whether existing women's prisons should be replaced with geographically dispersed, small custodial centres.

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