

WOMEN IN PRISON

In the last ten years, the number of women in prison has tripled.

Yet they represent some of the least dangerous and most vulnerable offenders.

Samantha is 20. She is in prison for trying to import cocaine. Although it was her first offence, she was sentenced to four years. "I don't know why I did it. Someone's waving a wad of money in your face. Four years for a first offence..."

She has a daughter who is three years old. Currently her partner is looking after their daughter, but Samantha constantly worries that the child will be taken into care. On her infrequent visits her daughter is desperate for attention from her mother – sometimes resorting to hiding her shoes or taking her clothes off. "I wonder sometimes whether it would be better for her not to come," says Sam. "But I'm desperate to see her. It's so hard."

Women are imprisoned for less serious offences

17% of women were received in prison for violent offences compared with 24% of men. Most women are in prison for crimes such as theft or handling stolen goods. The top two offences for women sentenced to prison in 2001 were theft from shops (2,400) and fraud (490).

Women tend to serve shorter sentences than men

In 1998 49% of women who went to prison were sentenced to less than six months compared with 39% of men. Many women prisoners could therefore be eligible for alternative sentences.

Women have fewer previous convictions

Women are twice as likely as men to be sent to prison for a first-time offence.

Most women prisoners are mothers

Nearly 50% of women prisoners are mothers with dependent children. Around a third have children under five and two-thirds have children under ten. It is estimated that 8000 children are affected every year by the imprisonment of their mother.

Women prisoners are far from home

The relatively small number of women in prisons means that they are more likely to be housed far from home. This is immensely disruptive for families and many families break up under the strain.

More women prisoners have more health problems than men

It is estimated that 40% of women prisoners were receiving treatment for mental health problems the year before their imprisonment – double the proportion of male prisoners. Half are taking some form of medication for mental health problems. Almost half were drug-dependent in the year before entering prison.

Rethinking...

- Why are more women being locked up?
- Is prison the right place for mothers?
- What effect does imprisonment have on the offender's family?