

PUBLIC SAYS PRISON NOT THE ANSWER FOR WOMEN

The public favour providing women offenders with residential drug treatment centres, mental health care and community sentences rather than locking them up, according to a new survey published today by the Fawcett Society.

These findings come ahead of the publication of the report of the Fawcett Society's Commission on Women and the Criminal Justice System later this week (31 March 2004), which will highlight the "man-made justice" that women receive as victims, offenders and workers throughout criminal justice.

Government figures show that:

- There are now over 4,500 women in prison, up by 194% in the last ten years
- Suicides in women's prisons have exploded from 1 in 1993 to 14 in 2003
- 70% of women prisoners have two or more mental health disorders
- Around 50% of females have used crack or heroin in the year prior to imprisonment

The MORI survey for the Fawcett Society, which presented different ways to deal with record numbers of women in prison, found that:

- More than eight in ten people (82%) favoured providing more treatment centres for offenders with mental health problems
- 74% supported more residential treatment of drug problems
- 68% wanted greater use of community sentences

In contrast fewer than half of people asked said they wanted more prisons, and just one per cent suggested tougher penalties.

Chair of the Commission, Vera Baird QC MP commented today:

"The dramatic increase in the number of women in prison has put a severe strain on the Prison Service. The horrifying number of suicides indicates the level of desperation amongst women prisoners and it is well-known that imprisonment is very damaging not only to the woman herself, but also to her children and family.

Most women in prison have been convicted of non-violent offences such as shoplifting or fraud and there is a pressing need to look again at why we are imprisoning women who do not pose a serious threat to others. We urge the government to look seriously at alternatives to prison for women."

Speaking today, Rob Allen, Director of Rethinking Crime and Punishment, which has supported the work of the Commission, said that:

"For too long politicians, judges and magistrates have wrongly assumed the public wants more people locked up. This misconception about the climate of opinion has led to record numbers in prison. As this new research shows, what the public really wants is for offenders, especially women, to receive specialist mental health care, residential drug treatment and community penalties and certainly not tougher sentences."

The Fawcett Society's Commission on Women and the Criminal Justice System will be publishing its final report at a reception on 31 March 2004 addressed by the Home Secretary, David Blunkett. The report is the result of a year-long Commission into women's experience of the criminal justice system, the first of its kind internationally to look at women's experience right across the criminal justice

system. Commissioners were drawn from the senior ranks of the criminal justice system and brought to their work a wealth of experience of all parts of the system.

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Notes:

1. The Fawcett Society can be contacted on 020 7253 2598. For out of hours press inquiries please phone 07939 257040.

2. The Fawcett Society's Commission on Women and the Criminal Justice System is an independent inquiry into women's experience of the criminal justice system, chaired by Vera Baird QC MP. The Commission has been funded by The Barrow Cadbury Trust, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation's Rethinking Crime and Punishment initiative and The Lankelly Foundation. The Commissioners, senior experts from across the criminal justice system and other areas of public life, are:

Vera Baird QC MP – Chair of Commission

Liz Bavidge - Magistrate

Ruth Bunday – Solicitor, Harrison Bunday & Co.

Angela Deal – Crown Prosecution Service (from June 2003)

Lord Navnit Dholakia – House of Lords, Liberal Democrat

Commander Cressida Dick – Metropolitan Police

Cheryl Gillan MP

Ms Justice Heather Hallett – High Court

Dr Kate Malleson – London School of Economics

Karon Monaghan – Barrister, Matrix Chambers

Fiona Morton – Former Senior Probation Officer

Baroness Usha Prashar – House of Lords, Crossbencher

Hannana Siddiqui – Southall Black Sisters

Anna Southall – Barrow Cadbury Trust

Baroness Vivien Stern – House of Lords, Crossbencher

Professor Robert Stevens – Covington & Burling Solicitors

Monica Townsend – Crown Prosecution Service (until June 2003)

Jenny Watson – Equal Opportunities Commission, Women's National Commission

3. MORI conducted 1,006 interviews by telephone among a representative quota sample of British adults aged 16+ between 6-8 March 2004. Data were weighted to match the known demographic profile of adults in Great Britain.

4. Sources: *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners*, Social Exclusion Unit, 2002. The Prison Service website, www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk