

# Time after Time – A study of women’s transitions from custody

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## Abstract

This study stems from the author’s work as a manager with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), with particular responsibility for the INSPIRE Women’s Project. The research explores the transition of women from prison into the community through the women’s own accounts — within the context of Northern Ireland — and tests the view

that, if women can sustain periods in the community following release beyond twelve weeks, the likelihood of successful re-integration is improved. The research used a longitudinal qualitative methodology centered on in-depth, life history interviews with women pre- and post-custody.

## Findings

- Of the 14 women interviewed in custody prior to release, 12 were also interviewed 3 months post-custody and 9 were interviewed at the six and nine month stages.
- Ages ranged from 20 to 61 years. The majority were mothers and 8 were in relationships prior to committal.
- A high proportion of the women were first-time offenders and most had no previous experience of custody. The majority were sentenced to a period of custody of less than eight months, some with a post-custody licence.
- The case-studies demonstrated that preparation for release, and support in the community after release, is critical for successful re-integration and rehabilitation.
- Many of the women, including those who had served short sentences, described a sense of loss and disorientation in the initial days and weeks following release. An effect of institutionalisation was a loss of self-confidence and initiative needed to manage everyday affairs.
- Those who were mothers talked about the pain of being parted from their children. Those in relationships said that the separation exacerbated problems.
- All reported that their mental health had been adversely affected by the period in custody.
- Six of the women lost jobs as a result of imprisonment.
- The personal cost of prison was significant. The overwhelming view of the women was that the period of custody was a wasted time which had a lasting and damaging effect on their lives.
- Women who offend in NI endure similar problems to their counterparts in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland — but they tend to be at a higher rate due to the additional impact of living in a society emerging from years of conflict.
- The DJ should ensure long term funding for community initiatives that provide women exiting prison with practical and emotional support to rebuild and return to the community.
- The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSS&PS) should ensure full assessment and treatment of women who report poor mental health and ensure that any required support is arranged with appropriate community services on release.
- All women leaving custody should be registered with a GP within the local community.
- There is a need for the DoJ, in partnership with the Department of Social Development, to consider accommodation needs for women leaving custody.
- The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) should pay further attention to the impact that custody has for partners and families of women in prison. There needs to be more emphasis on supporting the women who intend to return to the home by increasing the amount and range of family contact whilst in custody. Consideration should also be given to support women to return home during the period of imprisonment by means of day release and weekend visits in order to support and maintain family contact.
- NIPS and DHSS&PS should ensure arrangements are made to allow women to maintain contact with their children. Such arrangements should include contact visits outside the prison estate and use of local child care provisions.
- The DHSS&PS need to make arrangements for women prior to them leaving custody to ensure timely access to benefits.
- Women leaving custody should be assisted to obtain personal identification documents to ensure that they can access services.
- NIPS and PBNI need to ensure that licence conditions are shared with women in advance of their release to allow them time to fully understand and plan for release. Licences should be shared with women at least 14 days prior to their release.
- PBNI should explore with the DJ ending supervised licences before their end date where ongoing supervision is deemed unnecessary.

## Recommendations

- The Department of Justice (DJ) should commission a review of the sentencing of women offenders in NI to establish the grounds on which women are sentenced to periods of custody.