

A women's worker in court: A more appropriate service for women defendants with mental health issues?

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Abstract

Aims: Court liaison services aim to reduce mental illness in prison through early treatment and/or diversion into care of defendants negotiating their court proceedings. However, liaison services may inadvertently contribute to gender inequalities in mental health in the prison system because women often do not access liaison services. This is attributed to services failing to recognize that women have different needs from men. To address this, it is essential that the needs of women in contact with the criminal justice system (CJS) are clearly articulated. However, there is a dearth of research that considers women's needs at this stage of their journey through the CJS. This paper aims to identify these needs before women enter prison. It does so through an analysis of a pilot Women's Support Service based at a magistrates' court, a response to concerns that women were not accessing the local liaison service.

Methods: Proformas were completed by a women's specialist worker for 86 women defendants assessed over four months. Information was collected on characteristics including education, domestic violence, accommodation, physical and mental health. This specialist worker recorded the range of needs identified by defendants at assessment and the services to which women were referred.

Results: Access to the Women's Support Service is high, with only 11.3% of women refusing to use the service. Women attending have high levels of physical and mental health issues. Their mental health issues have not been addressed prior to accessing the service. Women often come from single households and environments high in domestic abuse. Women have multiple needs related to benefits, finance, housing, domestic abuse, education and career guidance. These are more frequent than those that explicitly link to mental health. The women's worker providing the service referred women to 68 services from a wide variety of statutory and voluntary organizations.

Conclusions: The Women's Support Service is accessed by a higher number of women, many more than access the local liaison service. It is suggested that this is due to their multiple and gender-specific needs being adequately addressed by the former service and the organizations to which they are referred. Mental health needs may also be secondary to other more basic needs, which makes the generic service provided by the Women's Support Service more appropriate than a liaison service that deals with mental health support alone.

There are strong associations between crime and mental illness with 90% of the prison population having a mental health problem.^{1,2} One step towards addressing this in the UK has been the development of liaison schemes, based

in some courts. These have the purpose of assessing defendants with mental health issues.³ These services are run by mental health workers who access courts to provide specialist mental health services. Their purpose is to assess