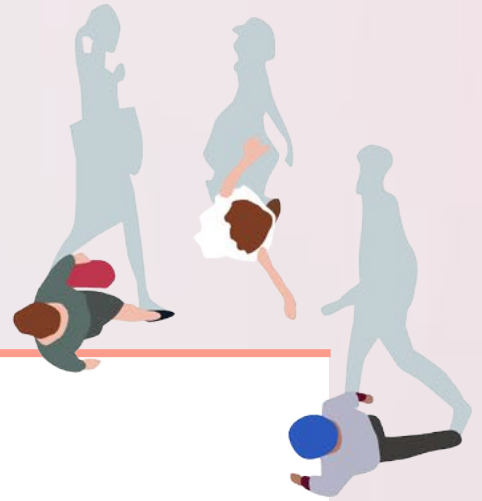




What Works *for*  
**Children's  
Social Care**



# A REVIEW OF APPLICATIONS TO MOTHER AND BABY UNITS IN PRISONS

November 2022





# What Works for Children's Social Care

## Acknowledgements

This review was carried out by What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC). As well as the listed report authors, many WWCSC staff past and present participated in various stages of the review process. Thank you to HMPs Styal, Bronzefield, New Hall, Peterborough and Eastwood Park for sharing their case files with us, as well as all the local authorities who shared the corresponding case files. Thank you to Georgia Parry (Director of Operations) for coordinating this data collection, and to Isabel Dyer (Team Administrator) and Albana Hasani (Team Administrator) for anonymising the case files. Thank you also to James Somerville (Policy, Partnerships and Public Affairs Officer) for quality assurance and additional support for this report.

The authors would also like to acknowledge the work of Chief Social Worker for Children and Families Isabelle Trowler and Lauren McCrum on the wider review of the decision making process used in mother and baby units, and thank them for taking forward Lord Farmer's recommendation.

## Funding and competing interests

This project was funded and delivered by WWCSC.

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# CONTENTS

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<b>SUMMARY</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>LIMITATIONS OF THE REVIEW</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>BACKGROUND TO THE REVIEW</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>DISCUSSION</b>	<b>21</b>
What is an MBU?	4	<b>RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH</b>	<b>23</b>
About the project	5	<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>METHODS</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>APPENDIX 1: MOTHER, CHILD AND FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS</b>	<b>25</b>
Overall sample analysis	6	<b>APPENDIX 2: METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>32</b>
In-depth analysis of subsample	6	Selecting the thematic review sample	32
<b>FINDINGS</b>	<b>7</b>	Analysis	33
A. Overall sample analysis	7		
B. In-depth analysis of sub-sample	15		



# SUMMARY

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This thematic review looks at the characteristics and family histories of women who applied to prison Mother and Baby Units (MBUs) between 2017 and 2021. We carried out this analysis as part of a wider review of the decision making process used in MBUs. This wider review followed a recommendation from Lord Farmer for the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families to carry out a case review of children removed from their primary carers when they enter prison. The findings from the wider review are available [here](#).

We reviewed the characteristics of 67 women whose applications to an MBU were accepted, and 39 women whose applications to an MBU were rejected and have reported important contextual information about their applications. Where appropriate, we have reported figures for women whose applications were rejected and whose applications were accepted separately so that differences between these groups can be considered in line with the wider review. However, our sample size was too small to carry out any statistical analysis on the data, so any differences, whilst illustrating potential trends, may not be statistically significant and therefore meaningful.

Alongside this, we present a more in-depth thematic analysis of the applications of 15 women whose applications were accepted and 15 women whose applications were rejected by the MBU, again considering rejected and accepted applications as sub-groups.

We found that adverse childhood experiences were common amongst all applicants, with some also experiencing involvement with children's social care (CSC) themselves as children. We found much less information about fathers and their experiences.

Where the mother's interaction with their baby was reported, this was largely described positively and many mothers were seen to be taking positive steps for change.

Our findings highlight the importance of understanding more about the histories and experiences of women who apply to MBUs, and may be useful to inform future research in this area.



## BACKGROUND TO THE REVIEW

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In 2016, the government commissioned Lord Farmer to carry out a review on the importance of strengthening male prisoners' family ties to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime (Farmer, 2017). Subsequently, as part of the Female Offender Strategy published in June 2018, the Ministry of Justice commissioned Lord Farmer to conduct a second review looking at women in the criminal justice system through the lens of family. His review raised concerns about women whose children are removed from their care while they are in prison and found that "the physical severing of family ties when a woman enters custody often has profound and lifelong consequences for both them and the children or other dependents involved" (Farmer, 2019, p.93). His review included a recommendation for a case review of children removed from primary carers when they entered prison to be carried out by the Chief Social Worker for England.

The Chief Social Worker, Department for Education (DfE) and What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) took forward this recommendation, carrying out a review of whether decisions made to grant women a place in an MBU are in the best interests of the child. The full review report is available [here](#). As part of this wider review, WWCSC undertook a thematic review looking at the characteristics of women who applied for an MBU place. This report presents the findings from the thematic review.

### What is an MBU?

An MBU is a part of a women's prison where a mother can live with her baby up to the age of 18 months. There is provision for extended placements up to 24 months where appropriate, such as when the mother's sentence ends shortly after the child is 18 months old. Pregnant women, and women with children younger than 18 months old, can apply. There are no exclusions relating to remand status/sentence, offence type, sentence type or sentence length.

There are currently six MBUs in England in the following women's prisons: Styal, Bronzefield, New Hall, Askham Grange, Peterborough and Eastwood Park. Across the country there is capacity for 64 mothers and 70 babies (to allow for multiple births), with each MBU being equipped for 10 to 12 mothers (Ministry of Justice, 2020, p.7).

The aim of MBUs is to provide a "safe, secure and appropriate environment for babies and young children to live with their mothers" with appropriate safeguards in place (Farmer, 2017). There is a focus on the importance of the attachment relationship between mother and baby, preserving Parental Responsibility, and the welfare of mother and baby. Whilst the mother is in prison, her baby still has access to the appropriate services as if in the community.

Women apply for a place and a multi-agency Admissions Board, chaired by an Independent Chair, decides on applications, using the same best interests guidance as issued in the



Children Act (1989 and 2004). Alongside the mother's application, the Admissions Board will consider a case file which may contain the local authority CSC report, adult social care report (where appropriate), a security report, medical records and other offender and prison reports, where these are provided.

The decision to admit a mother and her child takes into account:

- Whether it is in the best interests of the child
- The necessity to maintain good order and discipline within the MBU
- The health and safety of other babies and mothers within the unit (Ministry of Justice, 2014).

The Board makes a recommendation on the application to the prison governor who must then endorse this before the mother is offered a place. More details on the application and appeals process are included in the full review report.

## About the project

We carried out this thematic review to supplement the case review of children removed from primary carers when they entered prison, carried out by the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families for England ([Trowler, 2022](#)).

Our thematic review looked at the characteristics and family histories of women who applied to MBUs, as found in the case files we received from the prison and the women's local authority. We wanted to understand patterns across the case files of women (and their children) who applied to MBUs in England from 2017 to 2021, including differences between mothers whose applications were accepted or rejected

from the MBU. We did not analyse the MBU Boards' decisions themselves, as this was the main focus of the Chief Social Worker's wider review.

Our research questions were as follows:

1. What are the characteristics (including risk and protective factors) of the mother and family history in cases where applications have been made to MBUs?
2. Are there differences between cases where mothers with children were accepted to the MBU and where they were not accepted to the MBU?

To our knowledge, this is the first time these questions have been addressed in this way. This project was reviewed by the WWCS Research Ethics Committee.



# METHODS

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## Overall sample analysis

Using anonymised case files provided by the MBUs and local authorities, we analysed the characteristics of 39<sup>1</sup> rejected and 67<sup>2</sup> accepted applications from five MBUs in England. We aimed to examine applications made to MBUs in the three years before February 2020 (to account for the impact of COVID-19), but two cases from 2021 were also included due to delays in receiving case files. All available cases from this period were collected for review (a total of 106 case files), although one MBU had missing data that could not be examined over a period of two years. Askham Grange MBU (the sixth prison MBU in England) was not included in this sample as it is an open prison; women must meet the criteria set out in the Security Categorisation Policy Framework (which are different for the other prisons with MBUs) and there are different timescales for applying to the others (women can only apply to Askham Grange MBU once sentenced, and usually have been transferred there from another prison to serve the end of their custodial sentence).

The amount of information available to review for individual applications varied considerably. For some applications, this information was drawn solely from the MBU Admissions Board's letter, which varied in format from prison to prison, with some being more detailed in recording the discussion during the hearing or the reasons behind the Board's

decision than others. Other documents which provided contextual information include assessments from social workers, healthcare reports (including from midwives and drug and alcohol workers), conduct reports from prison officers and personal letters from applicants. The information provided to us varied, particularly from prison to prison, and each prison has their own format for each type of document. Primarily all documents are free text, or in the form of text boxes.

Due to the small sample size, variations in data and missingness of data, no statistical analyses have been carried out beyond the presentation of descriptive statistics.

## In-depth analysis of subsample

We also undertook a more in-depth analysis of a subsample of 15 accepted and 15 rejected applications. These were selected to include applications from across all five MBUs and cover a range of characteristics related to the mother's age, the type of offence, and prior involvement of CSC.

For this in-depth analysis, we undertook a qualitative analysis of the selected subsample of pseudonymised case files (including the files provided by the MBU and the child's case file from the local authority) to identify any themes across the cases.

More information about the methodology is available in Appendix 2.

- 1 These 39 cases include a case which was accepted then removed, as well as one that was rejected then later accepted.
- 2 72 applications were initially identified, but five accepted applications had no files available to access



# FINDINGS

## A. Overall sample analysis

We describe the key characteristics for all 67 accepted and 39 rejected applications. Full details of the characteristics for all applications can be found in Appendix 1 Table 1.

### Variation of applications between MBUs

We found variation in the number of applications received by each MBU (Table 1), with one MBU receiving many more applications than others, providing the largest proportion of both accepted and rejected applications - 50% of our total sample. It is unclear why one MBU had more applications than the other four MBUs. From the data we have, we know that most applications were made to the MBU that was closest to the mother's local authority (36 of 67 accepted applications, and 34 of 39 rejected applications). However, the mother's local authority was unknown in 28 accepted applications and two rejected applications:

the reasons behind why this was unknown should be explored in further research.

For applications which were accepted, over half of the applications included in our review came from one MBU (36 applications, 54% from MBU 3), with two MBUs (MBU 2 and MBU 5) providing just three each of our sample of 67 accepted applications (4%). Similarly, for rejected applications, almost half again came from the same MBU (MBU 3) (17 applications, 44%), with one MBU (MBU 2) providing just two of our sample of 39 rejected applications.

The proportion of applications which were accepted or rejected varied between the MBUs, with two accepting around half of applications, and one accepting almost three-quarters of applications.

### Children's social care involvement

We found variation in whether a report was submitted from CSC on the mother's

**Table 1: Number of cases accepted and rejected in each MBU**

	<b>MBU 1</b> Number of cases (% of all cases in sample)	<b>MBU 2</b> Number of cases (% of all cases in sample)	<b>MBU 3</b> Number of cases (% of all cases in sample)	<b>MBU 4</b> Number of cases (% of all cases in sample)	<b>MBU 5</b> Number of cases (% of all cases in sample)	<b>TOTAL</b> Number of cases (% of all cases in sample)
<b>Accepted</b>	14 (13%)	3 (3%)	36 (34%)	11 (10%)	3 (3%)	67 (63%)
<b>Rejected</b>	5 (5%)	2 (2%)	17 (16%)	12 (11%)	3 (3%)	39 (37%)
<b>Total</b>	19 (18%)	5 (5%)	53 (50%)	24 (23%)	6 (6%)	106 (100%)





parenting ability to the MBU Board as part of the application process, and whether a social worker attended the hearing (Figure 1).

In over half of all applications, a report was recorded to have been submitted from CSC to the MBU Board (43 of 67 accepted applications, and 28 of 39 rejected applications).

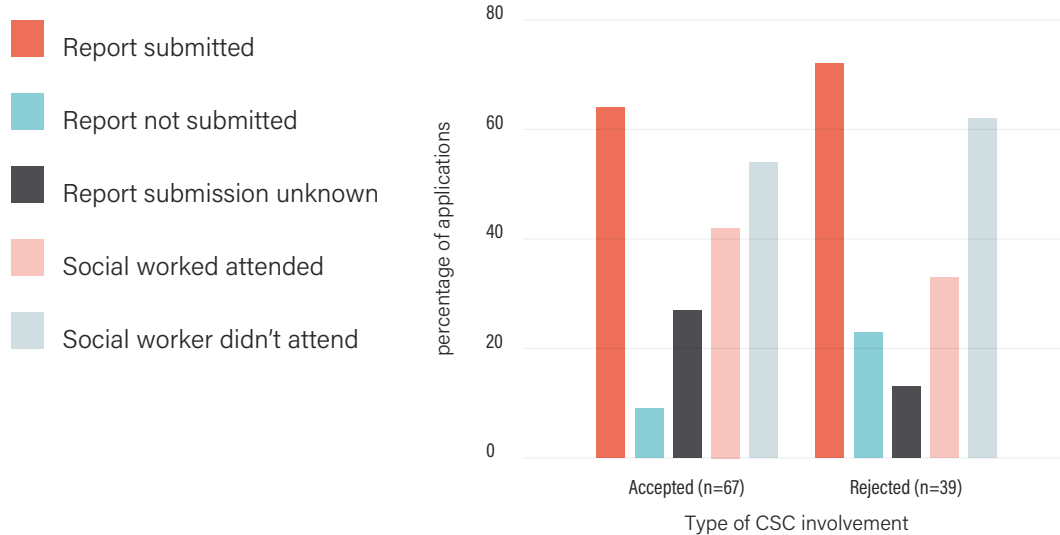
Conversely, in over half of all applications we determined that, based on the information provided, a social worker did

not attend the MBU Board hearing (36 of 67 accepted applications and 24 of 39 rejected applications).

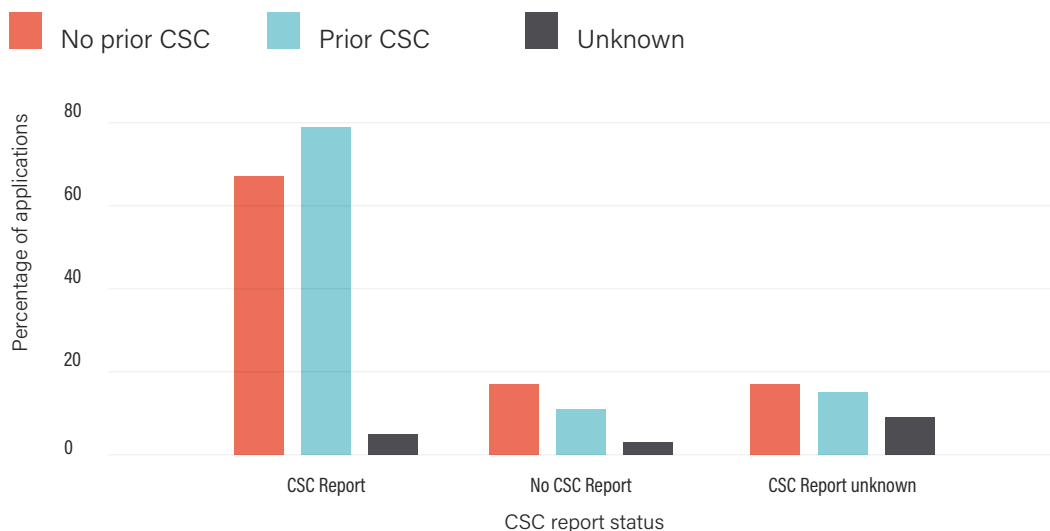
In some instances it was unclear based on the information available whether a report had been submitted or a social worker attended the Board hearing.

It is unclear whether having prior involvement with CSC is related to any notable differences in whether or not social care submitted a report or attended the Board hearing.

**Figure 1: Children's social care involvement in the MBU Board**

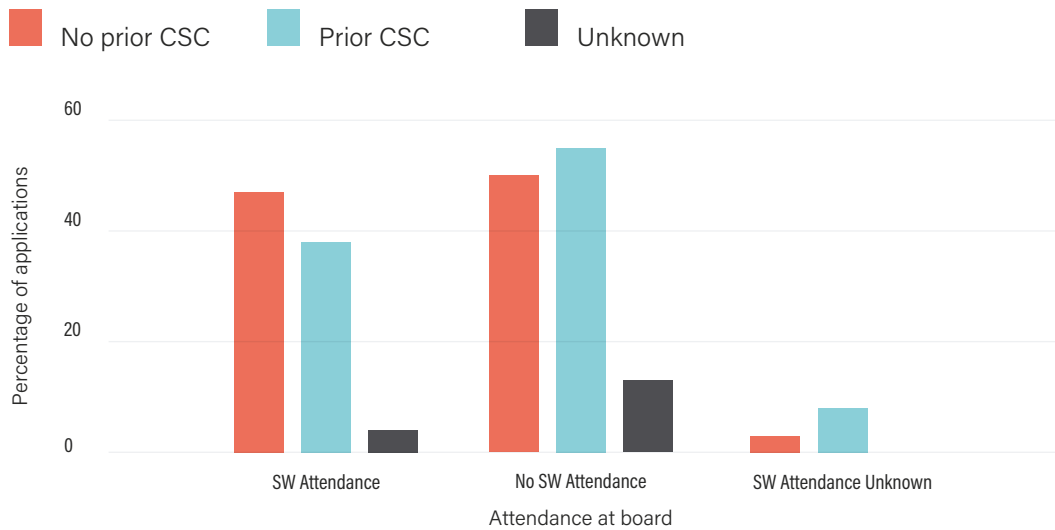


**Figure 2: Whether a report was submitted by children's social care to the MBU Board, by whether there had been prior involvement by children's social care**





**Figure 3: Whether a social worker attended the MBU Board, by whether there had been prior involvement by children's social care**



We found that those who had prior CSC involvement<sup>3</sup> appeared to be slightly more likely to have a social care report submitted (42 of 56;<sup>4</sup> 75%), than those who had no prior CSC involvement (24 of 36; 67%) (Figure 2).

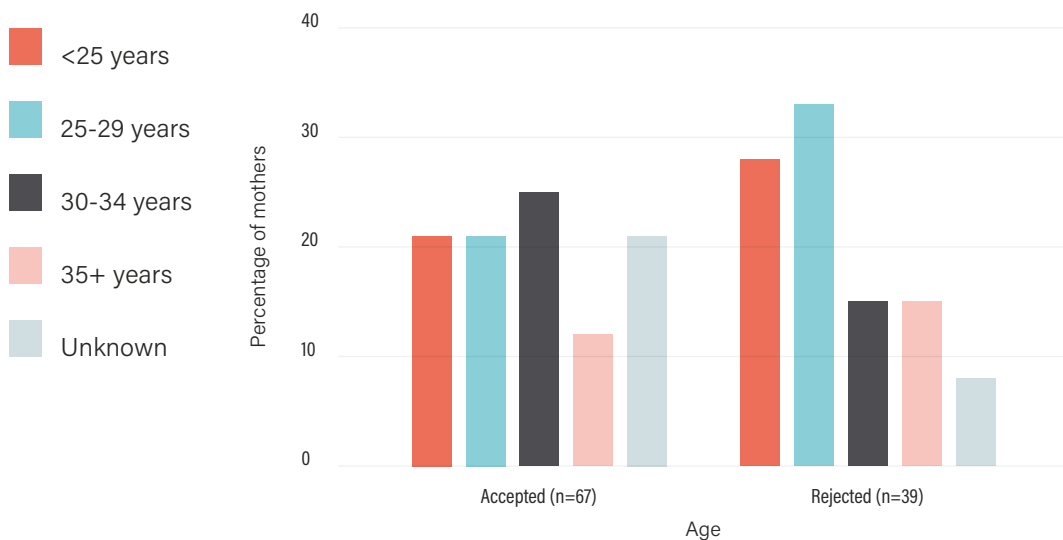
We also found that those who had prior CSC involvement appeared to be slightly less likely to have a social worker attend the Board hearing (20 of 53; 38%) than those who had no prior CSC involvement (17 of 36; 47%) (Figure 3).

### Mothers' and fathers' characteristics

We found that that mothers' ages at the point of application to the MBU<sup>5</sup> varied (Figure 4).

The average (mean) age of mothers for both accepted and rejected applications in our sample was 28 years. A substantial proportion of applications were made by younger mothers, with 67% of rejected applications and 54% of accepted applications made by mothers under 30.

**Figure 4: Mother's age**



3 Either relating to this child or an other child

4 Due to sample size, accepted and rejected applications are combined for this data

5 Or if date of application was unknown, at the date of the MBU Board



Fathers' ages were largely not reported. It is unclear whether this is because the father was not known or not involved in the child's care.

Information on the ethnicity, nationality and immigration status of both mothers and fathers was largely missing for all groups. We had local authority files for most of the rejected applications, and so ethnicity and nationality information was more likely to be available for these mothers than those with accepted applications, although immigration status was still largely missing in both accepted and rejected applications.

Of women whose applications were rejected by the MBU, 13 were recorded as White, and 5 recorded as Black, Black British, Caribbean or African. The mother's ethnicity was unknown for 19 of 39 (49%) of rejected applications.

Where ethnicity, nationality and immigration status were provided for women whose applications were accepted by the MBU, 17 were recorded as British, and 5 were recorded as foreign nationals, although a further 19 accepted applicants' nationality and immigration status were unknown to us. We have not reported on ethnicity, nationality and immigration status for rejected applications because of the large amount of missing data.

Similarly, there was very little information on whether mothers and fathers were care experienced. Often, we had insufficient information to determine whether or not mothers and fathers were care experienced. We were able to identify that 6 of 67 women (9%) whose applications were accepted by the MBU were care experienced, as were 6 of 39 women (15%) whose applications were rejected by the MBU. Due to the insufficient information on the care experience of mothers in the applications we have reviewed, the true figure of those with care experience may be higher. Whilst the known proportion of care experienced women in our sample is higher than the general population, those with care experience are overrepresented in the prison population, with an estimated 24% of the prison population being care experienced (Berman & Dar, 2013).



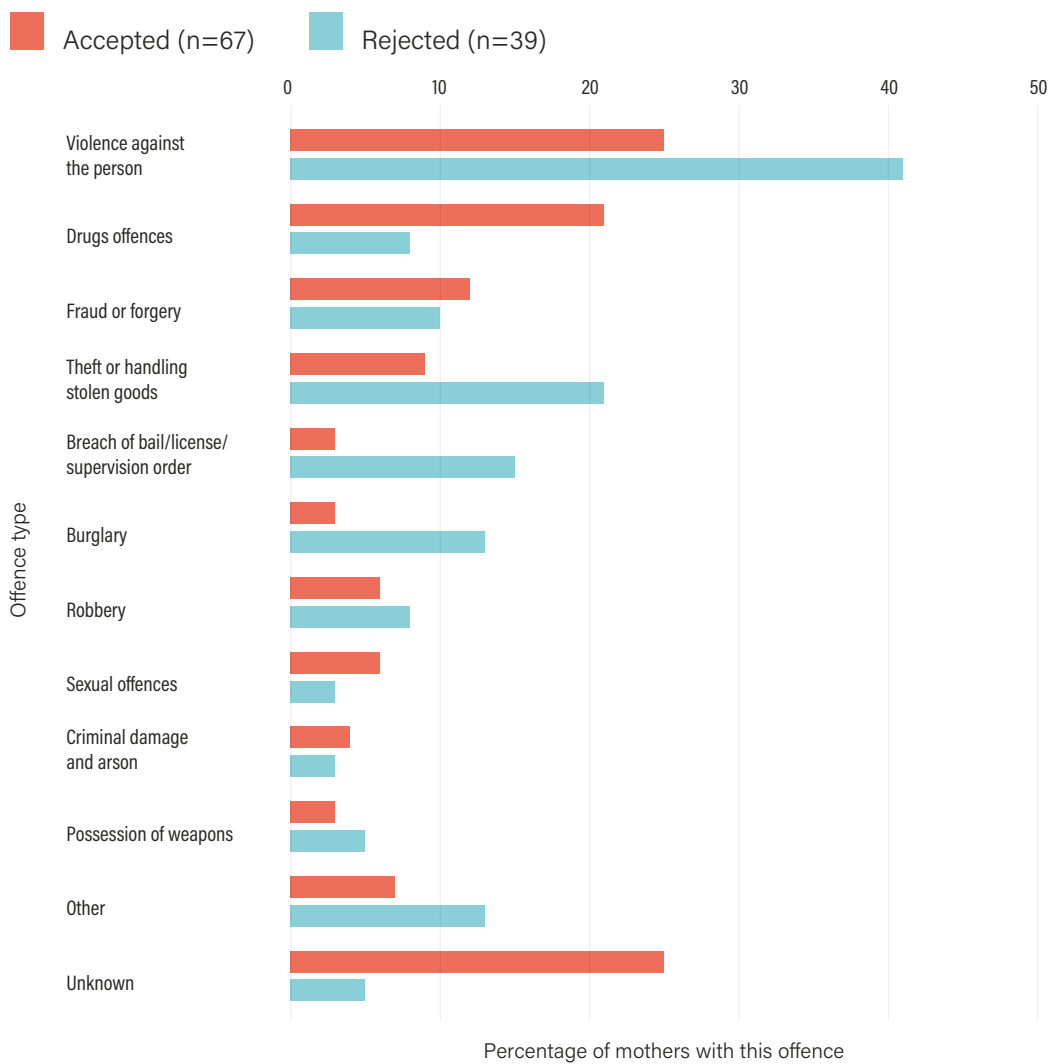
### Mothers' offending

Where the offence was known, the most common type of offence for both accepted and rejected applications was violence against the person: listed as an offence in 17 of 67 accepted applications (25%) and 16 of 39 rejected applications (41%). However, data on the offence type is missing in a number of cases (in 17 of 67 accepted applications, and 2 of 39 rejected applications) so the true figure may be higher, and the missing data means we are unable to see the full picture.

A third of women whose applications were rejected were either on remand or unsentenced (13 of 39, 33%). For women whose applications were accepted, 7% were either on remand or unsentenced (5 of 67).

The average sentence length for women where the sentence length was known was similar for both groups (35 months for women whose applications were accepted and 33 months for women whose applications were rejected).

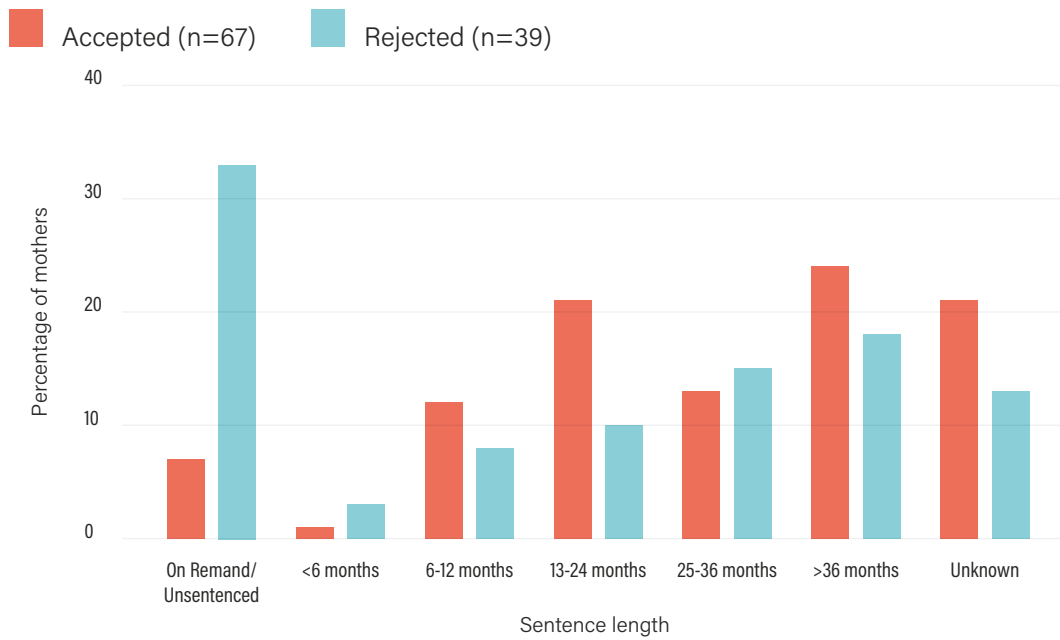
Figure 5: Mother offence type\*



\* Note: Some mothers have multiple offence types



Figure 6: Mother's sentence length



Typically the maximum length of time a baby is able to stay on an MBU is 18 months (or up to a maximum age of 24 months in special circumstances). As the average sentence lengths are longer than this, it suggests that sentence lengths longer than the time a baby would be able to spend on an MBU

are not in themselves deterring applications being accepted.

Nearly two-thirds of women whose applications were rejected had previous convictions (23 of 39). Fewer than half of women whose applications were accepted had previous convictions (30 of 67).

Figure 7: Whether mother has previous convictions

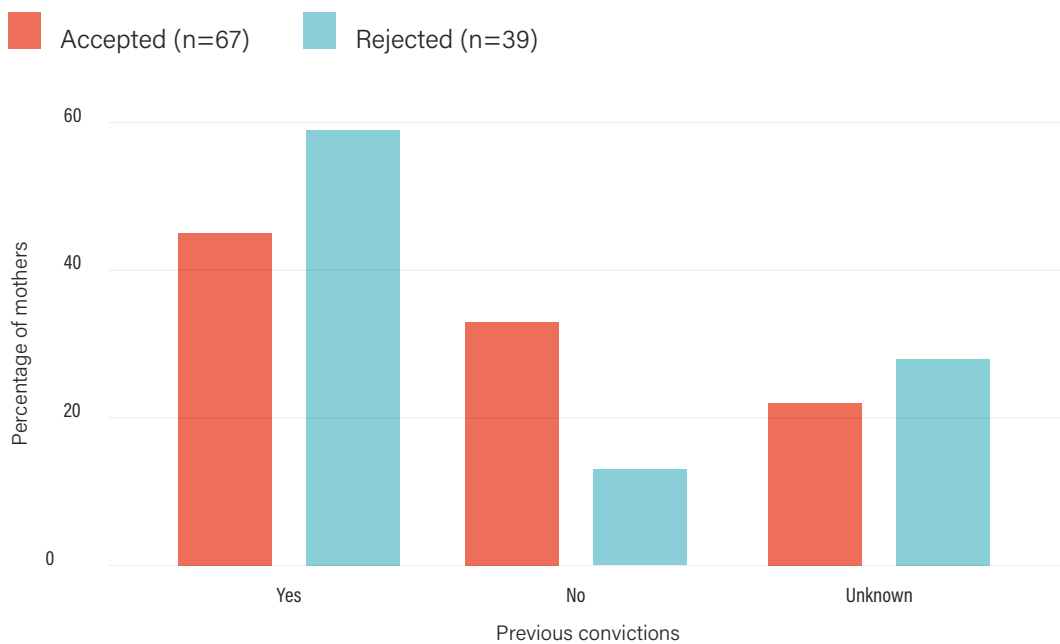
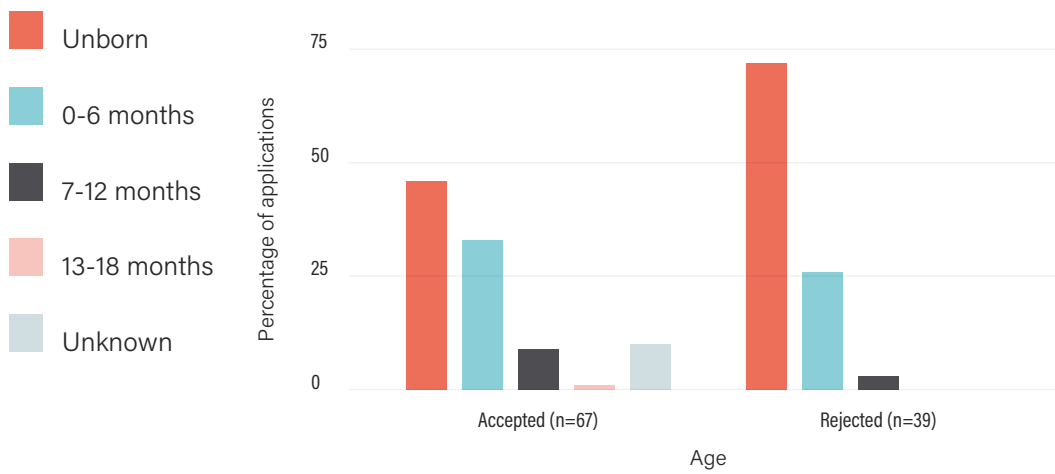




Figure 8: Child's age



### Child's characteristics

Women can apply to an MBU if their child is under the age of 18 months (including unborn children for pregnant women). Figure 8 shows the child's age at the point of application to the MBU.<sup>6</sup> Often, children were unborn at this point in time, with 31 of 67 (46%) accepted applications being unborn and 28 of 39 (72%) rejected applications being unborn. Most other children were below six months of age.

Prior to the mother entering custody, almost all children involved in the MBU applications were in the care of their mother. We also looked at cases where children were living at the point of their mother's application to the MBU.<sup>7</sup>

Children of women whose applications were accepted were commonly with their father or another family member at the time of application. Similarly, for rejected applications, children were also commonly placed with their father or another family member, but were also likely to be a newborn in hospital or in foster care.

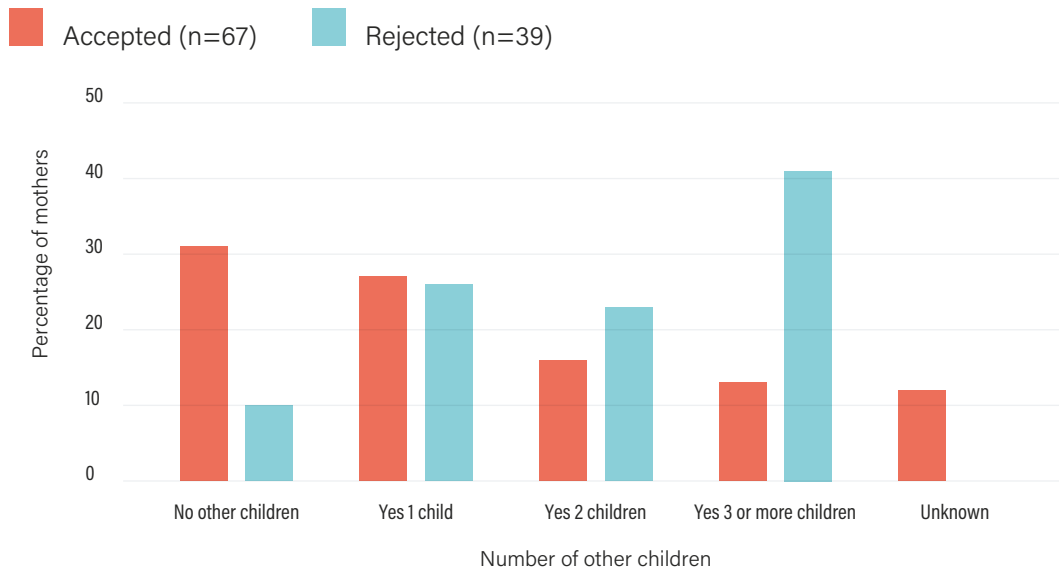
Information about where children who were not accepted to an MBU were subsequently placed was often missing (17 of 39, 44%). Where we did have the information, foster care was the most common intended placement (16 children). Some children were due to be placed with a family member or their father (six children).

6 Or if date of application was unknown, at the date of the MBU Board

7 Or if date of application was unknown, at the date of the MBU Board



**Figure 9: Whether mother has had other children**



**Other children and prior CSC involvement**

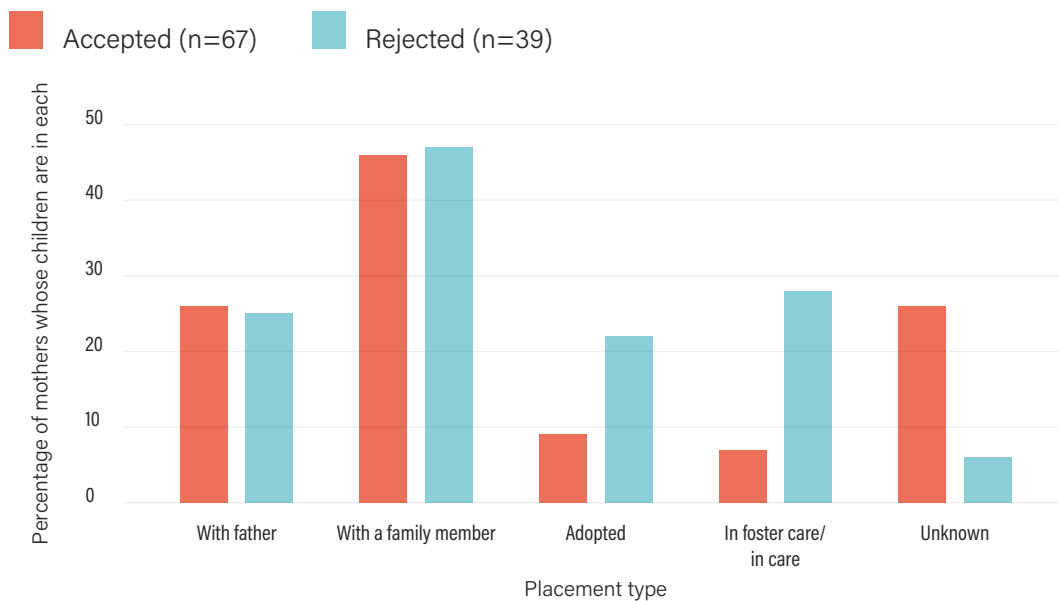
For women whose applications were accepted to the MBU, it was most common for this child to be their first child (21 of 67). For women whose applications were rejected from the MBU, it was most common for them to have three or more children (16 of 39).

For both rejected and accepted applications, the number of women whose other children (not connected to the MBU application) lived with their father or another family member whilst the mother was in custody was similar.

Of the women who had other children whose applications were rejected (32 women), half had their other child(ren) placed in foster care or adopted (16 of 32).

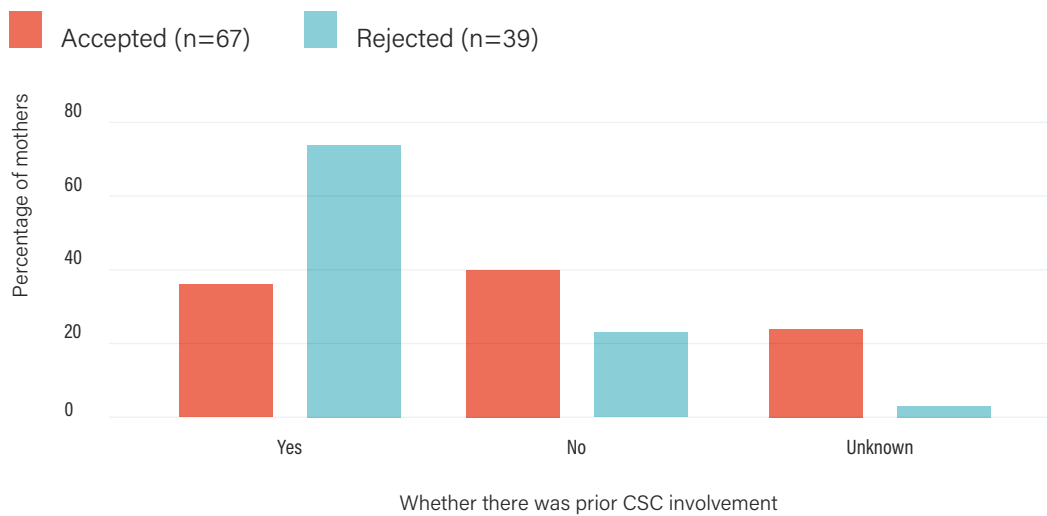
Of the women who had other children whose applications were accepted (46 women), 15% had their other child(ren) placed in foster care or adopted (7 of 46), but the residence of the other children was unknown in a larger number of accepted applications, so we are not able to see the full picture.

**Figure 10: Residence or placement of mother's other children whilst mother is in custody (by mother not by child, but some mothers have more than one placement type)**





**Figure 11: Whether this child or mother's other children were known to CSC prior to mother going into custody**



We found that three-quarters of mothers whose applications were rejected from the MBU had prior involvement of CSC with either this child or an older child (29 applications) and just over a third of mothers whose applications were accepted by the MBU had prior involvement of CSC with either this child or an older child (24 applications).

## B. In-depth analysis of sub-sample

This section presents the findings from our more detailed thematic review of a sub-sample of the case files reviewed above, building on section A by providing more depth as well as additional information on a number of areas not captured in the whole population dataset.

This thematic review includes findings about parents' history and prior CSC involvement, recent statutory involvement with their children, their current baby's life or pre-birth experience, risk and offending behaviour, and protective factors.

Full details of the characteristics for the subsample of 15 accepted and 15 rejected applications can be seen in Appendix 1 Table 1.

### Parents' childhood experiences

Some of the women's case files presented information about experiences they had in their childhood, some of which may have influenced them in later life.

Adverse childhood experiences that had considerable long-term impact on women were documented in cases that had been both rejected and accepted by the MBU. For a number of the women, this experience led to them receiving support from social services, although this was not always explicit in all case files. Due to the varied nature of experiences across women, and the small sample size, it was not possible to identify any meaningful patterns in relationships between adverse childhood experiences and specific outcomes.

Some case files reported that the women were care experienced. Factors such as





neglect, abuse, family breakdown and parental drug misuse were some of the reasons given for contact with CSC as children.

Fathers' childhood involvement with CSC was seldom reported within the mothers' and children's case notes, although there were some case files which disclosed that the fathers had experienced longstanding involvement with CSC, with one of them being a care leaver. The limited information provided meant that we were not able to identify any notable differences between fathers where applications were accepted and where they were rejected.

### Parents' physical health

Very few files contained information about the women's physical health and disabilities. Disabilities were only mentioned in two cases. A few accepted women's cases reported medical conditions which required medical attention.

### Recent statutory involvement with their children

Many women's applications revealed previous contact with CSC regarding current or other children.

All of the women in our subsample whose applications were rejected by the MBU already had children. The majority of these women were also already known to CSC prior to their conviction. In the applications where the women were accepted by the MBU, there were fewer reports of mothers having had other children removed from their care.

In cases where women's applications were rejected, her older children were less likely to be reported as living with their father. They were instead placed with other family members, such as grandparents, or in out of home care provided by CSC.

Some of the women's children's case files disclosed the type and reasons for statutory involvement. This included time on a Child Protection or Child in Need Plan and having had other children taken into care.

We noted a difference between the women whose applications were rejected and accepted from the MBU relating to removals due to drug use: removals from women due to drug use were more often recorded in applications that were rejected from the MBU. Other reasons identified for children being removed or for statutory involvement (in both accepted and rejected cases) included: mental health problems, domestic violence, homelessness and incidents of neglect, sexual abuse and the death of the mother's other child.

### Current experiences with social workers

Many of the women's babies had social workers before the woman made an application to the MBU. However, it is not a statutory right for all women applying to a MBU to have access to a social worker.

Some of the women whose applications were rejected had not had a stable relationship with one social worker (or had not received consistent support from one social worker), because of social worker turnover. This meant that some women were left without the support of a social worker, which they felt affected their mental health given the significant uncertainty about their future and their baby's future.

There were reports of women whose applications had been rejected by the MBU who were unsatisfied with their social workers. One expressed dissatisfaction about the lack of contact from social services and the fact that, despite reassurances, her social worker did not attend her MBU Board meeting. Another woman felt that she was



receiving poor care and felt harassed by her social worker. This illustrates the perceived challenges that some of the women faced with accessing support from CSC to understand what would happen with their baby. These issues were not identified in the files of accepted women, but this could possibly be explained by the fact that this group had less previous involvement with CSC.

### **Safety of the environment for children**

Whether or not the mother provided a safe environment for her baby and other children was documented within some of the case files.

The files we reviewed, where this information was provided, reported that the women's interaction with their current babies was largely positive, and they were bonding well with their newborn. We found no notable differences between the women whose applications were accepted or rejected by the MBU.

However, for some of the women, there were concerns recorded relating to their parenting of other children (for example, failing to seek medical support). These concerns were more often raised in the rejected women's case files.

Additionally, in some of the rejected applications, babies had experienced significant harm due to the mother's continued drug use whilst pregnant. This was not recorded in any of the accepted case files in this subsample.

### **Offending behaviour**

Some of the offences of women whose applications were rejected related to children, which affected whether they were deemed safe to be around children.

Of the fathers that had a history of offending, it was noted that some of these offences included drug related offences, sex trafficking

and assault (including domestic). Some of the fathers were currently imprisoned for these offences.

In some of the case files, the mother and father had been sentenced for the same crime. There were no notable differences in the fathers' offending history between the case files of the mothers whose applications were accepted or rejected by the MBU, possibly due to the limited data available.

### **History of domestic abuse and exploitation**

Experiences of domestic abuse and exploitation featured prominently in the case files.

In our subsample of women whose applications were accepted by the MBU, some had previous experiences of domestic abuse, although typically not with the father of their baby. Meanwhile, some of the women whose applications were rejected from the MBU were noted to still be in abusive relationships (though some women disputed this).

A small number of the rejected and accepted case files reported that the woman experienced domestic abuse whilst pregnant, with some of these identifying the woman as both a victim and a perpetrator of domestic violence.

We identified experience of sexual exploitation and assault in a small sample of the applications both rejected and accepted by the MBU, with one woman carrying a weapon after being sexually assaulted and others paying for drugs with sex. The small number of case files reporting exploitation meant we could not identify any notable differences between the case files of the women whose applications were accepted or rejected by the MBU.



## Alcohol and substance misuse

The case files documented whether the mother or father had a history with alcohol or substance misuse.

Many of the women whose applications were rejected had a long standing history of drug or alcohol misuse. For some of these women, this began at a young age. In some cases, alcohol and drugs impacted their other children and some of their babies' health, as the mothers did not seek medical assistance to support them or continued consumption whilst pregnant. There was no mention of drug or alcohol use whilst pregnant for the women whose applications were accepted by the MBU.

Whilst in prison, many of the women were attempting to stop using drugs and instead take methadone to help them. Some of the mothers rejected by the MBU were found to still be taking drugs. In some of the MBU Board documents, the professionals appeared to lack confidence that the women would be able to sustain their move away from drug use when released from prison. We found similar themes of drug use amongst fathers in the case files of women whose applications were rejected and their children.

## Mothers' mental health

Many of the women's case files, both accepted and rejected, disclosed that they had experienced mental health difficulties. There were also a few examples where fathers disclosed having mental health difficulties. Some women were prescribed medication to help them deal with their symptoms, although there were instances where women were not adhering to medication.

## Engagement and actions for change

Case files of women whose applications had been rejected provided a considerable amount of detail about the woman's engagement with services and professionals. Many women argued that they were striving to make positive changes for themselves and their baby. Some had been actively taking steps to leave abusive relationships, stop substance misuse, improve their mental wellbeing and/or remove themselves from people that were not protective.

Many women showed positive and consistent engagement with services, including those to support their baby, such as midwife appointments, accessing pregnancy-related information and parenting courses. Some case files documented engagement in smoking cessation programmes and negative tests for drug use, and a small number also reported attending vocational courses and gaining employment within prison. However, some of the women whose applications were rejected did not engage with professional support, for example, not attending appointments, or being perceived as not working openly and honestly with professionals.

In the mothers' and children's case files there were very few references to fathers' engagement with professional services. Where this was mentioned, some case files reported that fathers had engaged in work with professionals, while others noted that the father had partly engaged but disengaged after a point or simply had not engaged.

## Family networks

The mother's relationship with the baby's father and the father's involvement in the baby's life was documented in a small number of case files. Some case files noted committed relationships, others reported



more strained relationships and some noted that the parents were no longer in a relationship.

Many of the women, from both accepted and rejected categories, had a good network of family support. Some of these family members had been nominated to care for the baby or had been looking after the mother's other children. However, we found some case files, mostly those of women whose MBU applications were rejected, that mentioned a lack of family support. Some did not have friends or family networks, and there were a few women that had poor relationships with their families. There were some cases where potential risks to the child within the friends and family network meant that women were unable to associate with them.

### **Level of stability**

The case files commented on the stability of women's lives, reporting on factors like education, housing and employment.

There was limited information about the women's educational attainment and occupational backgrounds. Educational attainment was only reported in two case files of women who had been accepted by the MBU, and not reported in the case files for any mothers whose applications were rejected.

A small number of case files for the women whose applications were accepted by the MBU noted that they had previous employment. For instance, one of the women's case files mentioned that she would be returning to work at her husband's business once she was released from prison. Employment history and future prospects were not reported in the case files of the women that were rejected by the MBU.

Some women whose applications were rejected by the MBU experienced housing instability prior to being in prison; this was sometimes viewed as a risk factor.



# LIMITATIONS OF THE REVIEW

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Caution must be used when drawing implications from findings presented in this report, given the relatively low number of cases included. We also found that there was missing data within the sample, limiting the extent of analysis that we could carry out on the quantitative data. Some case files contained limited information and we did not have CSC records for all women. In some instances, this was because the records were requested from local authorities but not provided. In most instances, particularly for accepted applications (because all rejected applications were part of the panel review), we did not request the information as we only requested local authority files for the ten accepted applications included in the panel review and the additional five included in the thematic review. We have noted throughout the report where data is missing.

Due to this missing CSC data, the ten cases selected for panel review, and the additional five accepted cases selected for the in-depth thematic review, were selected based on whether or not records from local authorities were available, rather than through a random selection process. These cases were also selected before information about the case characteristics had been extracted for our whole sample review, therefore we were unable to direct the selection of these cases to ensure a balanced sample. As a result, the findings of this review are not generalisable and do not represent a true spread of characteristics from the full sample of accepted cases. A large proportion of the cases selected for the panel review came from a single MBU.



# DISCUSSION

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This research sought to understand the characteristics and family histories of women who had applied for an MBU placement, and any differences between cases which were accepted by the MBU and those that were rejected. To do this, we considered the characteristics of a sample of 67 women whose applications to an MBU were accepted, and 39 women whose applications to an MBU were rejected. We also carried out an in-depth thematic review of a sub-sample of 15 women whose applications were accepted and 15 women whose applications were rejected by the MBU. Descriptive statistics allowed us to note potential trends in the accepted/rejected groups, and thematic analysis allowed us to further consider these differences, although no definitive conclusions about differences can be made based on this data.

Although the whole sample data presents only limited information about whether mothers and fathers were care experienced, the thematic review highlights that adverse childhood experiences were common amongst both groups of women, with some also experiencing involvement of CSC as children.

We found that where the mother's interaction with their baby was reported, this was largely described positively, and many mothers were seen to be taking steps towards positive change.

Our analysis did identify some differences between the women whose applications were rejected and those accepted by the MBUs. Women whose applications were

rejected more often had other children, and previous involvement with children's social care (for this child or their older children). The case files of women whose applications were refused tended to detail reports of poor parenting and existing children being removed from their care.

Similarly, women whose applications were rejected by the MBU were more likely to be on remand, and to have a history of offending behaviour. The thematic review highlights that some of these women's offences related to children, which meant that they were not able to be around children.

Many of the women in our sample had experienced domestic abuse, with some of the women whose cases were rejected by the MBU in our subsample still in an abusive relationship with the father of their baby. The thematic review also suggests that a longstanding history of drug or alcohol misuse may be more common amongst women whose applications were rejected by the MBU, including drug use whilst pregnant. Substance misuse was often a reason for previous involvement with CSC for these women. Our thematic review highlights the importance of family networks; the lack of a supportive family network was a feature of some women whose applications were refused by the MBU.

There was very limited information about fathers in the case files we reviewed. The in-depth analysis of the sub-sample provided some insight into fathers' lives, such as previous involvement with CSC, history of



offending, substance misuse, mental health difficulties, their engagement with services and their involvement in their child's life. The lack of recorded information about fathers means that it is difficult to draw conclusions about whether these characteristics differ between fathers where the mothers' applications to MBUs were accepted and those that were rejected.

Information regarding the women's childhoods highlights that many of them have experienced great difficulties throughout their key developmental years. Further information within the case files on childhood involvement with social services would be beneficial to understand the history of the parents and the support they may require to deal with their childhood experiences.



# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

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This is one of the first studies that we are aware of that considers the experiences of women who apply to MBUs. Further research is needed to look at the longer term experiences and outcomes of these women and their children, and to explore if there are any statistically significant differences between the characteristics of women whose applications are accepted and whose applications are rejected. Future research could also consider the experiences and roles of fathers, as information about them is often missing from the mothers' and children's case files.

This review has highlighted the absence of systematic data collection about the characteristics of mothers in prison and their children. We had to take an in-depth approach to reviewing the text information within files to extract this information. A standardised approach to recording women's characteristics and details such as the nature of their offence, or involvement of CSC, would ensure a better understanding of this group, and enable future research to ask more detailed questions about these women, the support they receive and their outcomes. Better recording of factors such as ethnicity and immigration status for example, would help improve understanding of the experiences of certain subgroups of women.

This report should be read alongside the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families' wider report. The wider report contains more detailed recommendations about improving the MBU application process with the aim of improving outcomes for women and children.





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# APPENDIX 1: MOTHER, CHILD AND FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

Table 1: Mother, child and family characteristics of rejected and accepted applications from five MBU's in England 2017-2021

	Characteristics of whole sample				Characteristics of sub sample included in thematic review			
	Accepted applications		Rejected applications		Accepted applications		Rejected applications	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>MBU applied to</b> (Percentages relate to proportion of the sample which came from each MBU)								
<b>MBU 1</b>	14	21	5	13	2	13	3	20
<b>MBU 2</b>	3	4	2	5	2	13	2	13
<b>MBU 3</b>	36	54	17	44	7	47	4	27
<b>MBU 4</b>	11	16	12	31	2	13	3	20
<b>MBU 5</b>	3	4	3	8	2	13	3	20
<b>MBU acceptance rate</b> (Percentages relate to proportion of applications within each MBU which were accepted or rejected)								
<b>MBU 1</b>	14	74	5	26	-	-	-	-
<b>MBU 2</b>	3	60	2	40	-	-	-	-
<b>MBU 3</b>	36	68	17	32	-	-	-	-
<b>MBU 4</b>	11	48	12	52	-	-	-	-
<b>MBU 5</b>	3	50	3	50	-	-	-	-
<b>Mothers age<sup>8</sup></b>								
<b>&lt;25 years</b>	14	21	11	28	4	27	3	20
<b>25-29 years</b>	14	21	13	33	3	20	6	40
<b>30-34 years</b>	17	25	6	15	4	27	2	13
<b>&gt;35 years</b>	8	12	6	15	2	13	3	20
<b>Unknown</b>	14	21	3	8	2	13	1	7
<b>Average age (years)</b>	<b>28</b>	-	<b>28</b>	-	<b>27</b>	-	<b>29</b>	-

8 At time of MBU application or MBU Board if application date unknown



**Table 1: Mother, child and family characteristics of rejected and accepted applications from five MBU's in England 2017-2021 continued ...**

	Characteristics of whole sample				Characteristics of sub sample included in thematic review			
	Accepted applications		Rejected applications		Accepted applications		Rejected applications	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Child's age<sup>9</sup></b>								
<b>Unborn</b>	31	46	28	72	6	40	14	93
<b>0-6 months</b>	22	33	10	26	7	47	1	7
<b>7-12 months</b>	6	9	1	3	2	13	0	0
<b>13-18 months</b>	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Unknown</b>	7	10	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Year of application to MBU</b>								
<b>2017</b>	14	21	12	31	5	33	3	20
<b>2018</b>	16	24	12	31	3	20	5	33
<b>2019</b>	20	30	4	10	3	20	1	7
<b>2020</b>	13	19	10	26	3	20	6	40
<b>2021</b>	2	3	1	3	1	7	0	0
<b>Unknown</b>	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0

9 At time of MBU application or MBU Board if application date unknown



**Table 1: Mother, child and family characteristics of rejected and accepted applications from five MBU's in England 2017-2021 continued ...**

	Characteristics of whole sample				Characteristics of sub sample included in thematic review			
	Accepted applications		Rejected applications		Accepted applications		Rejected applications	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Type of (current) offence by number of mothers<sup>10</sup></b>								
Violence against the person <sup>11</sup>	17	25	16	41	7	47	5	33
Drugs offences	14	21	3	8	1	7	2	13
Fraud and forgery	8	12	4	10	3	20	1	7
Theft & handling stolen goods	6	9	8	21	2	13	4	27
Breach of bail/licence/ spvsn order	2	3	6	15	2	13	1	7
Burglary	2	3	5	13	1	7	1	7
Robbery	4	6	3	8	0	0	1	7
Sexual offences <sup>12</sup>	4	6	1	3	1	7	1	7
Criminal damage and arson	3	4	1	3	2	13	0	0
Possession of weapons	2	3	2	5	0	0	0	0
Other	5	7	5	13	1	7	1	7
Unknown	17	25	2	5	0	0	1	7
<b>Mother's sentence length</b>								
Other	5	7	5	13	1	7	1	7
Unknown	17	25	2	5	0	0	1	7
6-12 months	8	12	3	8	3	20	1	7
13-24 months	14	21	4	10	2	13	2	13
25-36 months	9	13	6	15	4	27	2	13
>36 months	16	24	7	18	5	33	3	20
Unknown	14	21	5	13	0	0	2	13
Average sentence length (months)	<b>35</b>	-	<b>33</b>	-	<b>39</b>	-	<b>35</b>	-
<b>Was a report from CSC submitted to the MBU Board?</b>								
Yes	43	64	28	72	12	80	8	53
No	6	9	6	15	2	13	5	33
Unknown	18	27	5	13	1	7	2	13

<sup>10</sup> We have recorded where some mothers had more than one type of offence (but multiple offences of the same type by the same mother are not counted due to insufficient information on number of charges)

<sup>11</sup> Includes murder

<sup>12</sup> Includes controlling prostitution



**Table 1: Mother, child and family characteristics of rejected and accepted applications from five MBU's in England 2017-2021 continued ...**

	Characteristics of whole sample				Characteristics of sub sample included in thematic review			
	Accepted applications		Rejected applications		Accepted applications		Rejected applications	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Did the social worker attend the MBU Board meeting?</b>								
<b>Yes</b>	28	42	13	33	6	40	7	47
<b>No</b>	36	54	24	62	9	60	7	47
<b>Unknown</b>	3	4	2	5	0	0	1	7
<b>Was there CSC Involvement (for this child or mother's other children) prior to mother going into custody?</b>								
<b>Yes</b>	24	36	29	74	5	33	13	87
<b>No</b>	27	40	9	23	9	60	2	13
<b>Unknown</b>	16	24	1	3	1	7	0	0
<b>Who was the child's primary carer before the mother entered custody?</b>								
<b>Unborn</b>	36	54	30	77	9	60	14	93
<b>Mother (including mother and baby foster care)</b>	25	37	8	21	5	33	1	7
<b>Newborn in hospital</b>	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0
<b>A family member</b>	1	1	0	0	1	7	0	0
<b>Unknown</b>	5	7	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Where is child resident when application to MBU is made<sup>13</sup> (i.e. after mother is in custody)?</b>								
<b>Unborn</b>	30	45	30	77	5	33	14	93
<b>With mother (in community awaiting sentence at point of application)</b>	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Newborn in hospital (usually with mother)</b>	4	6	4	10	2	13	0	0
<b>With father</b>	7	10	2	5	2	13	0	0
<b>With a family member</b>	10	15	0	0	3	20	0	0
<b>With a family friend</b>	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>In foster care (or in unspecified care placement)</b>	3	4	3	8	2	13	1	7
<b>Already in the MBU (e.g. emergency placement made)</b>	6	9	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Unknown</b>	5	7	0	0	1	7	0	0

<sup>13</sup> (or initial MBU meeting held if application date unknown)



**Table 1: Mother, child and family characteristics of rejected and accepted applications from five MBU's in England 2017-2021 continued ...**

	Characteristics of whole sample				Characteristics of sub sample included in thematic review			
	Accepted applications		Rejected applications		Accepted applications		Rejected applications	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Where is the child due to be placed after the MBU decision (after birth)?</b>								
With father	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0
With a family member	0	0	5	13	0	0	3	20
In foster care (or in unspecified care placement)	0	0	16	41	0	0	3	20
In the MBU	67	100	0	0	15	100	0	0
Unknown	0	0	17	44	0	0	9	60
<b>Has the mother had other children?</b>								
No	21	31	4	10	7	47	0	0
Yes 1 child	18	27	10	26	3	20	2	13
Yes 2 children	11	16	9	23	4	27	3	20
Yes 3 or more children	9	13	16	41	1	7	10	67
Unknown	8	12	0	0	0	0	0	0
Average number of other children (where mother has children)	2.1	-	2.7	-	1.9	-	3.7	-
<b>Where are mother's other children resident by number of mothers (i.e. whilst mother is in custody)<sup>14</sup>?</b>								
With father	12	26	8	25	3	38	3	20
With a family member (this may be SGO / ICO / private fostering / s20)	21	46	15	47	4	50	7	47
Adopted	4	9	7	22	1	13	4	27
In foster care (or in unspecified care placement)	3	7	9	28	2	25	6	40
Unknown	12	26	2	6	0	0	0	0
N/A (no children, child over 18 or children deceased) <sup>15</sup>	21	-	7	-	7	-	0	-

14 Where mothers with multiple children have children in more than one residence we count the number of different types of care per mother, and not the number of placements per child

15 Percentage excludes 'N/A' response



**Table 1: Mother, child and family characteristics of rejected and accepted applications from five MBU's in England 2017-2021 continued ...**

	Characteristics of whole sample				Characteristics of sub sample included in thematic review			
	Accepted applications		Rejected applications		Accepted applications		Rejected applications	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Does mother have previous convictions?</b>								
Yes	30	45	23	59	7	47	7	47
No	22	33	5	13	8	53	3	20
Unknown	15	22	11	28	0	0	5	33
<b>Was the application made to their closest MBU (based on their local authority)?</b>								
Yes	36	54	34	87	14	93	12	80
No	3	4	3	8	0	0	2	13
Unknown	28	42	2	5	1	7	1	7
<b>Mother's ethnicity</b>								
White	13	19	13	33	5	33	8	53
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	1	1	5	13	0	0	1	7
Asian or Asian British	1	1	1	3	0	0	1	7
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	0	0	1	3	0	0	1	7
Any other ethnic group	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unknown	52	78	19	49	10	67	4	27
<b>Father's ethnicity</b>								
White	7	10	5	13	3	20	4	27
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	0	0	4	10	0	0	0	0
Asian or Asian British	0	0	1	3	0	0	1	7
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0
Any other ethnic group	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0
Unknown	60	90	27	69	12	80	10	67



**Table 1: Mother, child and family characteristics of rejected and accepted applications from five MBU's in England 2017-2021 continued ...**

	Characteristics of whole sample				Characteristics of sub sample included in thematic review			
	Accepted applications		Rejected applications		Accepted applications		Rejected applications	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Father's age<sup>16</sup></b>								
<25	1	1	3	8	1	7	2	13
25-29	0	0	4	10	0	0	1	7
30-34	6	9	1	3	3	20	0	0
>35	1	1	1	3	1	7	1	7
Unknown	59	88	30	77	10	67	11	73
<b>Mother's nationality and immigration status</b>								
British	7	10	17	44	2	13	10	67
Foreign National	10	15	3	8	1	7	0	0
To be deported	2	3	1	3	1	7	1	7
Leave to remain	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0
Asylum Seeker (NRPF)	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unknown	47	70	17	44	11	73	4	27
<b>Father's nationality and immigration status</b>								
British	4	6	9	23	0	0	3	20
Foreign National	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0
Not in UK	1	1	1	3	0	0	1	7
Unknown	62	93	28	72	15	100	11	73
<b>Is mother care experienced?</b>								
Yes	6	9	6	15	1	7	1	7
No/Unknown	61	91	33	85	14	93	14	93
<b>Is father care experienced?</b>								
Yes	1	1	2	3	1	7	1	7
No/Unknown	66	99	65	97	14	93	14	93

<sup>16</sup> At time of MBU application or MBU Board if application date unknown





## APPENDIX 2: METHODOLOGY

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### Selecting the thematic review sample

A subsample of 15 accepted and 15 rejected cases were selected for the in-depth review. We aimed to stratify this sample to ensure coverage of a range of key criteria.

### Selecting the rejected case subsample

The 15 rejected cases were selected based on the following criteria:

- Three per MBU except where there are less than three applications per MBU
- A range of sentence lengths,<sup>17</sup> proportionate to sentence length across the whole sample, including mothers who are on remand and mothers who have been sentenced.
- A mixture of those with and without prior involvement of CSC, proportionate to involvement of CSC across the sample, where possible including a spread across other children being taken into care and if the local authority (LA) data allows timing-wise, and whether there have been Child Protection (CP) plans or care proceedings.
- A range of mother's age, proportionate to mother's age across the sample

### Selecting the accepted case subsample

Due to limited numbers of cases with details of the mother's LA, and difficulty accessing files from the local authorities, the 15 accepted cases for the thematic review were selected as a convenience sample based on the 10 that were selected for the panel review, plus five additional cases. The ten selected for the panel review were selected before information about the case characteristics had been extracted for our whole sample review, therefore we were unable to direct the selection of these cases to ensure a balanced sample. As a result of there being gaps in information about the LA in many files, a large proportion of the cases selected for the panel review came from one MBU. When selecting the further five case files, we sought to balance the characteristics of the ten from the panel review (across mother's age, sentence length and prior CSC involvement). However, we were still limited to files from which information about their characteristics had been extracted by that point. This means that the sample of 15 accepted cases used in the thematic review did not represent a true spread of characteristics from the whole cohort of 67 accepted cases.

<sup>17</sup> We did not select based on other offence characteristics as we expect sentence length to be informed by seriousness of offence and previous offending.



## Analysis

Analysis involved a high level descriptive overview of the characteristics extracted from all cases we have obtained data for, as well as a more in-depth qualitative analysis of a subsample of 15 accepted and 15 rejected cases.

### 1. Descriptive review of case characteristics for the whole sample

We manually reviewed all files we had access to in order to extract pre-selected characteristics of women and their children. We had MBU files for all applications, and this occasionally included files from the LA (such as assessments) which were held by the MBU. However, we only had consistent access to LA files for those applications which were included in the thematic review, as requesting these files was a very challenging and time consuming process.

We analysed this information descriptively, and it is presented in tables and graphs in this report.

### 2. In-depth qualitative thematic review of a selected subsample of cases

We undertook a qualitative analysis of the selected subsample of pseudonymised case files (15 accepted cases and 15 rejected cases) to identify any themes across the cases. This involved:

- a. Reviewing pseudonymised files for selected cases
- ii. The child's case file from the LA
- iii. Files provided by the MBU (i.e. applications / dossier information, Board meeting minutes, decision documents)
- b. Using codes to label key information from each case file in relation to mother and family characteristics (including risk and protective factors). This was based on a pre-determined coding frame, but was further revised as analysis progresses.
- c. Drawing codes together to identify patterns across cases in relation to mother and family characteristics (including risk and protective factors). This process was undertaken using Nvivo software, and following Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. We used a mixed inductive-deductive approach to coding. Three researchers were involved in coding and developing themes.
- d. Consideration of how themes differ between cases which were accepted and those that were rejected from the MBU
- e. Findings from the thematic review were reviewed with the expert panel.



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