

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Mothers in Prison

Q How many women are in prison?

A There are currently around 4,400 women in prison in England and Wales.

Q How many prisoners are mothers?

A According to Home Office research, 66% of women in prison are mothers of children under the age of 18. At least a third are lone parents. Nearly 18,000 children a year are thought to become separated from their mothers as a consequence of imprisonment.

Q What happens when a mother goes to prison?

A Nearly one third of women lose their homes (whether rented or owned) as a result of being imprisoned. If the children do not have a suitable adult to look after them, for example their father, grandparents or other relative, they will be taken into care. Eventually they may be fostered or adopted.

Q What other problems do children whose mothers are in prison encounter?

A Just 5% of children of female prisoners remain in their home once their mother has been sentenced. Separation from a parent is a traumatic event, which has deep emotional repercussions. Children often become depressed and withdrawn. They may react with anger and feel a sense of loss, betrayal and shame. Children and families of prisoners often also suffer from abuse and bullying, at school and in the community. The stigma of having one's mother in prison can be especially acute.

Q How easy is it for a child to visit her or his mother in prison?

A Only a minority of women seem to want to receive visits, and most are not visited by their children but by other relatives, such as a parent or partner. This could be for a number of reasons:

- On average female prisoners are held in prisons more than 50 miles away from home, some of which are in rural locations, inaccessible by public transport.
- Many mothers in prison say that they simply could not bear to see their child whilst in prison and would find parting at the end of a visit too traumatic.
- Some do not want to put their children through the visiting and search procedures.
- For many families, the practical and financial implications of visiting are impossible to meet.
- Some women have lost contact with their children or are reliant on social services arranging a contact visit.
- For the increasing number of prisoners who are foreign nationals, a visit from their children is simply an impossibility.

Q Can a child stay with her or his mother whilst in prison?

A Babies up to the age of 18 months can remain in prison with their mothers in mother and baby units. Places in such units are limited, and not every prison has one. There are seven mother and baby units across England and Wales. In mid-1997 there were 39 children in mother and baby units. In 2004, 114 women gave birth while serving a prison sentence.

Q Should women be held locally, in units where contact with their children, irrespective of their age, is made easier?

A The Government has set up a project looking at whether existing women's prisons should be replaced with geographically dispersed, small custodial centres. A report is expected in April 2008.

Date: January 2008