Hidden costs of female incarceration in London

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Closure of Holloway Prison

In the autumn of 2013, then Chancellor George Osborne announced the closure of HM Holloway, the largest women’s prison in Western Europe and the only women’s prison in London. Female prisoners received a slip of paper under the door notifying them of the impending closure. Less than a year later, the prisoners were moved out of Holloway and the historic prison Holloway was decommisioned.

What happens on the Holloway site could set an important precedent for future inner city prisons that are to be closed in London and beyond, and the balance between the economic realities and social duties of the government. The Ministry of Justice included the disposition of the Holloway site as part of its larger Prison Estate Transformation Programme. The announced a plan to invest £1.3 billion to “modernise the prison estate and support rehabilitation.” This includes closing older prisons “no longer fit for purpose” and creating 9 new prisons.

525 women were held in Holloway prison on any given day just before it closed in 2016.

50% experienced and witnessed domestic abuse as a child.

1 in 3 women in prison have spent time in local authority care.

In Islington in 2015-16, cost about £34,000 per year per child

The MoJ has argued that the sell of the land would allow for the provision of better conditions for female prisoners, primarily services which would make life in prison as close as possible to normal life to facilitate re-integration. However, the movement of female prisoners to the periphery raises concerns in regards to how normal this life can be. The proposed court hearings through Skype, the distance to existing independent services which were located to the Holloway and family may accommodate the complete opposite and fail to account for hidden costs.

HIDDEN COSTS OF FEMALE INCARCERATION IN LONDON

An Alternative for Holloway

The MuJ spends $4.9 million/year incarcerating women, and the local authority itself spends about $525K caring for the children of incarcerated women.

Nearly £5.5 MILLION spent on incarcerating women in Islington

An alternative to provide a one stop shop, where women who are at risk of offending or have interacted with GWS can go to address the root causes of committing a crime has a strong economic and social justification.

A review of women centres in Brighton, Manchester network of women’s centres, and similar strategies aimed at women in Glasgow and Manchester found they were more successful at reducing reoffending rates than incarceration and had costs reduced to as little as £250 per woman per year. Savings that are shared across the entire system, from local authorities, to the MoJ, health services, and the police.

In London MOPAC is starting to test diversion programs for women in police districts which have adequate access to women’s centres like Minerva Project and Beth Centre. But coverage is still limited. These spaces provide Counselling, Education, health, child care, Art and Crafts classes, Support Groups, Fitness classes, massage Therapy, Assistance and Legal Advice on matters such as housing, employment, affordable housing, greenspace.

Looking at this list, it’s evident that the needs addressed for women at risk are not as distant from the needs of general community. We are now trying to understand what such a building would look like and how to design it in such a way that it is integrated into the Holloway site and the community.

Through a human centred characterization of the female population in Holloway, drawing from secondary resources, as well as socio-spatial analysis of the location of female prisoners to peripheral prisons we aim to prove that the existing system is failing to address the specific needs of women and an alternative approach which takes into account these hidden costs could not only benefit women in the system but all women in general, their families and the communities they belong to.

THE HIDDEN COSTS OF INCARCERATION

Because one of the main reasons for closing and relocating the prison was economic, we wanted to get a good idea of just how much money is costs to run the criminal justice system as it is.

Identified two large costs:

The overall costs of incarcerating women

2017-2018, cost £47,258.00 to incarcerate one woman in the UK per year

Second cost of looking after children when mothers are imprisoned:

In Islington in 2015-16, cost about £34,000 per year per child

Aside from these, there are several hidden costs associated with the relocation of Holloway prisoners and incarceration in general. Social service centres providing care to women in Holloway Prison before it closed have found their connections either strained or severed.

Costs nearly £20 more family members to visit prisoners at HMP Downview and Bronzefield. Children of incarcerated women more likely to become NEET, develop substance abuse issues and become incarcerated themselves.

These are just some of the costs without taking into account the costs of maintenance and security of an empty prison, and the risk of increased recidivism.

AN ALTERNATIVE FOR HOLLOWAY

From the profile of women in prison and costs mentioned above we estimated that for Islington, the MuJ spends $4.9 million/year incarcerating women, and the local authority itself spends about $525K caring for the children of incarcerated women.

An alternative could provide a one stop shop, where women who are at-risk of offending or have interacted with GWS can go to address the root causes of committing a crime has a strong economic and social justification.

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