

mentalhealth

today

May 2007

in this month's issue: Learning to love Scotland's Mental Health Act
Race equality and the Irish community Coaching for beginners

A photograph of two young women in school uniforms standing in a grassy field. They are both wearing white long-sleeved shirts and dark grey pleated skirts. They are holding hands, and the woman on the right is wearing colorful beaded bracelets. Both are wearing pink and white polka-dot sneakers. The background is a blurred green field under a bright sky.

Best friends

Peer support in schools

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An inmate in Holloway prison – imprisonment is not the solution argues Baroness Corston



life sentenced

Prison is the last place to send vulnerable, damaged women, argues a Home Office funded report. Catherine Jackson talks to its author

Mandy Pearson hanged herself in the healthcare centre at New Hall Prison on 11 October 2004. The mother of three young children, 37-year-old Mandy was serving a five month prison sentence, and was just weeks away from release. She was one of 11 women who killed themselves by hanging at New Hall between January 2002 and May 2006, and one of 13 to die in the UK's women's prisons in 2004. She had been discharged from care by her psychiatrist shortly before she started her sentence, and was assessed by a nurse as not at high risk of suicide. The judge ignored a recommendation from the probation service that she should be referred for psychiatric review. The prison doctor and psychiatrist both assumed she was being monitored as a suicide risk. The jury at the inquest into her death earlier this year said she should never have been jailed. Giving evidence at the inquest, Anne Owers, chief inspector of prisons, said women were being sent to prison for lack of any other alternative. 'We are often using our prisons as a default setting for those who we do not have the proper resources to look after in the community.'

There are currently some 4000 women in the UK's prisons – and the numbers are rising, faster than they are for men, as judges impose tougher sentences for relatively trivial crimes. An estimated 80% of women in prison have some kind of mental health problem, and 40% already have a history of psychiatric treatment before imprisonment. According to a study of 500 women prisoners by the Department of Public Health at Oxford University, women in custody are five times more likely to have a mental health problem than women in the general population, and 78% already have some kind of psychological problem at entry to prison (levels of psychological problems among the general female population are just 15%). Three quarters of the women in the study had used drugs in the six months before prison, and 42% abused alcohol. Prison statistics show that 70% of women in custody need detox, compared with 50% of male prisoners. Suicide rates in women's prisons are also disproportionately high. Men are more likely to kill themselves outside prison; in 2003 women represented just six per cent of the prison population but accounted for 15% of all prison suicides – although death rates have since fallen from their highest at 14 in 2003 to three last year. Self-harm is also far more common in women's prisons than in men's: 16% of women in prison self-harm, representing 56% of all self-harm in prisons.

Yet the crimes for which women receive a prison sentence tend to be less serious: most commonly, fraud and minor theft, not violent crime. Moreover, most are serving short sentences – 70% are serving sentences of less than 12 months – and many are on remand. A significant proportion of those on remand do not go on to receive a custodial sentence, and need never have been imprisoned in the first place.

In March a plain speaking report on 'vulnerable women' in the criminal justice system was published by the Home Office. The Corston report is the result of an independent review of women in prison by Labour peer Baroness Corston. In it she calls for a radical change in the way women with mental health and drug and alcohol →

Women-centred

A small number of women's community centres already exist that are providing the kind of support recommended in the Corston report. They include the Asha Centre in Worcester, originally opened by the local probation service but a registered charity since 2002. It provides counselling, welfare advice, and a three tier education programme, starting with basic confidence building courses and moving on to vocational training, volunteering programmes and higher education, alongside a range of leisure, social and therapeutic activities. With a staff of 17, many working part-time, the centre can provide help to around 250 women, and survives largely on one-off grants, with some funding from the Home Office, the probation service and the local mental health trust. Most of their referrals come via the mental health service. 'Very commonly they are victims. Typically they have no social networks, no friends, very little social support, and no confidence to go and get it. About half have children and we have a small crèche. They are always on state benefits. We run courses every day and they can sign up for as many as they like, for as long as they like,' says director Chris Cawthorne. 'We are a non-medical way of helping people with mental health needs. We don't know who are and are not offenders. They lose that identity at the door. We never turn anyone away. They have all the same problems.'

The Calderdale Centre, also cited in the Corston report, offers a similar programme of support, education, training and employment opportunities. It too relies on a mixture of statutory and grant aid funding. It has 43 paid staff and 50 volunteers and gets some 14,000 referrals a year. 'We are women-centred and we can decide what that means. Our starting point is to ask women, "What do you need, what do you want?". There is very little difference between women offenders and disadvantaged women,' says chief executive Clare Hyde. 'Poverty, abuse, violence, alcohol and drug abuse, low education achievement, low self-esteem – these characteristics are shared and there's a very thin line between the two. We have to acknowledge that a lot of women are victims and perpetrators at the same time.'

The centre has recently received a grant from the Tudor Trust to work specifically with women offenders, providing alternatives to custodial sentences. The project goes live this month, and will evaluate its impact on re-offending rates. Says Clare Hyde: 'We will target women at arrest stage, or pre-arrest stage if we can, working with the police, probation and the criminal justice system, to provide the earliest possible intervention that we can. We're aiming to work with 200 women. Bearing in mind how complex their lives are, we want to offer long-term commitment. This isn't about a six-week programme. But the package we offer will not be very different. They're not going to be strangers to us in how they present.'

'Going to one of these centres and their approach to each individual helped these women turn their lives around. That is better than the revolving door of prison, and much cheaper,' Baroness Corston says. 'I talked to a woman at one of these centres. She couldn't remember how many times she had been in prison. She said coming there had, for the first time, made her accept her responsibility for the reason she was there. I don't see how anyone is going to move on from where they are unless that process happens.'

'What these centres had done for the women's self-esteem and physical health and the well-being of their children is unquantifiable.'



→ problems are treated within the criminal justice system. Only women who present a danger to others should be in prison; most women offenders should receive community sentences, and support to help them tackle the factors that brought them before the courts and to rebuild their lives. The majority of women in our prisons are more damaged than damaging, Baroness Corston argues.

‘It’s ridiculous to say no women should be sent to prison. People who have committed violent offences and are dangerous to the public need to be detained,’ she says. ‘It’s appropriateness that is the key ingredient. In the course of my review I saw too many women for whom prison was not only not the solution, but would make things worse. A considerable number were mentally ill or were coping with the emotional and psychological consequences of abuse – domestic abuse, sexual abuse. You heard stories that were inutterably shocking.’ She describes one woman who had been raped by her grandfather from the age of 18 months, with her mother’s connivance: ‘That went on for years, and there she was, in prison, with no sense of self-worth. To categorise her as criminal seemed to me to be missing the point. She needed to work through what made it impossible for her to live the kind of life that we would think of as normal. And the women who were mentally ill – one woman was so ill I found it truly shocking that someone like that could have been seen as fit to plead.’

The statistics bear out Baroness Corston’s descriptions from her visits to the UK’s six women’s prisons. Up to

What she wants, and for which she argues forcefully in the report, is a national network of women’s community centres, where offenders can get the help they need – whether it’s detox, psychological treatment, emotional support and/or education and training – to repair some of the damage they have suffered and give them skills to cope with a more normal life. This is something that prison very evidently fails to do, as Lucie Russell, director of the campaign organisation Smartjustice for Women, points out. ‘Prison doesn’t reduce women’s offending behaviour. Six out of ten women who serve a prison sentence are reconvicted within two years of their release, and prison just makes their problems worse. They need more support in terms of tackling their offending behaviour, which they don’t get in prison.’ Cathy Stancer, director of Women in Prison, agrees: prison is being over-used, and very often this is because the court doesn’t think there are any alternatives. ‘A woman comes before them in a chaotic state – she’s got mental health problems, she’s homeless – they think if she’s in custody at least she will get a detox and a roof over her head. The criminal justice system ends up mopping up problems that haven’t been dealt with by other services – they’re the one service that can’t say no.

‘Helping these women is not very complicated,’ she argues. ‘In our experience women above all need somewhere safe to stay, and support and assistance to tackle the things that have led them to offend in the first

Prison is being over-used, and very often this is because the court doesn’t think there are any alternatives

50% of women in prison have experienced domestic violence. A third are victims of sexual abuse. Of 50 chronic self-harmers reviewed for the report, only 12 had not been raped or abused, and 18 said they had been abused in their childhood. ‘I can’t tell you how many women I met in prison who said, “I needed someone to talk to and I couldn’t find anyone. I knew an explosion was waiting to happen. If only it had been possible for me to talk to someone to try to make sense of the thoughts and feelings I had, things might have been very different”,’ Baroness Corston says.

Moreover, as the report points out, other lives can be destroyed by women’s imprisonment. Two thirds of women in prison have children; one third are lone parents. Some 18,000 children a year are separated from their mothers by imprisonment, and many go into care – which itself is a risk factor for imprisonment in adulthood. A third of the 50 self-harming women reviewed for the report had been in care as children. Moreover, women are in most cases the primary carer and home-maker, so when they are sentenced they very often lose their home as well as their children. ‘Many women are in prison just long enough to lose their children and their home. When they go to the local authority housing department, they’re told they aren’t a priority because they haven’t got their kids, and if they go to social services they say they can’t have their children because they’ve nowhere to live,’ Baroness Corston says.

place, the tools to overcome their history – the trauma and abuse, substance use, mental health problems. Most of the women we work with talk longingly about leading a normal life – a family, somewhere to live, a modest income.’

Baroness Corston’s report is likely to fall on listening ears at the newly established Ministry of Justice. The current crisis in England’s overcrowded prisons has prompted the government to start thinking seriously about alternatives to custody. Shortly after the Corston report was published, the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit issued a policy review urging a more preventive approach to ‘offender management’, including non-custodial sentences with support and treatment for non-serious offenders with mental health needs. Baroness Corston points out that closing the women’s prisons would release several thousand places for men, and that substitute community women’s centres would cost far less – thereby making a considerable contribution towards the £1.5 billion bill the government is facing to increase the prison establishment for men. But also, she argues, the government is legally obliged to act: ‘From April the government has a statutory duty to eliminate gender discrimination and promote equality under the Equality Act. The current situation where men and women are treated the same within the criminal justice system does not result in equal outcomes. A different and distinct approach is needed for women.’ ■