

Women in prison

August 2012

On 17 August 2012 the number of women in prison in England and Wales stood at 4,132. Between 2000 and 2010 the women's prison population increased by 27%. In 1995 the mid-year female prison population was 1,979. In 2000 it stood at 3,355 and in 2010 it was 4,267.¹

A total of 10,181 women were received into prison in 2011, that is 153 fewer than 2010.

Following the re-role of HMP Morton Hall to an Immigration Removal Centre there are now 13 women's prisons in England and none in Wales. Women represent 5% of the overall prison population.²

Most women serve very short sentences. In 2011 58% were sentenced to custody for six months or less.³

26% of women in prison had no previous convictions – more than double the figure for men (12%).⁵

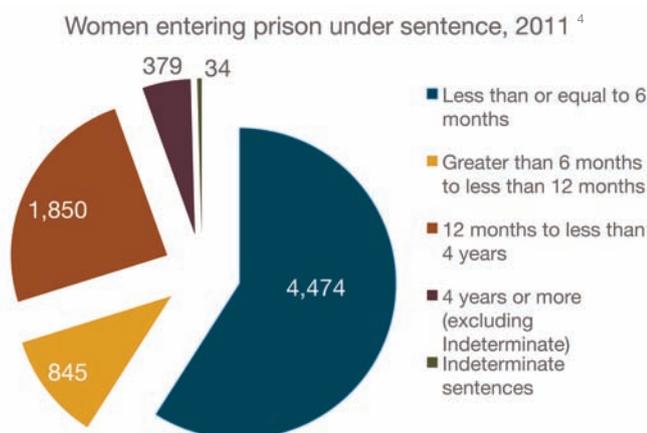
4,260 women entered prison on remand awaiting trial in 2011 - a decrease of 7% from the previous year. This comes after an increase of 22% over the period between 2004 and 2008.⁶ These women spend an average of four to six weeks in prison and nearly 60% do not go on to receive a custodial sentence.⁷ On 30 June 2012 there were 633 women on remand, 15% of the female prison population.⁸

In 2009, 1,052 women entered prison for breaching a court order. This represents 13% of all women entering prison under an immediate custodial sentence.⁹

51% of women leaving prison are reconvicted within one year - for those serving sentences of less than 12 months this increases to 62%. For those women who have served more than 10 previous custodial sentences the reoffending rate rises to 88%.¹⁰

At the end of June 2012 there were 614 foreign national women in prison, 15% of the female population.¹¹

In the 12 months to June 2012, 81% of women entering custody under sentence had committed a non-violent offence, compared with 71% of men.¹²



1. Ministry of Justice (2012) Weekly Prison Population Bulletin - 17 August 2012, London: Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Justice (2012) Offender Management Statistics Quarterly Bulletin October to December 2011, London: Ministry of Justice

2. Table 2.1c Ministry of Justice (2012) Offender Management Statistics Quarterly Bulletin October to December 2011, London: Ministry of Justice

3. Ibid. 4. Ibid. 5. Table A1.28, Ministry of Justice (2012) Offender Management Caseload Statistics 2011, London: Ministry of Justice

6. Table 2.2a, Ibid, and Ministry of Justice (2010) Offender Management Caseload Statistics 2009, London: Ministry of Justice

7. Department of Health (2009) The Bradley Report, Lord Bradley's report on people with mental health problems or learning disabilities in the criminal justice system, London: Department of Health 8. Table 1.1c Ministry of Justice (2012) Offender Management Statistics Quarterly Bulletin, January to March 2012, Ministry of Justice

9. Ministry of Justice (2010) Offender Management Caseload Statistics 2009, London: The Stationery Office

10. Table A5(F) and A9(F), Ministry of Justice (2011) Adult re-convictions: results from the 2009 cohort, London: Ministry of Justice

11. Table 1.5, Ministry of Justice (2012) Offender Management Statistics Quarterly Bulletin, January to March 2012, Ministry of Justice 12. Table 2.2b, Ibid.

Theft and handling was the most common offence that women were serving a custodial sentence for during the same period. They accounted for 35% of all women serving custodial sentences.¹³

28% of women offenders' crimes were financially motivated, compared to 20% of men.¹⁴

Breach of license or of a community penalty comprised 60% of offences within the 'other offences' category received for women, and 42% for men.¹⁵

Most of the rise in the female prison population can be explained by a significant increase in the severity of sentences. In 1996, 10% of women convicted of an indictable offence were sent to prison, in 2010 the number was 14%.¹⁶

The government's strategy for diverting women away from crime made a commitment to reduce the women's prison estate by 300 places by March 2011 and 400 places by March 2012. The re-role of HMP Morton Hall to an Immigration Removal Centre has reduced the operational capacity of the female estate by 392 places.¹⁷

The average distance adult women in prison were held from their home or committal court address is 55 miles. In 2009, around 753 women were held over 100 miles away.¹⁸

A University of Oxford report on the health of 500 women prisoners, showed that: 'women in custody are five times more likely to have a mental health concern than women in the general population, with 78% exhibiting some level of psychological disturbance when measured on reception to prison, compared with a figure of 15% for the general adult female population'. Researchers also found that women coming into prison had very poor physical, psychological and social health, worse than that of women in social

class V, the group within the general population who have the poorest health.¹⁹

Of all the women who are sent to prison, 37% say they have attempted suicide at some time in their life.²⁰

There were 95 self-inflicted deaths of women prisoners between 1990 and 2011.²¹

In 2010, there were a total of 26,983 incidents of self-harm in prisons, with 6,639 prisoners recorded as having injured themselves. Women accounted for 47% of all incidents of self-harm despite representing just 5% of the total prison population.²²

Nearly 80% of IPP sentences for women surveyed by the Chief Inspectors of Prisons and Probation were for offences of arson, which is often an indicator of serious mental illness or self-harm.²³

As of March 2011 there were 150 women serving IPP sentences, just over 2% of the total IPP population.²⁴

One in four women in prison has spent time in local authority care as a child. Nearly 40% of women in prison left school before the age of 16 years, almost one in 10 were aged 13 or younger.²⁵

Over half the women in prison say they have suffered domestic violence and one in three has experienced sexual abuse.²⁶

Women prisoners are subject to higher rates of disciplinary proceedings than men. In 2009 there were 150 proven breaches against discipline per 100 women in prison compared to 124 per 100 men. According to the Ministry of Justice, 'women may be less able (due for example to mental health issues) to conform to prison rules.'²⁷

The proportion of women prisoners aged 40 and over has risen from 18% in 2002 to 28% in 2009.²⁸

13. Ibid. 14. Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Task Force (2009) Short Study on Women Offenders, London: Cabinet Office. Note: evidence from analysis of Offender Assessment System data 15. Ministry of Justice (2009) Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System, London: Ministry of Justice
16. Table A5.19, Ministry of Justice (2011) Criminal Justice Statistics Quarterly Update to December 2010, London: Ministry of Justice and Table 1.8, Ministry of Justice (2007) Sentencing Statistics 2006, London: Ministry of Justice
17. Ministry of Justice (2009) A Report on the Government's Strategy for Diverting Women Away from Crime, London: MoJ
18. Hansard HC, 7 January 2010, c548V and Hansard HC, 25 November 2009, c238W
19. Plugge, E. et al. (2006) The Health of Women in Prison, Oxford: Department of Public Health, University of Oxford. 20. Corston, J. (2007) The Corston Report, London: Home Office 21. <http://www.inquest.org.uk/>
22. Table 1, Ministry of Justice (2011) Safety in Custody 2010 England and Wales, London: Ministry of Justice
23. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, HM Chief Inspector of Probation (2008) The indeterminate sentence for public protection: A thematic review, London: HMIP
24. Table A1.15, Ministry of Justice (2011) Offender Management Caseload Statistics 2010, London: Ministry of Justice
25. Social Exclusion Unit (2002) Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners, London: Social Exclusion Unit
26. Ibid. 27. Ministry of Justice (2010) Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System, London: Ministry of Justice
28. Ministry of Justice (2010) Offender Management Caseload Statistics 2009, London: Ministry of Justice

Around one-third of women prisoners lose their homes, and often their possessions, whilst in prison.²⁹

It is estimated that more than 17,240 children were separated from their mother in 2010 by imprisonment.³⁰

Only 9% of children whose mothers are in prison are cared for by their fathers in their mothers' absence. Just 5% of children remain in their own homes while their mother is in prison.³¹

Women with babies in prison may be unable to claim benefits for their children.³²

At least a fifth of mothers are lone parents before imprisonment compared to around 9% of the general population.³³ Black and ethnic minority women are particularly likely to be single mothers, as more than half of black African and black Caribbean families in the UK are headed by a lone parent, compared with less than a quarter of white families and just over a tenth of Asian families.³⁴

Only half of the women who had lived, or were in contact with, their children prior to imprisonment had received a visit since going to prison.³⁵

One Home Office study showed that for 85% of mothers, prison was the first time they had been separated from their children for any significant length of period. It also showed that 65% of mothers in prison were receiving their first custodial sentence.³⁶

An ICM public opinion poll, commissioned by SmartJustice in March 2007, found that, of 1,006 respondents, 73% thought that mothers of young children should not be sent to prison for non-violent crime.³⁷

Imprisoning mothers for non-violent offences has a damaging impact on children and carries a cost to the state of more than £17 million over a ten-year period.³⁸

29. Social Exclusion Unit (2002) Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners, London: Social Exclusion Unit

30. Wilks-Wiffen, S. (2011) Voice of a Child, London: Howard League for Penal Reform

31. The government's response to the report by Baroness Corston of a Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System, December 2007

32. Citizens Advice (2007) Locked Out: CAB evidence on prisoners and ex-offenders, London, Citizens Advice

33. Social Exclusion Unit (2002) Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners, London: Social Exclusion Unit

34. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2009) Race relations in prisons: responding to adult women from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, London: The Stationery Office

35. Social Exclusion Unit (2002) Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners, London: Social Exclusion Unit

36. Home Office Research Study 162 (1997), Imprisoned Women and Mothers, Home Office: London

37. SmartJustice (2007) Public say: stop locking up so many women, London: Prison Reform Trust

38. new economic foundation (2008) Unlocking value: How we all benefit from investing in alternatives to prison for women offenders, London: new economic foundation

39. Ibid.

40. Hansard HC, 26 January 2009, c202VV.

41. Hansard HC, 10 May 2011, c1072VV.

42. Hansard HC, 29 April 2009: c1332W

43. Social Exclusion Unit (2002) Reducing reoffending by ex-prisoners, London: Social Exclusion Unit

44. Table A4.23, Ministry of Justice (2011) Offender Management Caseload Statistics 2010, London: Ministry of Justice

45. Corston, J. (2007) The Corston Report, London: Home Office

The main social cost incurred by the children of imprisoned mothers – and by the state in relation to these children – results from the increased likelihood of their becoming 'NEET' (Not in Education, Employment or Training).³⁹

Between April 2005 and December 2008, 382 children were born to women prisoners. This is a rate of almost two births a week in England and Wales.⁴⁰ However, information on the number of women who have given birth in prison is now no longer collected centrally.⁴¹

Between April 2006 and March 2009 seven girls aged 16 and 17 years old in secure training centres and one in a secure children's home gave birth.⁴²

Women prisoners are often inadequately prepared for release. Only 24% of women with a prior skill had the chance to put their skills into practice through prison work. Just 11% of women received help with housing matters whilst in prison.⁴³

In 2010 a higher proportion of women than men completed their community sentence successfully or had their sentences terminated for good progress on both community orders (69%) and suspended sentence orders (74%).⁴⁴

In March 2007, the Corston review of vulnerable women in the criminal justice system, commissioned by the Home Secretary following the deaths of six women at Styal prison, stated: 'Community solutions for non-violent women offenders should be the norm', and; 'There must be a strong consistent message right from the top of government, with full reasons given, in support of its stated policy that prison is not the right place for women offenders who pose no risk to the public.'⁴⁵

An ICM public opinion poll commissioned by SmartJustice in March 2007 found that, of 1,006 respondents, 86% supported the development of local centres for women to address the causes of their offending. Over two thirds (67%) said that prison was not likely to reduce offending.⁴⁶

The new economics foundation has found that for every pound invested in support-focused alternatives to prison, £14 worth of social value is generated to women and their children, victims and society generally over 10 years.⁴⁷

If alternatives to prison were to achieve an additional reduction of just 6% in reoffending, the state would recoup the investment required to achieve this in just one year.⁴⁸ The long-run value of these benefits is in excess of £100 million over a ten-year period.⁴⁹

Since June 2008 the National Federation of Women's Institutes have been working on their Care not Custody campaign with the Prison Reform Trust to call a halt to the unnecessary imprisonment of people who are mentally ill and to support diversion into treatment and care. This is a generic campaign covering men and young offenders but prioritising women in custody. The WI has opened a unique branch in HMP Bronzefield.⁵⁰

On 21 December 2010 the UN General Assembly took an important step towards meeting the needs and characteristics of women in the criminal justice system. It approved the UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (known as the 'Bangkok Rules').⁵¹

The new Bangkok Rules include an annex that addresses such issues as gender-sensitive prisoner classification and security risk assessments, gender-specific healthcare services, treatment of children living with their mothers in prison, the specific safety concerns of women prisoners, and the development of pre- and post-release programmes that take into

account the stigmatisation and discrimination that women face once released from prison.⁵²

In July 2011 the final report of the Women's Justice Taskforce recommended a cross-government strategy to be developed to developed to divert women from crime and reduce the women's prison population, which includes measures of success and a clear monitoring framework. Responsibility for implementation to lie with a designated minister and accountability for the strategy to be built into relevant roles within government departments and local authorities.⁵³

On 16 October 2011 the National Council of Women (NCW) unanimously adopted a resolution to reduce women's imprisonment. They are calling on the government to prioritise the sustained and determined implementation of measures to divert women from crime, reduce offending and reoffending by women, and stop sending so many women to prison.⁵⁴

In December 2011 the Soroptimist International UK Programme Action Committee took the decision to mount a campaign in partnership with the Prison Reform Trust to reduce women's imprisonment. The Soroptimists will work with local authorities, police, probation, magistrates and crown courts, and voluntary groups to gather information on effective options for women in trouble with the law and press for reform.⁵⁵

The Prison Reform Trust, supported by the Pilgrim Trust, has developed a three year strategy to work with national and local government and allied agencies to reduce women's imprisonment.⁵⁶

46. SmartJustice (2007) Public say: stop locking up so many women, London: Prison Reform Trust

47. new economic foundation (2008) Unlocking value: How we all benefit from investing in alternatives to prison for women offenders, London: new economics foundation

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. <http://www.thewi.org.uk/standard.aspx?id=14999>

51. Penal Reform International (2011) Briefing on the UN rules for the treatment of women prisoners and non-custodial measures for women offenders ('Bangkok Rules'), London: Penal Reform International

52. <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2010/gashc3980.doc.htm>

53. Prison Reform Trust (2011) Reforming Women's Justice, Final report of the Women's Justice Taskforce, London: Prison Reform Trust

54. National Council of Women website, available at <http://www.ncwgb.org/news.php>

55. <http://www.soroptimist-ukpac.org/>

56. <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/ProjectsResearch/Women>

The Prison Reform Trust is grateful to the Bromley Trust for supporting the production of this briefing paper.

This briefing is based on the Prison Reform Trust's Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile.
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