

Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment?

England and Wales

July 2021



"The shorter length you're in [prison], the less help you get...you lose your house, a lot of bad things can happen, and they haven't got any time to address anything."

PRT/User Voice Women's Council member

Women in prison

Women make up only **4%** of the prison population.

Women were sent to prison on **5,011** occasions in 2020 – either on remand or to serve a sentence.¹

There are **twice** as many women in prison today as there were in 1993.²

99 women have died in prison in England and Wales since 2010. Nearly two in five deaths were self-inflicted.³

600 pregnant women, on average, are held in prison each year.⁴

Rates of self-harm in women's prisons have risen by **20%** in the last decade.⁵

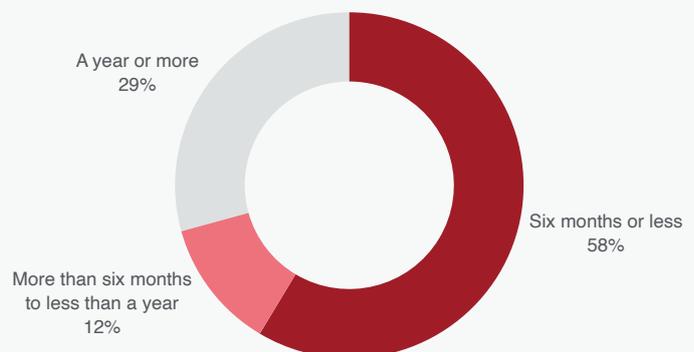
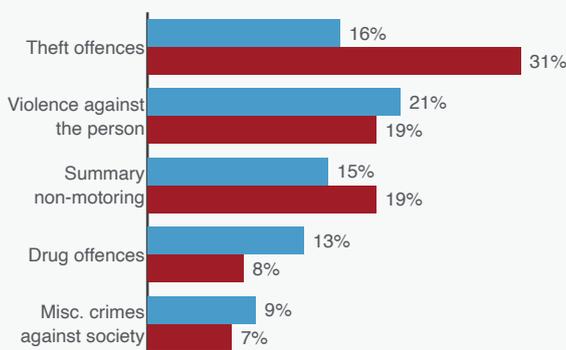
It is estimated that nearly **60%** of women who offend have experienced domestic abuse. The true figure is likely to be much higher.⁶

An estimated **17,000** children are affected by maternal imprisonment each year.⁷

Women tend to commit less serious offences than men, and so are more likely to be serving a short prison sentence

72% of prison receptions in 2020 were for non-violent crimes

70% of sentences started in 2020 were for less than 12 months, compared with 54% for men



Source: Ministry of Justice, Offender Management Statistics

Women are more likely than **men** to:

- Report having mental health issues, **71%** to **47%**.⁸
- Be identified as suffering from anxiety and depression in prison, **49%** to **23%**.⁹
- Report experiencing emotional, physical or sexual abuse as a child, **53%** to **27%**.¹⁰
- Commit their offence to support someone else's drug use, **48%** to **22%**.¹¹
- Be in prison for their first offence, **23%** to **14%**.¹²
- Report having a drug problem on entry to prison, **46%** to **27%**.¹³
- Report having a problem with alcohol on arrival to prison, **28%** to **17%**.¹⁴
- Report being subject to ACCT case management, **39%** to **19%**.¹⁵

The government's Female Offender Strategy: Three years on¹⁶

- The strategy promised a focus on early intervention, community-based solutions and the need for more effective and decent custody for women who do have to be in prison.
- The strategy recognises the evidence base for a distinct approach to women and the case for local area 'whole system approaches'.
- A key aim of the strategy is 'to reduce female prison places'.

Progress has been slow—only 31 of 65 commitments in the strategy have been fully achieved. Where commitments have been met through publication of guidance or instructions there is little or no information on whether they are having the desired impact. The strategy is not backed up by clear and comprehensive measures of success.¹⁷

"Commitments to reduce the women's prison population are undermined by plans to build 500 new prison places for women—going against the government's own evidence and published strategy which acknowledges most women in prison do not need to be there."

Women in Prison¹⁸

Abuse and trauma

Most women in prison have been victims of much more serious offences than those they are accused of committing.

- There are strong links between women's offending behaviour and their experience of domestic abuse, coercive control and sexual abuse.¹⁹ There is no effective defence for women driven to offend as a result of abuse.²⁰
- Research by the Disabilities Trust with 173 women at HMP Drake Hall found almost two-thirds (64%) had a history indicative of brain injury and for most this was caused by domestic violence.²¹ Women with learning disabilities are particularly vulnerable.²²
- Experience of abuse and trauma can lead to problematic substance use, either as a result of coercion or as a coping mechanism to deal with trauma. A woman's situation is often worsened by poverty, substance dependency or mental ill health.²³
- A lack of training for those involved at all stages of the criminal justice system, can mean opportunities are missed to identify serious mental health issues at early stages such as arrest, prosecution and sentencing.

For further information on this please read:

- ["There's a reason we're in trouble"—Domestic abuse as a driver to women's offending](#)
- [Out of the Shadows: Women with learning disabilities in contact with or on the edges of the criminal justice system](#)
- [Leading Change: the role of local authorities in supporting women with multiple needs](#)

Race and ethnicity

- Black and minority ethnic women are more than twice as likely to be arrested than white women, and more likely to receive a custodial sentence on conviction in the Crown Court.²⁴
- 17% of the women's prison population are from a minority ethnic group, compared to 11.9% of the women's population in England and Wales.²⁵
- Black women are 29% more likely to be remanded in prison at Crown Court than white women.²⁶
- Black, Asian and minority ethnic women face racial and religious discrimination from staff and other prisoners, and report feeling less safe in prison.²⁷

- Foreign national women represent 8% of the general population in England and Wales²⁸, but 9% of the female prison population.²⁹ Some foreign national women are known to have been coerced or trafficked into offending.³⁰
- Gypsy and Traveller women account for approximately 6% of the prison population but an estimated 0.7–1% of the general population. However, the Traveller Movement warns that the true number is likely to be higher and does not include Roma women.³¹ Few prisons provide adequate support according to inspectors.³²

For further information on this please read:

- [Still no way out: Foreign national women and trafficked women in the criminal justice system](#)
- [Counted Out: Black, Asian and minority ethnic women in the criminal justice system](#)

Mothers in prison

- On 28 October 2019 there were 47 pregnant women in prison.³³
- Women in prison are far more likely than men to be primary carers of children. Nearly three in five women in prison (58%) report that they have children, compared with around half of men (48%).³⁴ Whether or not women have dependent children is still not recorded or routinely asked by criminal justice agencies.
- The UN Bangkok Rules specify that non-custodial sentences are preferable for pregnant women and those with dependent children, but the law and sentencing guidance are inconsistently applied.³⁵
- Only 9% of children are cared for by their father when their mother goes to prison.³⁶ Yet nearly three-quarters of children live with their mother when their father is imprisoned.³⁷
- Research indicates that children who have experienced maternal imprisonment are at greater risk of unemployment, drug use, alcoholism and coming into contact themselves with the criminal justice system in later life.³⁸
- The impact on mothers of being imprisoned is significant, increasing the levels of distress and exacerbating any existing ill-health.³⁹
- The 2019 Farmer review for women made helpful recommendations to improve outcomes for children whose mothers are in contact with the criminal justice system.⁴⁰ Progress has been too slow with only 17 of the 33 recommendations complete.⁴¹

For further information on this please read:

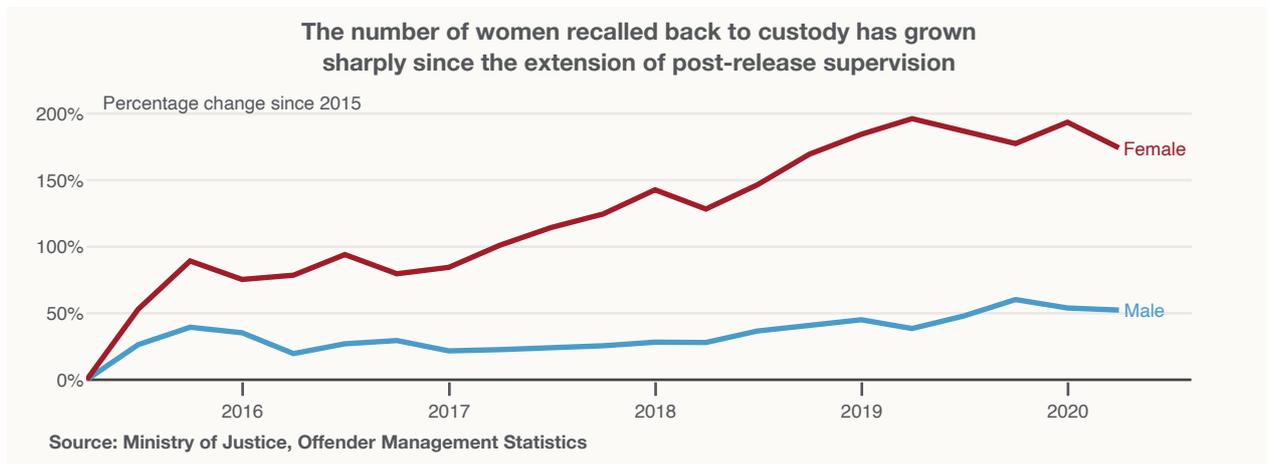
- [What about me? The impact on children when mothers are involved in the criminal justice system](#)

Women on remand

- 18% of women in prison are currently being held on remand, compared to 16% of men.⁴²
- In 2019, a third (33%) of women remanded into prison by the magistrates' courts and 40% remanded by the Crown Court did not go on to receive a custodial sentence.⁴³
- Almost nine in 10 women on remand are low to medium risk of serious harm.⁴⁴
- 17% of self-harm incidents by women in prison in 2020 were committed by those held on remand.⁴⁵
- Women continue to be remanded 'for their own protection' under the Bail Act 1976—this is wholly inappropriate. Prison is a damaging and unsafe environment for people in crisis and should never be considered a place of safety.⁴⁶

Women recalled to prison

- Women who have been recalled back to custody currently account for more than one in 10 women in prison (12%).⁴⁷
- The Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014 introduced a one-year mandatory post-custody supervision period for all those sentenced to less than 12 months in prison. As women mostly receive short prison sentences, they have been disproportionately affected by this change.
- In 2020 there were 1,584 recalls of women to custody. Women serving a sentence less than 12 months accounted for almost half (47%) of recalls.⁴⁸



“No support. No housing. Released homeless. I had nowhere else to go. I had to go back to my ex’s. That was against my licence conditions. They recalled me because of that.”

Imogen, on feeling ‘set up to fail’ when recalled to prison after release⁴⁹

For further information on this please read:

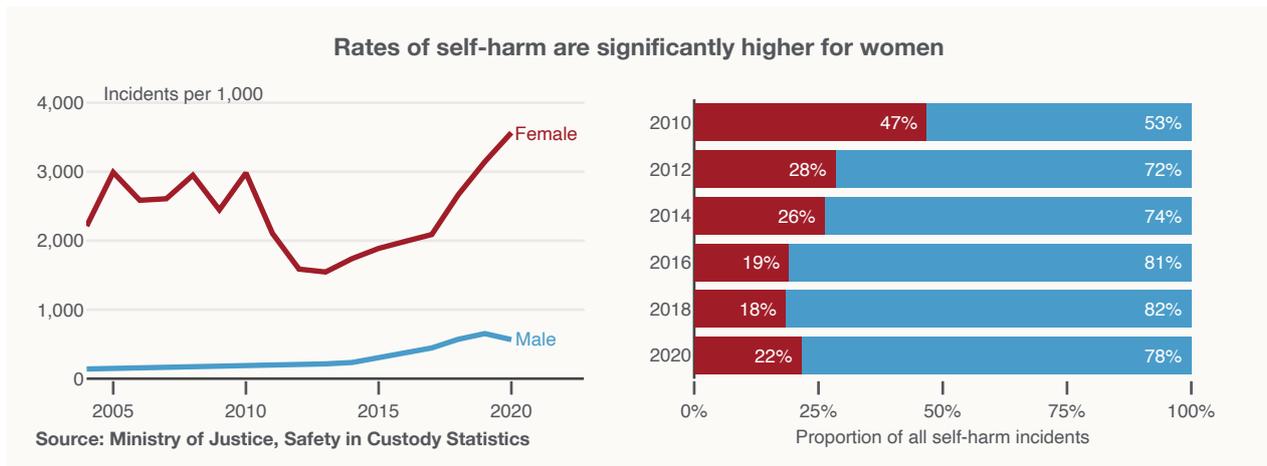
- [Broken Trust: The rising numbers of women recalled to prison](#)

Women serving long sentences

- Whilst the vast majority of women serve short prison sentences, long sentences are an increasing proportion of the prison population.
- As of 31 March 2021 there were 362 women serving life or other indeterminate sentences. A further 172 women are serving a determinate sentence of 10 years or more.⁵⁰
- Research shows at least 109 women have been given long or life sentences under joint enterprise laws despite often being marginal to the violent event, not being at the scene or, in the majority of cases, never having engaged in any physical violence.⁵¹
- The majority of purposeful activity provided for women in prison caters to the short sentenced population, leaving far more limited provision for women serving long sentences.⁵²
- Research on the impact of long-term imprisonment found that women reported an acutely more painful experience than men. This is linked to separation from their children and family, the loss of relationships, experiences of abuse and trauma in pre-prison life, the strain on their mental health, and the lack of control, privacy and trust inside prison.⁵³

Impact of imprisonment on women

- The average distance a woman is held from her home is 63 miles, but many are considerably further away.⁵⁴
- Women are imprisoned further from home than men and receive fewer visits, limiting their capacity to maintain relationships and family contact. Prisoners who receive visits from family members are 31% less likely to reoffend than those who do not.⁵⁵
- Evidence shows short prison sentences are less effective in reducing reoffending than community sentences. Between April and June 2016, 51.6% of women released from custody reoffended within a year, compared to 70.7% of women following a sentence of less than 12 months.⁵⁶
- Women are much more likely than men to self-harm whilst in prison. In 2020, women made up 22% of all self-harm incidents despite making up only 4% of the prison population.⁵⁷



Accommodation and employment for women on release

- More than a third of women (36%) left prison in the year to March 2021 without settled accommodation—more than one in six were homeless and nearly one in 20 were sleeping rough on release.⁵⁸
- Another survey found that fewer than half (48%) of women released from prison had housing to go to; 45% has no address to go to and 14% only had a temporary address.⁵⁹
- Lack of accommodation increases the risk of reoffending and jeopardises women’s ability to engage in employment, training and support services and to care for their children.⁶⁰
- The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 introduced a ‘duty to refer’ where prisons are required to notify local authorities of anyone at risk of homelessness on release in good time for the local authority to meet its housing duties, but practice has been inconsistent.⁶¹
- Fewer than 1 in 20 women (4%) were in employment six weeks after release from prison, compared with 1 in 10 men (10%).⁶²
- Half of women who have been involved in the criminal justice system, including conviction, caution or prison sentence, are claiming out-of-work benefits two years later, compared to just over a third (35%) of men.⁶³

“I always had short sentences; by the time I was able to see someone I was already out. When I did get out... there was no resettlement there, there was no housing, I was just back in the cycle again.”

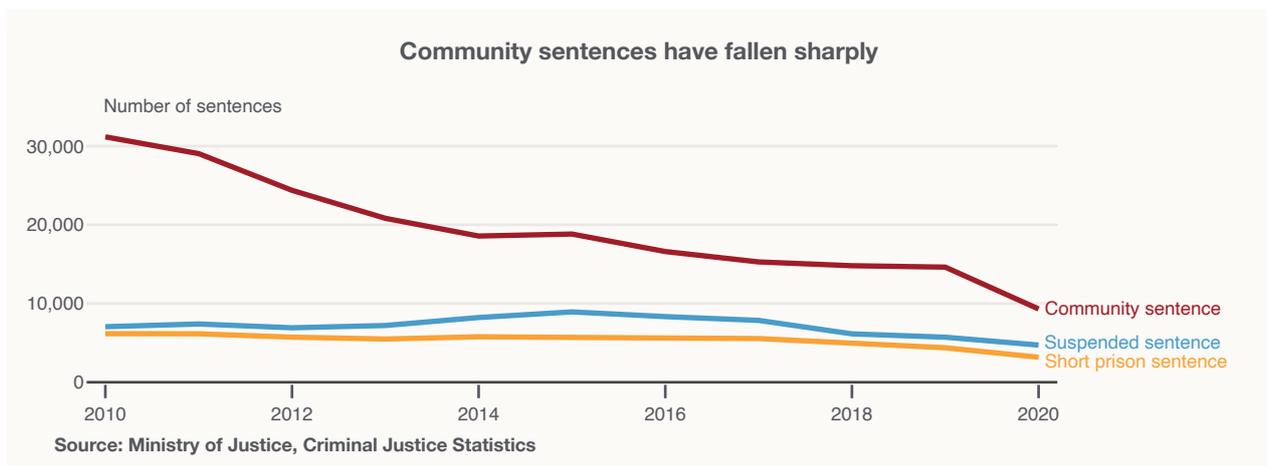
Women’s Council Member⁶⁴

For further information on this please read:

- [Home Truths: Housing for women in the criminal justice system](#)
- [Safe homes for women leaving prison](#)
- [Working it out: Employment for women offenders](#)

Community solutions

- Across England and Wales, a 10% reduction in women’s imprisonment could save £9.5–14.7million.⁶⁵
- A place at a women’s centre ranges from £1,223 to £4,125 per woman depending on needs, whilst a place in prison costs £52,121.⁶⁶
- Women’s community centres can provide effective support programmes for those at risk of offending and play a vital role in reducing women’s reoffending. They can provide safe, non-stigmatising settings for women to address issues that can drive their offending such as problematic substance use or accessing support with abusive relationships.⁶⁷
- Out of court disposals (OOCs) can offer a simple, swift and proportionate response to women’s minor offending. The proportion of women dealt with by OOCs is small and decreasing. 52,336 cautions were given to women in 2008 and only 13,862 in 2018, a 74% decrease over 10 years.⁶⁸
- The use of community sentences has dropped by two-thirds in a decade.⁶⁹ The drop in usage is disappointing given that community sentences allow women to maintain community ties, employment and accommodation, whilst reducing the disruption to their families and children.
- The use of suspended sentences for women has fluctuated in the last decade, but only account for 3% of all sentences.⁷⁰
- The government’s National Concordat was published early 2021. More than two years after it was promised, with no funding attached to implementation of cross departmental working and the document commits only to a ‘one-year on’ review.⁷¹



Covid-19 pandemic

- In response to the pandemic the prison service introduced an ‘exceptional regime’. This meant 23 hours or more behind the door every day, no social visits and other meaningful activity suspended.
- An End of Custody Temporary Release (ECTR) scheme was introduced but was “largely ineffective” according to inspectors.⁷² By June 2020, of 236 women who had asked to be considered for ECTR only 6 had been released. 159 women had been deemed ineligible.⁷³
- Only 7 pregnant women and 16 women in Mother and Baby Units were released under the Special Purpose Licence scheme.⁷⁴
- The suspension of childcare resettlement licence (CRL) in March 2020, which allows a sole carer who is currently in prison to spend time with their child in the community, has had a disproportionate impact on women. Between October and December 2019, 451 CRLs were issued to women, compared with just 34 for men.⁷⁵
- Rates of self-harm amongst women in prison are at the highest level since records began in 2004.⁷⁶

For further information on this please read:

- CAPPTIVE: women’s experiences of prison during the Covid-19 lockdown regime

Endnotes

- 1 Table A2.1i, Ministry of Justice (2021) Offender management statistics quarterly, Prison receptions 2020, London: MoJ
- 2 Ministry of Justice (2020) Offender management statistics: Prison Population 2020, London: MoJ; Ministry of Justice (2021) Population and capacity briefing for 25 June 2021, London: MoJ
- 3 Ministry of Justice (2021) 'Deaths in prison custody 1978 to 2020' Safety in Custody quarterly: update to December 2020, London: MoJ
- 4 Birth Companions (2016) Birth Charter for women in prisons in England and Wales, London: Birth Companions
- 5 Ministry of Justice (2021) 'Self-harm in prison custody 2004 to 2020' Safety in Custody quarterly: update to December 2020, London: MoJ
- 6 Ministry of Justice (2018) Female Offender Strategy, London: MoJ
- 7 Kincaid, S., Roberts, M. & Kane, E. (2019) Children of Prisoners: Fixing a broken system, Crest Advisory
- 8 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2020) Annual Report 2019-20, London: The Stationery Office
- 9 Ministry of Justice (2012) Estimating the prevalence of disability amongst prisoners, London: MoJ
- 10 Williams, K., Papadopoulou, V. & Booth, N. (2012) Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds, London: MoJ
- 11 Light, M. et al (2013) Gender differences in substance misuse and mental health amongst prisoners, London: MoJ
- 12 Table A1.20, Ministry of Justice (2019) Offender management statistics quarterly: Prison Population 2019, London: MoJ
- 13 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2020) Annual Report 2019-20, London: The Stationery Office
- 14 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2020) Annual Report 2019-20, London: The Stationery Office
- 15 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2020) Annual Report 2019-20, London: The Stationery Office
For information ACCT refers to assessment care in custody and teamwork
- 16 Ministry of Justice (2018) Female Offender Strategy, London: MoJ
- 17 See <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/PressPolicy/News/vw/1/ItemID/1011>
- 18 Women in Prison (2021) PRESS RELEASE: Women in Prison responds to MoJ funding announcement
- 19 Prison Reform Trust (2017) "There's a reason we're in trouble" Domestic abuse as a driver to women's offending, London: PRT
- 20 See the Centre for Women's Justice: DA Bill – proposed changes in the law for victims/survivors driven to offend
- 21 The Disabilities Trust (2019) Making the link: Female offending and brain injury, London: The Disabilities Trust
- 22 Prison Reform Trust (2019) Out of the Shadows: Women with learning disabilities in contact with or on the edges of the criminal justice system, London: PRT
- 23 Loveless, J. (2010) 'Domestic Violence, Coercion and Duress', *Criminal Law Review*, pp.1–3
- 24 Ministry of Justice (2016) Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic disproportionality in the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales, London: MoJ
- 25 Table DC2101EW, Office for National Statistics (2012) 2011 Census. London: ONS; Table 1.4, Ministry of Justice (2021) Prison Population: 31 March 2021, Offender Management Statistics quarterly: October to December 2020
- 26 Table 5.3, Ministry of Justice (2016) Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic disproportionately in the Criminal justice system in England and Wales, London: MoJ
- 27 Prison Reform Trust (2017) Counted Out: Black, Asian and minority ethnic women in the criminal justice system, London: PRT
- 28 NOMIS (2011) LC2102EW - National Identity by sex by age
- 29 Table 1.7, Ministry of Justice (2021) Offender Management Statistics quarterly: October to December 2020, London: MoJ

- 30 Hales, L. & Gelsthorpe, L. (2012) *The criminalisation of migrant women*, Cambridge: Institute of Criminology
- 31 The Traveller Movement (2021) [Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Women in Prison](#), London: The Traveller Movement
- 32 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2020) [Annual Report 2019–20](#), London: The Stationery Office
- 33 Ministry of Justice (2020) [Review of operational police on pregnancy, Mother and Baby Units and maternal separation](#), London: MoJ
- 34 Niven, S. & Stewart, D. (2005) *Resettlement outcomes on release from prison*, Home Office Findings 248, London: Home Office
Referenced in Williams, K., Papadopoulou, V. & Booth, N. (2012) *Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds*, London: MoJ
- 35 Minson, S. (2014) *Mitigating Motherhood: A study of the impact of motherhood on sentencing decisions in England and Wales*, London: Howard League for Penal Reform
- 36 Corston, J. (2007) *The Corston Report: A Report by Baroness Jean Corston of a Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System*, London: Home Office
- 37 Referenced in: Williams, K., Papadopoulou, V. & Booth, N. (2012) *Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds*, London: MoJ
- 38 Murray, J. & Farrington, D. (2008) 'The Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children', *Crime and Justice*, 37(1), pp.133-206
- 39 Arditti, J. A., Grzywacz, J. G. & Gallimore, S. W. (2013) 'A Demedicalized View of Maternal Distress: Conceptualization and Instrument Development', *Psychological Services*, 10(4)
- 40 Ministry of Justice (2019) [The importance of strengthening female offenders' family and other relationships to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime](#), London: MoJ
- 41 [House of Lords debate: Female Offender Strategy, 21 June 2021](#)
- 42 Table 1.1, Ministry of Justice (2021) *Prison Population: 31 March 2020, Offender Management statistics quarterly: October to December 2020*, London: MoJ
- 43 Ministry of Justice (2020) *Criminal justice system statistics quarterly: December 2019*, London: MoJ
- 44 Ministry of Justice (2018) [Female Offender Strategy](#), London: MoJ
- 45 Table 2.6, Ministry of Justice (2021) *Safety in Custody Statistics: Self-harm in prison custody 2004–2020*, London: MoJ
- 46 All Party Parliamentary Group on Women in the Penal System (2020) [Prison for their own protection: The case for repeal](#), London: Howard League for Penal Reform
- 47 Table 1.1, Ministry of Justice (2021) *Offender Management Statistics quarterly: October to December 2020*, London: MoJ
- 48 Table 5.2, Ministry of Justice (2021) *Offender Management Statistics quarterly: October to December 2018*, London: MoJ
- 49 Prison Reform Trust (2018) [Broken Trust: The rising numbers of women recalled to prison](#), London: PRT
- 50 Table 1.9a and 1.1, Ministry of Justice (2021) *Offender management statistics quarterly: October to December 2020*, London: MoJ
- 51 Clarke, B. & Chadwick, K. (2020) [Stories of Injustice: The criminalisation of women convicted under joint enterprise laws](#), Manchester Metropolitan University
- 52 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2020) [Annual Report 2019–20](#), London: The Stationery Office
- 53 Crewe, B. Hulley, S. & Wright, S. (2017) 'The Gendered Pains of Life Imprisonment', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 57(6), pp1359–1378
- 54 Lord Farmer (2019) [The importance of strengthening female offenders' family and other relationships to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime](#), London: MoJ
- 55 Ministry of Justice (2014) *Prisoners' experience of prison and outcomes on release: Waves 2 and 3 of SPCR*, London: Ministry of Justice
- 56 Ministry of Justice (2018) [Supporting data tables: Female Offender Strategy](#), London: MoJ
- 57 Ministry of Justice (2021) *Safety in Custody Statistics: Self-harm annual tables, 2004–2020*. London: MoJ

- 58 Table 11, Ministry of Justice (2020) Community performance quarterly MI, update to March 2020, London: MoJ
- 59 Independent Monitoring Board (2020) Resettlement: A survey by Independent Monitoring Boards of women being released from prison, London: IMB
- 60 Prison Reform Trust (2018) Home Truths: housing for women in the criminal justice system, London: PRT
- 61 Safe Homes Initiative (2020) Safe homes for women leaving prison, London: SMitF, LPM & PRT
- 62 Table 11, Ministry of Justice (2020) Community Performance Quarterly, update to March 2020, Employment Circumstance table (April 2018 to March 2020), London: MoJ
- 63 Ministry of Justice (2018) Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2017, London: MoJ
- 64 Prison Reform Trust (2020) Women's Voices – London: Report of the User Voice London Women's Council, London: Prison Reform Trust
- 65 The Centre for Social justice (2018) A women-centred approach: Freeing vulnerable women from the revolving door of crime, London: CSJ
- 66 Women's Budget Group (2020) The Case for Sustainable Funding for Women's Centres, London: WBG
- 67 Radcliffe, P. & Hunter, G. (2013) The Development and Impact of Community Services for Women Offenders: An Evaluation, London: ICPR
- 68 Ministry of Justice (2019) Out of Court Disposals data tool, Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: December 2018, London: MoJ.
Note: more recent data on cautions has been delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 69 Ministry of Justice (2021) Sentencing data tool, Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: December 2020, London: MoJ
- 70 Ministry of Justice (2021) Sentencing data tool, Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: December 2020, London: MoJ
- 71 Ministry of Justice (2020) The Concordat on Women in or at risk of contact with the Criminal Justice System, London: MoJ
- 72 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2020) Report on short scrutiny visits to prisons holding women, London: HMIP
- 73 House of Commons written question 62432, 2 June 2020
- 74 Joint Committee on Human Rights (2020) The Government's response to COVID-19: human rights implications, London: HM Stationery Office
- 75 Table 3.5, Ministry of Justice (2021) Offender management statistics quarterly: October to December 2020, London: MoJ
- 76 Table 2.1, Ministry of Justice (2021) Safety in custody quarterly update to December 2020, London: Ministry of Justice

The Prison Reform Trust works to create a just, humane and effective penal system and has long called for a reduction in women's imprisonment.

To find more information visit www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/women

womensprogramme@prisonreformtrust.org.uk

Cover image by AndyAitchison.uk

Prison Reform Trust, London EC1V 0JR 020 7251 5070 prt@prisonreformtrust.org.uk
Registered in England, Charity No 1035525. Company Limited by Guarantee No 2906362