

**INQUEST** 

Truth Justice Accountability

**BUILT TO**

**HARM**

**HOW WOMEN'S PRISONS  
TAKE LIVES**

**Executive Summary**

## **INQUEST**

is an independent charity providing expertise on state related deaths and their investigation to bereaved people, lawyers, advice and support agencies, the media, and parliamentarians. This is informed by 40 years of specialist casework which includes deaths in prison and police custody, immigration detention, mental health settings and deaths involving multi-agency failings or where wider issues of state and corporate accountability are in question.

This report examines the circumstances of seven recent deaths in women's prisons, situating them within broader systemic issues that have persisted for decades. It provides further evidence that the women's prison estate is – and has long been – incapable of adequate reform.

Thematic analysis of these deaths reveals three recurring issues: the failure to believe prisoners in crisis and at risk, failings in prison processes, and the continued use of imprisonment as the default response to social inequality. The report concludes with a statistical analysis of deaths and self-harm in women's prisons between 2018 and 2024.

## Background and context

The publication of the independent Corston Report in 2007 marked a watershed moment in the criminal justice sector.<sup>1</sup> For the first time, an official report called for the dismantling of women's prisons in the UK. It was the first time an official report had put forward the recommendation that **women's prisons in the UK should be dismantled**.

However, the government failed to adopt this core recommendation.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the government defaulted to piecemeal reforms that heavily relied on an underfunded voluntary sector working closely with probation services, while the judiciary largely continued to imprison women.

As of December 2024, almost 3,500 women were imprisoned, a number projected to surpass 4,000 by September 2028.<sup>3</sup> This demonstrates the **absence of structural change in the years since the Corston Report**.

Between 2014 and 2024, **109 people died in women's prisons** according to MOJ data, laying bare the failures of consecutive governments to safeguard the lives of some of the most marginalised people in our society.

2018

### The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) launches the Female Offender Strategy

With the supposed aim of reducing the women's prison population, the government had delivered on less than half of the 65 commitments by 2021.

2021

### The MoJ announces 500 more prison places for women

The move is met with resistance from the NGO sector for undermining the government's own evidence and criminal justice strategy.

2024

### Experts warn that funding pressures for women's centres will result in more imprisonment

2024

### Government pauses women's prison expansion, but commits to resuming later

2025

### The Independent Sentencing Review recommends long-term funding for women's centres as well as extending punishment into the community

The review promotes extending punishment into the community through intrusive technology-based supervision, while failing to address the structural drivers of imprisonment like poverty and inequality.

# KAY MELHUISH

Kay held qualifications in canine psychology and was an avid breeder of cocker spaniels. She loved Nike Air Max trainers. Those who loved her describe her as having a strong character, who lived for her children, and as being a loyal friend and sister.



**Died in HMP Eastwood  
Park in July 2022**

**Inquest conclusion:**  
Neglect, serious failings

*Died aged 36*



# ANNELISE SANDERSON

Annelise grew up in Runcorn, Cheshire. A tomboy from an early age, Annelise was interested in biking and playing football. A passionate, loving and forgiving person, her family said she cherished the relationships of those to whom she was closest.

**Died in HMP Styal in 2020**

**Inquest conclusion:**  
Narrative, serious failures

*Died aged 18*



# Analysis

This analysis includes reference to means of deaths and should be read with care.

## Not believing prisoners in crisis and at risk

Many of the deaths of people in women's prisons that INQUEST have worked on expose a pattern of ignored warnings from prisoners and their support networks. Despite clear risks, and prisoners disclosing suicide plans and swallowed batteries, prison self-harm safety plans were often closed early or not acted on.

Even when a prisoner's legal representative, family, and psychologists raised concerns and care plans were in place, critical needs went unmet.

## Failing prison processes

### Emergency cell bells

All prison cells are installed with an emergency cell bell, which prison staff are required to answer within five minutes with personal contact. Yet in multiple cases, including a woman left to give birth alone and another woman in opiate withdrawal who was later found ligatured, calls for urgent help were ignored, with fatal consequences.

### Poor oversight of health conditions

Post death investigations revealed repeated failures to follow healthcare guidance. In two cases, women with serious

health conditions (epilepsy and diabetes) were dismissed with only paracetamol, leading to preventable deaths. For both women, mandatory checks were either missed or were unsatisfactory.

### Poor signaling of medical emergencies

In two of the deaths in the report, the failure to immediately radio an emergency code resulted in a delay of emergency medical assistance.

### Lack of adherence to self-harm and suicide prevention guidance

Prison policy requires opening a safety plan (ACCT) for prisoners at risk of suicide or self harm, but this was often ignored. Despite clear warnings, including prisoners disclosing plans to self-harm or take their own lives, ACCTs were not opened promptly or at all.

## Imprisonment as the default

The circumstances surrounding the imprisonment of the women featured in this report casts serious doubt over the decision to imprison them in the first place.

Many of the people were in extreme distress or mental health crises at arrest, and, instead of receiving care, were punished. In many instances, this occurred despite known risks of self-harm and suicide.

Many of the deaths expose how women with highly complex needs are sent to prison, where their needs are much less likely to be met and the risk of their health deteriorating is much higher. For example, a woman who was drug dependent entered an environment where drug use is common and treatment is ineffective. In fact, 19% of women in prison report developing substance problems after incarceration,<sup>4</sup> showing that imprisonment itself is a driver of drug use.

# Recommendations

## 1. Reducing the prison population

This report adds to the already extensive evidence that demonstrates how the prison estate is an intrinsically harmful environment where people are more likely to die than if they were in the community.

To end the vicious cycle of harm, the government must commit to dismantling women's prisons and halting all prison building and expansion of existing prisons.

## 2. Departing from punishment

Many of the women featured in the report were experiencing severe mental health crises in the community, with some trying or threatening to take their own life, at the point at which they came into contact with the police. They should not have been punished. INQUEST is concerned about government plans<sup>5</sup> to expand punishment and surveillance of women in the community, such as through electronic tagging. These measures will do nothing to address women's acute needs and risk extending some of the known harms of depriving women of their liberty into the community.<sup>6 7</sup>

INQUEST recommends the government reconsiders its plans to extend the punishment of women in the community in recognition of the harm it could cause.

## 3. Towards care and dignity

If the people included in this report had in the first instance been met with care, treated with dignity, provided appropriate treatment for their mental and physical ill health, it is unlikely they would have come into contact with the criminal justice system. Prison compounded their existing issues, dehumanised them, and contributed to their deaths. Had this not been the case, they may still be alive. More broadly, this report addresses how poverty and inequality can create conditions whereby someone comes into contact with the criminal justice system.

Therefore, in order to reduce imprisonment, the government must ensure that people's material needs are met through investing in community-based services such as welfare, housing, specialist drug and alcohol services, and education, alongside gender-specific services such as women's centres and refuges.

## Endnotes

1 <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/The-Corston-Report.pdf-Corston-Report.pdf>

2 <https://www.inquest.org.uk/still-dying-on-the-inside-report>

3 <https://www.inquest.org.uk/deaths-in-prison-a-national-scandal>

4 [https://hmiiprison.justiceinspectrates.gov.uk/hmiipris\\_reports/annual-report-2024-25/](https://hmiiprison.justiceinspectrates.gov.uk/hmiipris_reports/annual-report-2024-25/)

5 <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/4012>

6 <https://www.womeninprison.org.uk/news/weve-graded-the-uk-governments-sentencing-bill-efforts-to-transform-the-justice-system-for-women/>

7 <https://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/04/In-Brief-14-digital.pdf>

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