

The Lost Mothers Project



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Background

- In the UK, estimations suggest that 6-7% of the female prison population are at varying stages of pregnancy, and approximately 100 babies are born to incarcerated women each year (Abbott, 2018).
- There are no exact data of the numbers of new-born babies removed from their mother at or soon after birth. However, accounts from women being mandatorily separated from their new-born babies demonstrate a deep sense of loss (Abbott et al. 2023) and increased adverse mental health outcomes (O'Malley & Baldwin, 2019).
- Furthermore, the experience of pregnancy in prison can be isolating and frightening, as pregnant women in prison experience higher levels of miscarriage and pregnancy complications (Davies et al. 2020).
- This study explores the experiences of women who undergo mandatory separation of new-born babies in prison. **It is the first project to link the professions of social work, health visiting, midwifery and criminal justice staff, with the experiences of women** who have been in prison, in understanding their care needs and experiences.

References
 Abbott, L., 2018. The incarcerated pregnancy: an ethnographic study of perinatal women in English prisons.
 Abbott, L., Scott, T. and Thomas, H., 2023. Compulsory separation of women prisoners from their babies following childbirth: Uncertainty, loss and disenfranchised grief. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 45(5), pp.971-988.
 Davies, M., Roliewicz, L., Schiepper, L. & Fagunwa, F., 2020. Locked out? Prisoners' use of hospital care. Research summary. Nuffield Trust.
 O'Malley, S. and Baldwin, L., 2019. Mothering interrupted: Mother-child separation via incarceration in England and Ireland. *Mothers without their children*.

Imprisoned pregnant women undergoing mandatory separation from their newborn babies experience compounded punishments and a uniquely painful prison experience



Findings

- Preliminary findings from the research project indicate that pregnant women in prison undergoing mandatory separation experience health and care inequalities which are compounded by their incarceration and social care intervention.
- Emergent themes resulting from the data around mental health, stigma, lack of joined up working practices from professionals, indicate that imprisoned pregnant women who experience mandatory separation, experience disparate and variable levels of care and support.
- These experiences are compounded with the added insecurity and mental anguish of potential separation from their babies once they're born to provide a uniquely painful experience for expecting mothers in prison.

“I did cry and I was emotional, but I just pulled myself together and just thought, well, I have to be strong and just get on with it. I don't want to be crying all the time and stuff, so I'm just trying to get on with it and then do what I have to do in here and when I get out of here to make a change, so that's what I want to do.” (Jess)

“She was doing everything right, but then the courts decided no. So then you're supporting a mum that's literally grieving for a child, which is difficult, because she knows that she's lost him and the likelihood of her getting him back is going to be minimal. So she's grieving for that child that she's lost, even though he's still here, she's still grieving for him. It is difficult. It's difficult for them, and it's difficult for staff.” (Prison Officer)

Aims

- Explore the effects of mandatory separation of imprisoned women from their babies.
- Bring together professionals from health, social care and prisons to propose new guidance to actively support women.
- Progress an empirically grounded conceptual framework for understanding the sociology of loss through mandatory separation of babies from mothers in prison, adding to the overall sociology of loss and grief.

Methodology

- This research utilises in-depth face-to-face interviews with women who have been, or who are in the process of, being separated from their babies.
- Semi-structured interviews are used with key professionals involved with pregnant women who have Criminal Justice System involvement and who have experienced or are anticipating separation.
- **At the heart of this research are co-productive methodologies.** This research project works with the Lived Experience Team at Birth Companions who act as consultants to the project. This includes the creation of interview questions, assisting with the analysis process, co-producing written work, and the design of the project logo.



“ I am grateful to be a part of it and use my lived experience to make an impact with this project to try and make change for all the other mothers that have been through the criminal justice system and the mothers that are currently in it.” (Lived experience team member)



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