

# RESEARCH FINDINGS No. 38

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## MOTHERS IN PRISON

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*Information about the number of mothers in prison is not routinely collected by the Prison Service. Instead, information is obtained by conducting surveys of female prisoners, concentrating in particular on questioning those who are mothers. The results of a 1994 survey are summarised here.*

### KEY POINTS

- ▶ 1,082 of the 1,766 women prisoners surveyed (61%) were mothers of children under 18 years. They had a total of 2,168 children between them – nearly a third were under five.
- ▶ Nearly three-quarters of these children were living with their mother at the time of her imprisonment, sometimes with their mother only. This meant that most of the children lost their principal carer and one-third lost their only carer.
- ▶ While in prison the mothers relied heavily on temporary carers to look after their children, notably grandparents and female relations, who often experienced financial difficulties as a result.
- ▶ The children were reported as having a variety of behavioural problems as a result of separation from their mothers.
- ▶ Most of the women kept in contact with their children by letters, telephone calls and visits. Foreign nationals had particular difficulties maintaining family ties.
- ▶ Three-quarters of the mothers planned to rejoin their children after release. However, accommodation and employment opportunities had been lost by many and financial difficulties were often anticipated.

### BACKGROUND

In recent years there has been increasing interest, both within and outside the Prison Service, in imprisoned mothers and their children. This is largely because children whose fathers are in prison remain with their mothers in the family home while the children of female prisoners face considerable disruption. What happens to children when parents are in prison is therefore particularly pertinent for women prisoners. In an attempt to provide an answer the Prison Service has carried out three surveys of mothers in prison – in 1982, 1986 and 1989. They provided information on the number of imprisoned women with children and the arrangements made for the children's care during the period of imprisonment.

The surveys had some limitations – prison staff usually identified mothers and distributed and collected questionnaires. This may have affected the women's

willingness to reveal whether they had children. Also, response rates for the 1989 survey were poor with 18% of the women refusing to co-operate. Certain aspects of the questionnaire meant that ambiguous answers were sometimes given. Moreover, remanded and civil prisoners were excluded.

Studies by outside researchers have also been relatively rare. One of the most detailed studies, carried out nearly thirty years ago, was limited to one establishment (Gibbs, 1971). A more recent study by Richards et al. (1996) was based on fairly small samples.

### THE PRESENT STUDY

This study was undertaken to fill some of these gaps. For the first time, remanded and civil prisoners as well as sentenced prisoners were included at the (then) twelve prisons for women.

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Interviews were conducted by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) over a two-week period during November – December 1994. There were two main stages:

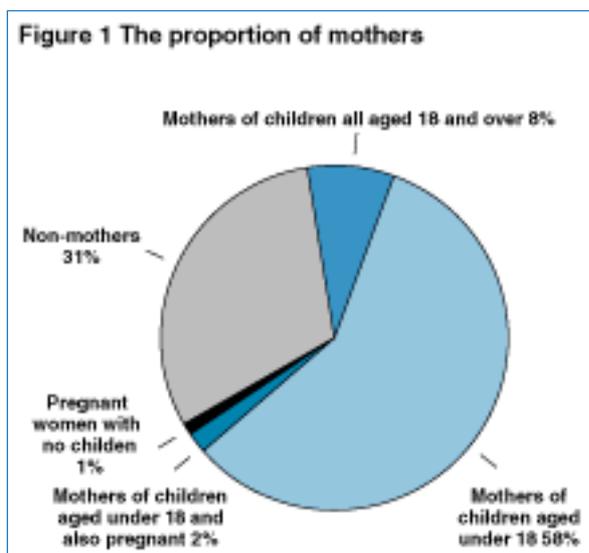
- ‘Screening’ interviews with 1,766 women prisoners to identify those with children.
- In-depth interviews with those women who were mothers.

The in-depth interviews provided information on:

- the mothers and their children
- opportunities for maintaining contact during imprisonment
- preparation for release and plans for reuniting with children.

### THE MOTHERS

Mothers were defined as women who had children aged under 18 and/or were pregnant. Using this definition of the 1,766 women questioned, 1,082 (61%) were mothers (Figure 1) of whom 1,057 (98%) agreed to be interviewed in depth.

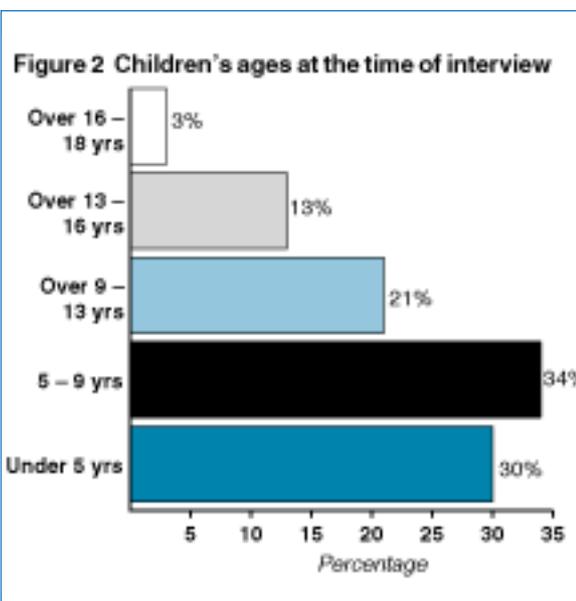


The women prisoners had become mothers at a much younger age than those in the general population. Over half (55%) were teenagers when their first (or only child) was born compared with a fifth of women in the general population. They were also more likely to be single mothers (27% compared with 8%).

### THE CHILDREN

#### Children's ages and living arrangements

The mothers had 2,168 children between them – nearly a third were aged under five (Figure 2). Almost three-quarters were living with their mothers before imprisonment, some with their mothers only. So, most of the children lost their principal carer and a third their only carer when their mother was imprisoned. This is very different from the situation experienced by fathers in prison. Whereas the children of male prisoners are generally looked after by their partner, women prisoners relied heavily on temporary carers to look after their children – notably grandparents and female relations (41%). This placed a heavy financial burden on these people which they were often ill equipped to meet.



Of some significance was the fact that fathers were caring for their children in only nine per cent of cases. Eight per cent of the children were placed in local authority or foster care (Figure 3).

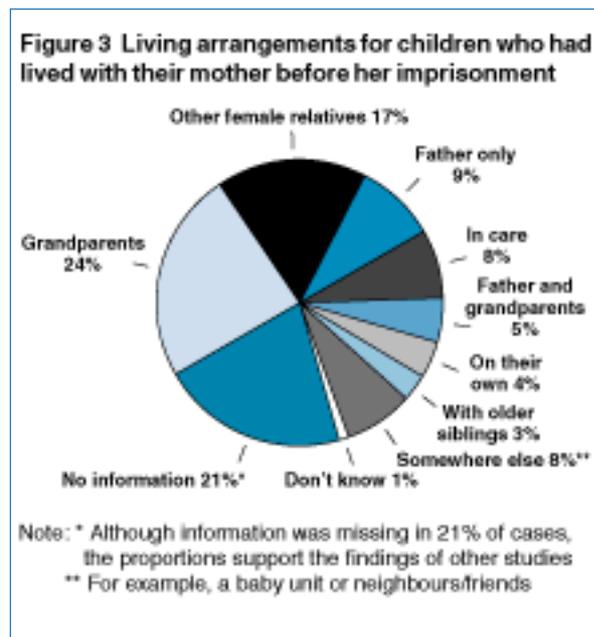
The children were reported to be experiencing a variety of problems as a result of the separation from their mother. Following imprisonment problems with their children's behaviour were reported by 44% of the mothers and 30% said their children had become withdrawn. (Such problems were more common amongst older children, those who had been separated from their siblings or placed in care.) This confirms other research (Richards et al. 1996) which found that the children of women prisoners tended to have quite serious emotional and behavioural problems whereas the children of male prisoners tended to have relatively minor problems.

#### Children's awareness of their mothers' imprisonment

Well over half (60%) of the mothers said that all, or most, of their children knew they were in prison. The children's knowledge of their mothers' imprisonment was largely related to their age and their ability to understand the situation: two-thirds of the mothers with children aged over ten and almost half the mothers with children aged between five and ten, said their children knew of their imprisonment compared to only a quarter of those with children under five.

Remanded mothers were least likely to have told their children they were in prison (37% of remanded prisoners compared with 45% of civil prisoners and 52% of sentenced prisoners). This probably reflected the fact that they were hoping to be released fairly shortly either without being sentenced or having served a short sentence.

Mothers who had not told their children about their imprisonment were asked to say why – the reason given most frequently (by 66%) was that their children were too young to understand. These mothers had most commonly told their children that they were working away from home or that they were in hospital.



### MAINTAINING CONTACT WITH CHILDREN

The Prison Service has recognised the importance of helping prisoners maintain family ties through letters, telephone calls and visits. Good contact with family and friends is seen as helping prisoners to cope better with custody as well as preparing them for their return to the community. Over the last ten years Prison Service policy has included the installation of cardphones in every establishment; a reduction of censorship of letters; an increase in the number of visits permitted and the introduction of all day visiting schemes for children at certain prisons. A limited number of Mother and Baby Unit places have also been provided.

#### Letters and telephone calls

The majority of the mothers were in contact with their children by letter (85%) and by telephone (75%). Difficulties with using the telephone were most frequently reported by unconvicted prisoners, reflecting their need, for example, to make frequent calls in connection with their cases or domestic arrangements. Expense was the problem most frequently mentioned by the mothers (49% lacked money to buy phone cards), but problems such as long queues and lack of privacy when using the telephone were also frequently mentioned.

#### Visits

Half the mothers who had lived with their children or been in contact with them before imprisonment had been visited by their children. Remanded mothers were least likely to have been visited, reflecting the fact that they were least likely to have told their children of their imprisonment (see above).

The children often had long, tiring journeys to the prison, sometimes for a short visit with their mothers in a restrictive setting. The mothers were asked what they considered to be the most important improvement to visiting arrangements for children – 36% said town visits (where mother and child spend time together outside the prison) and 27% said all day/extended visits. Other suggestions included an official escort to bring their

children to the prison and more opportunity to cuddle and touch their children.

#### Foreign nationals

Foreign nationals who normally lived abroad had particular problems maintaining contact with their children. As Richards et al. (1995) point out, Prison Service initiatives to help prisoners maintain their family ties, such as extended visits, have little relevance for foreign nationals. Not surprisingly, only a very small proportion had been visited by their children (11% compared to 60% of the British nationals). They were also less likely to have received letters.

Making telephone calls also posed more difficulties for foreign women. Overseas calls are expensive and time differences are such that the calls need to be made at times when a response can be ensured. To compensate for their lack of visits, foreign women can be granted a limited number of overseas telephone calls at the public expense – 57% had been granted such calls. Even so, three-quarters of the foreign nationals reported telephone difficulties compared with half the British mothers, mostly concerning calls being expensive or lack of money to buy phone cards.

#### Mother and Baby units

A limited number of Mother and Baby unit (MBU) places are available which allow mothers and babies to stay together in prison until the babies reach nine or eighteen months of age. At the time of this study 48 MBU places were provided. (This number has since increased to 66.) The present sample of mothers required 82 unit places. Information about the MBUs was not widely available to women on reception to prison and very few mothers had received the Prison Service leaflet about the units.

### PREPARING FOR RELEASE

#### Post release expectations

Mothers faced a considerable number of practical problems on release. Accommodation and employment opportunities had been lost by many. For example, as many as 39% of those nearing release had lost their homes and there was an increase in the number expecting to be homeless or in temporary accommodation after custody. The experience of imprisonment also had quite serious implications for the women's parenting and family structure, with an increase in the number of mothers who anticipated being single parents. The situation for male prisoners is rather different, with most returning to their partners.

Partly in recognition of these resettlement difficulties, the Prison Service has introduced initiatives to help prisoners prepare for their release. Inmate Development and Pre-Release courses, for example, teach prisoners skills to help them cope with major resettlement problems, such as those relating to housing and employment. Preparing prisoners for release is also an integral part of the sentence planning process whereby constructive use is made of time spent in custody by identifying and addressing prisoners' needs and developing their employment and training skills.

### Reuniting with children

Three-quarters of the mothers expected to live with their children after custody. However, plans for reuniting with children were sometimes affected by imprisonment. For example, 10% of the mothers who had lived with their children before prison did not expect to do so after release. Those prisoners who planned to rejoin their children often anticipated financial and housing problems. Others thought they would have problems with their children's behaviour, in getting their children back or with their children not remembering them. They were most likely to turn to their family for help with these problems.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study highlights the fact that while mothers serve their sentence they also try to keep their family together with all the associated difficulties and strains. Fathers on the other hand generally serve their sentence knowing their partners will keep things together, albeit with difficulty. This fundamental difference in the experience of men and women in prison perhaps needs greater recognition by sentencers and the Prison Service. For example, it suggests that, where imprisonment cannot be avoided, the regimes in women's prisons should provide adequate opportunities for mothers to fulfil their responsibilities towards their children.

The Prison Service has taken a number of measures to mitigate some of the problems resulting from maternal separation. It has recognised, for example, the importance of providing good visiting facilities both in terms of the length of visits and the environment in which they take place. Headway has already been made by individual establishments to improve arrangements for children.

Given the current pressure on resources it is doubtful whether other substantial changes are possible but the survey suggests some measures which could improve the Prison Service's ability to respond to the particular problems experienced by mothers and their children:

- The Prison Service could routinely and systematically collect information about prisoners' parental status which should form part of the Inmate Information System (88% of the women and 91% of the mothers said they would be willing to tell prison staff that they had children). This should be done sensitively with careful explanation that the information is needed to help plan suitable services and programmes within the context of the sentence planning process. At the same time women who are pregnant and/or have babies aged up to eighteen months should be given information about the Mother and Baby Units.
- The number of Mother and Baby Unit places has now increased with a new unit at New Hall prison. Even so, the provision of Mother and Baby Unit places is slightly less than required and should be continuously reviewed.
- The Prison Service should continue to develop facilities where possible which allow mothers to be with their children, e.g., visiting areas should, at a minimum, provide facilities for children to play safely and to have contact with their mother. If space allows, there should be feeding and changing areas so that mothers can take responsibility for the care of their children, albeit for a limited amount of time.

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More detailed results are given in *Imprisoned women and mothers* by Diane Caddle and Debbie Crisp, Home Office Research Study 162, London: Home Office. Available from the Information and Publications Group (address below).



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