

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear CJM,

Browsing through issue 14 of CJM I came across an article by Mary Eaton - Women in Custody, which I read. At first I thought it was a joke, but then realised with astonishment that the writer appeared to be in earnest. What an amazing piece of special pleading. Women are already treated differently by the courts in that less are sent to prison proportionally than men and those who are get shorter sentences. The differences between the numbers in prison approximately 1,600/44,000 are certainly not due to a like difference in criminal activity. The comparison made between 17% and 34% convicted of violence for females and males is therefore not a comparison of like with like.

The writer advocates not sending women to prison if they do not pose a threat to the community. But for some reason which escapes me, does not seem to be suggesting that the same treatment is given to men. I wonder why.

She cites difficulties with child care, a prison system designed for men, poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, the degradation of imprisonment and so forth as reasons for special treatment.

Most of the factors mentioned as applying to women also apply to men, and as far more men are incarcerated, they are at least to that extent of great significance.

I cannot see any justification for treating women more favourably than men. Whatever happened to equality of opportunity and treatment which the militant females have been advocating for years. Sex discrimination is unlawful. Why then should these principles not apply when it comes to imprisonment and sentencing. I can just imagine the furore that would result if the proportions of people in prison were reversed and some man was advocating the course that Mary Eaton clearly favours. The dust would never settle.

Yours sincerely,
J D Addison
Governor 4, HMP Littlehey

Dear CJM

Thank you for the opportunity to reply to the letter from J D Addison and thanks to the reader for taking the trouble to write.

To respond to the points raised:

1. In the first paragraph J D Addison recognises that as a population women's penal history differs from that of men, but he claims that this is not due to the difference in criminal activity. How does he know this when both the official statistics and the recent criminological literature give a different picture?
2. In the later paragraphs the writer appears to be puzzled that I am writing about women but not about men. I am doing so because:
 - i) I was asked to write about women;
 - ii) women are sufficiently different in their criminal history and social context to have different needs and pose different problems.
3. In the final paragraph J D Addison writes 'I cannot see justification for treating women more favourably than men.' Nor can I, but this begs the question of whether the present system is right for men or women. I would argue that such provision that exists, for good or ill, was designed with a male population in mind. If I had been asked to address the issue of men prisoners I would have considered whether that population is best served by this system.
4. Equality of opportunity does not mean uniformity of treatment, it is rather a recognition of difference. It is by acknowledging the differences that a system may respond most appropriately to differences between and within prison populations.

Yours sincerely,
Dr M E Eaton
Assistant Principal
St Mary's College
Strawberry Hill

Dear CJM,

The 'secure training order' for 12 to 14 year olds introduced by the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill is a step backwards in both penal policy and child care policy.

It has now become clear that the secure training centres will be run by private sector organisations with no experience in dealing with vulnerable and difficult young people. There will be just five centres serving England and Wales, so that many young inmates will be held a long way from their homes and families.

This measure is misguided for a number of reasons. First, there is no reason to believe that these new institutions will be any more successful than other types of custodial establishment for young people, with their 70 to 85% reconviction rates within two years of release. Secondly, the long distances from young people's home areas will weaken the family links which are crucial to their resettlement after they leave the secure institutions.

Third, a common factor in suicide attempts by imprisoned young people is depression aggravated by lack of family contact - a problem which, as explained above, will arise from the geographical location of the new centres. Another factor in suicides is often the bullying of younger and weaker inmates by older and tougher young people. With sentences of up to two years, the age range within the secure training centres will be from 12 to nearly 17, so that the scope for such bullying will be considerable.

Fourth, the cost of the measure will be high. The Government has earmarked £30 million a year for a system with just 200 places. This would be better divided between two purposes - providing more local authority secure units to improve their geographical spread and funding a comprehensive range of community programmes for young offenders in every area. The latter are much more likely than institutions to divert young people from reoffending.

In short, the secure training order is an expensive mistake, which would man unnecessarily locking up many more young people in establishments which can only increase their chances of reoffending.

Yours sincerely,
Paul Cavadino
Secretary, New Approaches to Juvenile Crime