The Reintegration Needs of Women Prisoners in Northern Ireland

Brigid Roberson and Eleanor Radford*

**Summary:** On 21 and 22 May 2005 members of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) Resettlement Branch carried out needs analysis interviews with 25 women prisoners held in Ash House, Hydebank Wood Prison, Belfast. On the weekend of the survey, the women prisoners represented just 2.2% of the total prison population (27 out of a total of 1,248 prisoners). The interviews sought to ascertain the extent to which the women felt prepared for their release from prison and reintegration into the community. This article summarises the research findings.

**Keywords:** Reintegration needs, resettlement needs, women prisoners, needs analysis, reoffending.

**Introduction**


- A full analysis of the offending behaviour needs of women prisoners in Northern Ireland should be undertaken with an assessment of how those needs would be best met.
- An analysis of the reintegration needs of women prisoners in Northern Ireland should be undertaken and appropriate services provided.

In response to these recommendations the NIPS Resettlement Team

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carried out a needs analysis on 21 and 22 May 2005, followed up by full consultations with all those involved with working on this issue. The report analysed the women’s impressions of how equipped they were to return to the community, and of whether their time in prison was helping them to prepare for this.

**Research methodology**

The Resettlement Branch, a joint partnership between NIPS and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, is required under its strategy implementation plan to identify and analyse the custody needs of women prisoners (action plan – 7c). To achieve this, we sent a personalised letter of introduction to each of the women in Hydebank Wood and arranged to meet them on an evening during their association time. At that meeting we explained that we would like to conduct individual, questionnaire-based interviews lasting up to 40 minutes and outlined the purpose of the research and its value to the women now and in the future. All the women agreed to participate and asked if we would come at a weekend, when they have little to do; two women were unavailable when the time came and chose not to be interviewed.

**Key findings**

The survey questionnaire was divided into sections covering the different themes relevant to reintegration issues. Twenty-five women were interviewed, over half of whom were released in the three months following the interviews. The findings are summarised below. Consultations with prison staff and professional organisations have confirmed that the areas of need identified are representative of women prisoners in general, and not solely relevant to those interviewed.

*Offence and security issues*

The women prisoners interviewed had been sentenced for a range of offences from defaulting on a fine to murder. Some of the respondents had only been in Hydebank Wood for a couple of weeks; others had served large portions of long sentences. The three most frequent offences were violence against the person, drug offences and motoring offences.

- 72% were serving a sentence and the rest were on remand.
- Approximately 44% of the sentenced respondents were serving a
sentence of one year or less; 33% were serving under two years and the remaining 22% were serving two years and over.

• 50% of the sentenced respondents had received Custody Probation Orders.
• 77% of sentenced respondents had not been in custody before.

*Family relationships*

Women prisoners in Hydebank Wood have access to their families during visiting times, through dedicated child-centred visits, a telephone located within the wing and compassionate temporary release and home leave schemes. The shame and social stigma of serving a prison sentence played a large role in their relationships with family; it is not clear that a similar survey of male prisoners would provoke the same response. Research confirms the importance of family in helping an offender to return to the community and avoid reoffending and there seemed to be scope for greater involvement of the respondents’ families in the sentence and in the reintegration process.

• 60% were mothers, and of those one-third were on remand.
• 96% had family support whilst in custody but 12% of those did not expect to have family support on release.
• 64% were the first family members in custody, and of those 94% received family support before and expected it after custody.

*Health and wellbeing*

We were shocked to discover the high percentage of women prisoners who had experienced the death of someone close to them within the previous five years. Some of the women were clearly in the first stages of grieving when interviewed. We were also surprised by the multiple death experiences of many of the women – some of whom were still in their 20s.

A high proportion of the women prisoners had physical and mental health issues, most of which they were receiving treatment for before coming into prison. This reflects the situation in England and Wales, where the Mental Health Foundation report that 66% of women prisoners have depression or a similar disorder whereas the comparable figure in the community is less than 20%.

• 76% had experienced the death of someone close to them within the previous five years.
• 60% were taking some form of medication and with one exception
they had been receiving this or similar medication prior to coming into prison.

- 88% had experienced depression and 68% had received treatment for it.
- 68% had been referred for psychiatric assessment (the majority of these respondents had taken some form of medication prior to coming into prison).
- 72% had used drugs and/or alcohol (16% had used just drugs, 20% had used just alcohol and a further 36% had used both alcohol and drugs) and the majority of those felt their usage was to excess.
- 76% had experienced sleeping problems and 32% of those had received treatment for it.
- 60% had suffered from panic attacks and half of those had received treatment for it.

Benefits and finance
A high proportion of women had received social welfare benefits at some stage in their lives and almost one-quarter had outstanding debts, though few of significant amounts.

- 72% wanted support with their benefit claims prior to release.
- 68% felt able to manage their personal finances on release.
- 64% were receiving some form of social security benefits prior to coming into prison.
- 76% considered they would need benefits on release for financial support; many hoped this would be temporary.

Housing
Problems with accommodation (homelessness) are often linked to offending behaviour. Indeed, this is one of the contributory factors to offending behaviour outlined by Farrington (1994). A significant percentage of the women prisoners had experienced housing problems, homelessness, living in a hostel and/or living in care. This experience is often complicated by mental health issues as identified by both the psychology team and the probation service in Hydebank Wood.

- Prior to custody 52% were living with their family.
- 48% were in favour of a specialist housing advice service being integrated into the prison.
- 36% did not know where they were returning to on release.
- 44% had experience of living in a hostel.
- 32% had experience of living in care.
Education and employment

Although gainful employment is key to avoiding reoffending, people with chaotic lifestyles often have difficulty adapting to routine and structure. The survey was designed to explore the scope of these issues in relation to women prisoners and to identify any singular needs.

- 12% said they had problems with reading and writing.
- 72% had some form of qualifications.
- 52% were unemployed prior to custody.
- 28% were employed; of those, 57% thought they would be unemployed on release and 26% expressed a desire to return to employment.

Returning to the community

Many respondents had concerns about returning to the community. These women were genuinely fearful of their release, largely due to anxiety about making the transition out of the prison environment although social concerns also played a role. 50% of the sentenced women would be released with supervision, which meant that probation officers would supervise their transition out of prison and a substantial period after that release.

- 32% felt safe in their community before coming to Hydebank Wood and feel safe returning.
- 44% did not feel safe in their community before coming to Hydebank Wood and do not feel safe returning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What would you like help with?</th>
<th>Now</th>
<th>On release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>15 (60%)</td>
<td>11 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug/alcohol issues</td>
<td>11 (44%)</td>
<td>10 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>11 (44%)</td>
<td>9 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological problems</td>
<td>11 (44%)</td>
<td>8 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience</td>
<td>10 (40%)</td>
<td>9 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career advice</td>
<td>9 (36%)</td>
<td>9 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with family</td>
<td>7 (28%)</td>
<td>6 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice on managing money</td>
<td>5 (20%)</td>
<td>5 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical issues</td>
<td>5 (20%)</td>
<td>4 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>4 (16%)</td>
<td>5 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>3 (12%)</td>
<td>4 (16%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• 52% felt they were not encouraged at Hydebank Wood to think about and plan for their release.

Conclusion

This research was prompted by the 2004 HMCI report into Hydebank Wood, which found that the needs of the women prisoners were not being met fully. Our analysis identified the following priorities for future work:
• Additional support services.
• Further activity and employment opportunities.
• An alternative environment comprising a centre for women offenders to inform the future estates strategy for women prisoners.

Report availability

Copies of the report are available free of charge from:

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or download from the NIPS website:

www.niprisonservice.gov.uk

References
