



## **All Party Parliamentary Group on Women in the Penal System inquiry on girls in the penal system Revolving Doors Agency submission**

**October 2011**

### **Key points**

- A traumatic childhood and the early onset of multiple problems is a common experience of many adult women in the 'revolving doors group' – those who have multiple problems and are in repeat contact with the criminal justice system.
- Our research shows that when these women do not receive support to address the underlying causes of chaos and crime they are likely to continue costly patterns of service use resulting in a quickly escalating bill to the public purse. The costs to the criminal justice system are particularly high.
- There is a clear case for early intervention to address developing problems – for the girls themselves but also for their families, communities and, as our model demonstrates, for the public purse.
- These challenges feed into and exacerbate each other and should be addressed 'in the round'. Family work is also essential - whether with a biological family or carers. Strong partnership working will be essential in order to address these multiple problems.
- There are huge savings to be made from addressing multiple problems, but not every government department saves. The bill for criminal justice services may go down, but the bill for housing and support services is likely to go up, at least in the short term. New financial approaches are needed to address this issue.
- Young adults require a distinct approach. Particular attention should be paid to transitions from the youth justice system to adult offender services.

## About Revolving Doors

Revolving Doors Agency is a charity working across England to change systems and improve services for adults with multiple problems, including poor mental health, who are in repeat contact with the criminal justice system.

Our mission is to demonstrate and share evidence of effective interventions and to promote reform of public services through partnerships with political leaders, policy makers, commissioners and other experts and by involving people with direct experience of the problem in all our work.

We have three main areas of activity:

- i) **Policy and influencing:** We work with policymakers in national and local government, across Whitehall and in local and regional authorities to improve responses for people with multiple problems in contact with the criminal justice system
- ii) **Service user involvement:** Through our National Service User Forum and Young People's Forum we engage 60 people with direct experience of multiple needs in improving local services and national policy.
- iii) **Development and partnerships:** We work in partnership with organisations and individuals across England and Wales to demonstrate, develop and improve solutions for people with multiple problems in contact with the criminal justice system.

## Our response to the inquiry on girls in the penal system

Revolving Doors Agency aims to improve responses to adults who experience multiple problems including poor mental health, who are in repeat contact with the criminal justice system, the 'revolving doors group'. Our police, courts and prisons see people in this group everyday yet they get little or no effective help from mainstream health and other services.

In 2011, we developed a women-specific version of our Financial Analysis Model. This identifies the public costs incurred when people move towards or become trapped in a 'revolving door' cycle of crime and mental health problems, often alongside substance misuse and homelessness. The model also looks at how these costs are affected as people are supported to address their problems.

The full report, *Counting the Cost*, can be downloaded from <http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/documents/counting-the-cost/rda-counting-the-cost.pdf>

As part of this work we undertook interviews with service users and staff at three women's centres in Birmingham, Newcastle and Gloucester. The findings from these interviews were stark.

## **Multiple problems develop early**

We had been aware of the highly traumatic backgrounds of many women in the revolving doors group, but this research highlighted the extremely early start of multiple problems. All the women interviewed had factors in their early lives that caused them difficulties. Some had suffered childhood abuse or had parents involved in drug or alcohol abuse or domestic violence. Many had experienced a transient childhood, interrupted schooling, a lack of positive role models, and financial hardship.

Some of the women we interviewed have been involved in sex working and heavy substance misuse from a very young age, and have experienced years of chaos and contact with criminal justice services. The more serious the difficulties in childhood, the more likely it is that a chaotic life started in or before mid to late teens.

As adults, these women face social and psychological problems. Poor mental health, substance misuse, domestic violence, or loss of children to the care system, difficult family relationships, domestic violence, poor anger management and a background of childhood trauma are all common. At least one interviewee had experienced the death of her child. These problems interact and, in the absence of effective help, lead to periods of intense chaos and associated offending.

Our findings align closely with other studies of women offenders including our earlier research, (Revolving Doors Agency, 2004, 2010; King & Kenny, 2010), Baroness Corston's report (2007), the study carried out by Cabinet Office in 2009 (SETF 2009) and other research (Fossi, 2005; Gelsthorpe et al, 2007).

## **Chaos and crime is expensive, and costs quickly build up**

Our research shows that when women do not receive support to address the underlying causes of this chaos and crime they are likely to continue costly patterns of service use resulting in a quickly escalating bill to the public purse. The costs to the criminal justice system are particularly high.

## **Implications for working with girls in the penal system**

### **I. Early intervention**

Although our work focuses on adult women, it is clear that for many, complex lives and multiple problems started at a very young age. There is a clear case for early intervention to address developing problems – for the girls themselves but also for their families, communities and, as our model demonstrates, for the public purse.

## **2. Need for holistic approach and partnership working**

Where problems had started early, girls were often dealing with many problems at the same time; experiences of abuse and neglect, mental ill health, substance abuse by parents, carers or themselves, being placed in local authority care, disruption to education, arrest and time in custody. These challenges feed into and exacerbate each other and should be addressed 'in the round'. Family work is also essential - whether with a birth family or carers. Strong partnership working will be essential in order to address these multiple problems,

## **3. Supporting people to address multiple needs can save money, but not every government department spends less**

Our Financial Analysis Model shows that when adults are supported to address their problems, considerable savings can be made to the public purse. However, these savings are not spread evenly across government departments. The bill for criminal justice services may go down, but the bill for housing and support services is likely to go up, at least in the short term. We can logically assume this can also be applied to young women.

The government's current focus on community budgets is an encouraging step forward in recognising this issue. A recent focus on 'families with multiple problems' will be a useful tool in applying this work to young women in contact with the criminal justice system. However it is vital that this work recognises girls who are not living with their families but instead in care or in custody.

Further to work around community budgets, we recommend that the government and/or local areas explore how pooled budgets can recognise different agencies' savings and expenditure as people facing multiple needs are helped to address their problems. This could be achieved either through commissioners or agencies putting in different amounts (e.g. the police save more so contribute more) or through in-area transfers from those that save to those that end up spending more.

Finally, there are also lessons from work around 'Justice Reinvestment'. In this, local areas which divert individuals from criminal justice using successful community programmes are rewarded with the savings made by the Ministry of Justice, which are reinvested into the community schemes.<sup>1</sup> The concept could be transferred to multiple needs and exclusions. Areas operating successful coordinated approaches (via a pooled budget) could be rewarded for coordinated effort by being able to reinvest (or provide directly to local partners) the national savings made by the Ministry of Justice, Home Office and Department of Health.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see Lanning, T. Loader, I and Muir, R (2011) *Redesigning justice: Reducing crime through justice reinvestment*, IPPR, London

#### 4. Transition to adulthood

Revolving Doors is a member of the Transition to Adulthood (T2A) Alliance, and we support the submission they have made to this inquiry. We underline assertions that:

- Young adults in contact with the criminal justice system experience particular challenges and needs and require a distinct approach.
- Issues of maturity should be a key consideration in both sentencing and the treatment of young adults whilst serving custodial or community sentences.
- Transitions between children's and adult services – in particular between the youth justice system and probation – present acute challenges to young adults and careful consideration should be given to the impact of these transitions on young adults. Our publication *Towards a shared future: a commissioning guide* outlines the distinct challenges faced by young adults with multiple needs in transition between children's and adult services, and the high costs that result. It describes the current commissioning landscape and explores how commissioning for this group can be improved. It includes a specific chapter on the criminal justice system. It can be downloaded from <http://www.revolving-doors.org.uk/documents/towards-a-shared-future/>.
- The T2A pilots show that arrangements to better respond to young adults making the transition from the youth to adult justice system can be made within existing resources.

See submission by the Transition to Adulthood Alliance or [www.t2a.org.uk](http://www.t2a.org.uk) for further information.

#### Contact

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