

Pregnant Women and Mothers in Prison, Mother and Baby Units and Mental Health

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Abstract : Background: Over two thirds of women in prison in England are mothers, and estimates suggest between 100 and 200 women per year give birth during imprisonment. There are currently six mother and baby units (MBUs) in prisons in England which admit women and babies up to the age of 18 months. Although there are only 65 places available, and despite positive impacts, they are rarely full. Mental illness may influence the number of admissions, as may interpretation of admission criteria. They are the only current alternative to separation for imprisoned mothers and their babies. Aims: To identify the factors that affect the decision to apply for/be offered a place in a prison MBU; to measure the impact of a placement upon maternal mental health and wellbeing; To measure the Initial outcomes for mother and child. Methods: A mixed methods approach - 100 pregnant women in English prisons are currently being recruited from prisons in England. Quantitative measures will establish the prevalence of mental disorder, personality disorder, substance misuse and quality of life. Qualitative interviews will document the experiences of pregnancy and motherhood in prison. Results: Preliminary quantitative findings suggest the most prevalent mental disorders are anxiety and depression and approximately half the participants meet the criteria for one or more personality disorders. The majority of participants to date have been offered a place in a prison MBU, and those in a prison with an MBU prior to applying are more likely to be admitted. Those with a previous history of childcare issues, who are known to social services are less likely to be offered a place. Qualitative findings suggest that many women are often hungry and uncomfortable during pregnancy, many have feelings of guilt about having a child in prison and that feelings of anxiety and worry are exacerbated by lack of information.

Keywords : mothers, prison, mother and baby units, mental health

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