

Reforming Women's Justice: reducing the imprisonment of women

November 2012

The Prison Reform Trust is launching a three year strategy to reduce the imprisonment of women in the UK. Supported by the Pilgrim Trust and PRT Friends, the strategy builds on the work of the Women's Justice Taskforce.



Most women...don't want to go to prison, don't want to offend. So if we can gain trust, and support them before that and through that you'll save an awful lot of women and a lot more children from the destruction, the pain...of that.

Wendy, recruitment manager, former prisoner, 2011

Too many women are imprisoned every year for non-violent offences. Women's offending is commonly linked to underlying mental health problems, drug and alcohol misuse, financial difficulties and debt. Over half the women in prison report having suffered domestic violence and one in three has experienced sexual abuse. Many spent time in local authority care as children. Some are victims of human trafficking and are coerced into offending. Most women in prison have dependent children.

- About 13,500 women are sent to prison in the UK every year. At any one time there are around 4,650 women in our prisons. Although women are only about 5% of the overall prison population they account for 31% of all self-harm incidents in prison
- The average annual cost of a women's prison place is £56,415, compared to £10,000 - £15,000 for an intensive community order

Coming to the issue fresh, I was struck by the waste of lives, time and money behind the cold statistics and the evidence we heard.

Fiona Cannon, Chair of the Women's Justice Taskforce, 2011

Over the next three years we will work with our partners to:

Reduce the number of women imprisoned on remand:

- 70% of women entering prison each year in the UK do so on remand
- less than half of those remanded by magistrates' courts and subsequently found guilty are given a prison sentence
- recent changes to the Bail Act will mean that defendants cannot be remanded into custody where there is no real prospect of a prison sentence on conviction.

Reduce the number of women imprisoned for breaching community orders:

- in 2009 more than 1,000 women were imprisoned for breaching a court order – about one in eight of all those given an immediate prison sentence
- in many of these cases the original offence would not have resulted in a custodial sentence.

Reduce reoffending by women:

- 51% of women leaving prison are reconvicted within one year, and for those serving sentences of less than 12 months this increases to 62%
- more than half of women sentenced to prison in 2011 received sentences of six months or less, which have the highest reoffending rates
- specialist community services offering women the support and supervision they need to stop offending have been shown to be effective.

Commenting on his 2011 inspection of HMP Styal, the Chief Inspector of Prisons said he was disappointed to find:

too many cases of women, some of whom were clearly mentally ill, serving very short prison sentences which served little purpose except to further disrupt sometimes already chaotic lives.

Reduce the number of women in prison with serious mental health problems:

- 30% of women in custody have had a psychiatric admission prior to entering prison
- one in seven sentenced women prisoners has a psychotic disorder – 23 times the incidence amongst women in the general population
- more than a third of women sent to prison say they have previously attempted suicide
- new liaison and diversion services in police stations and courts must be tailored to women's needs and circumstances.

Reduce the number of women in prison with drug and alcohol problems:

- 52% of women surveyed in custody said they had used heroin, crack or cocaine in the four weeks before entering prison
- 29% of women prisoners surveyed had a problem with alcohol compared with 22% of the general prison population
- around 70% of women entering prison require clinical detoxification.

Reduce the number of women in prison with dependent children:

- over 17,000 children were separated from their mother by imprisonment in 2010
- only 9% of children whose mothers are in prison are cared for by their fathers
- it is estimated that two babies are born in English prisons every week
- sentencing guidelines recognise sole or primary care responsibilities as a mitigating factor in sentencing.

Reduce the number of foreign national women in our prisons:

- foreign national women account for 15% of the total female prison population (616 women at 30 September 2012) in England and Wales
- many of these women have been trafficked or coerced into offending.

A November 2012 YouGov opinion poll of more than 1,500 people across Britain commissioned by the Prison Reform Trust reveals strong support for public health measures to tackle women's offending. Treatment for drug addiction, help to stop alcohol misuse and mental health care were the top three measures to get public backing.

We will work with national and local government, the Soroptimists, National Council of Women, and the National Federation of Women's Institutes, and allied organisations and charities, PRT Friends and supporters committed to reforming justice for women and achieving change.

To stay in touch with the progress of our work to reduce women's imprisonment sign up for our newsletter and see www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/women

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To achieve equitable outcomes for male and female offenders different approaches need to be taken.

"Equal but different? An Inspection of the use of alternatives to custody for women offenders" HMI Probation/HMI Crown Prosecution Service/HMI Prisons, October 2011.

The Prison Reform Trust provides advice and information, conducts research and works with government to create a just, humane and effective penal system. Find out more and support our work: www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/supportourwork

