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Bronzefield baby death report sparks campaign to end prison sentencing for pregnant women, by mothers, midwives and campaigners

- A coalition of mothers, midwives, campaigners and academics are calling for an end to prison sentencing for pregnant women in the UK.
- In the wake of today's damning Prison and Probation Ombudsman report, which detailed 'a series of failings in care' for a pregnant woman at Bronzefield prison in 2019, which led to her giving birth alone in her cell at night and losing the baby, the group say "pregnant women and new mothers should not be in prison."
- A [public petition](#) targeting Justice Secretary Dominic Raab has been launched

A coalition of mothers, midwives, academics and campaigners are demanding a change in the law to end prison sentences for pregnant women and new mothers. The call follows the results of an investigation into the death of a newborn baby whose 18-year old mother gave birth alone in her cell at Bronzefield prison in 2019, one of two baby deaths in the women's prison estate in the past two years.

The campaign is spearheaded by Level Up, Birth Companions, and Women in Prison in partnership with a group of mothers who have been pregnant in prison. The campaign is supported by the Royal College of Midwives and leading academics Dr Laura Abbott, Dr Lucy Baldwin and Dr Shona Minson.

[Level Up have launched a public petition directed at new Justice Secretary Dominic Raab](#), calling for a new statutory duty for judges to consider pregnancy and the health of the mother and child when sentencing – and for prison sentences to be avoided at all costs.

Those behind the campaign say that prison is not, and will never be, a safe place for a pregnant woman or mother of a young child. It interrupts healthcare, separates women from their support networks, destroys employment and housing, and breaks families apart [1]. The impact of maternal separation in the critical first two years of a child's life is well documented [2]. Separation and loss of children 'were the most commonly cited factors leading to the high risk of suicide and self-harm within prisons' in England and Wales [3].

The continued imprisonment of pregnant women, criticised for decades, goes against the government's own commitment to reduce the women's prison population. This commitment has been further compromised by the recently announced plan to build 500 new prison places for women. This plan, which includes provision for children to stay overnight with their mothers in prison, could see more pregnant women and new mothers sent to prison.

There are 12 women's prisons in the UK. There are no publicly available figures on the number of pregnant women passing through the prison system each year, or on the outcomes of their pregnancies. Two babies are known to have died in women's prisons in the past two years: one at Bronzefield in October 2019, and one at Styal prison in June 2020. Research by the Nuffield Trust found that just over one in ten women giving birth during a prison sentence did so before they reached hospital - in the prison or while on transfer to hospital [5]. Analysis of hospital records has also shown a steady increase year on year in the number of babies born to women while serving prison sentences, reaching 67 in 2018-19 compared to 43 in 2013-14. Meanwhile, community sentences for women have dropped by two thirds in the last decade [6]

Most women in prison are serving short sentences for non-violent offences, with many swept up into crime as a result of their experiences of poverty, trauma and abuse [7]. 72% of women in prison are serving sentences of 12 months or less [8]. Almost half have committed crime to support the drug use of someone else [9].

63% of women in prison are survivors of domestic abuse [10].

Quotes:

Janey Starling, Co-director of Level Up, said: "The voices of thousands of mothers, midwives and campaigners must be heard. Prison will never, ever be a safe place to be pregnant - no pregnant woman should ever be trapped behind locked doors in the first place, or isolated from her partner and family. The toxic stress of the prison environment causes lasting harm to both mother and child. The government can, and must, change the law to end the imprisonment of pregnant women - and support them in the community instead."

Seyi Falodun-Liburd, Co-director of Level Up, said: "The majority of women in prison are victims of domestic violence. The isolation of the prison system only serves to re-traumatise those women. Prison causes toxic stress to both mother and child, and even short sentences can have a lifelong impact - the government can and must stop this by ending the imprisonment of pregnant women and new mothers."

Naomi Delap, Director of Birth Companions, said: "Today's report from the PPO adds to the already considerable evidence showing that prisons are, and will never be,

safe environments for pregnant women. The system, by its very nature, creates significant barriers to healthcare. Birth Companions has been working with pregnant women in prison for 25 years; in this time we've seen and heard of other tragic deaths as well as many serious incidents and near misses. It's time for things to change for good. The gaps between policy and practice must be bridged, and the government can, and must, end the imprisonment of pregnant women and mothers of infants. This is far from a radical position – it is in line with the Bangkok rules, adopted by the UN General Assembly 11 years ago, and with the approaches of many other countries.”

Dr Kate Paradine, Chief Executive of Women in Prison, said:

“Every child deserves to get the best start in life but that will never be in prison. The trauma of prison affects both mothers and their unborn babies. What happens to an infant in their first 1001 days, including pregnancy, lays the building blocks for their future as they develop skills they need to thrive. Yet they are spending these vital days in prison.

“There is another way, the Government can and must change the law to stop the imprisonment of people who are pregnant and new mothers and do what's best for women and their children. Instead, they can be supported in the community through Women's Centres which provide an anchor to stop women being swept up into crime.”

Clare Livingstone, Professional Policy Advisor at the Royal College of Midwives, said:

“The tragic death of babies, the trauma of the mothers' experience and the anguish and incredible grief this causes, must be a wake-up call for the prison and justice system. This must be a spur for reform so that these women are not in prison in the first place, and that if prison is absolutely necessary, they get the same level of safe and high-quality maternity care that women in the NHS receive. There must be no exceptions to providing safe maternity care no matter where women are.”

The [RCM Position Statement Women – Perinatal Women in the Criminal Justice System can be read here.](#)

Dr Laura Abbott, Senior Lecturer in Midwifery at The University of Hertfordshire, said:

“From a midwifery perspective, prison is an unsafe environment for pregnant women and their unborn babies. My research found that in-cell births were not uncommon and that women were giving birth in the prison estate, without qualified midwifery support and in non-sterile, inappropriate environments, far more often than they should be. There are no midwives or doctors on duty in prisons overnight, so women going into labour lack appropriate medical assessment and care. This is highly

concerning and must be addressed as a matter of urgency, so women and babies can be protected.”

Dr Lucy Baldwin, Senior Lecturer in Criminology at De Montfort University, said:

"Many women are serving short prison sentences for minor offences yet those mothers, their babies and their children suffer too. The long-term harm caused to mothers and their children as a result of imprisoning pregnant women and new mothers cannot be underestimated, even if it's only for a short time. The government must change the law to stop sending pregnant women and new mothers to prison. We already know that the needs of mothers and babies are best met in the community with access to multi-agency support."

Dr Shona Minson, Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford, said:

"The rights of dependent children must be taken into account when a mother is sentenced, and that includes children who may be born inside prison. The research evidence, and the PPO Report, makes it clear that prison is an unsafe place for pregnant women and their unborn children. Deciding that a child should be born in prison, with all the known risks of that situation for the child in both the short and long term, is to discriminate against that child in breach of Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by the UK."

Notes for Editors:

[1] Birth Companions Birth Charter Toolkit (2019) https://hubble-live-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/birth-companions/attachment/file/132/BIRTH_CHARTER_TOOLKIT_Final.pdf

[2] <https://parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/1001-days/resources/>

[3] Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody, 2017, p.11

[4] https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/files/2021-03/1614850952_prisoners-use-of-hospital-services-main-report.pdf

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/nov/22/hmp-bronze-field-baby-death-prison-births>

[6] Prison Reform Trust, Prison: The facts (2021) <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Bromley%20Briefings/Summer%202021%20briefing%20web%20FINAL.pdf>

[7] Women in Prison, Key Facts <https://www.womeninprison.org.uk/campaigns/key-facts>

[8] Prison Reform Trust, Prison: The Facts (2019) <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/Bromley%20Briefings/Prison%20the%20facts%20Summer%202019.pdf>

[9] Women in Prison, Key Facts <https://www.womeninprison.org.uk/campaigns/key-facts>

[10] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/female-offender-strategy>

Birth Companions is a national charity specialising in the needs and experiences of pregnant women and new mothers facing disadvantage and inequality. It marks its 25th anniversary this year.

Website: <http://www.birthcompanions.org.uk>

Level Up is a feminist campaigning organisation fighting gender injustice in the UK.

Website: www.welevelup.org

Women in Prison is a national charity supporting women affected by the criminal justice system and campaigning to end the harm of prison.

Website: www.womeninprison.org.uk