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News Release

1,668 women die in custody in 10 years

The Howard League for Penal Reform has today (Monday, 13th July) released new figures which reveal that 1,668 women and girls have died in custody (prison, immigration, approved premises and detention under the Mental Health Act) between 1999 and 2008.

This figure includes 72 women officially recorded as 'self-inflicted deaths' in prison. Another three women have died in prison and been categorised as self-inflicted deaths this year, with one woman dying categorised as natural causes.

The Howard League has launched a campaign to put a stop to the increasing number of women and girls being sent to prison in England and Wales. The Lost Daughters campaign recommends that prison for women is unnecessary. The very few really dangerous women should be held in small secure units that can deal with their needs and prepare them for a safe return to the community.

Female deaths in prison custody 1999-2008

Natural Causes	27
Other Non-Natural	2
Self-inflicted	72
Total	101

A table of female self-inflicted deaths by prison between 1999-2009 (including the three deaths so far this year) is included below.

Female deaths detained under Mental Health Act 1999-2008

Natural Causes	1262
Unnatural Causes	299
Total	1561

The charity is particularly concerned at the number of women apparently dying by their own hand detained in mental health care. It pointed out that most women dying apparently from natural causes are elderly. The Howard League said that the high number of deaths raised serious questions that it will be pursuing with Ministers.

There were two female deaths in probation run premises over the ten year period (one categorised as suicide, one as an overdose) and one female death in an immigration centre. A gender breakdown of deaths in police custody is not currently available.

Self injury rates among women in prison rose by 48% between 2003 and 2007. Despite women constituting only 5% of the overall prison population, they commit over 50% of all self-harm incidents in prison, and we have already seen three suicides this year. One was Alison Colk, a young woman who committed suicide on her first night in Styal prison. She was on a 28 day sentence for theft.

The Lost Daughters campaign has two stories at its heart: One daughter lost, one daughter saved. Sarah was 18 and died within 24 hours of arriving at Styal prison. The response to her overdose was slow and she died in hospital. Susan was imprisoned after a deeply traumatic childhood and severe self injury left her in a life threatening condition. The Howard League obtained an emergency injunction that moved her from prison to a secure hospital.

Frances Crook, Director of the Howard League for Penal Reform, said, "The number of women dying in state custody over the last 10 years is a shaming indictment of our penal system. Judges and magistrates must not send women into our already bulging jails when effective community sentences are readily available. With the present level of overcrowding in prisons, people can be condemned to an early death, despite the best efforts of over-stretched prison staff.

"The overall figure of 1,668 female deaths in custody since 1998 tell a story of neglect and violence, with suicides and deaths by apparent natural causes all at alarmingly high levels. Each one of these deaths should sit uncomfortably on the consciences of the authorities and the nation.

"We are concerned at the high levels of deaths in mental health hospitals, which we feel emphasises the need to improve provision for women in the community. Too many women with mental health needs spend time in the high security end of detention under the Mental Health Act, often unnecessarily and for too long.

"Our Lost Daughters campaign draws attention to the shocking number of women languishing in our prisons and aims put a stop to these unnecessary deaths."

Further information

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Women self-inflicted deaths by prison 1999-2009

New Hall	13
Holloway	11
Styal	11
Eastwood Park	9
Brockhill	8
Durham	7
Edmunds Hill	3
Send	4
Bullwood Hall	2
Foston Hall	2
Downview	1
Buckley Hall	1
PECS 3	1
PECS 6	1
Peterborough	1
Low Newton	1

PECS = Prisoner Escort and Custody Services

Prison custody is neither safe for women nor effective in cutting crime: 64.3% of women released from prison in 2004 were reconvicted within two years of release.

- The number of women in prison has increased by 60% over the past decade; the majority of sentenced women prisoners are held for non-violent offences
Despite this increase, women still represent a relatively small proportion of prisoners, and it should therefore be easier to achieve radical change
- 70% of female sentenced prisoners suffer from two or more diagnosable mental disorders
- There has been a 40% increase in the number of women entering prison on remand within the past 10 years
- For women on remand, nearly two thirds suffer from depression
- Most women serve very short sentences; in 2007 nearly two-thirds (64%) were sentenced to custody for six months or less
- 71% of women in prison have no qualifications

The vulnerable women we imprison have often grown up in chaotic and abusive environments, and are often the victim of circumstance. Over half the women in prison say they have suffered domestic violence and one in three has experienced sexual abuse.

The figures for 1999 and 2008 were obtained by the Howard League for Penal Reform from papers of Ministerial meetings on Deaths in Custody.

Visit www.howardleague.org for more information on the campaign

The Lost Daughters campaign aims are:

- preventing the deaths of women in prison
- raising awareness of our concerns and views on women and girls in the penal system
- implementing the recommendation of the Corston Report: a review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system

One daughter lost

Sarah died, aged 18, while in Styal prison. She arrived at the jail on a Friday night, and was dead 24 hours later.

When Sarah was a child she was sexually abused. When she was a teenager she was raped, suffered from mental health problems and got hooked on illegal drugs. Sarah needed help. She did not find it in prison.

Soon after arriving at Styal, Sarah took an overdose of antidepressant pills. She did not mean to commit suicide. Sarah told prison staff what she was doing.

Women in custody are five times more likely to have a mental health concern than women in the general population.

There was a delay in calling an ambulance. The paramedics were held at the prison gate before being allowed to see her. They couldn't save her and she died in hospital.

Sarah was an intelligent girl and a talented artist. She had been drug-free for eight months at the time of her death. One of six women to take their own lives in Styal prison in the space of a year, Sarah's story is sadly all too common.

One daughter saved

Susan is a delightful, intelligent and creative young woman who is in a secure hospital. She was previously in prison and her appalling treatment in prison will now be the subject of a public inquiry.

Susan had been known to her local authority's social services since the age of one. One in four women in prison has spent time in local authority care as a child.

The action of Susan's mother prevented Susan and her sister from attending school, and Susan dropped out when she was 13. Nearly 40% of women in prison left school before the age of 16.

She began using illegal drugs at age 11 and at around the same time began to hurt herself, something she continued after she was arrested and sent to prison.

Susan was put into isolation as 'punishment' for her self-injury, which only made it worse. Over half of all self-injury incidents in prison are caused by women, despite women making up only 5% of the prison population.

By September 2005, Susan was so ill that her life was hanging by a thread.

The Howard League's legal team obtained an emergency injunction to prevent her return to prison. She is now in a secure hospital and receives treatment and care.

Susan has been given the chance to get better and has improved considerably. She was one of the lucky ones.