

Research Paper

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Time after Time: A study of Women's Transitions from Custody

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Executive Summary

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This study stems from the author's work as a manager with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), with particular responsibility for the INSPIRE Women's Project. The research explores the transition of women from prison into the community through the women's own accounts — within the context of Northern Ireland — and tests the view that, if women can sustain periods in the community following release beyond twelve weeks, the likelihood of successful re-integration is improved.

Methodology:

The research used a longitudinal qualitative methodology centred on in-depth, life history interviews with women pre- and post-custody; a group of fourteen women who spent time in prison in Northern Ireland in 2015.

Using a 'life-history' approach and based on multiple interviews with women over a nine-month period it describes their experiences of imprisonment, their release from custody and their transition back into the community. In doing so it recounts the challenges and problems they faced on this journey. The study is unique in that it not only aimed to explore women's experiences of custody, but also their transition back to the community - their plans, hopes and concerns. Importantly it documents their journeys over time - how they cope with adapting back into their families and the community, the difficulties they have to face and the extent to which their reintegration is helped, or otherwise, by agencies, whether official or voluntary.

Findings:

Research on women's pathways into crime indicates that gender matters significantly in shaping involvement in the criminal justice system. More recent studies have focused on the problems women face in custody and the impact of custody on families and community at the time of release. This research reveals that on leaving custody, women face lives which are often more difficult and stressful than they experienced prior to imprisonment, especially with regards to accommodation, employment, substance misuse, partner violence, ill-health and trauma.

The context of women's lives in Northern Ireland and their experience of imprisonment in a system that has been criticised for being overly concerned with security (Owers et al, 2011), is described in this research. Women in Northern Ireland do not have a dedicated prison, they are accommodated in a unit on a shared site with young offenders. All of the women found going into prison to be a traumatic experience and it was particularly harrowing for those there for the first-time. They described being unprepared and fearful of their situation, not knowing what to expect or how to manage. In contrast, those who were expecting a custodial sentence spoke of the plans they had made – much of which centred on the care of their families. Prison was particularly difficult for women who were the primary carers for their children and many respondents spoke of the pains of separation. The consequences of imprisoning women with children, particularly where she is the sole carer can be devastating, and the experience of separation was described by the women as the most difficult aspect of imprisonment.

Most women did adjust and reconcile themselves to prison life by developing a variety of coping mechanisms such as immersing themselves in prison culture and availing of programmes, classes and activities and building up friendships along the way. Many of the women spoke of the lockdowns and the impact that cell confinements had on their wellbeing.

Previous research notes the impact of institutionalisation on prisoners with long sentences but an important finding of this study was that even women who had spent short periods in custody reported a relatively rapid process of institutionalization. There were women who described custody as a place of safety, given that prior to custody they had survived childhood abuse, profound domestic violence, and on-going struggles with substance addiction and suicide attempts. Thus it is not surprising that most of the women described a sense of loss and disorientation in the initial days and weeks following release and the six-month period following release from custody posed the greatest challenges for women. Even women who had served short sentences spoke of the difficulties they encountered on leaving prison.

Women described how they were unable to cope with the day-to-day challenges of life outside prison. Simple activities such as meeting people, going to church services, going to the local town or shop and even using public transport were causes of stress but the most prominent concern was the feelings of shame and guilt. The sense of stigma that women experienced as a result of having been in prison was clear in many of their accounts. This was most acute during the initial weeks on leaving prison, however for many, the shame and stigma did not lessen over time. For some, they were able to shed their feelings of guilt and shame about their offending and prison and were unable to reintegrate back into everyday life. Women also reported the impact that being in custody had on their relationships and many experienced difficulties in re-establishing relationships with their partner and children.

Obtaining stable and well-paid employment is an important factor in assisting the successful resettlement and in reducing re-offending. Although half of the women were in employment prior to custody, only six of the women spoke of plans to seek employment on release from custody. The barriers to securing employment included family commitments, lack of transport, physical and mental health and the challenges of having a criminal record. Indeed, of the fourteen women, only three of the women had secured employment in the nine months following release. All were dependent on social security benefits when initially released from custody and a worrying aspect was the delay in processing their claims, which resulted in some being left in dire financial need for some time.

A high proportion of women in this study were first-time offenders and the majority had no previous experience of custody. Most were sentenced to a period of custody of less than eight months, some with a further period post-custodial supervision. The majority of offences were financially motivated and only one of the women was assessed as posing a significant risk to others. Over the period of the study, I am aware that only two of the women re-offended and it was clear from their accounts that the lack of structured support did contribute to their actions.

The question that needs to be asked is - did they need to make this particular journey, or to put it in another way did their offending merit a custodial sentence? It was clear from women's accounts that their period of imprisonment had left a long lasting and damaging effect on their lives, impacting upon their partners, children and other family members. The women acknowledged that they had done wrong, and they acknowledged that they had offended however many felt that a community sentence would have been more beneficial to them than their period in custody. They did question what purpose their incarceration had served society? Notwithstanding this question it was clear that when women received appropriate interventions and supportive planning for release that was matched by community backup, they were more likely to desist from further offending and re-integrated better into the community.

Women who were subject to post-custodial supervision did acknowledge the support they received initially from their Probation Officers. They welcomed the practical support accessing accommodation, finances, addictions and mental health services. Most reflected on the benefit of having someone to talk

to outside their family circle and they spoke of the importance of engaging in women-only environments where they did not feel judged. However, women reported as they moved on through their period on licence and due to the fact that they were not assessed as high risk, the level of contact decreased overtime and essentially became a monitoring function.

Women also reported that they felt that Probation placed too great an emphasis on the need to comply with the contact arrangements and overly stressed the penalties they would face for non-attendance. Women held misconceptions as to the process for recall and this highlights the need for full and correct information to be imparted to them throughout the period of licence. Finally, all of the women reported that the memory and experience of being in custody remained with them. The fact of being in prison, no matter what the length, or indeed how women coped with the experience did stay with the women throughout of the period of study. There is little knowledge as to when such memories fade allowing the women to move on to living their lives beyond prison.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 1 The Department of Justice should commission a review of the sentencing of women offenders in Northern Ireland in order to establish on what grounds women are sentenced to periods of custody.

Recommendation 2 The Department of Justice should ensure long term funding for community initiatives that provide women exiting prison with the practical and emotional support to rebuild and return to the community.

Recommendation 3 The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should ensure full assessment and treatment of women who report poor mental health and ensure that any required support is arranged with appropriate community services upon release.

Recommendation 4 All women leaving custody should be registered with a General Practitioner within her local community.

Recommendation 5 There is a need for the Department of Justice in partnership with the Department of Social Development to consider accommodation needs for women leaving custody, with a view to specialist provision for those women who have been excluded from mainstream accommodation.

Recommendation 6 The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) should pay further attention, and particularly the impact that custody has for partners and families of women in prison. There needs to be more emphasis on supporting the women who intend to return to the home by increasing the amount and range of family contact whilst in custody in order to reduce the length and time of the separation from their families. Consideration should be given to support women return to their home during the period of imprisonment by means of day release and at weekend visits in order to support and maintain family contact.

Recommendation 7 NIPS and Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should ensure greater contact arrangements are made to allow women to maintain contact with their children. Such arrangements should consider arranging contact visits outside the prison estate and making use of local child-care provisions.

Recommendation 8 The Department of Justice and the Department for Social Development need to put in place arrangements for women prior to them leaving custody and ensuring timely access to benefits.

Recommendation 9 Women leaving custody should be assisted to obtain personal identification documents to ensure that they can access services.

Recommendation 10 NIPS and PBNI need to ensure that licence conditions are shared with women in advance of their release to allow them time to fully understand and plan for release. Licences should be shared with women at least 14 days prior to their release.

Recommendation 11 PBNI should explore with the Department of Justice ending supervised licences before their end date where on-going supervision is deemed unnecessary.

ENDS

