

Written evidence from Dr Anna Schliehe¹ for the COMPEN Team (Professor Ben Crewe, Dr Alice Ievins, Dr Julie Laursen and Dr Kristian Mjåland), Prisons Research Centre, University of Cambridge

1. Introduction

In our presentation of evidence below, we draw on mixed-methods data (both qualitative and quantitative) collected and analysed as part of a research project (2016-2021) called ‘Comparative Penology and the Prisoner Experience’ [COMPEN]. The COMPEN project was funded by the European Research Council and entailed the comparison of a wide range of prisoners’ experiences in Norway and England & Wales. We conducted 728 in-depth interviews with prisoners, and obtained 1082 surveys in over 16 prisons in both countries. The evidence below only takes into account our data from the UK, drawing on 127 in-depth interviews with women and 207 surveys collected in women’s prisons and all names are anonymised.

We analysed women’s experiences of imprisonment from entry into custody to the period preceding discharge from custody to post-release, based on research in two main field-sites in England & Wales: HMP Peterborough and HMP Send. However, we also collected data in other prisons due to prisoners being moved within the prison system, including HMP Drake Hall, HMP Bronzefield and HMP Eastwood Park. We interviewed women on a wide range of sentences (from a couple of months to life sentences and in all age groups, including on the Mother/ Baby Unit of HMP Peterborough and specialist wings like the PIPE and the Democratic Therapeutic Community at HMP Send). Importantly, we deliberately ‘followed’ women from entry to exit and some to their lives into the community, so we have a variety of data referring to many different aspects of imprisonment.

There are many issues that could be raised in this Evidence paper. We have decided to emphasise the most pressing problems communicated to us in our research and will focus in particular on our survey results, trauma and trauma-informed practice, staff-prisoner relationships and release/resettlement. We want to emphasise that many of the issues we raise represent age-old problems, which policy changes have failed to address. In our study, we found many of the women we interviewed to be living in extremely adverse situations, many of them returning to prison on a regular basis. While their lives more broadly could often be described as extremely challenging, they often felt unsupported in prison for a number of reasons: Many found it particularly **hard to maintain meaningful connections with children and family, faced homelessness** and had little support with housing and got **caught up in a cycle of recall or repeated imprisonment**.

2. Survey Results and the pains of imprisonment

Our COMPEN survey had two main parts, the second of which comprised a list of 45 problem statements. These items, informed by previous research and qualitative studies, aimed to measure the most pressing problems and frustrations of imprisonment. More specifically, prisoners were asked to specify how often they experienced each problem and how easy or difficult they found it to deal with each problem. A ‘severity’ score was then

¹ Contact details: Dr. Anna Schliehe, Institute of Criminology, Prisons Research Centre, University of Cambridge: Sidgwick Avenue, CB3 9DA Cambridge.

calculated for each problem by multiplying the scores for these two measures. We then constructed a set of dimensions (e.g. ‘deprivation’, ‘outside relationships’, ‘mental and physical wellbeing’) which sought to highlight the underlying construct of the survey. In the analysis that follows, we draw on both the ranking of the individual problem statements, and the mean severity scores for these dimensions.

An important finding from the survey is that **for every dimension** imprisoned women in England & Wales scored higher (meaning more severe/problematic) than men in England & Wales (see table 1). On some of the dimensions the differences are small, but they are greater for other dimensions (particularly Social Frustration, Existential Frustration, Mental and Physical Wellbeing) and the overall trend is very clear. These results show that **imprisonment is generally a more painful experience for women** than for men.

	Men E&W	Women E&W
Deprivation	13.37	14.13
Control and Authority	11.43	11.90
Trust and Intimacy	11.14	11.89
Progression	11.68	11.93
Social Frustration	8.65	9.96***
Existential Frustration	11.03	12.15**
Mental and Physical Wellbeing	8.84	10.28***
Outside Relationships	13.02	13.28
Release Anxiety	11.63	12.56
Thinking about Crime	11.13	12.06

*= significant difference (p< .05)
 **= significant difference (p< .01)
 ***= significant difference (p< .001)

Further, in a listing of absolute severity scores for women, the first three individual items selected are relational: (1) *missing someone*, (2) *feeling like you have let down family and friends*, (3) *worrying about people outside*. This is also reflected in our interviews, in which women specified the aspects of imprisonment that they found hardest.

One overwhelming pain is related to the fact that many female prisoners are primary carers. Our interviewees often reflected on the role of motherhood in prison and the extremely difficult experience of grief, loss, shame and guilt associated with it. Some of the reasons for these issues are structural: there are currently 12 women’s prisons in England and Wales, which means that family contact can be difficult due to geographical distribution. For example, the closure of HMP Holloway means that there is no prison in inner London, with

many women from London held in prisons such as HMP Bronzefield and HMP Send, which are difficult to access. This exacerbates the pains that relate to children and contact with families. The women in our study relayed to us that distance is one reason that makes meaningful contact and connections with their children difficult. Other main reasons were that fathers did not tend to bring children to see their mums and ones taken into care faced added barriers to visitation.

What are the most important things you have lost during your sentence?

My family. My children. You've just been ripped away from everything that you had. (Amelie)

'[Imprisonment] was hard, it was hard. But for me the hardest part was leaving my kids' (Amber)

When my release date comes next December, I'm going home to three people [her partner and two children] I won't have seen for five years. (...) So, the family ties thing in this prison is a load of nonsense. I can have a phone call, of course I can write a letter, (...) It's not enough, no. (...) my partner probably reads it and throws it in the bin, cards and things I send. (...) There have been times where he hasn't answered the phone for months on end, so I haven't been able to speak to the children for months, and then I worry that they're going to forget who I am. That's happened many times during my prison sentence. (Tilly)

3. Trauma and Trauma-informed practice

The prevalence of trauma and traumatic forms of adversity in the lives of female prisoners is overwhelming and while connected to their lives prior to imprisonment (difficult childhoods, abusive relationships), others can be directly linked to their time in prison (difficult staff prisoner relationships, little access to meaningful activity, being released street homeless and more). With colleagues, we have analysed in what ways female prisoners in two prisons felt that the prison was responsive to their experiences of trauma. As part of a survey used in an MQPL+ exercise, a team from the PRC developed a new dimension intended to measure experiences around trauma informed practice² ((Liebling et al forthcoming; and see *Measuring the Quality of Prison Life*; Liebling et al 2011). These items were then used in the COMPEN survey in a second prison. Mean scores were produced for each item and those with a score of 3.00 or higher indicate an overall positive view for that item. Scores below 3 are negative.

The first prison is a semi-open women's prison, set in a rural location. The prison had begun to develop 'trauma-informed practice' training for staff 2018/19. HMIP Inspectors had praised the prison at its last inspection for its stability, and the progress made on safety. Prisoners, however, reported moderately positively for only two of the 22 relevant items that had been designed to measure trauma-informed practice- 'staff in this prison believe I can grow and change' (3.11) and 'this prison helps me recognise my strengths.' (3.01, more 'neutral' than positive: 36% agreed and 33% disagreed). They reported negatively for the other 20. In the interviews, some women raised negative or sceptical views towards trauma-informed practices and the their own experiences of trauma in prison:

² See <https://www.prc.crim.cam.ac.uk/directory/research-themes/mqpl> for further information.

‘Trauma-orientation is bullshit – they do not look into the deeper reasons for your behaviour.’ (Jeanette)

‘It’s [this prison] caused me trauma’ (Belle)

The same trauma-informed items were used within a survey being used in a second women’s prison, located around twenty miles south of London, and holding around 280 women. Unlike the first prison, the second one was not officially described as a trauma informed, but a course on ‘Healing Trauma and Becoming Trauma Informed’ was being delivered. In its most recent inspection report, the prison was rated highly as a safe environment with low levels of violence. This generally positive review was not reflected in the responses (n=70) to the 22 survey items relating to trauma, all of which were rated below the neutral threshold. The highest mean score was for the item, ‘Staff in this prison believe I can grow and change’, at 2.99, while the lowest was for the item, ‘In this prison I feel truly seen and heard’, with almost 60% prisoners disagreeing with the statement. Many women talked about the negative effects on them of not being fully ‘seen’, including feelings of loneliness: ‘all you are here is a number. In here you are very alone – extremely lonely’ (notes from interview); ‘I feel like I am dead’ (Soraya); ‘They don’t know your story here. They all knew my story in [another prison].’ (Sophia). Overall, while it is undoubtedly a positive initiative, and has been well received by staff, embedding trauma-informed practice, according to these data, remains a significant challenge.

4. Staff-Prisoner Relationships

Staff-prisoner relationships were complex in the prisons we researched. While many women reported that they could trust a few officers, this was not the case across the board. Most officers we interacted with voiced that female prisoners were more vulnerable than men and needed to be dealt with more carefully. They were also more willing to talk to women about their problems than they would be in men’s prisons. Taken together, these factors contributed to a number of issues, which fed into feelings of mistrust and women’s difficult relationships with authority rooted in their pre-prison experiences.

Many participants described a **blurring of professional boundaries**, whereby officers interacted with them on a level of informality that they found difficult to manage. For some women this worked well, but many of our participants struggled with inconsistent boundaries, especially when these represented forms of unprofessional practice, including the disclosure of personal details, perceived favouritism, and loose language. During our research women also commented on the difficulties of living in an environment in which coercive sexual relationships happened which further undermined trust.

Many of the incarcerated women we interviewed regarded their daily interactions as **infantilising**. Rhiannon, for example, commented on the similarities between discipline in prison and in childhood, and compared officers’ role as enforcers of the regime to that of a parent teaching a child that misbehaving has negative consequences. Generally, many women found the constant surveillance, control and enforcement of rules and regulations to be infantilising as well as petty. Being told what to do and when to do it, including, for example, officers monitoring who they interacted or were friends with, or what they were wearing, made some women feel like they were ‘back in school’.

The consensus extended to the fact that officers often **used their authority *inconsistently***. Inconsistency between officers, and in the practices of individual officers, made compliance with official rules difficult, and many women struggled to meet the behavioural expectations placed on them, because these were constantly in flux. Phrases such as ‘you never know where you stand’ (Arabella) or ‘you’re always on eggshells’ (Georgia) reflected the trepidation and uncertainty this generated, especially where it resonated with women’s experiences of erratic or abusive forms of authority in their lives before imprisonment.

5. Making sense of the sentence and the punishment

Most women expressed hope that they would be helped while in prison, but were disappointed with the level and form of help that they received in practice. Many felt that they had not experienced any justice in courts (especially women with serious charges against abusive partners), and that the assistance they had received during their sentence was very limited:

Getting the support that I think I need at this point in my sentence. I shouldn’t have to feel that I’ve been forgotten about, as a number. And any time I try to speak to staff, they ignore me, but you’re right here, in front of me, doing nothing but standing about watching the dining hall, where there’s another six, seven officers. Surely you can spare me five minutes?’ (Thea)

Punishment was not just communicated in court but throughout our participants’ time in prison and beyond. Lydia, an older prisoner encapsulated this sense of being treated as morally inferior: ‘It makes you feel that you’re just something you’ve brought in on your shoe’.

For many women, repeated sentences and the feeling of being given little or no help caused them to lose faith in the justice system, like Lexi:

‘There’s not a lot of justice [...] when you’ve got a history of coming to prison and you drug abuse and you’re like causing chaos outside, they don’t want to look into your future, they keep on your past’

The fact that imprisonment marks people, that punishment does not end with exit from prison, that being given a short sentence heightens the likelihood of returning to prison and that there is little practical help and support forces many women to question the meaning of justice and the punishment they have been given.

6. Release, resettlement and abandonment

Many of the women led lives of extreme deprivation outside prison. We met quite a few back in prison a couple of weeks or months after our initial interview. Many women were released homeless, were quickly recalled or ended up on another short sentence that led to the persistent cycling into and out of prison.

‘I was scared, because I didn’t know where I was going. I didn’t have anywhere to go. [pause] I wasn’t really excited about leaving’ (Charlotte).

Being 'set up to fail' was a powerful narrative from our female interviewees when approaching their release date. Upon release, many of them reported facing continuous problems, one of the most serious of which was leaving prison without accommodation. Many said that release from prison did not necessarily symbolise an end to the punishment and many returned to prison after a short while, and were resigned to this cycle of imprisonment, release and re-imprisonment:

'I'm 7 months pregnant and I'm going home Friday and I'm homeless, and they've still got nothing in place for me. (...) It's just literally present at the council and if there's a bed in a hostel then I'll get it, if there's not then I'll be on the streets.
And how do you feel about that?

Scared. Daunted. But I'm used to it now, that's become part of my life, this is like my 28th time coming to prison, which I'm not proud of, but I think every single time I've gone out homeless bar once.' (Freya)

Ella who had been in and out many times described the emotional impact of this cycle as follows:

'All sorts of certain feelings, because I've been doing this for so long now, in and out with my addiction and that. You get excited because you are going to be released and you are going to be seeing everybody but then you get this feeling of dread again, like oh here we go again sort of thing. It's like that vicious cycle and then get anxious as well because you want to try and do it and you don't want to let people down.'

The difficulties of release were exacerbated by the fact that women are at a particular risk when leaving prison (see Kendall 2013). Many of our participants were fearful of what the future would bring, and their feelings of being abandoned by the state meant that some described prison as a life-line compared to the extreme challenges of life on release. This shows the very complicated relationship between freedom and prison and belonging outside or inside (see Schinkel 2021) – an existential dilemma made more painful by extreme levels of deprivation, by often being imprisoned for minor charges (for short periods) and by having primary responsibility for children.

7. References and additional recommended reading

Chamberlen, A. (2018) *Embodying Punishment: Emotions, Identities, and Lived Experiences in Women's Prisons*. Clarendon Studies in Criminology, Oxford University Press.

Crewe, B, Hulley, S, Wright, S (2017) The gendered pains of life imprisonment. *British Journal of Criminology* 57(6): 1359–1378.

Kendall, K. (2013) Post-release support for women in England & Wales: The big picture. In: Carlton, B. and Seagrave, M (Eds.) *Women Exiting Prison: Critical Essays on Gender, Post-release Support and Survival*. Routledge, London, pp: 34-55.

Liebling, A.; Auty, K.; Schliehe, A.; Crewe, B. (forthcoming) What is trauma-informed practice? Towards operationalisation of the concept in two prisons for women. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*.

Liebling, A., Hulley, S. and Crewe, B. (2011), 'Conceptualising and Measuring the Quality of Prison Life', in Gadd, D., Karstedt, S. and Messner, S. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Criminological Research Methods*. London: Sage. (this book chapter describes the initial and on-going development of the MQPL surveys)

Player, E (2014) Women in the criminal justice system: the triumph of inertia. *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 14(3): 276–297.

Schinkel, M. (2021) 'Persistent short-term imprisonment: Belonging as a lens to understand its shifting meanings over the life course', *Incarceration*. doi: [10.1177/2632666321989018](https://doi.org/10.1177/2632666321989018).