

Submission to the Commission on Justice in Wales submitted by Dr Alyson Rees, Senior lecturer, Cardiff University.

The Prison Reform Trust (2015) found that 31% of women prisoners have been looked after in the past (24% of men). In England only 1% of the population are care experienced so there is a relationship between having experience of care and future custody (Prison Reform Trust, 2015). Having a parent in prison is listed as one of the adverse life experiences (ACEs) that contribute to the likelihood of future difficulties, as is being in care, so here we can see some intergenerational cyclical patterns (Bellis et al., 2016).

Women are often serving short sentences for non-violent offences (Farmer, 2019). Three quarters of all Welsh women receiving immediate custodial sentences in 2016 were given sentences of less than 6 months; in 2017 83% of Welsh women were sentenced to custody for non-violent offences (Jones, 2018). This causes huge disruption for children and interferes with their right to a family life United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child (UNCRC Article 8). The Welsh Affairs Committee's report on Prison provision in Wales (2019) and Lord Farmer (2019) are recommending that where possible women should serve sentences in locally based women's centres.

Staff from Cardiff University undertook an evaluation of the Visiting Mum scheme in 2017 (Rees et al. 2007), this was a project set up to support children from Wales visiting their mother in Eastwood Park prison, Gloucestershire (where it is in the children's interests to visit their mother). As there is no Welsh women's prison, children are having to travel long distances to visit their mother without any emotional or financial support. Women from south or west Wales serve sentences in HMP Eastwood Park. When sentenced to custody, no-one keeps a record of whether a mother has children and so these are a largely hidden group of children who are not being provided with any support. Children usually have to go and live with relatives or friends as only 9 % remain living with a father, (Prison Reform Trust, 2015) and siblings are often separated. Children may have to change school and are placed outside of their communities, all of which are damaging for the child's wellbeing. If there are no relatives or friends able to provide accommodation for the children, they would go into foster care. It makes sense that anything which helps ameliorate the impact of having a mother in prison (reducing the impact of ACEs) will have a long-term benefits for the child in their future life, not least as a result of maintaining their relationship with their mother and reducing their future chances of being taken in to care.

One catastrophic impact of custody is that when a woman is sentenced to prison, she usually loses her accommodation and employment. There is no support for finding accommodation within prison and if her children have been in foster care, they cannot go back to her without accommodation. She will not be allocated housing when she is not living with her children (CommonWeal Housing, 2017). She cannot afford a housing deposit or bond whilst in prison and unemployed. This a vicious circle which stops children returning to their mothers. Some women we interviewed (whose children had not been in foster

care) were still living in hostels with their children months after release. If the children have been in foster care they are likely to remain there because of this difficulty. Jones (2018) noted that there were on average 259 women in prison from Wales in 2017.

The Visiting Mum scheme was a unique, non-intrusive model which involved using volunteers to prepare and take the children and carer to visit a mother. At the prison the visits were tailored for children providing play activities, there was reduced security, they were longer (2 hours) and only one or two families visited at a time, so were far more intimate. Children told us how terrible standard visits are, being held in busy, noisy visiting rooms with uniformed staff present. Children are searched before entering and the mother has to remain seated in her chair across a table from her child. The Visiting Mum scheme was very successful in supporting children and helping to preserve relationships between mothers and children (as reported to us by both mothers and children- see Rees et al., 2017). Visiting Mum cost £168,000 per annum to operate and was run by Pact (utilising volunteers from Sova), funded by Big Lottery Innovation fund. The scheme was embedded within the prison establishment and was regarded as a flagship project within HMP Eastwood Park, as was noted in the inspection (HMIP 2017). The scheme did not continue after the Big Lottery fund ended as no-one was willing to take responsibility for these children. The scheme supported 164 children and facilitated 292 visits and would seem to be a good model of investing now to help support children and their mothers, and to break intergenerational cycles.

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