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**Book Section:**

Sharpe, G. (2024) Young women and punishment within and beyond the penal system. In: Wigzell, A., Paterson-Young, C. and Bateman, T., (eds.) *Desistance and Children: Critical Reflections from Theory, Research and Practice*. Policy Press, pp. 97-111. ISBN: 9781447369110.

<https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447369127.ch005>

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# Young women and punishment within and beyond the penal system

*Gilly Sharpe*

## Introduction

Feminist research on troublesome girls has revealed a close relationship between welfare and punishment, extending to the de facto punishment of girls through welfare mechanisms (for example [Chesney-Lind, 1989](#); [Carrington, 1993](#); [O’Neill, 2001](#)). Despite these scholarly insights, limited attention has been paid to similarities and continuities in young women’s experiences of punishment and punitiveness across penal and welfare settings, and youth justice and penal practices have tended to be considered in isolation from other institutional arrangements. Such compartmentalisation serves to fragment experiences which are overlapping and interwoven, and which may have cumulative and enduring effects on individuals over time. This chapter, through a focus on the structural and cultural contexts which shape both lawbreaking and desistance ([Weaver, 2019](#)), examines the treatment and punishment of marginalised young women across three domains: education, criminal labelling and the benefits system. Following [Carvalho et al \(2020, pp 265–6\)](#), I conceptualise young women’s experience of punitiveness as multi-faceted and ‘a central feature of a range of intersecting experiences and practices’. I argue that schools, formal and informal youthful criminal labels and the welfare benefits system constitute intersecting and sometimes mutually constitutive sites of punishment which, in combination, are likely to have a toxic impact on marginalised young women’s sense of self as well as on their economic and social prospects.

## Trans-institutional inaction and punishment

Research evidence on the backgrounds of young women in the youth justice system attests to their frequent experience of family violence, abuse and exploitation, as well as histories of state care ([Batchelor, 2005](#); [Douglas and Plugge, 2006](#); [Sharpe, 2012](#); [Chesney-Lind and Shelden, 2014](#); [Vaswani, 2018](#)). Care experience itself constitutes a significant and gendered pathway into the justice system, particularly youth custody ([Carlen, 1988](#); [Jacobson](#)

et al, 2010; Goodfellow, 2017; Moj/YJB, 2017; Fitzpatrick et al, 2023). For example, two thirds of girls aged ten to 17 who entered penal custody in England and Wales between 2014 and 2016 were, or had previously been, 'looked after' by the state, and almost half (46 per cent) had been subject to a Child Protection Plan (Moj/YJB, 2017).<sup>1</sup> Marginalised girls who experience childhood maltreatment are frequently responded to with indifference and disbelief, rather than sympathy and support, by statutory services (Allnock and Miller, 2013; Jay, 2014; Sharpe, 2016; Ofsted, 2021). A substantial body of scholarship has demonstrated that statutory children's social care services and interventions may be experienced by young women as no less punitive than penal sanctions, particularly when they involve secure care (O'Neill, 2001; Ellis, 2018). Several of the 52 youth justice system-involved women interviewed by Sharpe (2012, p 132), for example, explained that social workers had 'abandoned' them or 'closed the case', leaving them bereft of adult support. Moreover, statutory 'gender-neutral' services are often inaccessible to girls with multiple or complex needs who do not meet eligibility thresholds for support by statutory services because they are deemed too low risk, or, conversely, too high risk, or else too young or too old, to be offered support. This can leave young women feeling 'pushed out and left out', sometimes developing their own coping strategies which lead to them becoming the 'problem' rather than the victim (Agenda, 2022).

In addition to welfare inaction, marginalised girls experience overtly punitive responses within a range of state institutions on account of their class position and social background (Sharpe, 2024). Many of the 52 girls and young women interviewed by Sharpe (2012) disclosed bullying at school,<sup>2</sup> and others believed they had been treated unfairly or with intolerance by teachers, resulting in a lack of attachment to education and learning. There is a close association between school-based punishment and childhood criminalisation. Almost three quarters (71 per cent) of children with a criminal record, compared with 15 per cent of the general school population, have been suspended from school, and one tenth (versus 1 per cent of all pupils) have been permanently excluded (Department for Education, 2022). Marginalised girls and boys who are subject to disciplinary punishment in the classroom may be labelled as troublemakers from an early age (Reay, 2017), with 'recycling' or re-labelling effects if and when they subsequently come into contact with law enforcement agencies (McAra and McVie, 2005).

At a slightly older age as they transition into adulthood, many criminalised young women will be required to navigate both discriminatory criminal records disclosure requirements and a misogynistic and anti-youth welfare benefits system, in which claimants are represented as 'scroungers' and 'skivers' (Jensen and Tyler, 2015) and treated with hostility and a lack of compassion (O'Hara, 2020; Tyler, 2020). The possession of a criminal record, particularly among those with childcare responsibilities, impedes women's ability to work,

leaving them reliant on the welfare benefits system, where they may find themselves negatively judged and further punished. The following section explores school-based disciplinary punishment and exclusion, experiences which frequently foreshadow, as well as overdetermine, girls' subsequent encounters with the youth justice system.

## Punishment at school

There is a raft of evidence that children in the youth justice system have experienced school exclusion and disruption, as well as disengagement from education, and these experiences do not seem to differ markedly by gender, unlike among the general population (Jacobson et al, 2010; Department for Education, 2022). However, the relationship between disadvantage and exclusion from school does appear to be somewhat gendered. A notable finding of the major UK government-commissioned Timpson review of school exclusions (Department for Education, 2019) was that girls supported by social care – namely girls considered to be children 'in need', looked after by the state or subject to a Child Protection Plan – were significantly more likely than other girls to experience exclusion from school, a differential that was much less pronounced among boys.

Osler (2006) has contended that school exclusion is a social justice issue, and substantial evidence supports this position. Schools are a central site of social and civic participation for children, and exclusion from school can stem from, as well as worsen, existing social exclusion and disadvantage. Exclusion from school can have an enduring impact on individuals' future opportunities (Partridge et al, 2020). Exclusion is disproportionately experienced by children of colour, individuals with disabilities and marginalised children, identities which frequently intersect (Gillborn, 2015). Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are six times more likely to be excluded from school than pupils without SEND, and in England children eligible for free school meals – an indicator of poverty – are four times as likely to be permanently excluded (Partridge et al, 2020). Educational failure is also more prevalent in more unequal societies (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010), where school attainment has been demonstrated to depend largely on one's parents' economic, cultural and social capital rather than on individual ability or motivation (Reay, 2017). Reay (2017) contends that working-class children experience little sense of belonging at school, such that schools may impede, rather than enable, social mobility.

School exclusion broadly mirrors youth justice system involvement in terms of gender: boys are twice as likely as girls to be suspended from school and four times as likely to be permanently excluded (Department for Education, 2019), resulting in exclusion being seen as a boys' problem. McAra and McVie (2012), drawing on longitudinal data from the Edinburgh Study

of Youth Transitions, a cohort of around 4,300 mainly White individuals in Scotland, found that badly behaved girls were more likely than their male counterparts to evade school exclusion. By contrast, one New Zealand-based longitudinal examination of the relationship between school exclusion and subsequent justice system involvement among 593 individuals concluded that there was a lower threshold of tolerance for girls' misbehaviour at school than for boys' (Sanders et al, 2020). It is important to note here that recorded statistics are limited in describing and explaining school disciplinary practices and classroom responses to 'challenging' behaviour. Girls may be excluded in less visible and more informal ways than their male counterparts: for example, through the use of 'off-rolling', self-exclusion and unofficial school moves (Osler et al, 2002; Social Finance, 2020; Agenda, 2021).<sup>3</sup> Official data which record gender alone also mask intersectional differences relating to race, class and sexuality. Gypsy Roma girls (and boys) are excluded from school at the highest rate of all groups (Roma Support Group, 2017), and Black Caribbean girls are excluded at twice the rate of White British girls, with mixed White and Black Caribbean young women three times as likely to experience school exclusion (Partridge et al, 2020; Agenda, 2021). White middle-class norms and expectations of docility and quiet unassertiveness may lead to the punishment of girls who infringe gender norms, particularly if they employ physical violence (Jackson, 2006; Osler, 2006; Carlile, 2009).

Exclusion from school can relate indirectly to maltreatment outside school. Most of the young women in one recent consultation with previously excluded individuals explained their exclusion from school with reference to having to cope with abuse, violence and trauma (Agenda, 2021). As indicated earlier, girls' needs may go unnoticed and unmet at school and elsewhere. Non-verbal signs of maltreatment or neglect, such as a lack of personal care, bruises, excessive tiredness or emotional withdrawal, may be overlooked or ignored. Allnock and Miller (2013) conducted retrospective interviews with 60 young adults – 53 women and seven men – who had experienced sexual abuse and family violence during childhood. Four fifths of the respondents had attempted to disclose their abuse to a professional before turning 18, the majority while the abuse was still ongoing. However, as other studies have also found (Radford et al, 2011; Ofsted, 2021), most had not felt able to make a verbal disclosure but instead attempted to communicate in other less direct ways, such as through clues in their actions or by using indirect words. Forty-two per cent of those attempting to make disclosures had not been 'heard', and no action had been taken. It is extremely difficult for young people who are suffering abuse to make sense of what is happening to them: they may blame themselves, as well as fear the consequences of disclosure. This signals a need for increased awareness among professionals who work with children and highlights the importance of asking sensitive direct questions in a safe environment, as well as providing information to

children about help-seeking processes and support mechanisms (Allnock and Miller, 2013).

Schools' failure to respond to non-physical or superficially 'non-serious' bullying can also lead to exclusion of the 'victim'. All of the 81 girls interviewed for one study of girls and exclusion (Osler, 2006) were of the opinion that there is a direct relationship between bullying and school exclusion. Verbal bullying and taunting between girls may be normalised and attract no response from teachers, even when it is persistent and emotionally damaging (Sharpe, 2024). Physical violence perpetrated by young women, by contrast, may be seen as particularly serious and shocking. A girl who is the victim of persistent verbal abuse and psychological violence may therefore find herself without support from education professionals; yet she may be excluded if she subsequently 'explodes' in retaliation.

Inaction and a lack of concern by teachers can have a lasting impact on young women's sense of self. Sharpe (2024) analysed the retrospective accounts of 36 women in their 20s of their teenage experiences of school. The majority of respondents believed that their teachers had low expectations of them and that their school had little interest in their wellbeing, resulting in them feeling devalued and unimportant. Several of the women had also been excluded from school immediately prior to sitting external GCSE exams, perhaps in an attempt to avoid harming the schools' exam results and attainment rankings. Being prevented from obtaining qualifications is an acutely punitive act with potentially lifelong consequences.

## **Criminal records and media representations: gendered marks of shame**

Lawbreakers are widely stigmatised, with effects that can endure long after crime has been left behind. Criminal women in particular are subject to negative appraisals on account of being seen as failed women, failed citizens and, in some cases, failed mothers (Schur, 1984; Sharpe, 2015; Gålnander, 2020; Rutter and Barr, 2021). The possession of a criminal record is a formal mark of shame with specific generational and gendered impacts. Criminal records imposed on children have been likened to 'life sentences' (Stacey, 2018). Disclosure requirements pertaining to childhood criminal records were until recently far more permissive in England and Wales than in many other jurisdictions (Sands, 2016), despite the purpose and effectiveness of disclosing childhood misdemeanours, in some cases decades after their occurrence, being questionable. In November 2020, existing criminal records disclosure filtering rules in England and Wales were changed, and youth pre-court disposals (cautions, reprimands and final warnings) were no longer to be subject to automatic disclosure through an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service certificate, as was previously the

case (Beard, 2021). Several years before this welcome change, the [House of Commons Justice Committee \(2017, para 65\)](#) commented that the (then) existing disclosure regime discriminated against children from Black, Asian and other minoritised backgrounds, young asylum seekers, children in the care system and young women forced into prostitution. In addition to these groups, marginalised young women more broadly are disproportionately affected – and punished – by criminal records disclosure requirements. Women have been estimated to be around twice as likely as men to have their criminal records disclosed when applying for work ([Unlock, 2021](#)). Marginalised young women with few qualifications are disproportionately represented in work in the public-facing service and care sectors ([McDowell, 2016](#)), where enhanced disclosure of one's previous lawbreaking is usually required. [Unlock's \(2021\)](#) research, which drew on survey data from 511 women with criminal records in England and Wales, revealed substantial post-conviction problems, with most respondents (86 per cent) citing employment as the biggest problem in their lives.

In addition to formal criminal records checks, information technology and data-sharing systems, as well as the social media gossip machinery, make it more difficult to conceal one's criminal past ([Lageson and Maruna, 2018](#)). Furthermore, young women who have committed serious and/or violent offences are at high risk of trial by media, since their lawbreaking is frequently presented as particularly shocking or salacious and thus more newsworthy than that of young men ([Chesney-Lind and Irwin, 2008](#); [Sharpe, 2012](#)). The court of public opinion, ever more vitriolic in the age of social media, is frequently swayed by cultural representations of female lawbreakers. Women defendants – as well as victims, in cases of sexual violence – are routinely demonised and vilified, as well as masculinised ([Chesney-Lind and Eliason, 2006](#)), or depicted as more depraved than their male counterparts. These often-distorted representations frequently invoke class: offending girls are constructed both as disreputable and immoral subjects and as objects of disgust. Such depictions arguably constitute a generalised punitiveness towards criminal girls and women. They may also influence decision-making by criminal justice and other professionals ([Chesney-Lind and Irwin, 2008](#); [Sharpe, 2009](#)). While some professionals will be critical about media portrayals of women and intermittent moral panics that girls' and women's behaviour is getting worse or that they are becoming more violent, it is quite feasible that professional assessment practices and judgements affecting marginalised and criminalised women will be influenced by media (mis)representations of an apparently rising tide of girlhood alcohol consumption or violence ([Sharpe, 2009](#)).

Female defendants' less frequent appearance in court may also render individual girls and women more visible and memorable. While there are legal restrictions on the press reporting of criminal cases involving child

defendants in order to protect their privacy and avoid unnecessary stigma, there are indications that judges have become progressively more willing to lift these restrictions and allow the public exposure of child defendants (Stone, 2015). This more permissive approach appears to be underpinned by an incorrect and unsupported belief that ‘naming and shaming’ has the potential to deter others. As Stone (2015, p 100) has persuasively argued, this indicates a failure on the part of sentencers to distinguish between public interest imperatives and ‘the gratuitous appeasement of public curiosity’.

Disclosing one’s criminal past is a risky undertaking for women (Gällander, 2020): in addition to compromising one’s employment prospects, the shame of declaring oneself an offending woman, as well as fear of the consequences of so doing, is likely to be considerable. In some cases, this may cause individuals to shun contact with support services and avoid applying for jobs for which they are suitably qualified and experienced (Sharpe, 2024). This leaves many criminalised British young women at the mercy of a harsh and punitive welfare benefits system.

## The punitive political economy of welfare in austerity Britain

The political economy is a central consideration in women’s pathways into and out of crime, and the impact of economic policies, particularly in relation to state welfare, is likely to be enduring as well as multi-generational, affecting any dependent children as much as, if not more than, their mothers. Most female lawbreakers experience financial hardship (Corston, 2007), and, while precise data are not available, many criminalised mothers (Epstein, 2014), and probably the majority of criminalised *young* mothers (Sharpe, 2015), are lone parents. Beginning with the Thatcher administration of the 1980s, successive governments’ pursuance of a neoliberal agenda involving the rolling back of the state has led to the dismantling of the welfare settlement and social rights that had been in place since the post-war period. A plethora of ‘welfare reforms’ introduced by UK governments since the 1980s have progressively lessened the financial security and economic position of already-marginalised groups, disproportionately impacting migrants, minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities, and women and children and contributing to increased inequality between citizens (Taylor-Gooby, 2013). Indeed, the contemporary UK welfare system was described by Philip Alston, human rights lawyer and former-UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, as so sexist that it could have been drawn up by “a group of misogynists in a room” (Ward, 2018). Meanwhile, citizenship has been redefined around the dual axes of paid work/worklessness and inclusion/exclusion (Tyler, 2013, p 161), with the consequence that poor people, including those engaged in unpaid care work, must be coerced into work in

order to fulfil the obligations of citizenship. Contemporaneous with waged labour becoming more central as a marker of citizenship, employment in the UK and elsewhere has become increasingly precarious, particularly for young people (McDowell, 2016). Young people with criminal records are thus required to navigate an economic system which demands their inclusion in the labour market yet simultaneously excludes them on account of their past misdeeds.

Criminalised young women are less likely than their male counterparts to be supported, either financially or practically, by their families of origin, and they are more likely to experience homelessness (Sharpe, 2012; Prison Reform Trust/Women in Prison, 2018). Women in general tend to leave the family home earlier than men,<sup>4</sup> and family violence, discord and childhood maltreatment may propel marginalised young women out of the family home at a young age (Blaauboer and Mulder, 2010; Sharpe, 2012). The male respondents in one British longitudinal study examining young men's desistance from crime remained at 'home', in most cases, well into their 20s (Bottoms and Shapland, 2016), which is likely to have mitigated financial strain while providing some degree of practical and personal support, in turn aiding desistance efforts. Conversely, living alone – without, and especially with, dependent children – is more expensive, particularly for younger people who are poorly supported through social policy. Adults aged under 25 are entitled to lower rates of welfare benefits, due in part to a middle-class assumption that they will either remain in the family home or live in shared accommodation with friends. For those in employment, the national minimum wage is lower for workers under 23. When paid work is made difficult or impossible due to lone motherhood and the possession of a criminal record, financial strain is likely to be very considerable for women living independently.

Social security retrenchment in the UK during austerity has resulted in a punitive benefits system with increasingly stringent conditions of entitlement and harsh sanctions if these are not met. While welfare conditionality is not new, having been introduced in 1996, its reach was extended significantly under the Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments' austerity policies, during which time conditions first imposed by the earlier Labour administration on formerly exempt groups, including lone parents and people with disabilities, became more stringent (Whitworth and Griggs, 2013). 'Work conditions' for individuals in receipt of welfare assistance have become even tougher under Universal Credit, which, since its phased introduction between 2013 and 2018, has led to a reduction in income for most claimants (Tiratelli et al, 2023),<sup>5</sup> with particularly negative consequences for women, lone parents and their children (Andersen, 2020; Carey and Bell, 2022). A new rule introduced in January 2023 requires Universal Credit claimants who work part time to increase their working hours (to

at least 15, rather than 12, as was previously the case), or to increase their earnings by at least 25 per cent, in order to remain eligible for the benefit. This change will, again, affect women unequally, as well as their children and others they care for, not least due to the high cost and inaccessibility of childcare provision in Britain.<sup>6</sup>

As indicated, conditions attached to welfare eligibility have been found to disproportionately affect already-vulnerable groups, including disabled people and lone parents, who are also more likely to be sanctioned (their benefit payments stopped or reduced) (Rabindrakumar, 2017; Reeves and Loopstra, 2017). Sanctions, it has been claimed, push lone parents further from work while adding to their financial and emotional burden.<sup>7</sup> They also propel dependent children further into poverty. Half (49 per cent) of children in lone-parent families were in relative poverty in 2019, double the already-high rate (25 per cent) for children in two-parent families (Cribb et al, 2022). Young people under 25, too, are disproportionately sanctioned, with young people aged 20–24 the most likely group to receive a sanction (Harrison, 2023: 10). Welfare assessors have the power to act as ‘accuser, judge and jury’ (Standing, 2016, p 194) and to control access to financial support. They may exercise discretion regarding the imposition of a benefits sanction if work conditions have not been met, and there is potential for such decisions to be influenced by cultural stereotypes or character judgements based on a woman’s criminal past and/or social class position. Working-class women are routinely judged to be unrespectable, feckless and aggressive – ‘the [type of] women who tell their kids to fuck off in the social’ (McKenzie, 2015, p 51). Already deviant by virtue of their (former) lawbreaking and their possession of a criminal record, criminalised young women may be viewed as untruthful and undeserving in their interactions with welfare assessors. This has potentially serious consequences for their financial circumstances and in turn may constrain their opportunities to leave crime behind.

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined young women’s experiences of gendered and generational punishment within three domains that are normally considered in isolation from one another: school, the imposition of criminal records and labels and the welfare benefits system. Research on young women’s – and indeed young men’s – lawbreaking and their desistance from crime has paid insufficient attention to the ways in which institutions and practices beyond the penal system punish and exclude marginalised and criminalised individuals. This is an important omission, since the punishment of young women extends far beyond the penal system. Moreover, criminalised and disadvantaged young women’s experiences of discipline and punishment

within a range of state institutions are likely to intersect and overlap, and their treatment in one setting or context may influence their reception in others, either contemporaneously or at a later point in time.

Punishment can be structural in origin – for example, criminal records disclosure requirements or welfare benefits eligibility conditions. It also operates at the micro level through individuals' everyday interactions with teachers, judges and welfare assessors. At both levels, punitive and exclusionary policies and practices ultimately communicate to girls and young women that their lives are of little value. They also have the potential to limit women's opportunities well into the future. The reduction of punitiveness towards young women and the promotion of social (re-)inclusion thus requires change at multiple levels.

As discussed earlier, research evidence suggests that girls' exclusion from school is frequently related to, or precipitated by, verbal bullying. Bullying may in turn be associated with family distress and structural disadvantage, both of which may affect girls' appearance, demeanour, behaviour and attendance at school. The availability within schools of mainstreamed and well-resourced emotional support that is available to all at the point of need and for as long as required would increase the possibility of girls' welfare needs being recognised and met before problems escalate. Such provision is currently scarce (Agenda, 2022). Over a quarter of young women aged 16–24 have experienced symptoms of mental illness, and one in eight are likely to experience posttraumatic stress disorder (McManus et al, 2016). This suggests that in-school wellbeing support would benefit a substantial proportion of female students.

In relation to criminal records disclosure, while there has been welcome legislative change restricting the disclosure of one's criminal past, the minimum age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales remains, at ten, extremely low. Raising this age would significantly reduce the number of criminalised children, and it would improve girls' and boys' future employment prospects. Furthermore, convictions received as a juvenile remain eligible for disclosure for five and a half years, with particular implications for young women and men who live independently and must support themselves financially.

Finally, poverty and structural marginalisation over-determine women's crime and narrow their law-abiding options (Carlen, 1988). The UK's current highly punitive welfare benefits system discriminates against women 'by design' (Garnham, 2018). Yet women with a criminalised past, few or no qualifications and childcare responsibilities may be forced to rely on it. Without changes to the welfare system focused on supporting women and their children, rather than sanctioning them and pushing them further into poverty, marginalised women with a criminal past will continue to be punished, potentially long after they have left crime behind.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A Child Protection Plan is made when a child is judged to be at risk of significant harm.
- <sup>2</sup> The interviewees in this study were aged 13–19 years. Six individuals were aged 18 or 19 years old.
- <sup>3</sup> ‘Off-rolling’ is where a pupil is removed from a school roll without the formal exclusion process – for which there are accountability mechanisms – having been followed, or by encouraging a parent to take their child out of school. Importantly, off-rolling does not lead to the identification of a new educational placement (Partridge et al, 2020), thereby undermining the child’s right to education.
- <sup>4</sup> This is around two years earlier in the UK. See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/youngadultslivingwiththeirparents>
- <sup>5</sup> See ‘Childcare responsibilities’ on the Understanding Universal Credit website, Available from: <https://www.understandinguniversalcredit.gov.uk/new-to-universal-credit/your-responsibilities>
- <sup>6</sup> The average net UK childcare cost, when state funding was taken into account, was the sixth highest of all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries in 2022. See <https://data.oecd.org/benwage/net-childcare-costs.htm>
- <sup>7</sup> See ‘How benefit sanctions push single parents further from work’, LSE Blog, 18 April 2018, Available from: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/how-benefit-sanctions-push-single-parents-further-from-work>

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