

The issue of sending (expectant) mothers to prison attracts considerable media attention. Recent headlines like *Pregnant women suffer behind bars* (The Independent, 7 August); *Call for rethink on jail mothers* (Evening Standard, 24 June); and *Pity for mums* (Manchester Evening News, 6 October), highlight concerns about imprisoning mothers particularly for relatively minor offences.

# Mothers in prison

**Diane Caddle draws some conclusions from her research on prison mother and baby units.**

This is because imprisoned fathers generally serve their sentence knowing that their partners will continue to care for the children in the family home, albeit with difficulty. Imprisoned mothers on the other hand usually have to make special arrangements for the care of their children often relying on temporary carers, especially grandmothers, to look after their children. The knock on effects of these changes are considerable. As well as a new carer, the children may face a change of home, a new school and possible separation from their siblings.

## Facts and figures

There is no central record of the number of children with a mother in prison. But a recent survey (Caddle and Crisp, 1997) found that 61% of women prisoners were mothers of children under 18 years of age. Between them they had a total of 2,168 children, nearly a

third of whom were under 5 years of age. Three quarters of the children had been living with their mother at the time of her imprisonment. For most of these children imprisonment means separation from their mother. However, it is possible for a small number of babies to stay with their mothers in prison mother and baby units (MBUs).

## Mother and baby units

Four prisons have MBUs which provide separate accommodation for mothers and their babies within the confines of a prison establishment. The four prisons provide a total of 64 places as follows:

### Holloway closed prison:

13 places for remanded and sentenced mothers

### New Hall closed prison:

9 places for remanded and sentenced mothers

### Styal closed prison:

22 places for sentenced mothers

### Askham Grange open prison:

20 places for sentenced mothers

## Age limits

There are conflicting views about whether babies should be in prison. On the one hand there are those who believe that prisons are unsuitable places for children. On the other hand there are those who argue for an expansion of facilities to cater for older children, pointing to practice in countries like Holland and Germany where children can remain in prison until they start school. For now prisons in England have taken a compromise position accepting that the prison environment is not really suitable for children but that for very young children it may be in the child's best interests to remain with his or her mother than to be separated. But above a certain age children need freedom of movement and contact with other children which may not be available in the prison setting. As such, Holloway, and New Hall take babies up to the age of 9 months, while Askham Grange and Styal take babies up to the age of 18 months.

## Information about the units

All women should be advised on reception that if they have a baby,

or are expecting one, it might be possible to have their baby with them in custody. They should also be given a booklet with information about the units. But it seems that information about the units is not widely available. Caddle and Crisp (1997) found that two thirds of women potentially eligible for a unit place (ie with babies aged up to 18 months) had not been told about the units. Remanded women were least likely to be told about the units. Yet their uncertain position in terms of not knowing how long they will be in prison while awaiting trial, whether they will be found guilty or innocent or whether they will be sentenced to a custodial or non-custodial penalty, means that their care arrangements are most likely to be tentative and subject to disruption.

## Being on a mother and baby unit

The units try to provide a home for babies within a custodial setting. As such best practice suggests a child centred, stimulating environment with a variety of toys, opportunities for exploratory play and regular access to the local community. To help achieve this, nursery nurses are employed on all units.

Interviews with mothers on the unit revealed that over half felt that their baby's development was not greatly harmed by being in the prison environment. This view has been confirmed by Catan's research. She compared the development of unit babies with that of babies separated from their imprisoned mothers and cared for in the community. She found that the basic development of unit babies was normal and that good health care was provided.

Within the units Prison Service policy is for the mothers to be responsible for, and to make day to day decisions concerning, their children. Reflecting this, the overwhelming majority (90%) of unit mothers felt that the main responsibility for the care of their children rested with them and three quarters said that they were able to look after their babies in their own way.

## Conclusions

Prison mother and baby units enable a small number of babies to remain with their mothers. The number of places offered needs to

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be constantly reviewed as do the current age limits. Reception and induction procedures need to be geared up to target mothers with information about the units.

Whatever improvements are made, the reality is that the overwhelming majority of children will be separated from their imprisoned mothers. Because of this, measures like all day visits for children and special family days have been introduced at some prisons.

It is also clear that while mothers serve a sentence they try to keep their family together with all the associated strains and difficulties. This fundamental difference in the experiences of men and

women in prison needs greater recognition by sentencers and the Prison Service.

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#### References

- Caddle D and Crisp D (1997) *Imprisoned women and mothers*. Home Office Research Study 162. London: HMSO  
 Catan L (1989) *The development of young children in prison mother and baby units*. Home Office Research and Planning Unit Research Bulletin No 26. London: HMSO



**Child of Mine**

*Child do not cry or weep for me  
 Your life has just begun  
 The years have passed though sad they've been  
 There's loads of things I should have seen.  
 So please forgive my transgressions  
 As I did not realise  
 The pain you must have suffered  
 As I struggled on by  
 So now my life I give to you  
 So do not sit and sigh  
 You'll always be my baby  
 Until the day I die*

L Davies

Clean Break, the women's theatre group, was founded in 1979 by two women prisoners in Askam Grange in order to provide a voice for women prisoners and ex-prisoners and to educate the public on issues around women and crime.

Today Clean Break has a staff of two full-time workers and a number of part-time workers acting as freelance consultants, sessional tutors and support staff providing counselling and advice on welfare for women who have become involved in the criminal justice system.

# Providing a voice

**Mary Eaton learns more about the work of Clean Break Theatre Company**

I talked to Pauline Gladstone, the Education and Development Co-ordinator, about the current work of Clean Break. At their London premises in Camden, Clean Break run a theatre education and training programme offering a wide range of courses and workshops in drama, dance, singing, video skills and creative writing. The recent award of one million pounds from the National Lottery means that Clean Break will soon be moving to bigger premises in Kentish Town. These will provide five large workshop spaces for working with ex-prisoners and ex-offenders to facilitate self-knowledge, self-expression and self confidence. The new premises will also have space for three small workshops. The small businesses (media and stage crafts) occupying these premises will provide teaching hours and training opportunities in lieu of rent. They may even provide job opportunities for the women working with Clean Break.

**Plays and workshops**  
 True to its original foundation as a

theatre group, Clean Break still produces an annual play which focuses on an issue around women and the criminal justice system. The play is the work of a writer in residence in collaboration with women who have direct experience of the subject matter. In the past this has led to the production of *Head-rot Holiday* by Sarah Daniels (1992/3), *Mules* by Winsome Pinnock (1996) and *Goldmines* by Lavinia Murray (1997).

Once written and produced, the play then tours the country, giving 24 performances at a London venue, 13 performances at arts centres across the country, and 7 performances in women's prisons. Clean Break are continually looking for new ways to present sensitive material to women still serving time. As a result they have recently developed a workshop/performance format for presenting the play in the women's prisons. This allows for a recognition of the painful experiences that the subject matter may evoke and an opportunity for discussion and analysis of the drama within the context of the lived experience of

the audience. In this way Clean Break remains true to the aim of providing a voice for women prisoners.

This aim is also served by other Clean Break activities. Drama workshops held in women's prisons give women the opportunity of exploring their own and other's reactions to present and past situations. Frequently the emotions uncovered by drama lead on to writing as a means of exploration and expression. Clean Break offers a creative writing support service which gives women the opportunity to send in their writing for professional feedback and advice.

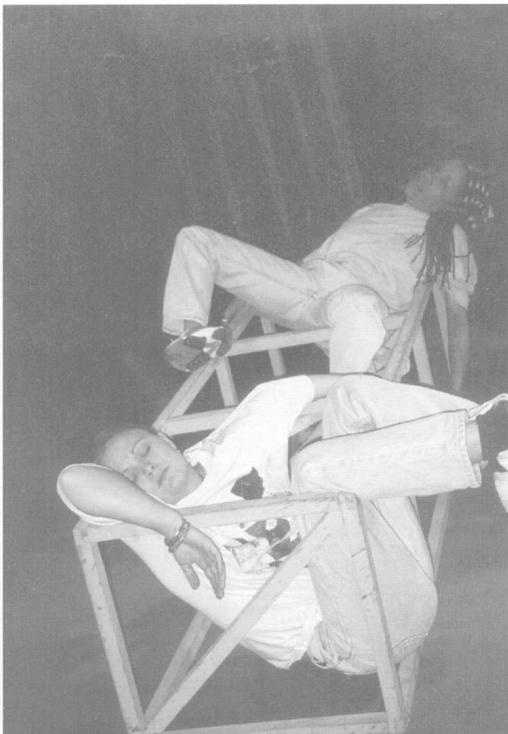
### The Take Five project

Making connections and providing continuity is central to the work of Clean Break. This was vividly demonstrated by the recent Take Five project. Over the course of a year, Pauline Gladstone coordinated work with women prisoners and arts practitioners across five prisons. The work done in each prison provided a stimulus for creative work in a different medium in the next prison. The aim was to encourage creative



Clean Break Theatre Company

*Is there something about the sight of a dirty neglected window that brings some basic human animosity to the boil? Or is it pity, are there a few sensitive souls who wander about putting uncared for windows out of their agony? Or do neglected windows themselves break silently in the darkness? Like languishing hearts? Certainly there always seems to be more broken windows about than can be blamed on boys wishing to prove their prowess with the sling shot.*



P. Gladstone, Clean Break Theatre Company

communication between women whose most common experience of being in prison is continual relocation which effectively severs communication. The project began in Styal with a creative writing group. Through writing the women explored and communicated their experiences and feelings with themselves and others. Some of this creative writing was then sent on to Cookham Wood where women responded through the visual arts working with large-scale photo-montage. The results from both prisons were then sent to Holloway where they formed the stimulus for a response in drama, once again celebrating both the commonality and the individuality of the women's experiences. Videos of the drama enabled it to become part of the work travelling on to Bullwood Hall. Here women worked with music and sound to produce a sound track using computer software with the human voice. The final site of the project was East Sutton Park. From here women were allowed out on day release to work in an editing studio to produce a five minute video in response to the creativity of the women in the other prisons. The theme of communication in a

situation of dislocation was forcefully brought home by the presence of one woman at both the beginning and end of the project. When the work began she was at Cookham Wood and she had been moved to Bullwood Hall before the year ended. Talking about the experience, this woman, and others, emphasised the value of taking part in such arts projects.

In 1999 Clean Break will carry out a similar project involving all the women's prisons in the UK. This will prove a fitting means of marking two decades of work with women prisoners. While the product, the creative art, recognises the damage done by disruption and separation, the process of women working together to create the art forms celebrates the potential for growth and change.

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