

# Last chance: older women through the criminal justice system

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## Abstract

This research project focusses on older women in the criminal justice system and aimed to:

- ascertain what proportion of older women offenders (50+) make up the growing prison population;
- examine community sentences and other punishments given as an alternative to custody, for this group;
- provide a focus on the rehabilitation and resettlement of older women on their release from prison, especially those

with drug and alcohol problems;

- examine the role of outside agencies in the resettlement of older women offenders and to determine their effectiveness.

The research is based on interviews with offenders, magistrates, judges, justices' clerks, probation officers, representatives of voluntary organisations, a deputy prison governor and government ministers.

## Findings

- Older female offenders are often thought to be recidivists but in this study 10 of the 19 women were first time offenders.
- A higher number of younger women get community sentences as there is more unpaid work for younger people in the community. Some areas have very little suitable for older women.
- Older women in prison find that their needs are not catered for. They suffer more from age-related illnesses than older women do in general and their medical needs are not dealt with appropriately.
- Some offenders feel that the only way that they can get long-term treatment relating to drug abuse is by remaining

in prison.

- Older women can be carers upwards as well as downwards: looking after elderly parents or other relatives in addition to their own children and grandchildren. (But) at the end of 2004 half of all women in prison were held more than 50 miles from their home and a quarter were held more than 100 miles away. (Prison Reform Trust 2004).
- It is disturbing to see that more women over 50 are being given custodial sentences. Where older women are apparently being sentenced more severely than their younger counterparts, issues of age discrimination should also be considered.

## Recommendations

- Older women who are longer term addicts need detoxification programmes in prison but also support in the community. This increased support should be developed by increasing short-term residential facilities.
- Community women's prisons should be established so that where a custodial sentence is imposed, older women can remain near their families and thus stand a better chance of not re-offending.
- It would be advantageous to have separate older women's units or customised cells designed to cater for older women and disabled women.
- Proper account should be taken of the recommendations of the National Service Framework for Older People (Dept. of Health, 2001), *'At any point in time 700 people in prison are aged over 60. They have a wide range of health and social care needs both while in prison and on release (and should) receive services which meet their continuing health and social care needs.'*

- Prisons should provide good prison care, particularly catering for women's health and emotional/psychological needs.
- There should be an Older People's Panel (similar to a Youth Court Panel) which specialises in dealing with older offenders.
- Prison should be kept for those older women who commit violent or more serious crimes not petty offenders.
- There is a need for women only programmes designed for older women under community rehabilitation orders.
- Older women offenders coming out of prison need help, before release, with housing, with their educational needs, with finding a job or sorting out their pension, and with relationship issues.
- There is a need for the Government to develop a strategy for older offenders.