

Prison Reform Trust response to the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime Police and Crime Plan 2021–25 – January 2022

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. We do this by inquiring into the workings of the system; informing prisoners, staff and the wider public; and by influencing Parliament, government and officials towards reform. The Prison Reform Trust provides the secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Penal Affairs Group and has an advice and information service for people in prison.

The Prison Reform Trust's main objectives are:

- reducing unnecessary imprisonment and promoting community solutions to crime
- improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families
- promoting equality and human rights in the criminal justice system.

www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) welcome the opportunity to comment on the draft of the Police and Crime Plan 2021-25. We have had a longstanding interest in improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system. As part of this work, a representative from PRT sits on the London blueprint for women in the criminal justice system delivery group. Given this expertise we have largely focused on the needs of women who come into contact with the criminal justice system, though recognise that many of these themes will also be applicable to men and young people.

The timing of the previous plan—alongside the appointment of a new Metropolitan Police Commissioner and the closure of HMP Holloway presented a real opportunity to think differently about the delivery of criminal justice services in London, including prison management. Since the introduction of this police and crime plan, progress has been made, including the launch of the London blueprint for a whole system approach to women in contact with the criminal justice system. But continued consistent investment is needed to implement a pan-London multi-agency response to crime. We hope that this new police and crime plan will continue to develop this work.

We have been pleased to work closely with MOPAC in its efforts to reduce the unnecessary imprisonment of women. However, whilst 884 immediate prison sentences were given to women in London in 2019, representing a welcome 43% decrease since 2009, these still were mostly for non-violent offences. 45% of the prison sentences were for theft offences. 67% of prison sentences in London in 2019 were for less than six months.¹ There is more to be done, particularly as court activity recovers from the impact of the pandemic.

¹ Ministry of Justice (2020) Court Outcomes by Police Force Area Data Tool, Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: December 2019, London: MoJ. Please note: although more up to date figures exist, we have included 2019 local area figures. This is because court closures in 2020 caused by the Covid-19 pandemic means that local area data is unreliable for this period.

Reducing and preventing violence

Preventing and Reducing Violence Affecting Young People

We welcome the continued commitment throughout the plan to invest in the provision of support for young people impacted by violence, and that this explicitly includes ‘those seen to be offenders’, acknowledging the overlap between offending and victimisation. As well as chronological age, maturity should also be a primary consideration in making decisions relating to diversion, sentencing and, where a custodial sentence must be given, how and where a young adult should be accommodated.²

Young adult women are consistently overlooked in policy and practice. So we welcome the commitment of a ‘gender responsive approach to address the often less-visible needs of young women and girls’. It is vital this approach is developed and implemented in consultation with young women, practitioners and other experts in this field. We would highlight the work of the Young Women’s Justice Project³ for further information on the specific needs of young women in contact with the criminal justice system.

We remain concerned about the introduction of knife prevention orders, and their impact on children and young people. These orders are a back door to custody, with a breach of the order possibly resulting in a prison sentence of up to two years. Prevention is what will help the most and there is no evidence that these orders will prevent harmful behaviour or address the root causes of knife carrying. Children and young people carry knives for complex reasons, including for their own safety.⁴ Effective prevention means dealing with that complexity, and investing in organisations and programmes rooted in the communities that are suffering the most.⁵

Reducing Offending Behaviour

We welcome the continued focus on early intervention in the draft Police and Crime Plan, to ‘develop resettlement and community interventions for young people already in the criminal justice system’. Evidence shows effective early intervention including community sentences can improve outcomes for individuals and their families, promote public protection and reduce the need for costly late interventions like prison. A place at a women’s centre ranges from £1,223 to £4,125 per woman depending on needs, whilst a place in prison costs £52,121.⁶ Community sentences offer credible, flexible alternatives to custody. Unlike imprisonment, they allow women to maintain family ties, keep jobs, maintain care for children and better deal with the multiple and complex needs which often surround women’s offending. The draft plan highlights that ‘evidence shows that repeat offenders are responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime and harm caused by violence in London’. The Ministry of Justice’s own evidence shows that reconviction rates for prolific offenders are lower when agencies persist with the use of community sentences rather than resorting to custody – and the positive impact is even more marked for people with mental ill-health.⁷

We are encouraged by the progress made since the introduction of the London Blueprint for a Whole System Approach to Women in Contact with the Criminal Justice System. PRT

² House of Commons Justice Committee (2018) [Young adults in the criminal justice system: Eighth Report of Session 2017-19](#), London: Justice Committee

³ See: <https://weareagenda.org/young-womens-justice-project/>

⁴ Palasinski, M., and Riggs, D. (2012) Young White British Men and Knife-Carrying in Public: Discourses of Masculinity, Protection and Vulnerability

⁵ HM Government (2018) [Serious Violence Strategy](#), London: HM Government

⁶ Women’s Budget Group (2020) The Case for Sustainable Funding for Women’s Centres, London: WBG

⁷ Hillier, J. and Mews, A. (2018) Do offender characteristics affect the impact of short custodial sentences and court orders on reoffending?, London: Ministry of Justice

continues to support widespread partnership working to deliver the objectives of the blueprint. This now needs continued investment and prioritisation in the Police and Crime Plan, in order to implement the blueprint successfully, and expand provision across London. All women in contact with the criminal justice system in London should have access to the necessary support and services. We know that offending does not keep to the bounds of one borough, so services must be expanded across all boroughs to identify individuals at risk of offending/reoffending.

Whilst we welcome the emphasis on developing resettlement interventions for young people in the criminal justice system, we would encourage this to extend to all those in the criminal justice system, particularly women. It is essential that the Police and Crime Plan encourages effective partnership working with other statutory bodies, such as Local Authorities, who have a key role to play in the resettlement of individuals leaving prison, and must not exclude them from access to housing registers. The Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison Initiative⁸ notes that access to safe, affordable, and stable accommodation that meets the specific needs of women who offend is essential to enable them to rebuild their lives. It is also a key element in reducing offending and reoffending.

Whilst there are some positive housing services already in place, these services are not consistent throughout all London boroughs and are often under-funded. A more joined up, integrated approach needs to be in place, involving resettlement staff in prisons, offender managers and responsible officers, local authority housing departments, and voluntary sector organisations to ensure that women in trouble and at risk are given the necessary support. There needs to be an assessment of an individual's housing needs at every stage of the criminal justice system in order to establish an appropriate rehabilitation action plan which includes housing (including support to maintain tenancies). Early intervention, as well as the appropriate sharing of information between agencies, is paramount.

Many of the issues faced by women in contact with the criminal justice system also apply to young people and men. As outlined in PRT's response to the previous Police and Crime Plan⁹, we continue to encourage the Mayor of London to adopt a wider definition of early intervention which would support all individuals who are at risk of entering the criminal justice system.

Making London a city in which Women and Girls are Safer and Feel Safer

We welcome the strong focus on tackling violence against women and girls in the draft Police and Crime Plan. However, more work is needed to raise awareness of the role domestic abuse and coercive relationships play as a driver to women's offending.

Women in prison have often been victims of much more serious offences than the ones they are accused of committing. More than half (53%) report having experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse as a child compared to 27% of men¹⁰ and 57% of women report having been victims of domestic abuse.¹¹ Because many women fear disclosing abuse, both figures are likely to be an underestimate. Women can become trapped in a vicious cycle of victimisation and criminal activity. Their situation is often worsened by poverty, substance dependency or mental ill health.¹² We often hear of women being arrested alongside their partner, with the police not recognising the impact of domestic abuse for women on their lives. There must be greater sensitivity to the dynamics of domestic abuse, including the likelihood that even where there may be allegations of assault on both sides, there is likely to be a primary aggressor, and in most cases, that is likely to be the man.

⁸ For more information see: [Safe Homes for Women Leaving Prison — London Prisons Mission](#)

⁹ See: [MOPAC Police and Crime Plan consultation response.pdf \(prisonreformtrust.org.uk\)](#)

¹⁰ Williams, K., Papadopoulou, V. & Booth, N. (2012) Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds, London: MoJ

¹¹ Ministry of Justice (2018) Female Offender Strategy, London: MoJ

¹² Loveless, J. (2010) 'Domestic Violence, Coercion and Duress', *Criminal Law Review*, pp.1–3

We continue to encourage MOPAC and the Metropolitan Police Service to make full use of the out of court powers that are available. In PRT's 'Fair Cop? Improving Outcomes for Women at the Point of Arrest' we set out a range of options for the police drawing on best practice from across England and Wales.¹³

Better Supporting Victims

We would strongly recommend more emphasis being given throughout the plan to the overlap between victims and offenders. It is important to recognise that many offenders will also be victims of crime and different groups of victims can have very different needs depending on their circumstances. As outlined above, women who offend have often been victims of far more serious crimes than they are accused of committing. More broadly, this also includes people in prison who are victims of crime. This group faces unique and particular difficulties in obtaining access to victims' services and having their rights as victims recognised by authorities.

Protecting People from being Exploited or Harmed

As outlined above, whilst we welcome the recognition that many of the women in contact with the criminal justice system have complex needs and histories of trauma, this should be highlighted more consistently throughout the plan. Contact with the criminal justice system can often exacerbate these difficulties and a multi-agency approach integrating health, social care and welfare services is essential.

We would also highlight the issues faced by victims of trafficking who find themselves in contact with the criminal justice system. We are concerned that there continues to be a failure to identify, protect and support victims of trafficking, which should then avoid them being prosecuted for offences committed as a consequence of their exploitation by traffickers.¹⁴

¹³ Prison Reform Trust (2017) [Fair Cop? Improving outcomes for women at the point of arrest: A discussion paper](#), London: PRT

¹⁴ Prison Reform Trust (2018) [Still No Way Out](#), London: PRT