PRISON
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Resetting the approach to women's imprisonment

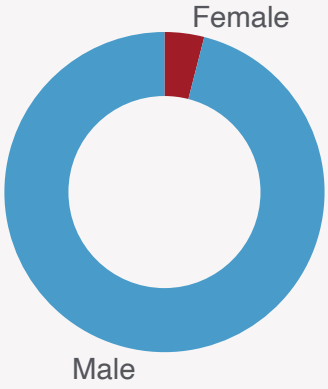
England and Wales

April 2025

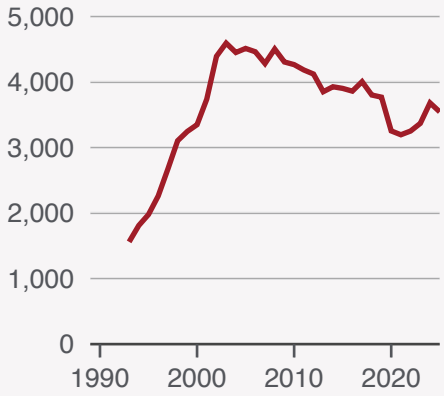
Women in the criminal justice system

The high level of multiple and often unmet need experienced by many women in the justice system is well documented.[1] Many women in prison are victims of more serious crimes than those they are accused of committing.[2] The past two decades have seen several key policy developments relating to women's imprisonment (see **Appendix 1**). Each of these developments show a trend towards recognising the distinct and specific needs of women in the criminal justice system and call for a reduction in women's imprisonment. However, the number of women in prison, especially on remand and on short sentences, has remained stubbornly high. Moving beyond this status quo requires bold and creative thinking alongside sustained development and implementation of pre-existing strategies. This briefing sets out key facts and figures relating to women in the criminal justice system and highlights progress to date in implementing an approach which recognises women's distinct needs.

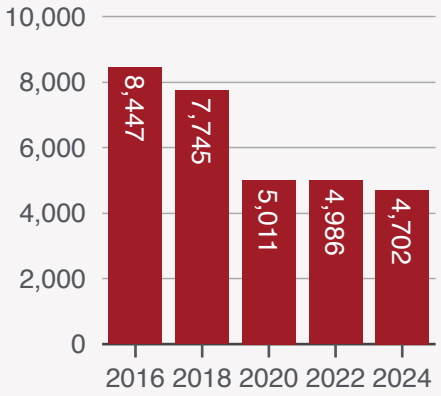
Women make up 4% of the prison population[3]



There were 3,546 women in prison on 17 March 2025[4]

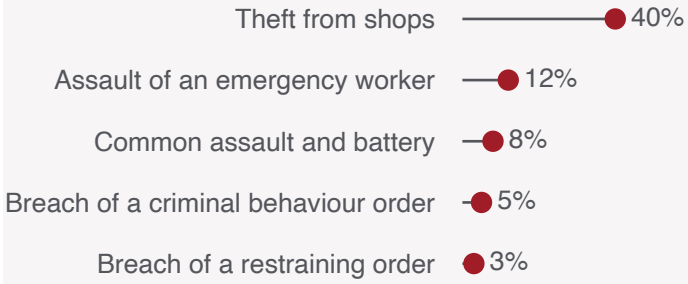


Women entered prison on over 4,700 occasions in the first nine months of 2024[5]

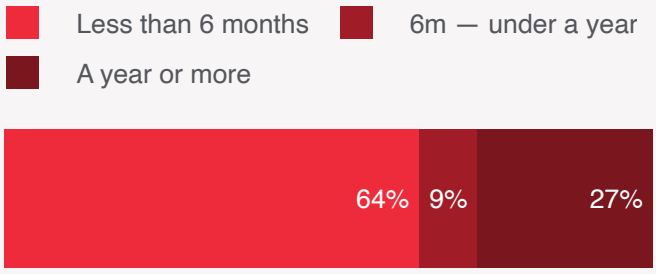


Note: 2024 data only to September

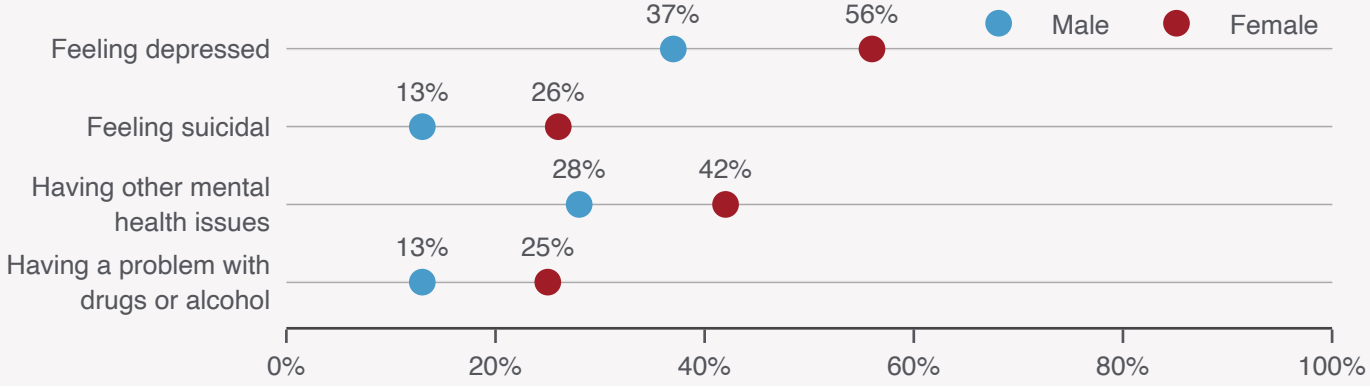
Women tend to commit less serious offences than men. For example, 'theft from shops' was the most frequent offence, accounting for 40% of women's prison sentences of less than six months in 2023.[6]



In 2023 almost two thirds (64%) of prison sentences given to women were for less than six months, despite widespread recognition that short prison sentences are harmful and ineffective.[7]



A recent thematic by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP)[8] found that, on entry into prison, women were more likely than men to report:



Women's imprisonment – the local picture

Last year, PRT published resources showing a detailed breakdown of the use of imprisonment from women in each police force area in England and Wales, based on 2022 local court data.[9] The findings showed significant geographical variations between police force areas. For example, in Nottinghamshire 73% of prison sentences given to women were for less than six months, compared to 43% in Merseyside.[10]

Some areas where there had been concerted efforts to develop more effective responses to women's offending through joined up working between police, courts, and women's services, showed a more positive picture. In Greater Manchester, for example, there was a 65% reduction in the number of women sentenced to less than six months between 2014–2022, compared to a 52% reduction nationally over the same period.

PRT has previously published these resources based on 2019 data, and very little had changed between these publications.[11] The postcode lottery of women's imprisonment, and overreliance on short prison sentences continues. We will be updating the resources in summer 2025 when the latest 2024 data become available.

Women on remand

On 30 December 2024, 26% of women in prison were being held on remand.[12] Almost nine in 10 women on remand are considered a low to medium risk of serious harm to the public.[13]

In 2023, 3,622 women were remanded into custody from the Magistrates' Courts, of which 32% went on to receive a custodial sentence. By contrast, 2,639 women were remanded into custody from the Crown Courts and 54% went on to receive a custodial sentence.[14]

In 2023, 26% of self-harm incidents by women in prison were by those held on remand.[15]

Women recalled to prison

In the year to September 2024 there were 2,603 recalls of women to custody, of which only 17% involved women facing further charge.[16] Women serving a sentence of less than 12 months accounted for 61% of recalls.[17]

Race and ethnicity

Women from minority ethnic groups are overrepresented at every stage of the criminal justice system.[18] They often face a 'double disadvantage' of being discriminated against because of their gender and their race.[19]

17% of the sentenced women's prison population are recorded as Asian or Asian British, Black or Black British, Mixed or 'other ethnic group'. This increases to 22% of the remanded women's prison population.[20]

Pregnancy, mothers in prison and their children

It is widely recognised that all pregnancies in prison are high risk.[21] Pregnant women in prison are seven times more likely to suffer stillbirth.[22] 215 pregnant women were held in prison at some point during 2023–24 — 21 more than the previous year — with an average of 47 imprisoned at any one time.[23]

It is estimated that, in 2020, more than 17,500 children were separated from their mother by imprisonment.[24] Parental imprisonment can double the risk in children of poor mental health and place them at greater risk of poverty, poor health and insecure housing.[25]

The UK has ratified the Bangkok Rules, which state non-custodial sentences are preferrable for women with dependent children and, if a custodial sentence is necessary, it should only be given after considering the best interests of the child and ensuring appropriate provision has been made for the child.

Mental health and wellbeing

A recent thematic by HMIP found more than eight in 10 women (84%) had felt unable to cope at some point in prison.[26]

Women are more likely than men to self-harm whilst in prison, with young women aged 21–24 being the most likely group to self-harm.[27] In 2023, women made up 27% of all self-harm incidents despite making up only 4% of the prison population.[28]

Evidence suggests that some women in contact with the criminal justice system who are considered to be in 'mental health crisis' are being remanded to prison for their 'own protection' or 'as a place of safety'. IMBs have found the number of women held under these provisions has increased in some prisons.[29]

110 women have died in prison since 2014. 41% (45) of these deaths were self-inflicted. This is a higher proportion than in the male estate where 28% of deaths since 2014 were self-inflicted.[30]

Resettlement

A 2024 joint inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation and HMIP found that in prison "there were too many barriers to good resettlement support…provision of services in prison is disjointed and too complicated, meaning women often fall through the gaps".[31]

The average distance a woman is held from her home is 63 miles, but many are considerably further away.[32] This means they can have more difficulty in retaining a 'local connection', which is often a precondition for local authority housing.[33]

Having somewhere safe and decent to live on release remains the greatest priority for many women.[34] RECONNECT services are an example of good practice that should be available to all women in line with their release plans.[35]

Less than half of women (47%) left prison in the year to March 2024 with settled accommodation. More than one in 10 (13%) were homeless or rough sleeping.[36]

Only 10% of women were in employment six weeks after release from prison, compared with 20% of men.[37] Six months on from release, this rose to 17% of women and 32% of men in employment.[38]

Progress to date

A whole system approach

An effective response to women with multiple needs requires government departments and professional services to integrate systems and support around the individual. Early intervention can help prevent women's contact with justice services and costly crisis responses. A whole system approach to women in the criminal justice system assesses her needs and provides gender specific multi-agency support.[39] There are good examples of whole system approaches, such as Greater Manchester and London where there have been concerted efforts to develop more effective responses to women's offending by collaborative working between police, courts and women's services across the health, social care and voluntary sectors. Building upon these examples would help to ensure all women in England and Wales benefit from joined up provision and person-centred support based on need.[40]

Early intervention and diversion

Several examples of good practice exist that may be further developed in keeping with the strategic aims of the WJB. These include, but are not restricted to, Liaison and Diversion services, Out of Court Disposals, Pre-sentence reports, and Problem-Solving Courts.

- **Liaison and Diversion (L&D)** services achieved full coverage across England in March 2020.[41] Services operate in police custody and the criminal courts to identify individuals who have

mental health concerns, are neurodivergent, and misuse alcohol and drugs. Information from L&D services helps to inform justice proceedings and decision making, including pre-sentence reports. L&D services improve overall health outcomes and support people in the reduction of re-offending. Each service has a gender specific women's pathway.

- **Out of court disposals (OOCDs)** can offer an immediate and proportionate response to women's offending. The simple caution has had a positive record in reducing reoffending.[42] The proportion of women dealt with by OOCDs is small and decreasing. In 2013, 35,737 cautions were given to women compared to 8,969 in 2023, a 75% decrease over 10 years.[43]

- **Pre-Sentence Reports (PSRs)** are a key part of the court process and give the sentencer a fuller picture of the person being sentenced. Courts are over 10 times more likely to impose a community sentence if a PSR is conducted, and the decline in the use of PSRs is closely linked to the sharp fall in the number of community sentences.[44] The quality of PSRs is key. Standard reports, the most detailed type, have fallen by 88% since 2013.[45] Oral reports, compiled on the day are unlikely to include all the relevant information a sentencer needs. Recent research by HM Inspectorate of Probation found that less than half of all inspected court reports were sufficiently analytical and personalised to the individual to inform the court's decision making.[46]

- **Problem-Solving Courts (PSCs)**[47] include a range of distinct models that put judges at the centre of rehabilitation and offer community sentences with specific components to support better outcomes. The white paper, 'A smarter approach to sentencing' (2020), identified PSCs as a "key approach to addressing offenders' individual needs with the aims to reduce re-offending and improve effectiveness of rehabilitation in the justice system".[48] Whilst there is a significant international evidence base of the effectiveness of PSCs, there is limited evidence from the UK because of inconsistent implementation and evaluation.[49] In July 2022 the then government announced three court pilots (known as Intensive Supervision Courts[50]), one of which is women specific. Interim findings in the process evaluation were published earlier this year, but were not gender disaggregated.[51] The full evaluation is forthcoming.

Community solutions

The use of community sentences for women has halved since 2011.[52] Unlike imprisonment, community sentences allow for maintenance of family ties, jobs, childcare responsibilities and housing — each of which are factors that help reduce the risk of reoffending. Community sentences help address the underlying factors that lead to reoffending, and repair harms caused by it.[53] The Ministry of Justice's own evidence shows that reconviction rates are lower for people on community orders than short sentences, and the positive impact is even more marked for people with mental ill-health.[54]

- **The Community Sentence Treatment Requirement (CSTR)** seeks to address the root causes of offending behaviour and improve health outcomes. Reflecting the link between offending behaviour, alcohol and drug misuse and poor mental health, treatment requirements are available for alcohol, drugs and mental health, and may be combined. Recent years have seen increased investment and development of CSTRs. An evaluation by the Ministry of Justice (2024) demonstrates the benefits of mental health treatment requirements, in particular, in improving health outcomes and reducing reoffending.[55]

- **Women's Centres**[56] play a vital role in reducing offending and reoffending by co-locating a range of health, social care and justice services in safe, non-stigmatising environments.[57] Women's Centres can be especially beneficial in the delivery of CSTRs for women. The economic argument in support of Women's Centres demonstrates the cost per woman ranging from £1,223 to £4,125 depending on need, whilst a place in prison costs £52,121.[58] Investment in Women's Centres is frequently short-term, inconsistent[59] and inadequate.[60]

- **Residential Women's Centres (RWCs)** have been suggested as a possible alternative to imprisonment. The Female Offender Strategy[61] committed to piloting five RWCs, none of which has materialised. Compared to investment in Women's Centres, RWCs are high cost and likely to serve only a small number of women. The charity One Small Thing has established "a pioneering residential community for women and their children" for which an initial evaluation is forthcoming.[62]

Appendix 1

Key policy developments

The Corston Report, 2007

This landmark review by Baroness Jean Corston argued "the need for a distinct radically different, visibly-led, strategic, proportionate, holistic, woman-centred, integrated approach".[63]

Female Offender Strategy, 2018

This government strategy launched a programme of work to improve outcomes for women in contact with the criminal justice system. It focused on the importance of early intervention, community-based solutions and delivering decent conditions for those women who do have to be in prison. A key aim was "to reduce female prison places".[64] In 2021 a PRT review of the strategy found only 31 or the 65 commitments had been fully implemented.[65]

The Farmer Review for Women, 2019

The review found that "family and other relationships needs to be the golden thread running through the criminal justice system". It focused on the increasing role of community-based women's services and recognised that many women are in prison for non-violent offences.[66]

Concordat on women in or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system, 2021

The document was originally promised as part of the 2018 Female Offender Strategy but was published more than two years later than planned and launched alongside the contradictory announcement of more women's prison places.[67] It aimed to support the implementation of cross departmental working to establish more whole system approaches to women in contact with the criminal justice system across England and Wales.[68]

Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan, 2022–2025

After publication of the Female Offender Strategy in 2018, a series of inquiries criticised the lack of governance, timetable and implementation of the strategy. In 2022, a delivery plan was published that set out how the government would deliver on four key priorities to reduce women's offending.[69] These were:

- fewer women entering the criminal justice system and reoffending
- fewer women serving short custodial sentences with a greater proportion managed successfully in the community
- better outcomes for women in custody
- protecting the public through better outcomes for women on release.

The National Women's Prisons Health & Social Care Review, 2023

A joint review by HMPPS and NHS England found women in prison have disproportionately higher levels of health and social care needs than men in prison and women in the general population. The review committed to improving health and social care outcomes for all women in prison and upon their release, reduce inequalities, and ensure equity of access to the full range of health and social care services for all women across the women's estate.[70]

Women's Justice Board, September 2024

In September 2024 the government announced a Women's Justice Board to "reduce the number of women in custody by using early intervention and tackling the root causes of offending." The board will publish a new strategy in spring 2025.[71] The board first met in January 2025, when the Lord Chancellor presented "a clear mission statement to send fewer women to prison".[72]

Endnotes

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The Prison Reform Trust works to create a just, humane and effective penal system and has long called for a reduction in women's imprisonment.

To find more information visit www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/project/women

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