

Needs of Women in the Criminal Justice System

House of Lords Debate - Thursday 25 July 2019

Women in prison are some of the most vulnerable individuals in our society. Over half say they have suffered from domestic violence and one in three have experienced sexual abuse¹. Reports show that female prisoners are five times more likely to have a mental health concern than women in the general population, with 37% saying they have attempted suicide at some time in their life². Figures from the Ministry of Justice have shown that a higher proportion of females in contact with Liaison and Diversion Services had mental health needs in comparison to males - 69% of adult females compares to 61% of adult males³.

Psychological therapies in the prison estate

Whilst emotional and psychological support for women in prisons has improved, it still varies dependent upon the prison itself; what the Governor's priorities are and what interventions are available in the community⁴. This postcode lottery of available support is damaging women's chances of overcoming their mental health condition and increasing the probability where they find themselves in a situation where they feel unable to cope.

Most concerning for BACP is that the availability of psychological interventions in prisons appears to be a relatively rare commodity. The Centre for Mental Health discovered that a few of the prisons they interviewed for their Mental Health and Criminal Justice report either had clinical psychologists or nurses with training in delivering psychological interventions; however, most institutions were not so resourced and were therefore unable to offer these services⁵. In contrast to this limited provision, the Centre for Mental Health found that there was a perception that psychological interventions could be of huge benefit to prisoners⁶.

The availability of psychological and counselling services in prisons as an alternative to medication is an important step to helping rehabilitate prisoners and minimise negative behaviours. In addition, an increase in choice of treatment, beyond medication, would also help improve outcomes for prisoners. Research has highlighted that psychological therapies often resulted in a significant improvement in symptomology and associated difficulties. Moreover, it showed that these therapies were found to be effective in

¹ *Women in Prison* (August 2012) Prison Reform Trust

² Ibid

³ *Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2017* (November 2018) Ministry of Justice

⁴ *Women in the Criminal Justice System* (2013) British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

⁵ *Mental Health and Criminal Justice* (March 2016) The Centre for Mental Health

⁶ Ibid

managing substance misuse. The positive perception from inmates to these treatments was also emphasised, with female prisoners noting the importance of counselling and appropriate mental health provision in supporting their recovery⁷.

BACP calls for an **increased focus on providing a choice of psychological treatments and counselling services to women in prison**, and that these services are available consistently across institutions.

There is also a need to improve mental health awareness and treatment in prisons. Lack of training and consequently awareness and understanding of mental health by prison staff means that many warning signs are ignored or overlooked, and prisoners are not being signposted to the help they need. BACP recommends that **all prison staff are provided with mandatory mental health awareness training** to improve their knowledge and understanding of mental health, and to help them identify and converse more easily with prisoners who are experiencing signs of mental distress. This training should be re-attended every three years as a minimum, to ensure that staff constantly refresh their skills.

Family

Family, especially children, is an area which needs a high level of consideration when discussing how to improve women's emotional wellbeing whilst in prison. Whilst the number of children affected by maternal imprisonment is unknown, due to it not being systematically recorded, it is estimated that the annual number of children affected in England and Wales is over 17,000⁸.

This separation has negative impact on both mothers and their children. The imprisonment of a household member is one of ten Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) known to have a significant negative impact on children's long-term health and wellbeing, as well as their school attainment and later life experiences⁹. Children of prisoners have at least double the risk of mental health problems and three times the risk of anti-social or delinquent behaviour compared to their peers¹⁰. Mothers are likely to have suffered severe distress from the separation, often exacerbating pre-existing mental health conditions¹¹. BACP supports the call from the Unfair Sentence report that **GPs, health visitors and midwives should be trained to support parents involved in the criminal justice system**, including 'equalities sensitive' training in providing physical/psychological support to women separated from their babies.

Recommendations

- BACP calls for an increased focus on providing a choice of psychological treatments and counselling services to women in prison, and that these services are available consistently across institutions.

⁷ *Mental Health Provision in Women's Community Services: Findings from a survey conducted in England and Wales* (2014) British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

⁸ *What about me? The impact on children when mothers are involved in the criminal justice system* (2018) Prison Reform Trust

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ *An unfair sentence, All babies count: Spotlight on the criminal justice system* (November 2014) Barnardo's and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

¹¹ Ibid

- BACP recommends that all prison staff are provided with mandatory mental health awareness training to improve their knowledge and understanding of mental health, and to help them identify and converse more easily with prisoners who are experiencing signs of mental distress.
- BACP supports the call from the Unfair Sentence report that GPs, health visitors and midwives should be trained to support parents involved in the criminal justice system, including 'equalities sensitive' training in providing physical/psychological support to women separated from their babies.

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

BACP is the leading and largest professional body for counselling and psychotherapy in the UK, with a membership of over 49,000 practitioners, drawn from across the various professional disciplines in the field of counselling and psychotherapy and based in a range of settings.

All BACP members are bound by the Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions and within this, the Professional Conduct Procedure.

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