

Special Independent investigation: Women in prison

Children in peril as women are jailed in record numbers

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Grandmother is struggling to bring up her twin grand-daughters in Surrey since her daughter was imprisoned. As a family carer she receives little support

Teri Pengilly

The number of women in prisons has more than doubled in 15 years, with 17,240 children separated from mothers who are in jail, an investigation by The Independent shows today.

Britain has the highest rate of female imprisonment in the European Union, **with 10,181 women put behind bars last year alone**. That statistic has raised fears that the criminal justice system is creating a lost generation of children raised without mothers.

Only 80 young children are accommodated with their mothers behind bars in eight mother and baby units, the figures show. Evidence suggests that separation by imprisonment causes long-term emotional, social, material and psychological damage for the children involved.

Nearly two-thirds of boys with a parent in jail will go on to commit some kind of crime themselves, research shows, and children with a parent behind bars are three times more likely than their peers to engage in anti-social behaviour. Their chances of suffering mental health problems also increase threefold.

Yet despite evidence that even a short maternal absence can be extremely disruptive to a child, two-thirds of the 10,181 women sent to jail in 2011 served sentences of six months or significantly less. More than a third were jailed for theft or handling stolen goods, or other low-level "nuisance" offending, and a quarter of them had no previous convictions.

"A significant number of women in prison are not a risk to the public," said the Labour politician Baroness Corston, who wrote a seminal report on women in British prisons in 2007. The average cost of keeping a woman in jail is £56,415 a year, but punishment in the community costs less than.