

A Strategy for Women Offenders? Lock them up, programme them... and then send them out homeless

Pat Carlen looks critically at the Government's strategy for women offenders.

The majority of women lawbreakers are less likely to be imprisoned than their male counterparts because women commit far fewer seriously violent crimes, have shorter criminal careers, and far fewer criminal associates than men. None the less, in recent times the courts' perceptions of women lawbreakers have changed, and between 1993 and 2001 the women's prison population increased by 145% – the fastest growing sector of the total prison population.

In 2001 the Government published its *Strategy for Women Offenders* (Home Office 2001). Yet, although it is generally agreed that women are much less 'criminogenic' than men, in its prisons section the *Strategy* gave pride of place to the psychological programming of prisoners, with the declared aim of reducing women's crime by making prisoners view their poverty, histories of abuse and drug addictions differently. Moreover, although women prisoners' material problems are generally recognised to be much more complex than those of male prisoners,

committed suicide. One in ten women claim to be homeless when they are admitted to prison and, of those who have homes when they are admitted, about a third lose their homes and their possessions while they are serving their sentence.

Pressures on women to say that they have an address in order to get parole or home detention curfew may mean that even these figures are a considerable underestimate. To talk about making women believe they have many choices about how they live their lives when they do not even have a roof over their heads is irresponsible nonsense.

Despite the multiplicity of in-prison programmes designed to make women prisoners see their problems in a new (law-abiding) light, many still come out of prison with no safe address to go to. As a prison officer remarked to me years ago, "resettlement' without a home is just so much hot air. If they haven't a home (and, in the case of mothers, a home suitable for their children to be with them), what do we resettle them to?"

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instead of prioritising community provision for women offenders based on a realistic assessment of women prisoners' often unfavourable circumstances outside prison, the *Strategy* promised to establish in-prison behaviour-changing programmes based on outdated psychological assumptions about women prisoners' 'criminogenic' and faulty thinking.

Indeed, the *Strategy* underlined its psychological approach by claiming that a major obstacle to reducing the recidivism of female prisoners is that "experiences such as poverty, abuse and drug addiction lead some women (prisoners) to believe that their options are limited" (Home Office 2001:7, emphasis added).

What planet was that *Strategy* writer on? It should be obvious to anyone that women's (and anyone else's) options are indeed limited by poverty, histories of abuse and drug addiction, and that a term of imprisonment limits them still further.

In 1997 almost half the women released from prison were reconvicted within two years, and in the first six months of 2003 eight women in British prisons were in such a fraught state that they

With three-quarters of women prisoners serving under 12 months, there is widespread belief amongst the relevant professionals that there should be less emphasis on in-prison programming and more on resettling women in their own safe accommodation. Studies of desistance from crime support this view by suggesting that what happens outside prison in terms of housing, jobs and personal relationships is much more important than any brainwashing attempts made via prison programming. Other studies suggest that imprisonment causes more psychological damage than any in-prison therapy can ever cure.

None the less, instead of the co-ordinated community provision recommended by all previous inquiries and reports, we now have the 'cognitive behavioural' programmes which cost between £2000 and £2500 per prisoner (Kendall 2002). These programmes are most probably harmless, and, insofar as they help women pass the time more pleasantly in prison, may even be beneficial; but their claims to reduce recidivism are unproven. More worryingly, there may well be a link between the increased numbers of women sentenced to imprisonment



(together with a possible transfer of resources from community to prison for drugs programmes) and the unfounded claims that the various programmes based on 'cognitive behavioural' approaches can reduce recidivism.

Comparison of what is happening now in England with what has already happened in Canada and the United States indicates the emergence of a 'prison programming/increased prison population' syndrome. In the case of women's imprisonment, it is typically triggered when public inquiries result in recommendations for a three-pronged reform strategy: new in-prison programmes; radical reduction in the numbers sent to prison; and increased community provision.

In response, new psychology-based programmes are set up in the women's prisons and unfounded claims (or unfulfilled promises) are made that they will reduce recidivism.

But the community provision and sentencing reforms are quietly let slide. The ideological justification for this emphasis on psychological readjustment rather than social integration is effected by a translation of welfare need into psychological need (Hudson 2002). Whereas 'need' was previously seen to mean 'welfare need', it is nowadays translated into 'risk of re-offending' which, in Home Office jargon becomes 'criminogenic need'

requiring psychological re-programming in prison.

Non-custodial programmes holding to the notion that women suffer more from economic deficits than cognitive deficits, and which attempt to show women how to cope practically and lawfully with their daily problems, do not receive official accreditation; traditional in-prison programmes (such as art and discussion groups) deemed to be without anti-criminogenic purpose are abandoned in favour of cognitive behavioural programmes parachuted in from Canada and originally designed for men.

Courts, impressed by the claims about the success of in-prison programmes in meeting criminogenic need, and not hearing much about the community programmes or the research which suggests that the claims of the psychological programmes are ill-founded, send more and more women 'at risk' to prison. As more women prisoners are in poverty (and therefore 'at risk') than male prisoners, the disproportionately increasing numbers of female prisoners has a knock-on effect in the men's prisons, leading to more overcrowding there.

Overcrowding in the women's prisons results in a lack of fit between the locations of programmes and the locations of prisoners and the gap between reform rhetoric and reform reality becomes wider than ever.

The main lesson to be learned from the scenario described above is that community reintegration and penal incarceration are two entirely different and opposed processes and that the former cannot be invoked to justify the latter. If a court decides that the only punishment for an offender is that she should be sent to prison, then let us at least be honest enough to say that women go to prison for punishment. Prison programming cannot provide the magic bullet which will reduce recidivism independently of a change in women's circumstances outside prison.

Meanwhile, however, the women's prison population steadily increases as courts continue to succumb to the promises of programming and ex-prisoners continue to succumb to the realities of poverty and homelessness. ■

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References

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