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GOVERNMENT SHOULD CLOSE WOMEN'S PRISONS

The Howard League for Penal Reform today (2 August 2006) called on the Government to institute a programme of closures of women's prisons, and a transfer of resources to community programmes and treatment facilities that tackle women's needs and reduce re-offending.

Launching a new Prison Information Bulletin on women and girls in the penal system, the charity argued that the current policy of imprisonment has failed to keep women prisoners safe, does not meet their rehabilitation needs and cannot ensure public protection when 67% of women released from prison are reconvicted within two years.

The Bulletin looks at the nature of the women and girls' prison population, sentencing, community programmes and the impact that imprisonment has on women, girls and their families.

It argues that with the prison population at a record of over 78,000 the never-ending increase in the male prison population is impacting on women's prisons. For example, the Home Office decision that to meet the demand for places for male prisoners it was going to re-role, or convert, two existing women's prisons - Bullwood Hall in Essex and Brockhill in Worcestershire - to male prisons, has resulted in vulnerable women being moved to prisons across the country and their sentence plans being interrupted.

Frances Crook, Director of the Howard League for Penal Reform, said:

"The Howard League for Penal Reform is calling for a properly planned closure programme for women's prisons and the transfer of resources to community programmes and projects that meet women's needs and, unlike prison, do successfully reduce re-offending. We hope that the current review of vulnerable women in the criminal justice system being conducted by Baroness Corston will provide the impetus for the Government to think radically about reducing the women's prison population so that only those very few women who do pose a danger to the public remain in custody. The vast majority can be managed safely in the community where they can make amends for their offending and help to heal the damage done by crime directly with victims or with the wider community."

Notes to editors

The women's prison population in England and Wales increased by 147% from an average of 1,811 in 1994 to 4,449 in 2004, with 1,771 more women and girls in prison than when Labour came to power in May 1997.

There were 4,613 women and girls in prison on 28 July 2006.

England and Wales has the third highest female prison population in Europe - beaten only by Ukraine and Spain.

The majority of women sent to prison have been convicted of a non-violent offence.

An unpublished needs analysis of women prisoners at Holloway prison shows the degree of vulnerability and need of women in prison. For example:

- 62% were aged under 30
- 49% had not previously been in prison custody
- 61% had at least one child
- 32% had been subject to formal suicide watch whilst in prison
- 50% had experienced and/or witnessed sexual abuse
- 73% had used illegal drugs
- 67% said their offending behaviour needs had not been assessed whilst in prison

Women and girls are held in 15 prisons in England and Wales.

Women are twice as likely as men to be held more than 50 miles from their home.

55% of all self-harm incidents in prison are committed by women, even though they comprise only 6% of the total women's population.

82 women have taken their own lives in prison since 1978, 42 since 2002.

64% of women released from prison are reconvicted within two years compared to 47% of women following a community sentence.

A copy of Prison Information Bulletin 2: Women and girls in the penal system can be purchased via the Howard League for Penal Reform's website www.howardleague.org

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ISDN line available on 020 7923 4196 - uses a G722 system. Interviews may be conducted in advance