Prisoners' Education Trust

Young women's education in prison

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In partnership with:

T2A Transition to Adulthood

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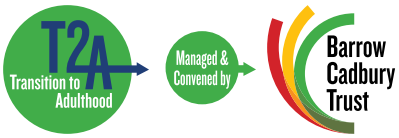

Credits and acknowledgements

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Executive summary

This small study confirms that undertaking education, employment and other purposeful activity in prison is of fundamental importance for young women (aged 18–24) during their imprisonment and after their release. While in prison, having access to the right opportunities can offer satisfaction and a sense of pride and achievement; it can provide a distraction from worries and a valuable sense of purpose. Physical activity, including use of the gym, and purposeful social interaction are particularly valued. Education, employment and other purposeful activities for young women in prison can also help young women to envisage a positive future after their release and offer a practical stepping stone towards further study, employment, or simply development of a hobby that is beneficial to their wellbeing.

Conversely, where young women in prison are denied opportunities for education or employment which they value, or indeed other purposeful or socially interactive activity, this is likely to be severely detrimental. The histories of several young women who took part in this study included childhood trauma, domestic abuse – including coercive control – and exploitation, which had had a direct impact on their engagement with education. Some of the young women identified lack of access to mental health assessment and support as a key barrier to their engagement in activities and overall wellbeing, and a cloud over their present and future. Some complained they could not access education and work opportunities in prison until they had undertaken their Maths and English Level 1, which felt to them like an arbitrary barrier. Several women found inactivity and excessive time in their cell very difficult to cope with and wanted more opportunities for purposeful activity and social interaction, including through team sports. Others described the satisfaction they gained from purposeful activity in prison, including work. Each of the participants described past achievements in education, employment and family life of which they were proud, and aspirations for the future as well as worries and fears.

Through this study we aim to help inform improvements to ensure that every young woman can experience the benefits of education, employment and other purposeful activity while in prison. We hope it will also be of interest to education providers in the community. We urge the Ministry of Justice to renew its efforts to develop a Young Women's Strategy, to do so through co-production with young women, and to include a distinct focus on education, employment and other purposeful activity. The aim should be to develop tailored support which is gender-specific, age-specific, and is accessible to all young women – including Black, minority ethnic and migrant young women.[1]

1 The author and Prisoners' Education Trust acknowledge that terminology to describe race and ethnicity is usually inadequate. This is the terminology currently used by Prisoners' Education Trust.

This work should draw on learning from youth offending teams and the children's secure estate, and widely held knowledge of the specific needs and characteristics of girls and young women. It should include universal provision of maturity assessments as well as assessments of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), provision of necessary support to meet identified needs, and investment in a wider range of education, employment and other purposeful activity in prison, including team sports. Staff delivering education and work opportunities will need to be highly skilled in order to engage young women and support their development. Barriers to participation should be removed, including through timely mental health assessments and delivery of therapeutic support where needed. Probation services should review their approach to supporting young women into formal learning and employment in prison and post-release. Progress must be measured through publication of data and insights from young women. Our recommendations are set out in full at the end of the report.

Methodology and research limitations

This report is based on qualitative research with eight women with experience of education in prison between the ages of 18 and 24, conducted between January 2021 and November 2023.

The research included one-hour telephone interviews with three women in the community between January 2021 and August 2022, all of whom had experience of education in prison while aged between 18 and 24 within the previous five years. All these women were referred to participate in the research by women's specialist frontline services. We also held a two-hour focus group discussion with five women aged between 18 and 24 in prison in November 2023. These women were referred to the session by prison staff. One young woman left before the end of the session. Two participants disclosed their heritage, including one Muslim Asian woman and one woman from a Traveller background. The research was also supported by an expert advisory group of women with experience of imprisonment.

The author acknowledges the limitations of the research given the small number of participants and the fact that they may not be representative. The three-year period during which the research was conducted reflects significant challenges in finding women to take part in the research during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, and the time taken to secure permission from HM Prisons and Probation Service to conduct research in prison. Further research with broader participation by young women would be beneficial.

Introduction

About Prisoners' Education Trust

Prisoners' Education Trust (PET) offers distance learning courses, advice and guidance to people in prison. The charity helps 1,400 people each year, giving them the skills to build brighter futures. PET uses policy and advocacy work to improve prison education and show policymakers and the public the impact it can have.

Every year, PET funds around 150 women in prison to take distance-learning courses, offering the same courses in both men's and women's prisons. Some of the women PET has funded use what they learn to support others – from founding charities helping women after release, to supporting young people caught up in crime.

Women's education in prison – good practice and areas for development

Research in England and Wales and elsewhere makes clear that participating in education while in prison reduces the likelihood of reoffending and increases the likelihood of prison leavers gaining employment.[2] It is known that 31% of women entering prison have been expelled or permanently excluded from school; 31% have experienced local authority care as a child, which may have involved disruption of schooling; and 71% have no qualifications at all.[3]

The latest data from the Ministry of Justice, from assessments conducted during 2022–23, shows that 76% of maths and 64% of English initial assessment outcomes for women entering prison were at the lowest qualification levels, Entry Levels 1–3, equivalent to literacy and numeracy levels expected at age 5–11 years.[4]

This compares to 67% and 65% respectively for men, suggesting that women entering prison have comparable levels of literacy to men but lower numeracy levels. Only five per cent of women's assessment outcomes in maths and 10% in English were at Level 2 (roughly equivalent to a GCSE pass) or higher. The data is not broken down by age category, so we do not know if the needs of young women differ.

2 Collins, J. (2024) Prison education: a review of the evidence
3 Cooney, F. (2018) Should prison education be different for women?
4 Ministry of Justice (2023) Prison Education and Accredited Programme Statistics 2022 to 2023

This data also shows that during 2022–23, 4,281 women in prison participated in education, including 2,111 who participated in a functional skills course, and 3,964 who achieved a full or partial grade. Again, this is not broken down by age. A recent joint review of the quality of work undertaken with women by HM Inspectorate of Probation and HM Inspectorate of Prisons noted that 'most women in our sample needed help with education, training and employment, but only half of them had received it'.[5] Little is known about the additional learning needs of women in prison, let alone young women.

In general, there is a gap in research into the experience and impact of education for all women in prison, and young women in particular, and a gap in understanding the views and experiences of all those with experience of education in prison.

In 2021, PET highlighted good practice and areas for development in its written evidence to the House of Commons Justice Committee's inquiry into Women in Prison, and many of these findings are echoed by this study. PET recommended:[6]

- **The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) should publish data on women's prior attainment levels and progression while in prison and do more work to identify the needs of women with additional learning needs.**
- **The MoJ should make the case for further investment in prison education, including digital technology.**
- **HM Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS) should review the processes that specifically disadvantage women. This includes disproportionate security arrangements that impede access to course opportunities, digital technology and Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL); and induction assessments which take place at a time when women are in 'entry shock' and unable to focus on the task, often due to worries about their family.**
- **HMPPS should expand the curriculum and provide more opportunities for higher level learning.**
- **HMPPS should develop a strategic approach to resettlement for women, providing motivational and supportive Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) that builds links with employers and education establishments.**

The Justice Committee subsequently made four recommendations which the government accepted, namely that the MoJ and HMPPS should:[7]

- **Set out how they are working to address the data gap regarding women's prior educational attainment, learning needs, care experience and school exclusion and ensure that data is collected and made available publicly. (Recommendation 29)**
- **Set out what work is being done to broaden provision of employment, training and education to meet the specific needs of women, both on short sentences and long sentences. (Recommendation 30)**
- **Provide more information about how they are implementing a gender-specific approach to improving access to ROTL, particularly in relation to education, training and employment, and to developing the New Futures Network to help place women into employment after release from prison. (Recommendations 31 and 32)**

Some useful data has since been published (see above)[8] but further work is needed to fulfil the above commitments. In particular, progress is needed to develop an age-specific approach for young women.

5 HM Inspectorate of Probation and HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2024) The quality of work undertaken with women: A joint inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation and HM Inspectorate of Prisons
6 Prisoners' Education Trust (2021) Prisoners' Education Trust submission to House of Commons Justice Committee Inquiry on Women in Prison
7 House of Commons Justice Committee (2022) Women in Prison: First Report of Session 2022–23, HC 265 (recommendations 29–32); House of Commons Justice Committee (2022) Women in Prison: Government's Response to the Committee's First Report, Fourth Special Report of Session 2022–23, HC 802
8 Ministry of Justice (2023) Prison Education and Accredited Programme Statistics 2022 to 2023

Young women's needs, circumstances and characteristics

Understanding the needs, circumstances and characteristics that are particular to young women is an essential precursor to developing effective prison education for this group.

Young women in prison

Women under the age of 25 make up 10% of the female prison population and are amongst those with the most acute needs.[9] As the government has pointed out, young women in prison 'are more likely [than older women] to have experienced traumatic histories including time in care, homelessness and premature parenthood,[10] more likely to self-harm than any other group of women in our care and are over-represented in assaults and anti-social behaviour'.[11] They are also particularly likely to have background experiences of childhood trauma, domestic abuse (including coercive control) and exploitation.[12]

The transition to adulthood is widely understood to be a time of vulnerability, with research by the Alliance for Youth Justice (AYJ), Transition to Adulthood (T2A) and others contributing to a shift in policy aimed at improving the support available. Nonetheless, as has been recently pointed out, 'there is a long way to go to improve outcomes, and there remain significant gaps in understanding how different groups of young people facing layers of marginalisation and disadvantage experience the transition, and the response that is required'.[13]

The case is well made by Agenda Alliance, AYJ and others, that the specific needs of young women and girls in contact with the criminal justice system have historically been overlooked.[14] In its 2021 Prisons Strategy White Paper, the government acknowledged this, expressing its wish to ensure it provides 'tailored, age-appropriate care and services to young women in custody'.

9 Ministry of Justice Prison Population: Offender Management Statistics Quarterly) April – June 2021 (2021), cited in Ministry of Justice (2021) Prisons Strategy White Paper, p.58
10 House of Commons Justice Committee The treatment of young adults in the Criminal Justice System: Seventh Report of Session 2016–17 (2016), cited in the Prisons Strategy White Paper, p.58
11 Liebling Prison Suicide and Prison Coping in Tonry and Petersilia (eds) Prisons 283–360 (1999), cited in the Prisons Strategy White Paper, p.58
12 Agenda Alliance (2023) A Call To Action: Developing Gender Sensitive Support for Criminalised Young Women
13 Alliance for Youth Justice (2024) Bridging gaps and changing tracks: supporting racially minority ethnic young people in the transition to adulthood in the criminal justice system, p.4
14 See for example: Agenda Alliance/AYJ (2022) "We've not given up" – Young women surviving the criminal justice system; Agenda Alliance and Alliance for Youth Justice (2021) 'I wanted to be heard': Young women in the criminal justice system at risk of violence, abuse and exploitation; Agenda Alliance and Alliance for Youth Justice (2021) Falling through the gaps: young women transitioning to the adult justice system; Goodfellow, P. (2019) Outnumbered, locked up and overlooked? The use of penal custody for girls in England and Wales

On this basis, the Ministry of Justice has committed to producing a Young Women's Strategy, 'bringing together best practice and evidence about how to support young women and providing the right services at every stage of their journey through the criminal justice system'.[15] This commitment was reiterated in the 2023 Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan.[16] However, no Young Women's Strategy has yet appeared.[17] The Ministry of Justice has begun pilots in two women's prisons aimed at improving outcomes for young women.[18]

Black, minority ethnic and migrant young women

In relation to Black and minority ethnic young adults in prison, AYJ reports:[19]

> **The disproportionate representation of racially minoritised people in prison is highest among young adults, and racially minoritised young people in particular report more negative experiences than non-racially minoritised young people…**

Women and girls from minority ethnic groups are over-represented at all stages of the criminal justice system, especially amongst younger age groups; nearly a fifth of young women prosecuted in 2021 were from minority ethnic groups.[20] Data on migrant women in prison is not broken down by age, and understanding of young migrant women's experience of the criminal justice system is limited.

AYJ has also pointed out disparities in educational experiences and outcomes for Black and minority ethnic young people:[21]

> **Structural educational inequalities and racism mean Black children are particularly likely to have poor experiences in school. Black Caribbean and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are most likely to be excluded from mainstream school and be placed in Pupil Referral Units. This puts them at increased risk of criminal exploitation, lower educational outcomes, and missing out on valuable educational opportunities.**

Black and minority ethnic young people also face disparities in relation to mental health needs and neuro-divergent conditions or SEND. Black and mixed heritage boys in the justice system are more likely than others to have an Education, Health and Care plan, and unaddressed SEND, and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are more likely to have SEND.[22] Research about experiences of SEND for young women and girls in contact with the criminal justice system is limited.

One of the focus group participants described being bullied at school because of her Traveller background, while one interviewee described what she experienced as differential treatment in prison because of her Muslim background (Interview 1):

> **They treat women like me a bit different. I don't think they understand a Muslim person's needs.**

15 Ministry of Justice (2021) Prisons Strategy White Paper, p.58
16 Ministry of Justice (2023) Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan 2022–2025
17 Agenda Alliance and Alliance for Youth Justice (2023) A call to action: developing gender-sensitive support for criminalised young women
18 Ministry of Justice (2024) Female offender strategy delivery plan: 'one year on' progress report
19 Alliance for Youth Justice (2023) Young people in transition in the criminal justice system
20 Ministry of Justice (2022) Women and the Criminal Justice System 2021
21 Alliance for Youth Justice (2024) Bridging gaps and changing tracks: supporting racially minority ethnic young people in the transition to adulthood in the criminal justice system, p.14
22 Alliance for Youth Justice (2024) Bridging gaps and changing tracks: supporting racially minority ethnic young people in the transition to adulthood in the criminal justice system, p.14

Research by the Osmani Trust found that young Muslim people in prison 'wanted much more support with their faith related needs and education whilst in prison as they believed this would have strengthened their resilience to reoffending' and recommended that '[p]risons must increase availability and contact time with Muslim Prison Chaplains as well the range of support and Islamic education offered by Muslim Prison Chaplains for Muslim service users'.[23] In their study, Muslim young people reported difficulties accessing some courses, especially Islamic studies. Forthcoming research by the Muslim Women in Prison project on young Muslim women's experiences in the criminal justice system will add to this evidence base.

Young women experiencing domestic abuse, coercive control and family pressures

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of girls and young women (16–24) serving sentences in the community have experienced rape or domestic abuse in an intimate partner relationship.[24] Young women face particular barriers to disclosing abuse.[25] In a recent survey of psychiatrists, 59% said violence and abuse was contributing to mental illness in their female patients, closely followed by relationship issues (49%), often caused by coercive behaviour, and home and family pressures (48%).[26]

Domestic abuse and family pressures were prominent in the backgrounds of several of the research participants. Three focus group participants mentioned their experience of coercion in intimate partner relationships before imprisonment, which affected their experience of education or employment. One explained how she had tried to be moved from a school because her then partner did not like her being there:

> **I liked that school; I made friends straight away there. At the other school I was always fighting everyone. But I had to get myself kicked out because my partner didn't like me being there.**

When asked if she felt there was anyone she could have talked to about the pressure she was under from her boyfriend, this participant immediately closed down this line of discussion:

> **I didn't talk to anyone. I still don't talk about it now.**

Another participant explained:

> **I came into prison three months ago, aged 22. I was with someone for six years – he was 36, I was 16. He took me out of college and my job; I was on drugs and prostituting for drugs – he was controlling me. I was using heroin every day. I had a miscarriage and didn't know I was pregnant.**

A third participant commented:

> **When I came to prison, I was on heroin with my partner. Because I was in recovery from my operation I wasn't in work. But I was then planning to go**

23 Osmani Trust (2023) Rebuilding lives: young Muslims from the criminal justice system to community resettlement, p.10
24 Kevin Wong, Rachel Kinsella, Jessica Bamonte and Linda Meadows, T2A Final Process Evaluation Report For the Barrow Cadbury Trust (Manchester Metropolitan University, 2017).
25 Agenda Alliance and Alliance for Youth Justice, Young women's Justice Project Briefing "I Wanted to be Heard" (2021).
26 Royal College of Psychiatrists press release, 'Violence and abuse are driving mental illness in women and girls, psychiatrists warn', 8 March 2024

back to work. But because of how heavily I was using heroin it wasn't possible to go back to work. Because she controlled me, I was alienated from family and friends; she isolated me. It was difficult to hold down a job because of the way she was. So it was easier to not work.

One interviewee talked about her experience of domestic abuse within her family, which was directly connected to her offence (Interview 1):

> **I was subject to physical abuse from the hands of my own family, the ones that were meant to protect me from danger. It started when I was a young child. It was just ongoing in my life. There was no stop to it until this crime happened.**
>
> **People struggle to understand the dynamics of how my family worked. They blamed me in court.**

One focus group participant cited family pressures as contributing to her difficulties before prison, while others commented positively on the support they received from family. Two of the women cited influence from friends and connected this with their use of drugs and alcohol and their subsequent offending:

> **I couldn't have faulted my parents – I had an amazing upbringing, but it was the people I associated with – people from school – from smoking weed to party drugs…**

Another focus group participant explained how her mother's mental health needs and problematic substance use had impacted on her:

> **I'd had quite a rough time before I came in here. I found out my mum had started taking drugs, so I had to get my siblings into a better situation; they didn't need to see that. It also put a lot of stress on me so I wasn't able to fully provide for my little boy either. So, my great aunt took him on for me, to give him more than what I could give him.**
>
> **…**
>
> **After that I got into a lot of bad relationships, got beat up a lot, drinking a lot, taking drugs; in some ways I'm thankful for the position I'm in now because it's got me away from all that.**

Young women with experience of local authority care

Young women's experience of local authority care can leave them more vulnerable to criminalisation and create additional barriers to disclosure of abuse,[27] as well as the broader gendered experience of stigma and devaluation that can play a significant role in the criminalisation of young women and have an impact on their transition to adulthood.[28] One interviewee, who had experience of local authority care and had been convicted of an offence under the law of joint enterprise, explained (Interview 2):

> **I was heavily involved in gangs. I was there [when the offence took place]…**

27 Kate Hunter, Brian Francis and Claire Fitzpatrick, Care Experience, Ethnicity and Youth Justice Involvement: Key Trends and Policy Implications (ADR UK, 2023); Jo Staines, Claire Fitzpatrick, Julia Shaw and Katie Hunter, "We Need to Tackle Their Well Being First': Understanding and Supporting Care-Experienced Girls in the Youth Justice System' (2023) Youth Justice online.

28 Gilly Sharpe, Women, Stigma, and Desistance from Crime: Precarious Identities in the Transition to Adulthood (Routledge, 2024).

She went on to explain:

> **I was physically abused when I was younger by my mother… I was then put in foster care. I had been in trouble once or twice before this but not imprisoned – for anti-social behaviour.**

This interviewee had positive experience of education while on bail, which was organised with help from social services because she was a care leaver:

> **Once out on bail… I went to another college and studied art for a couple of months but had to stop because I was going through the trial. It was a nice distraction… Social services helped me with that – I was still a looked after child, leaving care – still under 19.**

Young women and mental health

One focus group participant explained how a breakdown in her mental health had led directly to her offence:

> **I had a major breakdown and then ended up in prison. Because there wasn't mental health support outside and they had no choice but to send me to prison because of how I was behaving.**

This participant's future plans were dependent on receiving mental health support:

> **I want to go back to my barbering - as I've got a qualification I can rent a chair; hopefully my old boss will take me back. It's something I enjoy and will help with my confidence and mental health. Being around people all day, the amount of different types of people I met while I was working as a barber was crazy – from small babies to elderly people; no day is the same.**
>
> **What I need to achieve this is mental health support; I have been on a waiting list for so long and not even been assessed. I've been waiting 7 months for a mental health assessment.**

She went on to describe the negative impact on her mental health of being locked up and having limited activities, and the contrast between this and her life before imprisonment:

> **I just feel like I need to talk to someone. We're locked in from 6.30 in the evening until the morning. For people with mental health problems, it's ridiculous that you're locked up. You get locked up at 4.30 on the weekend. There should be more activities for us to do to occupy our mind. If you could work on the weekend and not just wing work.**
>
> **I worked 52 hours a week. So now, not working has completely destroyed my life – my social life was so good; I was living at home with my mum and dad. I had a partner and a car and work. Now I'm in here with no one and am struggling. I don't see a way out…**
>
> **… I feel stuck... Doctors said I may have to wait 18 months for mental health treatment... If there was more help on the outside, I probably wouldn't be in this situation now.**

She also noted the negative impact of having restricted family visits:

> **I think as well, when you're only on standard you only get two visits a month. I think if you're sentenced you should get more visits. It isn't enough at all.**

Two other focus group participants had waited five months for a mental health assessment. One explained:

> **I waited five months for a mental health assessment. Now I'm waiting for therapy. I don't know what is on offer – you don't get given a list; you just get told at the time.**

She agreed that the lack of activities was detrimental to wellbeing, particularly where you were already struggling with your mental health, commenting:

> **If you ask for a distraction pack, you get given some printed pictures and colouring pencils. Not everyone is a colouring person; some people like crosswords.**
>
> **I went from being super busy all the time to being on my own.**

One participant, who was receiving mental health support, felt the prison staff were doing their best in difficult circumstances:

> **Considering the staff shortages I think they do really well; considering there's no staff. I quite like the routine we're in. It's probably because I am working with mental health already. I had to wait for eight months.**

She noted the difficulty of separation from family:

> **Being away from my daughter and family has been hard.**

An interviewee explained that she felt inhibited about speaking about her mental health before going to prison, and agreed that inactivity was detrimental to mental wellbeing while in prison (Interview 1):

> **Self-harming is my coping mechanism. I self-harmed a lot in prison and got no support…**
>
> **I wasn't involved with mental health services before going to prison. You can't really talk to people that you've got mental health or they will probably think you're crazy. If you've got an injury, you can see it in clear daylight. In mental health it's always hidden. I'm one of those that won't speak about it…**
>
> **It's hard to say whether my mental wellbeing was improved [in prison]. The only way is staying busy, then you're not really thinking about other things. But then you're back behind your cell door, thinking about everything going round in your head.**

This interviewee also had a long wait before she received mental health support and described the negative impact this had on her:

> **I used to see a mental health nurse and some counselling for a few weeks. It was such a long wait before it started. It was someone to talk to. Even now I have counselling, and I had to wait so long to get it done.**

She went on to reflect on how this delay affected her, and the lack of support in prison to respond to ongoing coercive control:

> **The waiting is horrendous. People think people are fine but it's killing them inside. I got so anxious. I had family controlling me through phone calls and letters. My whole body was covered with plasters [from my self-harm].**

The same interviewee talked about how she sought support from education staff and other prison staff when she was experiencing mental health difficulties in prison, but felt she had been let down:

> **I used to talk to my teachers when I was struggling. The only thing they do is, for them to protect themselves, they will open up an orange file, it's called an ACCT [Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork] file. It's not always when you're self-harming. It's for the officers to check up on you to see, not only that you're safe but that you're still alive. I remember the first time they did open it [for me]… everyone's got a personal officer. They go to that officer if they're struggling. I had been asking to find out who my personal officer was. I never actually spoke to them. When I did ask for help, I said, 'My past is playing up.' I think they all just let me down. Sometimes you can't really say what's going on in your own head. How do you express it to someone? Mental health support was such a long wait. I got it more on the outside than on the inside.**

As AYJ have recently highlighted, the Harris Review into self-inflicted deaths of 18–24-year-olds in custody concluded that lessons were not being learnt from deaths, and a 2021 thematic inspection on young adults in custody shows that lessons have not been learnt from the Review. AYJ refer to a 2015 Justice Select Committee finding that 'the decommissioning of dedicated provision had a destabilising impact on prisons' and conclude that 'there must be dedicated and distinctive provision tailored to meet young people's needs' while balancing this with factors such as closeness to home.[29]

Asked if she could change one thing, one focus group participant said:

> **Quicker access to mental health support.**

Drugs and alcohol

Four out of the five focus group participants mentioned use of drugs or alcohol in connection with their disengagement with education or their offending. One explained how this had impacted on the start of her career:

> **In college I used to bunk off lessons and smoke weed… I didn't study much. Psychology – I enjoyed it so I wanted to learn it. I did maths – I passed it with great difficulty. I persisted – I didn't have a choice; I had to get a pass in it. When I left high school, I got accepted at an apprenticeship at a local machinery plant. I was one of three people who were accepted out of 50, but I didn't get the grades so had to go back to college…**
>
> **This was around the same time that I was doing drugs, and I was in a domestic violence relationship… I got out of that relationship and then got into the relationship which is the reason I'm in here now and she got me into heroin… I got good grades and passed maths and English; but the rest I didn't go to.**

29 Alliance for Youth Justice (2023) Young people in transition in the criminal justice system, pp17–18

Young parents

Two of the focus group participants had become parents while at school. This changed their educational paths in different ways. One woman explained:

> **I left [school] at 14 because I found out I was pregnant… After I had my baby and went back to college, I just kept to myself. I didn't stay for long. I finished level 1 in English and maths and raised my child. I just didn't want to finish – I felt I was missing out on him growing up. I left at 15. Jail was only time I stepped into a classroom after that.**

She described the positive impact she felt parenthood had had on her life:

> **My little boy literally saved my life. Before I was dealing with things by eating a lot and throwing up afterwards and cutting. After that everything got better – I was a mum and had my responsibilities to deal with… I started looking after myself better.**

Another focus group participant explained how she became more engaged with education after she had a child:

> **After I got pregnant at 14, I was just well behaved and went to all my classes. My attitude changed – it was about growing up. I done my GCSEs and passed them – maths, science and English. I went to college and… got my City and Guilds qualification.**

Young women's experiences of education and work before prison

School

As noted previously, the majority of women entering prison have low levels of literacy and numeracy and no formal qualifications. Nearly a third have been excluded from school.

This is reflected in the findings of this study, with four of the focus group participants having primarily negative memories of school.[30]

For example, one participant recalled how she didn't engage with school:

> **I don't really know [how I feel about school]. I was naughty from the age of five. Every time I went to school I left. I went over the back fence. Me and my mates used to do it. I was either fighting or bunking…**

However one had enjoyed school.

> **I went to a special needs school. It was alright - we did catering, IT, cooking. Zoo trips. I liked school, it was alright… I felt I didn't fit in as well as I would have in main-stream. But it was positive. I learned to deal with people with disabilities. It made me more open to the world.**

One interviewee acknowledged that she had received some help from school in relation to problems at home (Interview 1):

> **The school helped me to some extent. Social workers had been in my life as we were growing up, along with my other siblings. School did play that part because they're the ones that got them involved.**

However, she went on:

> **I'm not sure if I enjoyed school. I enjoyed college more. I didn't really enjoy the social side. I didn't really go out of my house. It was more of a cultural thing than anything. 'Don't talk to boys', 'Don't hang out with bad people'.**

Another interviewee recalled how she enjoyed dance at school, and recalled her academic achievements (Interview 3):

> **At school I really enjoyed dance – I got an A in that. English (B), Maths (C) and Science (C). I got merit in health and social care in year 11 – you had to choose additional subjects. I got BTech Sport, Health and Social Care Ofqual.**

30 Cooney, F. (2018) Should prison education be different for women?

The focus group participants discussed the subjects they enjoyed at school, noting it was easier to study subjects they enjoyed, and that having individual attention from teachers could be helpful:

> **I didn't enjoy school. I wasn't academic unless I enjoyed the subject – like food technology; history; biology.**

Another explained:

> **I went to lessons I wanted to go to, like cooking and health and social care.**

One focus group participant had happy memories of cooking at school:

> **[I was proud of] learning to cook when I was 11. I learned how to make new things, like spaghetti carbonara; I learned how to descale and cut fish; cook chicken and meat. We used to cook large meals and have a fun day for families, make cakes.**

Another was proud of her achievements in sport:

> **I was good at sports – I played rugby but wasn't allowed in the girls' team because I was a bit rough… I wasn't afraid to tackle people if I needed to. I'm from a competitive family.**

Two focus group participants explained how good teaching had made a difference to their engagement with education. One explained:

> **I liked maths… I would do maths all over again, I love it. I used to get so frustrated in lessons, my hands would get fidgety; the teacher used to notice when I got pissed off; he would sit down next to me to explain this – not tell the whole class; he would never pick me [to answer a question] because he knew my anxiety levels.**

Another added:

> **I really liked health and social care; I got on really well with my teacher and it was a lesson I could relax in; I didn't like maths. I really liked sport. I did GCSE sport. My teacher was really supportive. I think it's about the teachers more than anything and how they actually treat you. My sport teacher – if I didn't understand something they were always prepared to sit with me and explain it.**

Gilly Sharpe notes the importance of schools as 'sites where indicators of maltreatment, neglect and psychological distress can – and should be – recognised and acted upon, and young people listened to and offered support'. She points out the long-term damage that can arise where young women do not receive such support, and particularly where instead they are subject to negative judgement in school as in other areas of their early lives.[31] These findings were echoed by the young women taking part in this study.

One focus group participant had experienced a 'managed move' because of she had assaulted a teacher, before being returned to her previous school.[32]

> **My boyfriend didn't like me being at that school because there were fit boys there. Luckily my former school took me back because I was pregnant.**

This young woman said she believed her teacher knew she was the victim of abuse from her boyfriend at the time of these events, but that she did not ask for or receive any support in relation to this.

31 Gilly Sharpe, Women, Stigma, and Desistance from Crime: Precarious Identities in the Transition to Adulthood (Routledge, 2024), Chapter 5: Education and welfare intervention.
32 A 'managed move' is intended as a voluntary, permanent move to another school, agreed upon by all parties in the child's best interests (Source: Department for Education (2023) A guide for parents on school behaviour and exclusion)

Three of the focus group participants had been bullied at school. One had been singled out because of her Traveller background:

> **My experience of school was not positive at all… I was quite quiet at school. There was a lot of name calling received from my background being Traveller; 'Go back to your caravan.' Kids don't like outsiders... Some teachers weren't the nicest either - when they find out you're from that background, they're instantly looking down on you.**

Another woman had been bullied about her appearance:

> **I was bullied all the way through primary school and high school. So, I kept it to myself and dealt with it… When I got to high school the bullying got worse. I used to eat away my pain in primary school, then I got into drugs.**

The women didn't feel there was any effective help to stop school bullying, with one commenting:

> **If you grass it makes the situation ten times worse.**

Another woman had asked for help, but this hadn't materialised. She connected this lack of support directly to her subsequent offending:

> **I did not like school at all. I was bullied; I didn't feel like teachers understood me. I was quite angry at school. School did nothing about my complaint of bullying – they said there was zero tolerance of bullying, but they did nothing about it…**
>
> **If I'd got the support in school that I needed, I don't think I would be here today.**

Experiences of college

Some of the focus group participants had gone to college, while others had left school at an earlier age. One focus group participant explained how things changed for the better at college; she felt that the increased freedom of college suited her better and also other students who appeared more mature:

> **After school I went to college and did uniform services. I wanted to join the army. I really enjoyed it, and it helped me. I made lots of friends and then worked quite a few jobs. It was different at college. I didn't get bullied at all. Everyone was more mature and doing what they wanted to do. I'm the type of person that if I'm told to do something I rebel against it.**
>
> **When I was 18, I decided to do barbering and did an apprenticeship and got a City and Guilds qualification and worked there for 4 years. One day I stopped going and ended up in prison.**

One interviewee explained how she had gained her GCSEs in college (Interview 2):

> **I was in my second year of college before I went to prison… I had failed a lot of GCSEs and retook them at college and studied sociology, drama and design for A level.**
>
> **At that time, I didn't know I was dyslexic… The only thing I was good with was practical – art, design, DT [Design and Technology], drama. Education was hard. The incentive of getting paid to go to education was a main reason for staying in college. I enjoyed more the practical subjects – and creative.**

One thing about me – I was very productive. I think being dyslexic, you have to learn how to juggle things. You have to learn different ways and keep up. I didn't know I was dyslexic. I was very good at juggling things… In the end I passed five GCSEs.

Experience of work and future aspirations

The women described their circumstances at the time of their imprisonment. One focus group participant explained:

I was working, had my own place, when I committed my offence in 2021. I was drinking every day.

One interviewee commented (Interview 1):

I was 21 when I went to prison. I was in education before that, but it was more family struggles and family abuse that led me to go to prison. I didn't realise it wasn't normal to go through all that. Going into prison was a life changer because it was the only way to get out of the situation.

Two of the focus group participants had established themselves on a career path before imprisonment, while the other participants were less clear about their future.

One interviewee commented (Interview 3):

Workwise, I didn't have a plan at all. I just used to work myself silly. I enjoyed the nursery but didn't want to carry on forever. It's not very well paid.

One focus group participant had an established career before imprisonment:

Before prison I was working as a barber and doing care work. I was working at my barbers four days a week and as a carer working with people with brain injuries at a rehabilitation place – speech and language therapy alongside physios and OTs.

One interviewee explained how she had enjoyed working with children (Interview 1):

I'm just not that type of person to sit in a classroom. I'm more of a hands-on person. I enjoyed the childcare course more. I did two placements in nurseries. It was something I really enjoyed because I really love working with kids.

Another commented (Interview 2):

I had a job in Iceland part time on the tills, after school two days a week and on a Saturday.

I hadn't really thought about university, but I knew I loved drama. I didn't really have a sense of what I was doing in terms of what I was going to do in the future. I was going along with the flow. I was just 18 when I was arrested.

Another interviewee explained how busy she had been with education and work before her imprisonment (Interview 3):

When I went to prison, I was 18. I finished school at 16. I got nine GCSEs, A–D level. I started an apprenticeship at a nursery school. Did my level 2 and level 3 – there for a couple of years… I literally worked all the time. I had about five different jobs. I was very money-orientated and wanted to work as much as I could.

…

I was living with my parents at that point… I'm still here at the moment and next year will be different.

Young women's experiences in prison and post-release

Induction and assessment

All women entering prison should have initial maths and English assessments to gauge their level of literacy and numeracy. One focus group participant explained:

> **When you come in, they ask about your education previously and then offer you different things to do – hair and beauty, business/IT, art. There's not many educational courses really in this prison – it's not as wide as you probably expect it to be. It focuses on getting people a level 2 in Maths and English. I think they have more options on the men's side. There's now a go-carting course. There's also Open University courses, but you have to speak to a staff member to get onto the course.**

One interviewee explained (Interview 1):

> **You don't get to choose, they just put you with what is available. You didn't really have a choice about doing English.**

Another interviewee commented (Interview 3):

> **There was a little bit [of information, advice and guidance]. [Prison 1] didn't have as much. In the education centre you could take different classes and get a certificate. You have the choice of doing distance learning. They had a couple of them and that was about it really. There wasn't as much in the education centre as there was in [Prison 2].**

One focus group participant explained the dilemma caused by availability of different options in different prisons:

> **I've just done a hair and beauty course level 1 and have the opportunity to do level 2. But I'm now unsure whether I will do that or go to an open prison – so I'm undecided as to whether I stay here or go to open prison and do ROTL.**
>
> **If I went to an open prison it would be quicker to start doing ROTL, but then I would miss out on the education side. Now I could go into an open prison and be essentially home over Christmas, whereas here I wouldn't start ROTL until January and there are more limitations.**
>
> **For ROTL you have a selection of options to do – helping homeless people etc. If I stay here, I stay until September next year but if I was in an open prison I would**

have more opportunity to go out. But open prison is also further from home and my family wouldn't be able to visit as much as they can here. There is a lot to think about. If I stay here, I will do level 2 hair and beauty.

Another participant explained:

I did my level 1 gym course alongside my job. At the minute I'm in between whether I want to leave my job in seg [segregation] or do level 2 gym course and work at the gym.

As well as an educational assessment, AYJ notes that a 'maturity screening tool is in place to determine whether support in relation to maturity should be in place'. None of the young women taking part in this study mentioned having had an assessment. Of the young adults who have had an assessment, AYJ reports that almost two thirds were highlighted as having support needs in relation to maturity, but that only 2% of those assessed as needing it are accessing the Choices and Changes programme, the only tailored intervention available for young adults.[33]

The participants did not mention having any other assessments, such as for brain injury.[34]

Additional learning needs

One focus group participant explained that she had been diagnosed with SEND since arriving in the prison:

I did the assessment when I came in; I got diagnosed as dyslexic since being here and diagnosed with ADHD and autism. I did maths since coming here; I was in a rush to get that done because it's not my forte. I failed my exam; but now I'm doing art I feel a lot better in myself.

One interviewee, who said that she had no assessment of her learning needs in prison, explained how the failure to diagnose her dyslexia and put in place support caused her to disengage with distance learning in prison, despite high ambitions at the start (Interview 2):

Once convicted, aged 19, I went to [Prison 4] and after a year and a half then [Prison 3].

At [Prison 4] I started a psychology course with Open University. I don't think I finished my first year. I did one or two months… I think I spoke to someone in resettlement about education and told them I had my GCSEs and they didn't have anything at the right level for me… I wanted to make myself proud that I was in jail and my friends were in university so I could match up with them and leave prison with something.

When I was given my stuff, I was given the books and there was a lot of written work… I wasn't aware that I was dyslexic. Seeing words was just 'oh my gosh' this was a lot.

Maybe if they changed up the way, doing things not only for learners who can learn like that. If it wasn't so text based, breaking it down a bit. Things like that would make it easier for me.

33 Alliance for Youth Justice (2023) Young people in transition in the criminal justice system, pp17–18
34 For more information on women in prison and traumatic brain injury see: Kent, H. et al (2021) Traumatic Brain Injury: HM Inspectorate of Probation Academic Insights 2021/09

…

Being dyslexic and not knowing, being newly inducted into prison and all these books – it was just a lot to handle.

Her dyslexia was not diagnosed until after her release:

My first year of uni was a foundation year because I didn't have the full credentials. After my first year my supervisor asked me to take a dyslexia test because she could tell by my reading and my writing. After my first year it was better because I was able to look up dyslexia and get all these programmes and that helped with my learning.

She explains what a difference it could have made to her engagement with distance learning, if she had been diagnosed earlier and received support:

If I'd had that diagnosis at school, it would have made a big difference. I just thought I was stupid. I would often give up on things. In prison I didn't have much contact with a tutor because it was really only letters. It wasn't getting to know you.

…

A lot of women don't know about visual learning, and they don't do that in inductions and that would be a smart thing to do, so everyone knows how they like to learn and can then put that in. Already you're in a stressful place and sometimes education is a form of escape. When you can't do it, you feel stupid and it's a little more stress.

Proving your qualifications

One interviewee regretted that she no longer had her academic certificates (Interview 1). She had a qualification in childcare which was no longer open to her as a career, highlighting the importance of being able to access education in order to retrain where your past career is no longer an option:

Did GCSEs, didn't do too good in it. I weren't too academic. The police have got my qualification certificates…

… Half of people who go into prison are qualified but can't prove it because they've got no evidence. They go into prison and start from the bottom.

I did a childcare qualification in college for two years and couldn't do my last year because this all kicked off. I took a break. Even though I've got my Level 2 qualification in childcare but can't use it because of my conviction.

She noted the importance of being able to prove your qualifications in prison:

I think they do need to take in consideration that half the women are qualified but can't prove it.

Benefits gained through education, work and other purposeful activities

One interviewee explained (Interview 1) that she had done entry and Level 1 English in her first prison then entry maths, IT and business administration in her second prison. She did distance learning to gain business administration level 2. She was proud of this achievement, and it had been of practical use to her in getting work after her release:

> **I've got that qualification. You've done it in your cell. I don't know who organizes it. You send it on and get feedback. It all came to good use. I did actually enjoy it because now it's got me employment.**

She described her experience of distance learning:

> **It gets your mind thinking. You have to think what you're going to write… If I was struggling, I would ask my business admin teacher for help. I went through books from the library to help me understand it.**

She also identified the benefits of face to face education:

> **I did enjoy the face to face courses. It was just something I needed to do but I weren't that focused. I wouldn't say I liked the teachers. I think it was just a job for them, just like us. I think it did help me in other ways because it's got me where I am now with all the qualifications under my belt.**

Another interviewee had filled her time in prison with education and work (Interview 3):

> **I became a peer mentor in January. I was one of the people who do the inductions. I also went to the gym a lot and stopped smoking – I did a course on that. I did my entry level and level 1 in gym and fitness. I took on long distance learning in criminology in my spare time.**
>
> **…**
>
> **I did a first aid course at the gym and IQ. If you got stuck, you could speak to the gym instructors – they used to help me out a lot.**

She explained how her mother supported her with distance learning:

> **Only the criminology was distance learning… a lot of that was obviously when I was in my cell. My mum used to send me in loads of information from the internet. I would give her a question and I used to get these massive folders come in so that I could complete my work.**

She explained what motivated her to undertake distance learning:

> **I was working and used to go to the gym but otherwise wasn't making the most out of my time. When they said you can do long distance learning I thought that would be a really good idea, because if I do find something I'm really interested in… I thought I would give criminology a try because I had always been interested. I absolutely loved it, so I carried on.**

One focus group participant shared the satisfaction and sense of self-worth that she gained from working in prison:

> **As soon as I got in, I passed my maths and English on my initial assessment – level 2 – and I got a job in seg – cleaning and peer support for people with severe mental health etc. I've been there for nearly a year. It's draining but it is really good. I work on my own; there's always banging, screaming, blood and s***. It's draining but I enjoy it.**

I enjoy helping people. There's a couple of people where the staff have been trying to get a blade off them, I've got the blade off them in 15 minutes; then they can take them to hospital. It's rewarding. A lot of people say I've got that motherly thing about me; I can have a joke but at the same time, when it comes down to it, I'm very motherly.

Another participant had experienced limited opportunities:

I've been here since March [nine months]. I haven't had any education. I would like to do English and maths. I'm stuck on the wing doing wing work. I'd like to work in the salon, but you can't get a job without English and maths. If you've got existing skills, you should be able to use them. I've got entry level 3 for maths and level 1 English. I haven't had the opportunity to study these here. I would prefer to be in the salon or somewhere like that instead of on the wing.

An interviewee explained how using the gym had helped her mental health (Interviewee 1):

I did healthy living while in the gym and got paid for it... It was the only way to stay fit and healthy. Believe it or not that was better for my mental health.

They took me off gym to do a customer service job. I kicked off, saying gym was the only thing keeping me sane.

The same interviewee explained that payment could be a motivation to engage in education or work in prison (Interview 1):

I just did whatever they offered because I needed the money to survive in there… you don't get paid much for being behind your door. They take a pound off each week for your TV.

Another interviewee (Interview 2) agreed that pay was motivating:

After a while you feel like you become a burden to your family.

One interviewee explained how she was motivated to take part in education in order to get ROTL (Interviewee 2):

I did education to look good on my pathway plan, in order to get ROTL. I did a lot of these courses to show 'oh look what she's achieved while she's been in prison'.

I wanted to get ROTL to see family, to get back into society, to feel normal again.

For work I was working in the kitchens in [Prison 3] for most of my time there, and then I worked for [name of organisation]. When I did get my ROTL I worked in a staff mess and for [name of organisation]…

Speaking about her involvement in artistic activities in prison, one focus group participant spoke about her aspiration to return to her hobby of photography, which had been important for her wellbeing before imprisonment:

I used to do it when my boy was young, go for a walk with my dog and take pictures of the scenery… it was a release, a way to express myself without having to say anything. My main focus was on watching the snow melt.

Another interviewee explained the benefits of activities which involved interaction with others (Interviewee 3):

> **I enjoyed being a peer mentor. It was quite nice. It was really nice meeting the new women. It was nice to be able to give them a little bit of support. A lot of people that come in are very upset. It's nice to be able to chat to them and say it's not that bad, you will meet people. It's very much how you want to make your experience…**

She explained the benefits of being in an open prison with a range of purposeful activities, and being closer to family:

> **It was nicer because it was a lot closer for my mum and everyone to see me, so I was excited about that. It's an open prison so you have a lot more freedom to move around and do things. You can go to the gym whenever you want…**
>
> **I had just finished my criminology course and I did my functional skills in maths, English and ICT. You have an educational centre. I used to go two or three afternoons a week with a teacher, going through things on the computer. You do your course that way and get your level 1 and 2 in maths, English and ICT… I used to work on the farm there which I absolutely loved. My mum has lots of animals anyway so as soon as I saw that I thought 'Yes'.**

Limited choice and barriers to participation

Some focus group participants felt there were unnecessary restrictions on who could do what jobs in prison. Comments included:

> **I think we should be able to do jobs if we think we can do them.**
>
> **A lot of jobs have criteria to meet before you can do them.**
>
> **For hair and beauty – they might pass you by security for a course because of the tools, like scissors. I wasn't in possession of a knife, but it was a knife offence. Unless you have the opportunity to prove to them you're capable, how can you move on?… It shouldn't be dictated because of your crime; you should have the opportunity to prove yourself.**
>
> **Why do you need level 1 English/maths to do things?**
>
> **We should all be given a chance.**

Comments from two focus group participants illustrated the need for diverse provision. One explained:

> **I can't sit there and learn something from a book.**

While another added:

> **I love reading.**

One focus group participant commented that she could change one thing it would be:

> **More choice of educational courses in prison that doesn't have to be based on your grades but on your ability – not differentiated by your crime, just on your ability to learn and willingness to learn.**

One interviewee commented (Interview 3):

> **I feel like when I was in [Prison 1], the education was quite selected. Unless you asked to do a OU long distance course, they wouldn't come round and find you and offer you that... If you have a long sentence, you have to spend most of it in a closed prison. It would be good if they had… more of a bigger education centre in the closed prison because that's where people spend the longest time and you have less to do there as well.**
>
> **…**
>
> **In closed prison, because you are locked up from 7pm to 8am and for two hours after lunch. There's a lot of time to spend on your own just with a TV screen in front of you… If I wasn't studying, I feel like my brain is going dead because I'm just looking at four walls and a tv screen. It's not healthy. So it was really nice to be active in learning. It was just really interesting as well.**

One participant expressed doubts about the ability of women whose first language is not English to participate fully in education in prison:

> **For some women, English isn't their first language, and they make them do an ESOL class, but how much do they understand?**

Sport

Many of the young women enjoyed sport and spoke about their sporting achievements before prison. Three of the participants commented:

> **I did boxing and gym. I was meant to go into competitions. I'd only been there two weeks and they wanted me to do competitions.**
>
> **I did hockey, karate, swimming, football. When I was 9 or 10, I got offered a football scholarship for a local football club. I turned it down because I didn't want to do it.**
>
> **Outside of school I did karate, boxing, ballet, gymnastics, horse riding… After a certain age I rebelled and stopped… I went out drinking with bad people.**

Several women taking part in this study valued highly their access to gym facilities in prison but felt the lack of any opportunity to take part in team sports. Recent inspections of women's prisons reveal a mixed picture of the availability of sports activities. The majority of prisons have been assessed as offering reasonable or good gym facilities, with those at New Hall assessed as 'excellent'.[35] Sports facilities at East Sutton Park, Foston Hall, Low Newton and Peterborough were all subject to varying levels of criticism.[36] Opportunities to take part in team sports appear to be generally limited in women's prisons. At Peterborough, it was noted by inspectors that apart from the gym, PE facilities were too limited. There was no indoor court or outdoor pitch for team sports. The only other facility, the dance studio intended for aerobic activities, was closed because of structural problems.[37]

35 See for example: Askham Grange (2023): https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/02/Inspection-report-7.pdf#page=38, Page 38; Bronzefield (2022): https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/03/Bronzefield-web-2022.pdf#page=43, pp.43- 44; Downview (2021): https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/04/Downview-web-2021.pdf#page=42, p.42; Eastwood Park (2022): https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/03/Eastwood-Park-web-2022.pdf#page=45, Page 45; New Hall (2022): https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/03/New-Hall-web-2022.pdf#page=11, pp11 and 43

36 East Sutton Park (2023): https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/04/East-Sutton-Park-web-2023.pdf#page=33, p33; Foston Hall (2021): https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/04/Foston-Hall-web-2021.pdf#page=10, pp10 and 46; Low Newton (2021): https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/04/Low-Newton-web-2021-revised.pdf#page=45, p45; Peterborough (women) (2023): https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/03/Peterborough-women-web-2023.pdf#page=21, pp21, 39 and 40

37 Peterborough (women) (2023): https://cloud-platform-e218f50a4812967ba1215eaecede923f.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/19/2024/03/Peterborough-women-web-2023.pdf#page=21, pp21, 39 and 40

The focus group participants agreed that a wider range of activities should be available for younger women, including a wider range of sports than 'just a tiny gym', especially in the summer. Asked what should be on offer for young women, one participant commented:

> **Have a football team.**

Others agreed:

> **You can't play rounders or dodgeball.**

Some participants felt the options offered to them were limited because of risks associated with male prisoners, and in some cases felt that men had more freedom than they did:

> **They don't let us because males get aggressive, but it doesn't mean we will.**
>
> **They penalise us because of what the males do. The males have a lot more freedom than we do.**

Young women on remand

The Howard League for Penal Reform has pointed out the overrepresentation of young adults amongst prisoners on remand, reporting:[38]

> **Young adults raised significant concerns about their daily regime, with the majority spending around 23 hours a day in their cell. Young adults wanted to have jobs and engage in education.**
>
> **…**
>
> **Lots of young adults talked about the benefits of having time to exercise and the disappointment of being able to see facilities in the prison but not being able to access them. One young adult said, "The day I played football for an hour felt like I wasn't in prison."**
>
> **The Justice Committee recommended that the government ensure that people on remand are not deprioritised for education, training and employment (Justice Committee, 2023). This has been accepted by the government.**

One interviewee explained she received no Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) while on remand and that, in any event, she would not have been in a position to take it in (Interview 1):

> **No IAG. I had my own issues in my own head going through, with mental health and everything like that. I wasn't really that focused.**

One focus group participant who was imprisoned on remand explained the difficulties of accessing assessment and therapeutic support for mental health needs, and the benefits of engaging in activities to help with her mental wellbeing:

> **I really enjoy art… It's been a good distraction – I've got court coming up soon, the start of my trial which I'm dreading... The art is helping me in some ways – it's more of an escape; I can express myself in different ways. I haven't expressed a lot of my emotions since being here – I've chucked them on the top shelf.**

38 Howard League for Penal Reform (2023) What's wrong with remanding young adults to prison: voices and lessons learned

… I'm still on a waiting list to see therapy… It took five months for the mental health team to see me. I've been here seven months. I only saw them because they were seeing someone else in my cell and someone asked if they would fit me in. I don't know how long I'll get [after my trial]. I may get to walk away but if not then it will be a long time. I feel like I'm in limbo at the moment.

Post-release

On resettlement, AYJ point out, 'Literature highlights care leavers and young women as being at particular risk of falling through gaps in support upon leaving prison'.[39]

One focus group participant explained:

I never struggled to work before, but I feel like coming to prison has completely knocked my confidence.

One interviewee explained how she felt her own resilience and focus had helped her to prepare for release (Interview 2):

I had no ideas in my mind about my education and career – I was just focused on getting out if I'm being honest.

…

I think I've got a really resilient spirit. I'm always doing something. I'm a goal setter. Growing up being physically abused, sometimes I felt I had to do things to know I am a worthy. I am big on setting goals for things I think I can't do it. I was determined to go for uni after prison.

I focused on getting accommodation – that was my main focus… I decided to study psychology... I just think I wanted to make my family proud…

Another interviewee described her experience (Interview 3):

I didn't want to go out and work, I wanted to get myself into university… So I used to go out on ROTL and go to university. I started with a foundation course because I didn't have as much access. I was allowed out from 9–5 every day and could access the computers and library but you need a lot of time to sit and study. When I came back into the prison, I didn't have internet and couldn't do that.

…

My application to university was completely off my own back. When you meet people who set up things like that, they try and coax you into working in a charity shop or organisations they work with. I said no, I don't want to do that because it's not something I'm going to carry on when I get home. I want to get myself into uni and then I'll carry that on when I get home. When I was young, coming out when I was 21, I wanted to have something to show for myself. They're just going to see a prison sentence, so I thought if I can really dive into it and really boost myself up, hopefully they will see she's done this and this and this.

39 Alliance for Youth Justice (2023) Young people in transition in the criminal justice system, pp17–18

One focus group participant felt there was no support from the prison to help with gaining employment after release:

> **This prison doesn't tell you about what you can do on the outside and set up interviews. A lot of people struggle to know what they can do outside prison – you have to declare convictions; it's hard to know where to go and how to look for work. If they were to set up an interview for a certain date when you get out so it's easier for us.**

One interviewee had to relocate after her release (Interview 1):

> **I was MAPPA[40] at the time. I just wanted a fresh start away from everything. I knew if I ended up going to [her home area] I wouldn't survive.**

One focus group participant did not expect to be impeded by her criminal record:

> **For [her chosen career], my conviction isn't a barrier and I've got a plan for getting back into it.**
>
> **I can't imagine myself doing anything [else]. As soon as I leave here, I want to go back to my old job… It's a good job, I love it.**

Another focus group participant explained how her options were now going to be limited by her conviction, and how she planned to work around this, making use of the options available to her – including CFO3:[41]

> **My last job I did was as a carer; because of my conviction I won't be able to care for the elderly or children which is what I wanted to do…**
>
> **I loved caring but now I'm going down the route of hair and beauty. If I get level 2, I could work freelance when I get out and do mobile hairdressing. The other thing I thought was doing Open Uni course in psychology counselling – use my health and social care – get a degree in psychology to go into something else.**
>
> **I've started doing CFO3 here which is a scheme helping young offenders to go down the route they want, so if I go to hair and beauty they would pay for my equipment and accommodation. By them paying for tools it would enable me to start as soon as I get out. I'm currently having meetings about it. They put you on different short courses, including domestic abuse and thinking skills.**

Another participant added:

> **I also want to do CFO – it's inside and can continue outside. I would like to go to college and do photography or some sort of mechanics. I wanted to do that when my little boy was young. The go carting course gives you a mechanics qualification; you can then work at go karting racecourses.**

One interviewee explained (Interview 1):

> **As you grow up you change quite a bit and try to work out what is best for you.**

40 The Criminal Justice Act 2003 provides for the establishment of Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements ("MAPPA") in each of the 42 criminal justice areas in England and Wales. These are designed to protect the public from serious harm by sexual and violent offenders. They require the local criminal justice agencies and other bodies dealing with offenders to work together in partnership to this end. (Source: HMPPS (2024) MAPPA Guidance)

41 HMPPS Creating Future Opportunities (CFO3) is a resettlement support programme which delivers projects aimed at improving employability: https://www.creatingfutureopportunities.gov.uk

Some focus group participants expressed worries about what people would think of them and the impact of press coverage of their offences:

> **Once you've committed a crime, you're looked at as… That's because of what papers perceive you to be, not the person you are.**
>
> **Everyone knows about my crime. What they wrote isn't even what happened.**
>
> **I worry about what people will think if I go back to work. I don't want to look like a criminal. People with mental health problems are looked on as criminals for doing something wrong and not given a second chance. I probably can't be a carer again but that's something I enjoy. Just because you make a mistake once doesn't mean you'll make the same mistake again.**
>
> **I was just there at the wrong time and because he fled the scene I got arrested instead. I feel like I've been punished for something I didn't even do.**

One interviewee is now working full time in a management role and still studying for her degree (Interview 2). She adds:

> **I don't know if I want to study more or just get into my career. I really just want to finish my education.**

Another interviewee explained (Interview 1):

> **I've just done my GCSE English and waiting for the results. I re-sat in the autumn because I was downgraded. I'm studying for my GCSE Maths for this summer…**

She went on:

> **I have done level 2 IT, level 2 awareness in mental health since coming out of prison – all at [name] college. We have a job centre person come into the [support service] every month. I ended up meeting him and discussing everything. He helped me do a CV. He guided me to do courses. IT was something I really enjoyed. Now it's an ambition that I want to go into. I want to go to uni and study computers. I want to do software programming. Obviously I need my GCSEs to do that. I had no difficulty getting onto the courses at college. I had to explain everything to them. I did have struggles.**
>
> **Probation didn't want me to do college because they said it was a safeguarding issue. They hold you back so much. I actually went to college and explained to them the situation. The college said we'll do the safeguarding check on you. If you're not a risk, you can carry on. They found no risk. It was me, it developed me as a person.**
>
> **This is my first job since prison and was a surprise to me. I volunteered here for 2½ years. The manager offered me job as receptionist. I was shocked. This is since October 2020.**
>
> **I've had so much support from [resettlement support service]… [they've] helped so much I can't put it in words. [They've] kickstarted my mental health; [they've] got me in employment. [They've] helped me so much I can't put words to it. It's the only reason why I'm alive today. I know if I came out of prison with no help, I wouldn't be alive even the next day.**

Another interviewee commented (Interview 3):

> **I got out in July and had a month while I got used to being home and seeing my friends. I then actually started a job in a fish and chip shop. It was really busy, so it was good. I saved up some money. I went back to uni in September… I completed my degree in 2020 and started working at Wetherspoons and was furloughed during Covid. I did a Masters degree, which I finished at start of 2022. Still at Wetherspoons and actively looking for a career job which I hope to find by the end of this year.**
>
> **I've applied for an internship; supported by Working Chance – looking at frontline jobs such as support workers.**

She went on:

> **I don't feel like my prison experience has limited me in any way. I thought in the beginning that it would do. But everything that I've wanted to achieve, I have achieved. I did get myself into uni; I did graduate from a Masters. I have been able to maintain good jobs. Although it's difficult to find a career job at this moment, it's always going to be hard as I need to gain experience.**

Potential solutions

The participants in this study called for:

- **timely mental health assessments and therapeutic support to meet identified needs;**
- **more choice in education and work opportunities; and**
- **more access to purposeful activity including team sports.**

Noting concerns that have also been raised by criminal justice inspectorates, AYJ has pointed out the lack of prison service instructions, policy frameworks or any published national strategy for young adults in custody. AYJ also highlights the need for a distinct strategic approach that addresses the needs of specific groups such as young adults with SEND and care leavers, and addresses racial disparities.[42] The forthcoming Young Women's Strategy must address these cross-cutting areas through a gender-specific, intersectional lens recognising the needs of all young women, including Black, minority ethnic and migrant young women, and must be accompanied by a policy and practice framework to ensure proper implementation.

AYJ reports that there is growing support for extending the youth offending team model up to the age of 25.[43] Such provision would include 'better support within the justice system itself, as well as improved external support around mental health, substance misuse, education, and housing'. This type of approach would have carried clear benefits for the young women taking part in this study. A more specialised structure for young women in custody, modelled on provision for children, could allow for a routine filled with purposeful activity, instead of the inactivity described by some of the research participants.

AYJ refers to HMI Probation recommendations in 2021 for a national strategy for young adults in custody, to 'ensure assessment of needs and maturity, distinct and fully resourced provision, young adults being held in the establishments best able to meet their needs, and improved relationships, behaviour management, and access to education, training and work'[44], and highlights that particular attention is needed to improve outcomes for Black and minority ethnic young adults, including through improved monitoring. Further work is needed to understand the learning needs of those from different cultural backgrounds and to ensure these are met, including through diversifying the curriculum.

42 Alliance for Youth Justice (2023) Young people in transition in the criminal justice system, pp17–18
43 Alliance for Youth Justice (2023) Young people in transition in the criminal justice system, pp13–15
44 Alliance for Youth Justice (2023) Young people in transition in the criminal justice system, p20

In its research on developing gender-sensitive support for criminalised young women, Agenda Alliance has called for a shift in the culture of individual organisations and 'transformation across public services and systems to take a fundamentally preventative and person-centred approach', including education, training and employment services, youth services, healthcare and mental health services which 'take account of young women's life experiences and become age-, gender-, trauma-, and culturally responsive, ensuring problems are identified and responded to before escalation'.[45] These principles must be reflected in the Young Women's Strategy and its implementation, including a focus on addressing any barriers to young women's participation in education – as well as using education as an opportunity to provide support and help improve young women's safety and wellbeing both during their time in prison and after release.

Agenda Alliance calls for adequate resources to 'allow practitioners the time and capacity to develop trusting and supportive relationships with young women'.[46] They recommend that the government should establish a 'UK Specialist Women's Services Fund' that 'pools new cross-governmental budgets from the Ministry of Justice, Home Office, Department for Education, and Department for Health and Social Care', most of this to be ring-fenced for specialist and community-based women and girls' services, with further ring-fenced funding for services led "by-and-for" Black, minority ethnic and migrant women and girls, and other specialist services. Agenda Alliance recommend the establishment of a Young Women's Advisory Board to inform development of the strategy through co-production with young women with relevant lived experience and specialist services, including Black, minority ethnic and migrant young women and 'by and for' services.

45 https://t2a.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/FINAL-AYJ-Young-people-in-transition-in-the-criminal-justice-system-Evidence-review-April-2023.pdf, p17
46 Agenda Alliance (2023) A Call To Action: Developing Gender Sensitive Support for Criminalised Young Women

Conclusion

The insights of the eight young women who took part in this study revealed a lack of age-specific educational or employment provision for them while in prison. While some had clearly benefited from some activities while in prison, to some extent this depended on their own resourcefulness in seeking out opportunities.

Some had faced barriers due to a lack of mental health assessment or support, or not having the right educational qualifications to access the activities they were interested in. Many of them found it hard to cope with inactivity while in prison after a previously active life, which increased their feelings of isolation and anxiety. Several felt the lack of access to team sports was a significant missed opportunity for purposeful social interaction and healthy activity.

Several of the women's histories included childhood trauma, domestic abuse – including coercive control – and exploitation, which had had a direct impact on their engagement with education. It was not clear what support had been offered to the young women to help them address the impact of this on them both while in prison and in preparation for their release. One young woman described experiencing ongoing coercive control from outside the prison during her sentence, and the severe stress this caused to her. These experiences are closely bound up with young women's mental health needs, but they illustrate the need for young women to receive more support – not only in relation to their mental health – but also in relation to ongoing risk to them while in prison and after their release.

One woman said she felt she was not understood and that she was treated differently because of her Muslim background. More work is needed to identify the specific needs of Black, minority ethnic and migrant young women in terms of their education in prison and how to address these, especially given the particularly acute disproportionality faced by this age group.

The Tackling Double Disadvantage Partnership has called for HMPPS' Young Women's Strategy to 'provide a comprehensive policy framework to respond to the needs of Black, Asian, minority ethnic and migrant young women at all stages of the criminal justice system, with an explicit focus on reducing the stark inequalities in this age group'.[47] This must include consideration of educational provision, and should be done through co-production with Black, minority ethnic and migrant young women.

47 Tackling Double Disadvantage (2023) 'One Year On' Progress Report

Given that young women in prison are particularly likely to have the needs and experiences outlined above, it is essential that those delivering education to them have the necessary skills and resources to ensure that education is accessible for them, and that education is used as an opportunity to improve young women's safety and wellbeing. Staff will need to be both highly skilled and engaging but also have a wider understanding of the context the young women are facing, the ability to effectively refer and signpost, to be responsive to backgrounds of trauma, and to be culturally competent to support women from different backgrounds.

The young women talked about the challenges arising when their existing qualifications and skills were not recognised in prison. It will also be key for young women not to lose momentum if they are mid-way through their education when they leave prison. There may be a role for probation to be more engaged pre-release around education options, to prevent this.

Women leaving prison have poorer employment outcomes than men.[48] Attention is needed to ensure education in prison leaves young women with the best possible options for future employment, and does not unnecessarily funnel them towards lower paid roles.

Spending time in prison during the transition to adulthood is likely to be formative for any individual. The Ministry of Justice's forthcoming Young Women's Strategy is clearly an opportunity to develop a specialised approach that can maximise the chances of this influence being as positive as possible for young women.

We reiterate PET's previous recommendations to the Justice Committee's Women in Prison Inquiry (see above). While some progress has been made, further work is needed to address continuing barriers to women's successful engagement in prison education. This work must be undertaken with an age-specific approach that seeks to address the specific needs of young women under the age of 25 who have not yet reached maturity, as part of a wider tailored approach to this age group.

We urge the Ministry of Justice to renew its efforts to develop a Young Women's Strategy and to include within it a distinct focus on education, employment and other purposeful activity for young women in prison. The strategy must include specific attention to the needs of Black, minority ethnic and migrant young women and girls. It must address young women's mental health needs, the high prevalence of experiences of childhood trauma, domestic abuse and exploitation amongst young women, and the distinct barriers to disclosure and support that they experience, as well as taking account of young women's experience of local authority care. Addressing young women's experience of neurodiversity is also key.[49] As Agenda Alliance has recommended, it must be a cross-cutting strategy that includes education, health, social care, Violence Against Women and Girls services and housing.

48 Prison Reform Trust (2022) Why focus on reducing women's imprisonment?, p.7
49 Alliance for Youth Justice (2023) Young people in transition in the criminal justice system. See also: National Autistic Society (2022) 'My life could be so different': experiences of autistic young people in the youth justice system; KeyRing (2022) Fairer Justice for All: a report about young people with learning disabilities and autism in the criminal justice system

Recommendations

We recommend that the Young Women's Strategy and its delivery plan should be developed and implemented through co-production with young women with relevant lived experience and specialist services, including Black, minority ethnic and migrant young women, and should include the following priorities:

1. **Cross-government investment in cross-disciplinary, gender-specific support for young women in contact with the criminal justice system which is tailored to this age group and trauma-informed, using an intersectional approach to meet the needs of all young women, including Black, minority ethnic and migrant young women. This approach should draw on learning from youth offending teams and the children's secure estate, and knowledge of the specific needs and characteristics of young women. This should include a more specialised structure for young women in custody, modelled on provision for children with appropriate modifications, allowing for a routine filled with opportunities for purposeful activity, instead of the inactivity described by some of the research participants.**

2. **Measures by HMPPS, in partnership with NHS England and relevant expert organisations, to remove any barriers to participation in education that might arise from the particularly high prevalence amongst young women of mental health needs and backgrounds of childhood trauma, gender-based violence, abuse and exploitation – including coercive control. This should be implemented using an intersectional approach to ensure it meets the needs of all young women, including Black, minority ethnic and migrant young women, and should include:**

    a. **Prompt assessments of mental health needs on induction and at regular intervals thereafter, and delivery of therapeutic support to meet identified needs.[50]**

    b. **Prompt assessments of any ongoing risk of harm to young women from domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls while in prison and after their release, and delivery of support to help them address this.**

50 See also: NHS England & HMPPS (2023) A Review of Health and Social Care in Women's Prisons (Strategic Recommendation 2)

c. **Ensuring staff delivering education have the necessary skills and resources to ensure education is accessible to young women with mental health needs, trauma-informed, and is used as an opportunity to help improve young women's mental wellbeing and self-confidence and to support young women to keep themselves safe and establish healthy relationships while in prison and after their release.**

3. **Investment by the Ministry of Justice in a wider range of education and employment opportunities for young women in prison, and in other purposeful activity, including sport and creative activities.**

4. **HMPPS, in partnership with relevant expert organisations, to provide high quality information, advice and guidance to young women in custody – delivered by staff with the necessary skills and resources to deliver high quality motivational coaching - to support them in identifying what educational opportunities are right for them and their aspirations for the future.**

5. **HMPPS to increase the use of ROTL to enable young women in prison to access education and work in the community in the latter stages of their sentence.**

6. **Probation services to review their approach more generally to supporting young women into formal education and employment post-release, ensuring they deliver effective resettlement support that helps young women leaving prison to continue with education and/or enter employment post-release in the community, building on what they have achieved in custody.**

7. **Ministry of Justice to collect and publish data on young women's educational needs and progress in prison, including insights from young women themselves and disaggregated data regarding Black, minority ethnic and migrant young women.**

The above reforms will have the greatest chance of success if they are developed through co-production with young women. They will only succeed if they are implemented with adequate investment from central government, recognising the likely return on such investment in terms of young women's future life chances, and using an intersectional approach that aims to overcome structural barriers that can impede equal access to opportunities for Black, minority ethnic and migrant young women.

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