

Written evidence submitted by Dr Claire Fitzpatrick, Lancaster University

The National Audit Office (NAO) report on resettlement support for prison leavers provides powerful evidence and is a timely reminder of the huge challenges that can face those leaving prison. Yet according to the report: “HMPPS does not know why different groups of prison leavers have very different resettlement outcomes....For example, in 2021-22: 8% of female prison leavers were employed after six months compared with 18% of male prison leavers” (NAO, 2023:11).

In response to this concern, this evidence submission focuses on some of the specific resettlement challenges facing women. It draws particularly on unpublished evidence from the Nuffield Foundation-funded project, *Disrupting the Routes between Care and Custody for Girls and Women* (2022) which was led by Lancaster University and carried out in collaboration with colleagues from Liverpool John Moores University and the University of Bristol. The project focused on the neglected experiences of women and girls who had been in care as children (for example, in foster care or children’s homes), who are disproportionately represented in our prisons.

The research involved an international literature review, a data scoping exercise, documentary analysis of policy protocols and 94 interviews, including with women in prison who had been in care as children and with care-experienced girls and young women in the community. Interviews were also carried out with various professionals, including from the police, youth justice, the prison service, the probation service and the judiciary.

Selected Challenges:

For some who had been in the care system as children, and particularly in residential settings, prison was perceived as simply the next stage of ‘the system’, where women came to recognise fellow care-leavers who they had previously lived with in children’s homes or foster care. Those who had been institutionalised in state systems across their life course found some comfort in the familiar surroundings of jail, despite it being an inherently unsafe and damaging space for many as indicated, for example, by the very high rates of self-harm. This could lead to a fear of leaving prison – and greater recognition of the immense fear that some women feel is particularly important because it can have a profound impact on their prospects of successful resettlement.

Lack of sufficient safe and appropriate accommodation in the community was raised as a serious problem that subsequently impacted resettlement plans and could perpetuate a fear of leaving prison. Indeed, a lack of planning for life after prison was frequently referred to by imprisoned women and the professionals who worked with them. In particular, uncertainty around where someone would be living, often until the very last minute, could create severe anxiety and frustration for women and played out in various ways, including exacerbating existing mental health issues and increasing the likelihood of a return to domestic violence.

“What we probably don’t recognise enough is...if I’m a woman coming out of HMP Women’s Prison X and I’ve got you know uncertainty about where I’m going to be living and what I’m going to be doing and who’s looking after me. And I’ve got an abusive ex-partner knocking on the door going ‘well come on, I’ll look after you’. Even though that person’s abusive, I may decide to go with them because there’s some certainty there...It’s a massive, massive challenge for us” (Probation Officer).

A system that creates fear, uncertainty and anxiety, and leaves women with few safe options for life in the community, is setting these women up to fail. Furthermore, without access to appropriate housing with sufficient space, women who have had children removed (itself a deeply distressing experience) have little real prospect of getting their children back. Meanwhile, having no fixed address impacts the possibility of gaining employment after prison and may combine with the gendered judgements and negative stereotypes so often associated with women who have a criminal record. This can be compounded by racialised judgements faced by women from Black and minoritised backgrounds. The cumulative impact of these various factors may go some way to explaining the difference in resettlement outcomes for men and women cited in the NAO report.

Moving Forwards

The majority of women in prison are there for non-violent offences and on short sentences and there must be a far greater commitment to ensuring these women are kept out of prison wherever possible in order to avoid the immense impact that can come from such sentences which leave women at risk of losing their homes and their children.

For those already locked up, there needs to be far greater recognition of the anxiety created by leaving prison, particularly for those with care-experience who may not have wider networks of support to fall back on. The notion of (re)settlement may not even be applicable to those who have never felt settled or a sense of belonging in the community – and the far greater challenge may be trying to ‘settle’ them for the very first time (Graham & McNeil, 2018). Planning for life post-prison needs to take place at the earliest possible stage, with a focus on listening to, and learning from, those imprisoned about their needs. Our research highlighted how ensuring arrangements are in place for women to be collected at the gates on departure and taken directly to their accommodation was one example of good practice, albeit often reliant on the ‘battling’ of passionate practitioners willing to go ‘the extra mile’ for women in their care. Without this, women may be left feeling utterly hopeless about the prospects of a different life.

“We’re just thrown out them gates, got to walk over there so you can get a bus, haven’t got nowhere to live...all I’m doing is I’m going back out on the streets” (Josie, 41).

Multi-agency working was frequently cited by professionals as an important goal to aspire to, despite the challenges of making this happen in practice in often over-stretched and under-staffed systems. However, for those with care-experience, the joining up of sentencing/resettlement plans and local authority pathway plans, which tend to be done separately, may be a valuable way of ensuring that those entitled to leaving care support when they leave prison, including access to a personal advisor, do not fall through the gaps and actually receive the support that they are entitled to. Current efforts to explore how resettlement planning and pathway planning could be done more collaboratively between different agencies are certainly worth pursuing. This could also help to avoid individuals having to continuously repeat their stories and experiences to different agencies which can itself be traumatising.

Related to the above point, there is a serious need to harness the role of care-experienced leads in prisons. These roles have been developed in recent years as part of HMPPS’ work on care-experience, but they are not currently appropriately resourced. Care-experience leads must be given the time and workload space needed for their work to actually make a difference in practice. Their support can be vital to those in prison who have previously spent time in care – and who may not have access to wider networks of support that make successful resettlement more likely. Prisons with actively involved care-experienced leads are also more likely to be able to facilitate peer mentoring groups which, in the best cases, may enable women to support and empower each other.

References

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