



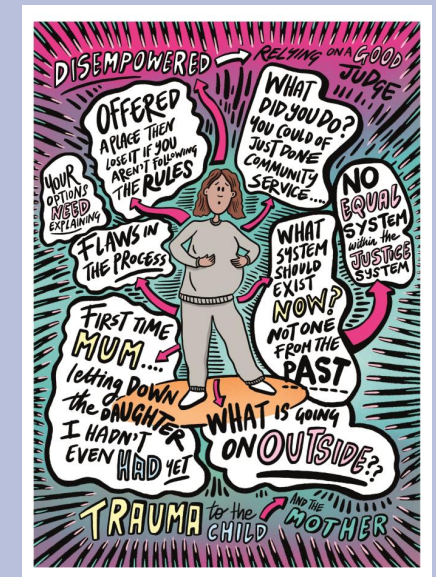
The Lost Mothers Project

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UK Context



- Undertaking research into pregnancy and motherhood in prison since 2012
- 12 Prisons with 6 Mother and Baby Units
- In April 2024 to March 2025 there were **196 pregnant women** in prison. This compares to **215 for the 2023/24 year**. Over $\frac{1}{3}$ are on remand
- In the year to March 2025, **42 women and 41 babies** were received into MBUs; compared with 55 women and 50 babies in the previous reporting year.
- In the 12 months to March 2025, **90% of recommendations (47 out of 52) were approved** by an MBU board. In the previous year, the approval rate of recommendations was **79%** (54 out of 68).
- Separation during the first **1001 days** risks long-term harm to mother and child
- Tragic outcomes exposing **systemic failings:**

‘On the day she died, she was informed that she could no longer visit her baby. The sudden change of plan, unavailability of equipment for expressing along with lack of psychiatric review, were likely to increase her sense of loss. In particular, no one asked her about thoughts of self-harm or suicide at a time that she herself had flagged up as being risky.’ (Cantwell et al, 2021; MBRRACE-UK, 2018:56)

- **No data** collected on mothers separated from babies after birth or upon entering prison
- **Community alternatives** exist but are underused



Pregnant women & new mothers within the criminal justice system – top lines from doctorate research

- System not designed with pregnant woman and new mother in mind (Institutional thoughtlessness)
- Pregnant women feel intense shame (especially when heavily pregnant in public)
- They do not always receive what they are entitled to (e.g. pregnancy 'packs'; mattresses; breast pads)
- Risk of harm – physically and psychologically (e.g. missed medication / mandatory separation of babies)
- Not a safe space from a health care perspective – (e.g. mental health / pregnancy / cell births)



The Lost Mothers Project – What We Did



Qualitative research

Co-production – project co-designed with women who have lived experience

“Nothing about us, without us”

5 prisons

Total number of participants: **n=74**

Participant Numbers

Women (**n=29**)

Prison officers (**n=12**)

Midwives (**n=13**)

Social workers (**n=8**)

Community care professionals (**n=12**)

Mother & Baby Board observations
(**n=5**)



Data Collection & Analysis

Audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews

Observations of MBU decision-making boards

Thematic Analysis + IPoems

Ethics & Sensitivity

Ethical approval HMPPS & UH

Trauma-informed

Anonymity, informed consent, and emotional support built in



What being part of Birth Companions and the Lost Mothers lived experience team means to me



"The lost mothers project is something very close to my heart. I am very grateful to be able to be a part of it and use my lived experience to make an impact with this project and have a voice 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."

A lived experience team member

The importance of lived experience

The Lost Mothers Project – What we found

- Support is often inadequate, highlighting need for personalised, structured care.
- Women experience emotional distress, invisibility, and threats to maternal identity.
- Staff face emotional strain, lack of training, and work within systems marked by bias and bureaucracy.
- Structural racism, lack of diversity, and systemic challenges hinder effective, compassionate care.

I had flashbacks for days of that cry that she gave out.

Midwife

*It was worse than giving birth. I've never felt pain like it...**It was just in here; in my chest; in my heart.** Oh, it was painful. It was the hardest day of my life.*

Charlie

*The officers kept asking me, '**You don't have any thoughts of self-harm, do you?**' I'm not suicidal. I feel helpless, that's how I feel.*

Priya

*We run on a regime, and the training that we receive is still quite old school and disciplined...**Everything's security, discipline, regime.***

Prison Officer



Beyond Loss – Survival and Hope

A lot of people look at me and just think, oh, well, you chose to take the drugs and drink. And we do choose, but people don't understand how hard it is. There's been times where it's either I turn to drink or drugs, or I'll kill myself. So sometimes drink and drugs have been the reason why my kids have still got a mum. **Mollie**

Do you know what my dream is? Just to be a normal person and have a home where I can fill my cupboards up and my fridge and freezer and have my kids around and cook tea from scratch, like a spag bol, or things like that. I buzz off normal, everyday things like what people take for granted. **Hope**

If there was still hope, you would cope. That's all you've got, a hope. It's hard being in here, dealing with it all. Once I start talking about things, it just comes out. I could carry on and on about it, but it's a lot. **Priya**

And I suppose it is good to have a little bit of hope, to get me through it. And my hope is that my children come and see me, I don't know, in about 19 years. But I know they will, and that's all I can live for. I live for myself, obviously, and I will never kill myself, because I want to meet my children. It's far in the distance, but I'll get there. **Leticia**

What needs to change?



The Lost Mothers Project

Spotlight on maternal separation in English prisons: Implications of the Lost Mothers project findings for policy and practice



An end to the imprisonment of women during the 1001 days, in all but the most exceptional of circumstances

Increased use of community, deferred and suspended sentencing

Mandatory 1001 days impact assessments to inform sentencing, license conditions and community orders

New policy to guide police, prosecution and probation services in the 1001 days

Increased funding and support for community alternatives to custody

Improve support for women at risk of separation or separated due to imprisonment



The Lost Mothers Project

Maternal Separation in English Prisons

What needs to change?



**LOST
MOTHERS**



birth
companions

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Thank you

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