

Maternal Imprisonment

Research on the impact of intergenerational trauma

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Maternal imprisonment in England and Wales:

Although women only make up around 4% of the prison population in England and Wales, the impact of their imprisonment can be far reaching. It is estimated that around two thirds of women in prison are mothers with dependent children, with more who are grandmothers or who have older children. Although this data is not routinely collected. The reality of what happens when mothers are imprisoned is often overlooked, with many mothers being imprisoned for non-violent offences and for short sentences. As there are fewer women's prisons, they are often sent further from home than men and have less opportunity for education, work and rehabilitation. There is a wider intergenerational traumatic impact of imprisoning mothers, who are usually the main caregiver and focal point of the family.

Research aims and methodology:

This study aimed to understand the experiences of criminalised mothers through the concept of 'intergenerational trauma' as a way of understanding the breadth and long-lasting impact that maternal imprisonment has, and the wider impact on children and families. Interviews were carried out with staff working with mothers in the community, and mothers who had experienced a period of imprisonment in the North East of England.

Key findings

a) Prior trauma

- The research found that the majority of mothers had experienced some form of prior trauma in their lives.
- Prior to sentencing, many women were advised they would not get a custodial sentence and therefore had not made arrangements for themselves or their children.
- A number of women spoke about issues with postnatal depression and psychosis and how this impacted on offending behaviour.

b) The traumatic impact of prison

- Separation from children and loss of the mothering role, even for a short time, had devastating effects going forward. In a number of cases the relationship was reported to never be the same.
- Visits were often difficult and caused conflicting emotions, some mothers did not want children to get used to prison, some children didn't know mum was in prison, some mothers wanted to see their children, but it was too painful.
- Difficulties were reported with the relationship with kinship carers either due to guilt/stigma or just the pressure of the situation.

c) Post-prison

- There were many issues spoken about regarding the difficulty of returning to the mothering role post-prison. There was no support provided for this.
- Housing and benefits were also a major issue for women coming out of custody. This impacted on their ability to get their children back and rebuild their lives.
- Stigma had a huge effect on mental health and community reintegration. It was potentially worse for mothers in part due to societal views of mothers who have committed offences.

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Actions and recommendations:

This study shows the breadth and depth of the impact of maternal imprisonment by understanding trauma as something experienced at different levels, both individually, within the family and the wider community and society.

- 1** A wider definition of trauma needs to be utilised by policymakers and practitioners that understands the link between social experiences and trauma.
- 2** In recent years trauma informed training for staff in the Justice System has begun to be rolled out, where possible this should be extended to staff working in the community with women before and after custody.
- 3** Work to address women's trauma needs to happen in the community. The research has identified a need to recognise the criminal justice system, custody in particular, as active causes of trauma for many women, not as a safe space or an appropriate punishment,. Community approaches and alternatives to custody for women need to be further supported and researched.
- 4** Housing continues to be a major problem for women who have been in custody. Government investment in housing for women leaving prison should be prioritised.
- 5** More detailed information about the process of sentencing, timescales and the likelihood of receiving a custodial sentence to be given, particularly to mothers so they can make arrangements for themselves and their children.
- 6** As detailed by the research study, visits continue to be underused and, in some cases, traumatic for mothers and children. More consideration of the barriers to visits taking place, the specific needs of families with children with disabilities or SEN, and how they can be supported, should be prioritised in future prison policy and strategy
- 7** During custody, financial support for kinship carers is vitally needed in order that they can properly care for any children they are responsible for.
- 8** To make this all happen, data on the number of women with children and pregnant women in the Justice System needs to be routinely collected and published.

Summary:

It is clear that the imprisonment of mothers is particularly problematic. Even a short period of imprisonment causes untold disruption to homes, families and finances. More importantly these are not short-lived problems but ones that continue to pervade family life for many years to come. The impact of maternal imprisonment is not just felt by the mother herself, but across the generations affecting children and often grandparents causing intergenerational trauma.

The harms inflicted by maternal imprisonment are not just those pertaining to individuals, many are much wider acting than this. Although individual women may have experienced specific traumas, the wider picture is that many are also battling with wider societal issues such as marginalisation, poverty and gendered violence.

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