

Not for publication before 00.01hrs, Monday 14 April

Friday, 11 April 2008

News release

Prison self injury rate accelerates at four times the rise in population

Rates of self injury in prison have rocketed by almost 40% in the last five years, accelerating well beyond what would be expected from the ever rising prison population in England and Wales.

Figures show that in 2003, there were 16,393 incidents of self injury in prison. In 2007, there were 22,459 incidents.

This rise of 37% is almost four times the rise in the prison population for the same period, which was just over 9.5%. In 2003, the average number of men, women and children in prison was 73,000. By 2007, the average population for the whole year was around 80,000.

Self injury rates among women in prison have risen even further, with a 48% rise in recorded incidents between 2003 and 2007. In Styal prison, self injury rates among the female prisoners have leapt from 376 to 1,324 in the past five years.

Alarming, these figures are only the registered incidents of self injury in prisons. It is safe to assume the scale of the problem is in fact larger again, with a significant number of incidents going unreported.

Director of the Howard League for Penal Reform, Frances Crook, said: "This shocking rise in self injury is far above what might be expected as we lock up ever increasing numbers of men, women and children whose mental health problems and addictions will never be properly treated within our flooded and failing jails.

"Warehoused temporarily in prison, many individuals are then released only to reoffend and be returned to custody. Rotting in the chaos and squalor of overcrowded prisons simply serves to exacerbate problems and will most likely to lead to more serious and frequent reoffending on release. The idea that public protection is served by this vicious circle is not one many victims of crime would recognise.

“When men, women and children in jail cut themselves and otherwise assault their own bodies, it is not a cry for help. It is a scream. How much longer before we realise that the national scandal happening behind bars has a direct impact on public safety and the healthiness of our society?”

The Howard League for Penal Reform has been concerned about rising rates of violence in English and Welsh prisons for many years. As a result of our campaign, the Howard League has now secured a public inquiry into the treatment of one girl who self harmed to a horrifying extent in prison, which will hold public hearings later this year and is being chaired by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO).

‘SP’ was aged 17-19 in the period under investigation (2003-5), after being remanded into prison custody, despite being a child in care. She has been represented by the Howard League for Penal Reform for four years and is expected to give evidence at the inquiry’s public hearings, expected to take place towards the end of this year. This is the first time a public inquiry concerning the principle of the “right to life” will hear from the person at the heart of the proceedings as previous inquiries have concerned deaths (Stephen Lawrence, Victoria Climbié, for example).

The decision to conduct an inquiry into SP’s treatment results from the government’s acceptance of the argument put by the Howard League that the level and seriousness of SP’s life threatening self harm and the appalling treatment she received in prison triggered the state’s investigative obligations under Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Frances Crook continued: “This inquiry is a unique opportunity because SP herself can give evidence at the public hearings. This public inquiry will expose the fact that prisons are a totally inadequate response to children who offend, particularly teenagers who have mental health problems and who injure themselves because of their misery and distress.”

Further information

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Prison by prison self injury figures for the period 2003-2007 are available in the ‘Information for Practitioners’ section of our website.

The Howard League for Penal Reform first acted on behalf of SP in 2003, who was then a 17 year old girl with severe mental health problems and a history of neglect and abuse. SP was transferred to an adult women’s prison from a local authority secure children’s home on her 17th birthday. In prison SP was placed on suicide watch due to her persistent and serious cutting and attempts at suicide and held in solitary

confinement for several months. While on solitary confinement SP was often locked in her cell for 22 hours per day, eating meals on her own and taking her only exercise in a metal cage. SP's self-harm was so serious whilst in prison that she had to be rushed to hospital for blood transfusions.

After two years of pressure and a high court injunction the Howard League's lawyers succeeded in getting SP moved from prison to a secure psychiatric environment. SP has since responded well to care and treatment and her condition has stabilized.

The first part of the Prison and Probation Ombudsman's investigation will be to review SP's records and relevant prison service and other policies that obtained at the time. The Ombudsman will then interview such witnesses as he considers will best assist the inquiry. He will also commission specialist reviews.

The Howard League for Penal Reform legal team will be representing SP at the inquiry.

The Howard League is the oldest penal reform charity in the world and set up a legal department to represent children and young adults in the penal system in 2002 following a successful judicial review against the Home Office that forced it to recognise that children in prison are protected by the 1989 Children Act. The Howard League legal team has represented more than 150 children and has a track record of success in forcing improvement to prison conditions, parole procedures and support on release.