

On detention: The use of prison for girls aged under 18

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Abstract

The objective of this project was to examine the processes that assist with effective resettlement for juvenile girls with specific reference to the work of the Rivendell Unit* by:

- identifying the concerns that young women and staff have about effective resettlement specifically in terms of gender;
- identifying successful current practice for this group in resettlement;
- identifying barriers to effective resettlement; and

- charting the experience of resettlement for these young women and follow-up issues over a set period of time.

Three main methods of enquiry were used: an extensive literature review, interviews with both the girls and members of staff based at the unit and follow-up questionnaires to external YOT workers.

**The Rivendell Unit at HMP and YOI New Hall, is one of five dedicated prison units in the country which holds girls between the ages of 17 and 18 and one month.*

Recommendations

Further research into the specific needs of these young women is needed to improve the understanding we have of this very complex group. This could then inform the necessary structural changes. Meanwhile, specific recommendations follow.

Unit-based

- To build upon good practice in the form of multi-agency working and education.
- To expand the education programme to include more life skills training.
- To provide narrative therapy-based interventions to build 'scripts for success' (Rumgay 2004) in conjunction with the holistic approach which values working relationships, social skills, group work and restorative justice projects.

National level

- To develop resettlement pathways which recognise the duality of vulnerabilities for this group; both as women and children in terms of domestic abuse and sexual exploitation.
- To provide suitable accommodation and gender-specific support packages upon release with appropriate support networks, relationships, the building of self-esteem and self-efficacy, and protection from exploitation placed centrally.
- To develop gender-and-age specific risk assessments to both provide accurate dynamic, criminogenic risk factors and also ensure effective risk management which enables the correct application of limited resources.
- To recognise the far-reaching impact of the population pressures upon this group and its potential for undermining all the good progress and plans established by the young woman and her sentence plan.

Findings

- The staff on the unit were all immediately able to highlight the differences between this age group and previous groups they had worked with in custody. These include the greater frequency of self-harm and emotional problems, the importance of relationships both with staff and support networks, and their own victimisation.
- The principle at the heart of the new regime is that 'The punishment of custody lies in the loss of liberty itself' (YJB 2004). Thus the interventions made during the girls' time in prison aim to be positive, inclusive and improve their life-chances upon release.
- The physical environment itself is subject to great debate both amongst the staff and the trainees. Of the staff that work at the unit, however, the overwhelming majority felt that it was a vast improvement (and) all the staff interviewed, without fail, identified that the new environment facilitated much more effective multi-agency working.
- Education was placed centrally within the regime to raise the girls' confidence and ambition. However, five of the staff thought that the education provision should be more vocational and/or life-skills based.
- The facilities, environment and culture of the unit have created vast improvements in the girls' 'ownership' of their own targets produced through this process.
- The major factor identified by 12 of the 14 members of the staff in response to the question 'What do you see as being problematic in terms of the young women's resettlement?' was accommodation.