

# Women offenders in London

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## Background

Women make up a small amount of the overall number of offenders in London. Women offenders are, however, a distinct group that often have very specific needs in relation to preventing offending and rehabilitation. Offending by women is commonly driven by drug and alcohol problems, mental health needs, coercive relationships, or financial difficulties and debt. Many women offenders have been victims of crime and many have dependent children.<sup>1</sup>

There is an increasing recognition of the specific needs of women offenders and the need for a tailored approach in dealing with their offending and reoffending. Particular attention has been given to the need to reduce the use of custody for women. Research suggests, for example, that the impact of keeping women in prison—often on short sentences for non-violent crimes—can include families experiencing financial and housing problems; an increased risk of antisocial behaviour in children; and children being moved away from the family home.<sup>2</sup> Many areas across the country have started to focus on reducing the number of women that are held in prison and dealing more effectively with women offenders in the community.

## Women's offending in London

- Around 30,000 of the total arrests made each year in London (15 per cent) are of women.<sup>3</sup>
- The majority of prosecutions of women are for 'summary' offences, such as acquisitive crimes (e.g. theft, and robbery), fraud and drug offences.<sup>4</sup> There are fewer serious or violent offences that could result in an offender being considered high-risk to the community.<sup>5</sup>
- The Prison Reform Trust suggests that London differs most greatly from other parts of the country in its sentencing of women: mainly because it "sends a disproportionately high number of women to prison".<sup>6</sup> In 2015, nearly a quarter of London's women offenders were sentenced to immediate custody, around the same as the West Midlands but more than other comparable and large forces.<sup>7</sup>
- The most recent data available on reoffending covers the period up to June 2015. The rate of women's reoffending in London is just below the national average: nearly 18 per cent, or 2,200

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<sup>1</sup> Prison Reform Trust, [Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment?](#), February 2017

<sup>2</sup> Prison Reform Trust, [Sentencing of Mothers](#), 2015

<sup>3</sup> Home Office, [Police powers and procedures England and Wales year ending 31 March 2016; Arrest data for 2014-15 and 2015-16](#), October 2016

<sup>4</sup> A summary offence is an offence that can be heard by a magistrate sitting alone, rather than a judge and jury. A summary offence can also be heard in the absence of the defendant. Summary offences are usually considered to be less serious offences.

<sup>5</sup> Prison Reform Trust, [A proposal for the establishment of a women's centre on the site of the existing visitors centre](#)

<sup>6</sup> Mayor of London, [Joint commission of a service for female offenders](#), December 2015

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Justice Courts by criminal justice area (CSV) 2015

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women, reoffend within 18 months of their sanction (compared to a reoffending rate of 26 per cent for men).<sup>8</sup>

### What works in rehabilitating women offenders?

It has been widely argued that the use of custody for women offenders is not effective in promoting rehabilitation. A review of vulnerable women in the criminal justice system by Baroness Corston in March 2007 concluded that “we must find better ways to keep out of prison those women who pose no threat to society and to improve the prison experience for those who do.”<sup>9</sup>

The Corston report made a range of recommendations with the aim of creating a “distinct, radically different, visibly-led, strategic, proportionate, holistic, woman-centred, integrated approach” to help women offenders. This included, for example, a recommendation that the Government should develop a strategy to replace existing women’s prisons with suitable, geographically dispersed, small, multi-functional, custodial centres.<sup>10</sup>

#### ***Problem solving courts***

The introduction of ‘problem solving courts’ for women offenders is being trialled. The aim of these types of courts is to bring together “the authority of the court and the services necessary to reduce re-offending and address the issues which drive crime.”<sup>11</sup> These courts:

- work on a “particular issue (like drug addiction), with a particular group, on a particular crime type or in a particular neighbourhood”
- focus on interventions like drug treatment or counselling which target the factors that lead people to crime, and monitor offenders to make sure that they are engaging with treatment<sup>12</sup>

#### ***Women’s centres***

The use of women’s centres has been promoted as a way of preventing offending and reoffending. Women’s centres provide a single access point for a range of services for offenders and women at risk of offending. Among the services they supply are:

- community sentences including ‘community payback’ and ‘specified activity requirements’
- counselling and psychological therapies
- life skill training
- support with court hearings
- specialist support for domestic violence or sexual abuse

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<sup>8</sup> Reoffending statistics are published by the Ministry of Justice. A proven offence is one that results in the offender receiving a sanction, such as a reprimand, warning, caution or conviction. A re-offence is when this happens for a second time or more in the 18 months following the original sanction. The data available is therefore subject to a time lag, so that it can be judged whether reoffending has occurred from the point at which a person is released from custody or has received another sanction.

<sup>9</sup> Home Office, [A report by Baroness Jean Corston of A review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice system](#), March 2007

<sup>10</sup> Home Office, [A report by Baroness Jean Corston of A review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice system](#), March 2007

<sup>11</sup> Centre for Justice Innovation, [What are problem solving courts?](#)

<sup>12</sup> Centre for Justice Innovation, [What are problem solving courts?](#)

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- accredited courses<sup>13</sup>

The HM Inspectorate of Probation's thematic review of services in the community for women who offend (2016) found that "women's centres are particularly vulnerable and some have already lost funding, yet they have an important role to play. We found cases where they had been pivotal in turning women away from crime and helping them to rebuild their lives."<sup>14</sup>

### ***Specialist provision for women offenders in London***

A range of specialist organisations in London are involved in providing services for women offenders. Many focus on specific issues such as employment or housing, but there are also a number of women's centres that aim to provide a holistic approach (see box below). Provision for female offenders in the capital has, become increasingly acute as a result of the closure of HMP Holloway.

#### **The Beth Centre, Lambeth**

The centre works to reduce re-offending rates among women offenders; increase positive familial relationships and increase the use of community sentences, rather than custody. Case Managers provide support based on women's individual needs, including advice, advocacy and support around issues such as housing, benefits, education, health, leaving prison and exiting prostitution. There is a comprehensive group workshop timetable, where women learn independent living skills and increase positive social networks.<sup>15</sup>

#### **The Minerva Project, West London**

The Minerva Project works with women who are either leaving custody or serving their sentence in the community.<sup>16</sup> The project delivers:

- advocacy and support to women who have or are at risk of breaking the law
- support and advocacy for women through the justice system and through the court process
- support services and activities to women and girls both during and after statutory supervision by the Probation Service or Youth Offending Service
- advocacy and support to women experiencing issues with debt, family relationships, social isolation, health, substance use, domestic or sexual violence and mental health<sup>17</sup>

### **Closure of HMP Holloway**

HMP Holloway was Europe's largest female prison, based in north east London. It had capacity for around 500 women offenders and young offenders. The closure of Holloway was announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review in November 2015. In a written statement, the then Justice

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<sup>13</sup> National Audit Office, [Funding of women's centres in the community](#), May 2013

<sup>14</sup> HM Inspectorate of Probation, [A thematic inspection of the provision and quality of services in the community for women who offend](#) September 2016

<sup>15</sup> Women in Prison, [The Beth Centre](#)

<sup>16</sup> Mayor of London, [Mayor's £500,000 boost to services tackling female reoffending](#), January 2017

<sup>17</sup> Women's Breakout, [ADVANCE Advocacy – The Minerva Project](#)

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Secretary said Holloway's "design and physical state" did not provide the best environment for the rehabilitation of offenders.<sup>18</sup>

Holloway closed in July 2016. London's women offenders are now held in HMP Bronzefield in Surrey (23 miles away); in HMP Downview on the Surrey border (19 miles away); and in some cases over 90 miles away in HMP Peterborough, or further.

Many organisations expressed concern about implications of the decision to close Holloway on London's women offenders. The IMB for Holloway, for example, was surprised at the decision as it had seen an improvement in conditions and the effective transition of Holloway into a local resettlement prison, and said that it was "worried about how the closure will affect offenders' rehabilitation".

### Role of the Mayor and the GLA

The Police and Crime Plan specifically refers to female offenders as a target group for reducing reoffending. It highlights that "female offenders need services that are specifically tailored to these needs and their circumstances" and makes a commitment to divert low-risk women from the formal criminal justice processes through the design and pilot of a police-led triage service that, will direct women into specialist support services.<sup>19</sup>

For those women who do need to be formally dealt with by the CJS, the Mayor has committed to "push for additional investment from partners, on top of £500,000 that MOPAC is investing, to expand access to specialist women's centres so that female offenders across London have access to gender appropriate provision designed to tackle reoffending."<sup>20</sup>

MOPAC's investment of £500,000 to boost services to tackle female offending was announced in January 2017. It intends to develop a new Female Offender Service, which builds on the work of the Minerva project. The Mayor has said that the new service will reach 950 female offenders across London. MOPAC's funding aims to enhance support services in 10 London boroughs, including specialist care in the areas of domestic and sexual abuse, trauma counselling, employment support, parenting and housing.<sup>21</sup>

## The investigation

### Proposed terms of reference

1. To examine the extent to which the closure of HMP Holloway has affected that rehabilitation of London's women in prison.

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<sup>18</sup> HM Government, [Prisons announcement](#), 25 November 2015

<sup>19</sup> Mayor of London, [A Safer City for all Londoners: Police and Crime Plan 2017-21](#), March 2017, page 74

<sup>20</sup> Mayor of London, [A Safer City for all Londoners: Police and Crime Plan 2017-21](#), March 2017, page 74

<sup>21</sup> Croydon, Southwark, Lewisham, Lambeth, Hounslow, Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington & Chelsea, Westminster

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2. To examine the provision of specialist support services for women offenders, in particular women's centres, across London.
  3. To assess the current and potential effectiveness of MOPAC's proposals to support the rehabilitation of women offenders through a Female Offender Service.
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