

Written evidence from Teesside University

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As an interdisciplinary group of academics, we have experience of researching in the area of imprisonment and have carried out research studies in both the male and female estate. Our expertise sits within the research team titled 'Co-producing Alcohol, Criminal Justice and Public Health Research' within the Centre for Social Innovation in the School for Social Sciences, Humanities and Law. We are also aligned with the British Society of Criminology Prison Research Network, we convene a prisons special interest group that includes both academic staff, researchers and PhD students and are keen to feed into the national debates around all aspects of imprisonment.

Introduction and context

- 1.1. Founded in the 1930s to support the skills needs of the local engineering and shipping industries, Teesside University is a multidisciplinary institution that has been at the heart of higher education and skills in Tees Valley for almost 90 years.
- 1.2. Teesside University is situated in Middlesbrough, in the Tees Valley. Although a small locality, the region has a considerable impact on the UK economy, with economic assets of national significance.
- 1.3. However, it also faces a number of persistent challenges including low levels of participation in the labour market, underperformance in relation to education and skills and an ageing workforce population.
- 1.4. As an anchor institution, Teesside University is committed to transforming the lives of the communities we serve and works in partnership with key institutions, authorities and businesses across the region.
- 1.5. We are committed to equality of opportunity and aims to be a fair and supportive institution that enhances the experience of its staff, students, partners and external clients. It is a Stonewall top 100 employer and has IIP gold accreditation and holds an Athena Swan Bronze Award. Our Equality and Inclusion policy builds on values outlined in *Teesside 2020*:
 - encouraging and embracing diversity, equality of access, esteem and opportunity and actively opposing and eradicating prejudice
 - empowering individuals to develop themselves and enhance their contribution to the future aims and strategic direction of the University.

- 1.6. Our experience of carrying out research in secure settings across both the male and female estate has focused on alcohol screening and brief interventions, drug recovery, reducing the drug supply, decision-making and police custody.
- 1.7. The University welcomes the focus of this inquiry, and we would advocate that the gender-specific needs of women should be at the centre of discussions about female imprisonment.

2. The impact of imprisonment on Women

- 2.1. There are currently 3,100 women in prison in the UK compared to 74,981 men and therefore women only represent 5% of the prison population (Ministry of Justice and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, 2021). As female offenders represent such a small percentage of people in prison their needs can be overlooked in research, policy, and support services (Prison Reform Trust, 2017) and their gender-specific needs are under-researched (Crewe *et al.*, 2017).
- 2.2. There is some acknowledgement of the specific needs of women in the Government's Female Offender Strategy (Ministry of Justice, 2018) that contained a number of recommendations including the reduction in the number of women given custodial sentences, and a recognition that they have different needs and vulnerabilities than their male counterparts. However, despite this, imprisonment rates for women remain high, with women more likely than men to receive a custodial sentence for their first offence. Women are also more likely to be incarcerated for non-violent offences, and to be given short sentences – in 2019 62% of sentences for women were of six months or less (Prison Reform Trust, 2021), which can lead to exacerbating the issues outlined above.
- 2.3. The commitment to reducing the number of women sent to custody is questionable when the Ministry of Justice and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (2021) recently announced funding for an additional five hundred new places for women in existing prisons. The Ministry of Justice has suggested that these new places will improve the conditions for women and in some prisons, there will be the provision of overnight accommodation visits with children to prepare women for release. Despite this, the expansion of prison places for women is concerning and therefore this is a crucial time to analyse and evaluate the impact of imprisonment on women.
- 2.4. The impact of custody on women can be disproportionate to that of their male counterparts as a result of their different needs and experiences before and during custody. There are distinct differences between men and women who receive custodial sentences, these include: a higher number of women who are serving sentences on remand; more women imprisoned for non-violent offences; and overall, women are more likely to receive shorter prison sentences (Prison Reform Trust, 2019). The Ministry of Justice highlighted that 53% of female prisoners had experienced some form of trauma prior to entering custody, compared with 27% of male prisoners, and were twice as

likely to be suffering from a mental illness and/or alcohol and substance misuse (Prison Reform Trust, 2017). Furthermore, it is essential to note that there are disproportionate levels of self-harm within the female prison population (Prison Reform Trust, 2021). Despite these clear gender differences and some recognition of the complexities of meeting the needs of the female prison population, there continues to be a lack of understanding and discussion about women's specific needs (Crewe *et al.*, 2017).

- 2.5. Women in prison have described a sense of isolation in an environment that can lead to a range of psychological pains, including anxiety, depression and a general sense of emptiness (Chamberlen, 2018). Recognising that women's experience of imprisonment is different means that it is important to understand more about how they cope with their sentence but in comparison to studies of male imprisonment, there is a paucity of studies that have specifically examined women's experience of imprisonment (Crewe *et al.*, 2017). Understanding the impact of imprisonment on women who are frequently dealing with past victimisation, trauma, addiction, abusive relationships and mental illness (Lempert, 2016; Prison Reform Trust, 2017) is critical to inform both policy and practice.
- 2.6. The psychological impact of imprisonment on women should not be underestimated because we know that they enter prison with a range of vulnerabilities that exceed the levels in male prisoners, as well as in the general population. If you examine the data on mental health 25% of women in prison have symptoms indicative of psychosis compared to 15% in the male estate, and 4% in the general population. The levels of anxiety and depression in women in prison are higher at 49% compared to 23% in male prisoners and 15% in the general population. Even more concerning is that a staggering 46% of women have attempted suicide at some point, compared to 21% of men in prison and 6% in the general population (Prison Reform Trust, 2021).
- 2.7. When exploring the impact of imprisonment on women it is argued that the 'pains of imprisonment' as originally discussed by Sykes (1958) remain a concern today and include the loss of liberty, access to goods and services, security, autonomy and ability to maintain relationships. However, in more recent work, Crewe *et al.* (2017) proposed that there are specific gendered pains for women serving sentences that include losing contact, power autonomy and control, mental and physical well-being, trust, privacy and intimacy. With this in mind, more consideration of the impact of imprisonment on women's mental health should be explored in more depth because women who offend have frequently also experienced domestic and sexual violence, past abuse, loss and addiction (Lempert, 2016). Research has shown that a range of factors can impact negatively on a person's mental health in prison, and these include being incarcerated more than 50 miles away from family, use of solitary confinement and overcrowding (Edgemon and Clay-Warner, 2019).
- 2.8. The impact of imprisonment on family relationships is noteworthy because women frequently enter custody following the traumatic separation from their children (Light *et*

al., 2013; Cummins, 2016) and they can find it difficult to regain custody on release (Prison Reform Trust, 2017). The maintenance of family relationships and social ties that are viewed as crucial for the reintegration of prisoners into society is a challenge for women because on average, they are held 64 miles away from their home, with some being held considerably further (Ministry of Justice and Office for National Statistics, 2020). This distance inevitably affects the number of visits women will receive from family and in open conditions, it can impact on their opportunities to go home on Release On Temporary Licence (ROTL). This can contribute to women experiencing what Aiello and McQueeney (2016) described as, “an invisible form of gendered punishment” (p.54). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic must also be considered because prisoners experienced what could be described as a ‘double lockdown’, with nearly the whole prison population in the UK confined to their cell for 23 hours or more every day, with no meaningful activity or rehabilitative support (Prison Reform Trust, 2021). When discussing female imprisonment there needs to be more recognition that the prison regimes and the fact that women are frequently held some distance from home can make it difficult to maintain family relationships, impacting negatively on her sense of self and overall wellbeing (Booth, 2020).

- 2.9. During their sentence women can become disconnected from the wider society due to economic insecurity, addictions and mental illness (Morash *et al.*, 2017) and the prison environment can be experienced as a dangerous place where they have very little control over their day-to-day experiences (Harner and Riley, 2013). The impact of penal power on the gendered identities of women in custody affects their ability to construct a positive narrative that supports them in resisting the stigma of imprisonment (Haney, 2010; Pollack, 2007; Rowe, 2011). During imprisonment, women can experience what Aiello and McQueeney (2016) described as, “an invisible form of gendered punishment” (p.54). Women in prison can face a multiplicity of factors that impact on their journey through the prison system, but they are not passive victims, they remain as active agents, with the capacity to shape their present and future with the appropriate support (Crewe *et al.*, 2017).
- 2.10. To date there are no tailored interventions for women in prison (Barberet, 2014) possibly due to the small numbers, yet, in an institution where rehabilitation is key to progression and issues such as alcohol prevalence is high, there is a need for further exploration. To use alcohol as an example, more females are found to be risky drinkers when they arrive in prison (24%) than their male counterparts (18%) (Ministry of Justice & Office for National Statistics, 2018). A recent study by the authors explored alcohol screening and brief interventions (ASBI) in an open prison setting. ASBI is a secondary preventative activity aimed at individuals who are drinking in a way that is harmful to their health or wellbeing (Haughton *et al.*, 2013). The use of ASBI is underpinned by behaviour change and relies on the concept of a “teachable moment” (Babor and Higgins-Biddle, 2001). The research found that pragmatic issues such as the timing of the intervention and the person delivering the intervention differ from that of their male counterparts (Holloway

et al., 2017). Highlighting a need to consider the delivery of interventions with the gendered pains of imprisonment in mind.

3. Recommendation

- 3.1. Screening programmes that will identify early stages of mental illness, including depression and anxiety to ensure that psychological support is available for all prisoners as soon as they enter the prison, and during their sentence.
- 3.2. Plans should be put in place to reduce the psychological pains of imprisonment including, but not limited to contact with family, a decrease in the use of solitary confinement, access to meaningful activity, including work and education, and a reduction in prison numbers to reduce overcrowding.
- 3.3. A clear plan to reduce the possible impact of any further Covid-19 waves in the future would ensure that all prisoners have contact with family and friends, are supported to engage in meaningful activities, and have access to additional psychological support.
- 3.4. The needs of women in prison are prioritised to ensure that their specific needs are catered for. This work should be trauma-informed and co-produced with women in prison because they are in a unique position to inform the development of a gender-specific response to women's mental health needs and psychological well-being.

4. References

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