



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear CJM,

In shock at J D Addison's contention (CJM 14) that 'the differences between the numbers in prison - approximately 1,600 (women) and 44,000 (men) - are certainly not due to a like difference in criminal activity'. I have been driven to maths!

Taking Criminal Statistics, 1991, Offenders sentenced by sex, type of offence and type of sentence or order, we learn that:

- 3,900 women were convicted of the offence of violence against the person as compared to 43,300 men so (and generously accepting that the degree of violence is the same) men have actively committed 11 times more violent offences than women
- 5,500 men were convicted of sexual offences as compared to 100 women, so men were 55 times more criminally active than women when committing sexual offences
- 1,400 women were convicted of burglary as compared to 44,500 men a plus activity rate on men's part of x 32
- robbery: 300 women to 4,500 men, a 15 times extra male activity rate here
- women were certainly more active, but less active than men when it came to theft and handling stolen goods, 25,400/107,500, and were only four times less likely than men to commit these offences; fraud and forgery approximately likewise: women 4,500, men 16,600
- men were convicted for criminal damage ten times more than women, 900/9,200, but the ratio lessens with drug convictions - men were convicted of 21,200 drug offences between 7 times plus more than women at 2,700
- men are more actively engaged in committing 'Other' unspecified criminal things than women, here the multiplier is eleven times plus, 2,700 women, 30,800 men
- males committed 10,900 motoring offences 22 times that of women who committed 500.

In 1991 47,800 men were sentenced to immediate custody as compared to 2,200 women or to put it another way they were sent to prison 22 times more often than women.

Of course these figures tell us nothing about gender- or race- or class-neutral sentencing, nor do they provide grounds for assessing any inequitable or 'favourable' treatment. No-one with a working knowledge of the capricious sentencing of the courts and the complexity and variations of both the crimes and the lives of the criminalised, would be foolish enough to claim that they do.

But I think we can safely assume that unless women are especially clever at avoiding detection and arrest (secretly committing the 4/5ths of crimes the police don't clear up perhaps) men are much more actively engaged in crime than are women. Unlike Governor Addison I think this is why there are so many more men than women in prison.

Perhaps we can agree on one thing: there are far too many girls and boys and men and women sent to prison. And isn't it time we started challenging the legitimization of inflicting such a brutal punishment on all of them rather than discussing the gender of the angels dancing on the head of this particular pin.

Yours sincerely,
Chris Tchaikovsky
Director, Women in Prison

Dear CJM,
The All Singing, All Dancing Probation Officer

Kevin Kirwin's account (CJM 15) of the contrast between his early years as a probation officer and those of today also reflects the experience of those who qualified many years before him, but I wonder whether distance has not lent enchantment to the view? My early days were similar (although I struggled to keep my caseload at 45, plus 12 reports a month). I felt isolated, inexperienced, and far too terrified of my experienced colleagues to ask for any help (and

enduringly grateful to the female colleague who did offer it unsolicited). My Senior Probation Officer was far too busy to offer the support and advice I really needed, and it was up to me to develop the contacts with employers, landlords, and other sources of help that my clients needed. I had absolutely no idea whether my work was good, bad or indifferent, and was therefore susceptible to the views of clients in this respect - not necessarily an entirely good thing. My clients in those days were far less demanding and less delinquent than are those of today's officers.

As a manager myself, I cannot say whether today's practitioners really value the attention which their managers can now give to supervising them, to helping them to develop their work, and to ensuring good standards of practice. I am however sure that the overall effectiveness of probation work is immeasurably enhanced by the development of specialist roles; and that Mr Kirwin correctly identifies the challenge which this then poses - to integrate our practice and to ensure that clients are jointly managed by different staff, or transferred from one to another, with care, courtesy and consideration.

Change is a constant feature of the probation service, because offenders occupy a constantly changing position in policy terms, and the problem of crime is never solved but always the subject of demand for improvement. In the past two years, the service has coped with an unprecedented reversal of policy for criminal justice, and I am proud of the dignified and professional way in which my colleagues continue to maintain their commitment and deliver the goods in the midst of such uncertainty.

Yours sincerely,
Jenny Roberts
Chief Probation Officer, Hereford & Worcester

KIDS VIP is a registered charity that has been established to lessen the effects that the imprisonment of a parent has on children.

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