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## **Why prison doesn't work for women**

Economist Vicky Pryce, who served a prison sentence for perverting the course of justice, will speak at a conference taking place at Northumbria University, Newcastle this week.

She will join former prisoners, prison reform campaigners and criminology experts arguing that the prison system is not suitable for women offenders.

'Does prison work for women?' takes place on 11 December. Over 120 people are expected to attend the one-day conference that will examine the impact that imprisonment has on women and their families.

Keynote speakers include Vicky Pryce, who has recently authored *Prisonomics*, a book calling for reform for women prisons, and Jenny Earle, director of the Prison Reform Trust's programme to reduce women's imprisonment.

Delegates will hear from ex-offenders and service providers for women prisoners and their families as they share their experience of why prison isn't working for women. They will also discuss effective alternatives to imprisonment that could help solve the problem of increasing reoffending rates for women.

The event has been organised by [The Centre for Offenders and Offending](#) at Northumbria University, [NEPACS](#), a regional charity providing support to prisoners and their families, the Prison and Offender Research in Social Care and Health Network (PORSCH), and [Open Gate](#), a charity providing mentoring and support to women offenders returning to their community.

Louise Ridley, Senior Lecturer in [Criminology](#) at Northumbria and a member of the Centre for Offenders and Offending research group at the University has been a pivotal member of the team organising the conference. Her work and research focuses on the use of imprisonment and the impact of custody on individuals and families.

Louise argues that the prison system has been designed for men and isn't suited to the needs of women offenders.

"Women are mainly imprisoned for low level crimes, such as theft or handling stolen goods, which are often linked to their domestic situation," she said. "The types of crimes are very different to men's offending but we know that even short custodial sentences for women leads to immense damage, including loss of home and losing contact with children.

"When men are imprisoned there is often a network of women – mothers, girlfriends, wives – who are caring for their children, paying the bills, and keeping their lives going so that they can more easily slip back into their family life when they are released. When women come out of prison they need support to rebuild their lives."

Louise argues that there is greater cost to the state when women are

imprisoned as there is often the need to support their children in care during the custodial sentence. There also appears to be a larger domino effect when women with families are sent to prison.

She said: “Studies have found that children with mothers in prison are more likely to go on to offend than those with just the father in prison. Due to the smaller female prison population – women make up only 5% of all prisoners in England and Wales – there are fewer women’s prisons and so most female prisoners are based in institutions between 60-120 miles away from their homes, making family visits difficult.

“Women have a greater need for community and close relationships and we have to question whether removing them from their communities is the best way to rehabilitate them.”

The number of female ex-offenders who are reconvicted within one year of being released from prison is 45%, a figure that is increasingly annually.

Helen Attewell, chief executive of NEPACS says that the new Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) which have been created as part of the government’s Transforming Rehabilitation agenda offer the possibility of creating more community based responses to support women who offend.

“Prison can be a traumatic and damaging experience for women and their families, with long term impacts on individuals and society,” she said. “The focus needs to move away from locking more women up and move towards tackling the root causes of women’s offending.

“We hope that this conference will be a timely opportunity to showcase what works and encourage the new CRCs to build on this good practice.”

Northumbria University boasts one of the largest criminology programmes in the country. Criminology achieved 90% ‘Overall Satisfaction’ in The National Student Survey 2015.

Placement opportunities are available to a number of undergraduate students in challenging environments such as prisons, youth offending teams, homeless charities and parliamentary offices.

Follow the conference debate on Twitter [@PrisonNU](#) & [#wiprison](#).

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