

"I want them to know me as a human being" – new report on pregnancy in prison published

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Pregnant women's experiences of maternity care in English prisons have left many feeling 'degraded' and 'inhuman,' according to a report published by Dr. Laura Abbott, senior midwifery lecturer at the University of Hertfordshire.

The Pregnancy and childbirth in English Prisons: institutional ignominy and the pains of imprisonment report, published in *Sociology of Health & Illness*, explored women's experiences by interviewing prisoners and [prison staff](#), and by observing how [pregnant women](#) are cared for whilst incarcerated.

The study found that [pregnancy](#), and the resulting necessity of regular outings in public for health assessments, leads to "supplementary suffering and shame for a woman different from any other type of prisoner experience," leaving many feeling judged and shamed after attending hospital appointments. Many participants in the study recalled being handcuffed whilst attending their appointment, which often "intensified" feelings of being humiliated and judged.

The special status of mother-to-be, something usually afforded to pregnant women in mainstream society, was found to be "mainly absent" in prisons and often "disregarded." For many participants in the study, pregnancy appeared secondary to their prisoner identity, which sometimes led to problems with their care.

In one of the more severe cases featured in the report, one woman went into spontaneous labour in prison three and a half weeks early, and was assessed by nursing staff not trained in midwifery. A nurse came to her cell, examined her abdomen and told her she was not in labour. Within ten minutes of the nurse leaving, the woman's waters broke and she called for help again before giving birth in her cell. Despite disagreeing with the nurse during the initial assessment, the woman "accepted her position of powerless [prisoner](#), rather than labouring [woman](#)."

When interviewed, many prison staff expressed empathy towards pregnant women in prison, with one saying that "prison is not the place for a [pregnant woman](#)." However, some referred to them as "the pregnant," a collective name described in the report as a "dehumanising label."

"Despite extensive literature on the sociology of reproduction, pregnancy amongst women prisons is under-researched. Pregnant women experience additional difficulties compared to typical prisoners, including the ambiguity of their situation, physical aspects of pregnancy and the necessity to attend regular appointments in public settings. These difficulties can negatively impact the care they receive, their wellbeing and the safety of their pregnancy," says Dr. Laura Abbott.

In total, 28 [women](#) took part in interviews: 22 whilst incarcerated and six following release from prison. 10 members of staff agreed to take part, including six prison service [staff](#) and four healthcare professionals. The study was carried out from 2015 to 2016 and formed Dr. Laura Abbott's doctorate, conferred in June 2018.

More information: Laura Abbott et al. Pregnancy and childbirth in English prisons: institutional ignominy and the pains of imprisonment, *Sociology of Health & Illness* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/1467-9566.13052](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13052)

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