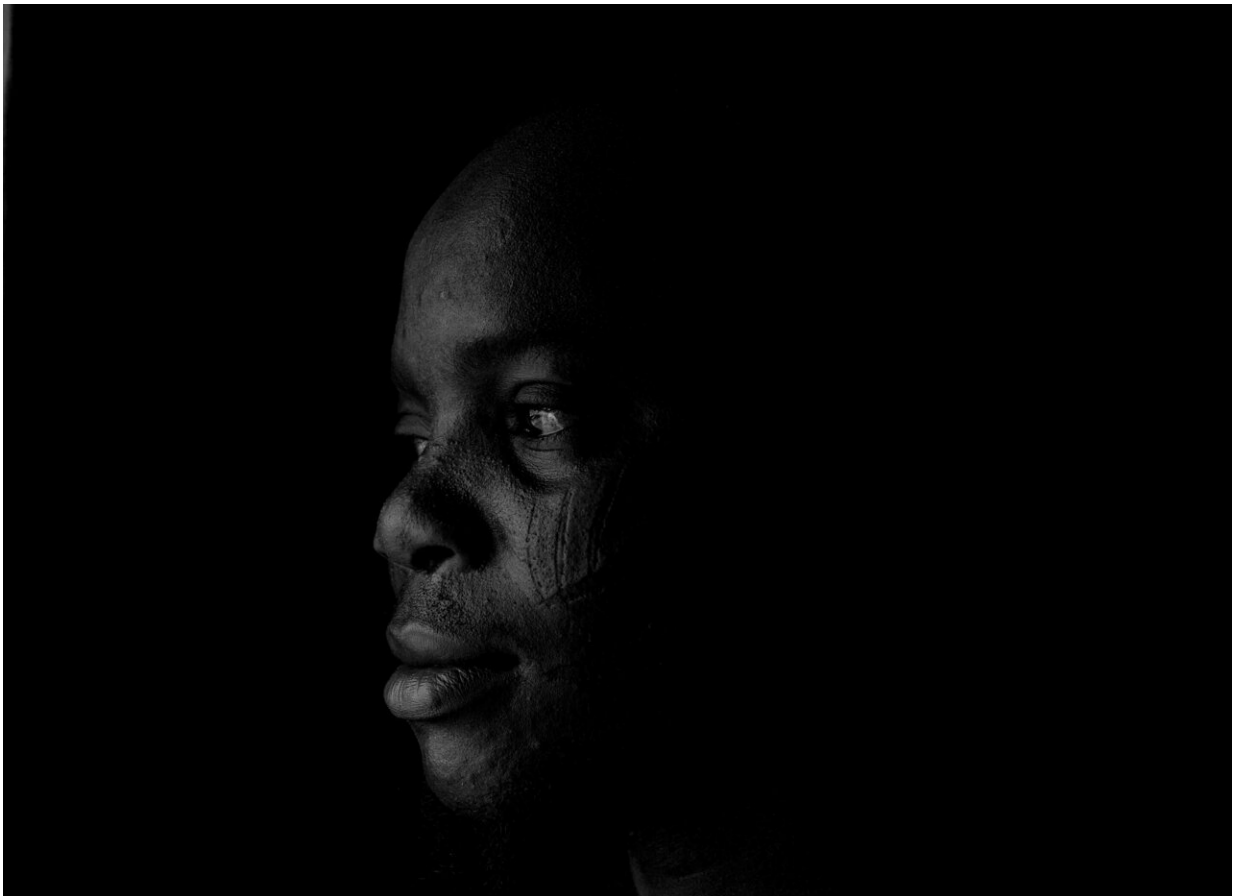


Women's prisons: Why they do more harm than good

July 30 2019, by Gillian Mcnaull



Credit: Oluwatoyin Adedokun from Pexels

Sending women to prison, and removing them from their children and families, has long been seen as a contentious issue. Particularly given

that women are [predominately nonviolent offenders](#) and tend to commit "victimless crimes"—such as theft—that are often survival based.

In England and Wales, the [Prison Reform Trust](#) and campaign group [Women in Prison](#), are calling for the decarceration of [women](#). Yet at the same time, Northern Ireland has seen a [recent increase in female prisoners](#).

[The weekly population](#) of women imprisoned in the Ash House unit at Hydebank Wood, the only women's [prison](#) in Northern Ireland, recently [peaked at 84 inmates](#). This is significantly over capacity. To put this into context there were 57 women in the unit (on average) between [2017 to 2018](#). And while it's common for spikes to occur in numbers of women imprisoned, a rise to over 80 is the highest recorded.

In 2018 [69% of women imprisoned](#) in Northern Ireland were sentenced to six months or less, while 29% were sentenced to three months or less. These sentence lengths are an ineffectual use of justice and have a [destructive impact](#) on women and their children. Indeed, in England and Wales, the justice secretary, David Gauke, has called for [sentences below six months to be scrapped](#).

A stopgap

Some 58% of women sent to prison in Northern Ireland in 2018 were what's known as "remand prisoners." This is when prisoners have been arrested and charged with an offence and they must wait in prison until their trial.

[My research](#) has found that in many instances, women are not remanded into custody because they commit a serious crime, but instead because of issues relating to marginality and vulnerability. I found that many women are being arrested and remanded to prison for issues around [mental](#)

[health crisis](#), suicide, alcohol use and homelessness.

I spoke to women who were arrested when they were in suicidal crisis. They spoke of damaging police cars or assaulting police officers due to their distress. On some occasions these women were remanded to custody not because their charges demanded a custodial sentence, but so that they could receive psychiatric assessment, or wait for transfer to a psychiatric bed.

In this way, women's prisons have become stopgaps, a place to simply put people society does not have alternative resources to deal with. Indeed, [recent figures](#) for England and Wales show that the number of women recorded as homeless when they enter prison has nearly doubled since 2015. This leads to an unacceptable use of prison as a place of "safety" and "containment" for women, despite the harms that prison produces. Prison is not the best place for women to receive support and it [doesn't always mean they are safe](#). And this issue is impacted by gaps in community supports.

Poverty and mental illness

I recently delivered a [policy briefing](#) at the Northern Ireland Prison Service, suggesting that women be diverted from custody urgently. The Department of Justice has since stated the number of women in custody is a "significant issue" and that they aim to reduce 'offending' among women.

While this is good news, efforts to reduce the number of women in prison must also include diversion from arrest. This is important because police responding to women in crisis [can often escalate issues](#) when there are other factors such as drink and drugs involved. And this can lead to the criminalisation of women who need help and support, rather than punishment. Specifically, more mental health support, addiction

support and housing is needed.

Within the rising female prison population, theft accounted for almost [30% of women's offences](#) in Northern Ireland in 2018, an increase over the previous two years. This raises questions about the possible effect of austerity upon women and the looming potential impact of the "[cliff edge](#)" of universal credit.

These shortfalls in housing, mental health support and detox services also impact court decision making. Lack of gender appropriate hostel accommodation, inadequate community mental health support and gaps in social care provision can lead to women being imprisoned unnecessarily as there is no where else for the courts to send them—further impacting fragile lives and harming the next generation of children.

While in Northern Ireland [the number of males](#) being sent to custody has [dropped](#), due to the increased use of [home detention curfews](#), decreases in remand and declines in numbers of offenders sentenced—the women's imprisonment rate continues to rise.

It is imperative that the Department of Justice address this inconsistency. This is particularly pressing at a time when the Northern Ireland Prison Service is developing a new estate strategy for imprisoning women. Methods to divert the number of vulnerable women being arrested and processed through the court system must be introduced. Otherwise, increased prison capacity only holds the promise of punishing and containing increasing levels of marginalised women.

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