



Severed Connections:

An exploration of the impact of imprisonment
on women's familial and social connectedness

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Dot Goulding
October 2004

Artwork by women and children from
Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women.

Acknowledgments

The production of knowledge does not occur without the often invisible work of an entire team of people. With this in mind, I wish to thank the following.

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DOT GOULDING
OCTOBER 2004

Origins of the research

In August 2001 members of the Prison Reform Group of Western Australia and the combined Social Justice Commissions of the Uniting Church of Australia and the Anglican and Catholic Churches gathered together at the decommissioned Fremantle Jail to commemorate International Prisoners' Justice Day. Their focus that year was on the plight of women in prison in Western Australia. In particular, they sought to raise community consciousness about the predicament of imprisoned mothers and the traumatic effects on their families. Unlike previous years when International Prisoners' Justice Day went largely ignored by the media, this event was given significant coverage by the West Australian newspaper.

From this publicity, several events ensued.

Jill Soderstrom, then Assistant Director of the newly established Centre for Social and Community Research at Murdoch University, read the article in the West Australian and saw that one of the speakers at the event was a recent doctoral candidate from Murdoch University whose thesis topic was a study of the effects of long-term imprisonment. Jill, immediately recognising the potential for a socially significant research project, approached the social justice consultant from the Uniting Church of Australia and relevant academics. And so, the first seeds of an idea for this study were sown.

Running parallel to the development of this research project, a proposal of a similar nature, focusing on the problems associated with women who were newly released from prison, was being put together by Ruah Women's Support Service. Both projects sought funding from Lotterywest at around the same time and were subsequently advised by the funding body that a collaborative project might be worthwhile. The result of this was a successful application for funding from Lotterywest through a joint effort between Ruah Women's Support Service, the Social Justice Commission of the Uniting Church of Australia and the Centre for Social and Community Research, Murdoch University.

Subsequently, the research project, *An Exploration of the Impact of Imprisonment on the Familial and Social Connectedness of Women*, was funded for a two-year study and the project representatives accepted a cheque from Lotterywest at the 2002 commemoration of International Prisoners' Justice Day, exactly one year later again at the old Fremantle Jail. The research commenced in October 2002.

In keeping with its genesis, this study has its ethos firmly grounded within a framework of prison reform.

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Executive Summary

In 2002 Lotterywest made funds available for a joint project between Ruah Women's Support Service, the Social Justice Commission of the Uniting Church of Australia and the Centre for Social and Community Research, Murdoch University. The aim of the project was to explore the experiences of women in prison and their broader connections with society and family – areas that have historically received little attention. Following two years of close research with women in metropolitan and regional prisons, families of women in prison and recently-released women, we are now pleased to present the findings of this study.

This study recognises the social and cultural diversity of its participants and the women have accordingly been grouped into six categories.

- Young, mainly non-Aboriginal, women, repeat offenders with chaotic lifestyles and no stable family or community connections.
- Urban Aboriginal women with strong kinship connections but questionable connections to mainstream society, often repeat offenders.
- Mainly middle class women, typically first time offenders engaged in white collar crime which is often work related.
- Aboriginal women from remote communities and regional towns with strong kinship and community connections, equally likely to be first time or repeat offenders.
- Foreign national women convicted while on visitors' visas to Australia, usually for drug importation. They suffer extreme social isolation and are spread across several socio-economic and cultural groups.
- Long-term and life sentenced women, also spread across several socio-economic and cultural groups.

The research shows that, although coming from vastly different backgrounds, these women share certain common experiences including histories of abusive relationships and mental illness. The women, many who are parents or caregivers, also share strong concerns regarding their ability to reconnect with children, family and community upon release. The factors making reconnection difficult include homelessness, social isolation, addictions, mental illness, abuse, self harm and suicide. And for some of the women in this study there was the threat of deportation.

The study, while giving due attention to the diverse backgrounds of women, examines their common experiences, identifies their concerns and considers the practical implications on both a personal level and in a broader social context. In doing so, it highlights the need for effective strategies to connect women with society both in prison and post-prison.

The women in this study stand to represent all women in West Australian prisons. Through personal interviews we are reminded that these women all have identifiable roles in society – both in and out of prison – and that sustainable and satisfying social relationships are as essential for them as for everyone else. The recommendations made in this study aim to help women to build and/or continue mutually necessary relationships with society while in prison and to reconnect with the broader community upon release.

The report includes the following major recommendations:

- Imprisonment ought to be regarded as the punishment of last resort, used only after all other options have been explored.
- Secure halfway houses be established in metropolitan and rural areas as places where women nearing release and/or serving short prison terms can serve out their sentences in an environment aligned with community standards.
- An effective screening system for the identification and management of women at risk of suicide or self harm be developed. This should be administered at reception for both remand and sentenced women and repeated during the term of imprisonment and just prior to release.
- The socio-economic and cultural groupings identified in this study be used as the basis for assessing female prisoners for rehabilitative programmes and services, with suitable flexibility to allow for individual difference.

In the body of the report, the following issues are highlighted and discussed:

- In relation to methodology, the importance of a qualitative and feminist approach, flexibility of process and cultural sensitivity (Chapter Two).
- The diverse nature of female prisoners in relation to their socio-economic and cultural status and the implications of this for women's experiences during and after prison. The Report distinguishes between: young, mainly non-Aboriginal, women who are repeat offenders; urban Aboriginal women; middle class women, typically first time offenders; Aboriginal women from remote communities and regional towns; foreign national women; and long-term and life sentenced women (Chapters Three and Six).
- The major issues faced by women in prison. These are identified as: concerns about children, homelessness, threat of deportation, mental illness, drug addictions, alcoholism, histories of abuse, self harm and suicide, and social isolation (Chapter Four).
- The experiences of the families of female prisoners and their importance. In this study, family members talked about their confusion and anxiety during the court process and the early period of their relative's imprisonment; their hurt and fear during prison visits due to summary treatment from some prison staff, and their troubled experiences at the time of the release of their family member (Chapter Five).

- The influence of socio-economic and cultural status on whether, and how, women were able/not able to reconnect with their communities and families upon release. In particular the Report argues that the 'one size fits all' approach to programmes and service delivery is unlikely to achieve positive outcomes. For example, women with entrenched problematic lifestyles will require longer and more intensive interventions than the three month pre-release and six month post-release assistance which is currently available to them. Short term interventions such as these may assist first time offenders from more middle class backgrounds, but are unlikely to be helpful to Aboriginal women from remote communities who often live in third world conditions (Chapter Six).
- In relation to reform, the Report argues that the importance of developing alternatives to imprisonment cannot be overemphasised. It draws attention to women's major role as nurturers and their relatively minor threat to the community and develops its recommendations in this context. It also argues for a collaborative approach to programme and service delivery with attention focused on the women's needs rather than those of prison authorities and service providers.



Chapter 1

Introduction



The situation of women prisoners has attracted relatively little attention, with research on women in prison constituting only three per cent of all publications on prisoners (McGuire, 2000: 4). Whilst it can be argued that women make up only a small proportion of the general prison population, in recent years Australia's female prison population has increased significantly, with the rate of female incarceration increasing by '110% compared to a 45% increase in the male prisoner population' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, AusStats: 4517.0). Women now constitute seven per cent of the Australian prison population (ABS: AusStats 4512.0 Corrective Services Australia) and eight per cent of the Western Australian prison population. In particular, the rate of imprisonment for Aboriginal women in Western Australia has grown disproportionately. At the time of writing, one hundred and twenty nine Aboriginal women are held in prisons in Western Australia (Department of Justice Monthly Graphical Report June 2004). In other words, Aboriginal women, who make up less than 3% of the general Western Australian population, constitute 48% of the female prison population.

Lack of a comprehensive, gender-specific knowledge-base

A lack of attention to the specific needs of female prisoners has been acknowledged by the Western Australian Attorney General, the Honourable Jim McGinty, who notes that:

Historically, the needs of female prisoners have been little understood throughout the world, and Western Australia has been no exception ... I want to bring women in from their isolationist position within the prison system (Ministerial Statement, August 2001).

This project aims to reduce this gap in knowledge. In so doing the researchers are mindful of McGuire's (1996) contention that theory, research and practice need to be brought more closely together if the work of human service practitioners in the area of women's incarceration is to be effective. McGuire's argument suggests that praxis (the marriage of theory and practice) is, by and large, lacking in this area and requires expedient and thorough attention. This study, therefore, seeks to provide a broad ranging account of how enforced separation through imprisonment affects women prisoners and their families.

Just as women prisoners have been neglected, so too have their families. The researchers support that neglect of the impact of imprisonment on families is problematic for all prisoners but particularly so for women, given their primary role in child rearing and care giving. Indeed, the Attorney General, the Honourable Jim McGinty, has pointed out:

... sixty-one per cent of women in prison in Western Australia had children, which, at the time the survey was conducted, equated to 221 young Western Australian children whose mothers were in prison ... One can immediately imagine the impact on those children when their mothers were taken away and locked in prison. We must punish people who offend, but we must also be cognisant of the effects of locking mothers in prison (Ministerial Speech to Parliament 19th March 2003).

Consequently, the imprisonment of women often signals the loss of 'mother' for the immediate and extended families of those concerned. The social disruption and family dislocation that results when mothers are imprisoned is, therefore, a central concern of this research. In particular, this study aims to throw light on the various levels of family and community connectedness of female prisoners and to gauge how these are affected by incarceration. It also explores how socio-economic status, ethnicity and the geographic location of prisons affect the experiences of women and attempts to identify the variables which strengthen and/or expand the women's family and community networks and those which undermine them. In sum, the study not only contributes to a better understanding of how imprisonment affects women but also contributes substantially to the knowledge base necessary for effective policy and legislative change in the area of women's incarceration.



Chapter 2

Methodology



The methodology used in this study involved in-depth interviews with women in prison, follow up interviews post-release and, where the women gave permission, interviews with their close family members. It was qualitative and woman-centred and largely ethnographic in nature.

The participants

Fifty-two women were interviewed who were either in prison at the time of the interviews or had recently been released from prison. Forty-three were first interviewed whilst still in prison and the nine remaining were first interviewed as newly released women.

Twenty-five of these women were Aboriginal Australians – fifteen from the metropolitan area or nearby and ten from regional towns or remote communities in the Pilbara or Kimberley. Another four were foreign national women who committed offences whilst in Australia on visitors' visas. These women will automatically be deported to their countries of origin upon release. Their countries of origin are Malaysia, Singapore, Germany and South Africa.

Follow-up interviews were conducted with as many women as could be located after their release. These were twelve Aboriginal and twelve non-Aboriginal. No foreign national women could be contacted.

Thirty-three family members of the women were interviewed. Nine of these were from non-Aboriginal families and twenty-four from Aboriginal families. In the case of the Aboriginal families, often several family members related to one participant elected to participate. No family members of the foreign national women were contacted.

The remainder of the 'in prison' group (twenty-three women) were non-Aboriginal Australians. That is, they were either Australian-born (fourteen), Australian citizens born overseas (five), or permanent residents of Australia also born overseas (four). The distinction between Australian citizens born overseas and permanent residents of Australia born overseas becomes important in regard to the possibility of deportation upon release. Namely, those women who were permanent residents of Australia born overseas but who had not achieved Australian citizenship status were likely to be flagged by the Department of Immigration for deportation (as persons not of good character) even if they had married an Australian and/or had Australian born children. Each of the permanent resident women who participated in this study had received letters from the Department of Immigration flagging them for possible deportation.

The overall situation in relation to interviews is summarised in Table 1.

	Aboriginal Australians	Non-Aboriginal Australians	Foreign Nationals	
Initial interviews in prison	23	16	4	43
Initial interviews post-release	2	7	-	9
Follow-up interviews	12	12	-	24
Family interviews	24	9	-	33

In relation to the prisons in which the women were interviewed, the breakdown is as follows:

- 28 women in Bandyup and Nyandi Prisons (metropolitan area)
- 7 women in Greenough Regional Prison (central West Australian coast)
- 8 women in Roebourne and Broome Prisons (Pilbara and Kimberley regions – far north of Western Australia and prisons holding mostly male Aboriginal prisoners)
- 9 recently released women
- 33 family members

These numbers represent around twenty-five percent of the female prison population in Western Australia at the time of the research. One hundred and nine interviews were completed.

Eastern Goldfields Regional Prison is the only institution holding women prisoners that is not represented in the study. The reasons for not including this prison in the project were practical. At the time the interviews were being conducted, the number of women held in the prison was low. In addition, the security rating of Eastern Goldfields prison is the same as Roebourne Prison, with similar conditions and social problems for women prisoners, and the project management team had access to an experienced researcher who was familiar with both Roebourne and Broome Prisons. She was known and accepted by the women in these prisons and visited the Roebourne area regularly in pursuit of other scholarly research.

Involving the women in the research

This study examines issues of a personal, sensitive and traumatic nature. All of the primary participants are currently serving or have recently served time in prison. The other participant group consists of their close family members. Because of their vulnerable position, it was imperative to find a methodology which did not objectify those who contributed to the research. Feminist research methodology is grounded on a clear understanding that how people view their everyday experiences should not be subsumed by a researcher's interpretation of these experiences. It is this ethos which underpins the study.

The research task, then, was to describe, interpret and understand the subjective reality of the women in terms of their prison experience and explore how this affected their ability to reintegrate with their families and communities upon release. In essence, the research sought to understand both the women's experience and understanding of their social environment in order for the researchers to appreciate how they understood that environment. Against this, we acknowledge that when a researcher enters into a relationship with the research participant the dynamics of the situation immediately change, contaminating and changing the social world in question (Goulding 2002: 55). So, in real terms, there is no fixed or permanent social world that can be entered or left, rather, there is an adaptable set of circumstances of which the researcher becomes a part. As a result, the rendering of the prison world of the women, recounted with the help of their voices, has to remain more of an interpretive than a concrete account of the social reality of women's imprisonment.

Our approach required that the researchers adopt the position of 'learners' in recognition of the participants' capacity to teach them about communication patterns within the prisons. It was equally important that the interviewers had a high degree of familiarity with the subject matter and a degree of closeness or relatedness

to the participants. From the outset it was assumed that women who have or are experiencing imprisonment could and should assist in the research process. In facilitation of this, several visits were made to both metropolitan women's prisons to discuss the purpose of the research and to familiarise the interviewers with the prevailing culture in these closed environments. The principal researcher talked with two focus groups of women in Bandyup and Nyandi Prisons about current issues and concerns, explained what the research hoped to achieve and asked for their input. She subsequently met with these women on several occasions in order to identify questions meaningful to them.

At least half of the questions in the research instruments came from the focus groups in Bandyup and Nyandi Prisons, newly-released women and family members. Assistance was also sought about the way in which these questions should be phrased. At one of the meetings with the women in Bandyup, for example, the researcher queried how issues relating to domestic violence could be phrased in the most sensitive way. The women simply said to 'ask it like it is'. They said 'we've all experienced domestic violence in one form or another and you need to be straightforward. You can't be gentle about domestic violence'. On this and many other occasions, the women were thus heavily involved in many aspects of the research process and, at the time of writing, the principal researcher still meets regularly with the focus group of women at Bandyup to update them on the research progress and to speak to them about prevailing issues and concerns. Through this process, and with the permission of all of the women involved, the researcher has been able to inform the women in the focus group of the progress of several of their friends now out in the community. In keeping with the spirit of the research, this has been particularly rewarding for both the researchers and the women concerned.

(The focus group of women at Bandyup remained a constant throughout the time span of the project because this group was made up of life sentenced women who were always available for consultation. Conversely, and since Nyandi is classified as an 'exit' prison which holds short-term, low-security prisoners and women nearing release, the focus group there only met on two occasions to help formulate the questions).

Research and the capacity for exploitation

Although feminist research methodology claims to diminish the power differential between researcher and researched, it also has the potential to be exploitative. That is, the social isolation, which is certainly characteristic of women's experience of imprisonment, can mean that the women may give too much information in the relief of finding a safe space within which to speak. So, the irony is that although feminist methodology claims to establish a relatively equal power relationship between researcher and researched it can inadvertently increase the vulnerability of disempowered groups such as the women participants in this study. In this research we attempted to minimise this through the use of various safeguards. Firstly, pseudonyms were used and the principle researcher transcribed all of the interviews, removing identifying information where possible. In addition, once their stories were told, the women had little control over what would be done with their information. In order to offset this, transcripts, wherever feasible, were returned to the women so that they could determine whether their transcribed interviews were in keeping with the spirit of their stories. Finally, given the personal nature of many of the questions, it was arranged that Prison Counselling Services, the Prison Chaplain and/or the Peer Support Women were available to talk with the participants after interviews if necessary.

The researchers: metropolitan prisons

As almost half of the women in Western Australian prisons are Aboriginal, it was vital that the research team include an Aboriginal interviewer. Dr Rosemary van den Berg, a Noongar woman, conducted the majority of the 'in-prison' interviews with Aboriginal women in the metropolitan area. The principal researcher, Dr Dot Goulding, has a background in prison reform and prisoner advocacy and was known and accepted by many of the women. Dot Goulding conducted all interviews with non-Aboriginal women in these prisons. Dr van den Berg was relatively unfamiliar with prison culture and so she and Dot Goulding made several visits to both Bandyup and Nyandi to talk with the women and to familiarise Dr van den Berg with the nature and culture of both prisons.

The researchers: regional prisons

The interviewer at Greenough Regional Prison was Ms Brenda Hodge, a woman who has experienced prison first-hand, having served time in both Bandyup and Greenough Prisons. She was known to the women as 'one of them' and she had recently made several official visits to Greenough Prison as an Independent Prison Visitor from the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services. She spoke to the women at Greenough about the research and asked for five participants. Seven of the women indicated strong interest in participating so she spoke with all of them. Two of the Greenough participants were foreign nationals, four were Aboriginal and one was non-Aboriginal.

Dr Kathryn Trees from Murdoch University was engaged to undertake the interviews at Broome and Roebourne Regional Prisons. Kathryn is also an Independent Prison Visitor at these prisons where she regularly visits the women in custody. Kathryn made three trips to the Pilbara and Kimberley to talk to the families of the women. Although she is not Aboriginal, Kathryn has very close personal, social and professional connections with many Aboriginal communities in the Pilbara region. Apart from visiting with the women in both prisons, Kathryn visited several remote communities in the far North and North West over a period of several months. To date, her journeys on behalf of this study have covered approximately fifteen thousand kilometres.

While most of the interviewers had spent time within the prison environment and were familiar with prison culture, only one had a personal knowledge of what it is to be a prisoner. In this sense, she was the only interviewer who could claim 'expert knowledge' of being prisoner and all the emotional and social baggage that this entails.

The interviews

In-prison interviews

Prior to commencing the interviews, arrangements had to be made with the Department of Justice and individual prison superintendents for the researchers to enter the prisons and talk privately with the women. Senior management at each prison were then made aware of ethics clearance from the Department and that information given during interviews was confidential to the research. In addition, senior security officers at each prison were advised that researchers had permission to use recording devices.

Generally speaking, the researchers had few problems gaining access to the prisons but, during the time span of the project, there was a somewhat spectacular escape from Bandyup which attracted an unprecedented amount of media coverage, causing embarrassment to the Department of Justice. Consequently,

security was visibly heightened at Bandyup. In practical terms, this meant a tightening of rules and regulations regarding official, unofficial and social visitors entering the prison, making all visitors liable to be subjected to random 'pat down' searches by gatehouse staff.

All visits to the prisons had to be pre-arranged at least twenty four hours before they took place. Prison staffs were generally helpful and flexible with booking arrangements, since the researchers did not always have specific participants to see, or women who had elected to be interviewed had been moved to another prison or had been released.

Bandyup

Researchers: Dot Goulding, Rosemary van den Berg

Bandyup is a maximum security prison for women, surrounded by two parallel high perimeter fences crowned with spiralling razor wire; a daunting place for those not familiar with prisons. Uniformed officers, security checks, surveillance mechanisms and the occasional presence of armed officers with large dogs all serve to instil anxiety in those unfamiliar with this environment. For the researchers, the journey from the car park into the prison consisted of security checks at the front gate, waiting in the liminal space between the two perimeter fences for one gate to slam shut before another would slide open, to more security checks at the gatehouse and often to challenges regarding permission to use recording devices.

Dr van den Berg was relatively unfamiliar with prisons prior to the study. She described her experience of entering Bandyup Prison for the first time in this way:

It was a scary experience when the gates were locked again behind me ... I was introduced to the prison guards on duty at the entrance. We were requested to leave any handbags or carry-bags in lockers there, had our identities checked and signed an entry book.

The interviews were normally conducted in a place where the women felt comfortable. This, of course, was subject to certain restrictions because of the unit structure in Bandyup. Long term and life sentenced women are those most often housed in self care, a self-contained part of the prison, with access restricted to the self care residents and prison staff. Residents of other units can only access their specific areas. The area known as 'the compound' is the least comfortable and attractive of all living areas at Bandyup, usually housing a disproportionate number of Aboriginal women and those considered to be a 'management problem'. The researchers were able to access each of the unit areas, but clearly the choice of interview area was more restricted in the compound area.

Interviews were usually conducted in the outside recreational areas near the women's specific units or alternatively, in or around the communal recreation centre. Few women felt comfortable talking openly about their lives and experiences in allocated offices or rooms for fear of being overheard by other women and/or prison staff. Some women felt that their conversations might be recorded by the authorities and so elected to sit in the outside areas.

Most of the interviews were pre-arranged but, the potential was there for the researchers to approach other groups of women, tell them about the project and ask if they would like to participate. Alternatively, the researchers were also approached by women who were curious about who they were and what they were doing in the prison. Several of these women offered to become participants, eagerly taking the opportunity to tell their stories.

Nyandi

Researchers: Dot Goulding, Rosemary van den Berg

Nyandi is a minimum security facility for women nearing release. Although it is surrounded by high fences and razor wire, security procedures there are more relaxed and the reception area is in an administration building which also houses some of the cells occupied by the women. Many of the women in Nyandi are eligible to attend work and to study out in the community, leaving the prison in the morning and returning late in the afternoon several days per week.

From a researcher's perspective, going in and out of Nyandi Prison was far easier and less stressful than its maximum security counterpart. Prison staff generally appeared to be more relaxed and approachable. Dr van den Berg noted that she felt more at ease in Nyandi than Bandyup, the atmosphere being friendlier and less focused on security and control. Against this, interview appointments were more difficult to arrange. Because many of the women at Nyandi go out into the community during the day to attend work or study, appointments were regularly untenable. When this occurred, the researchers sought to enlist participants, meeting the parameters of the study, from women who were working within the prison on that day or those women who had babies living in prison with them in the nursery area.

(During the time span of the research project and after completion of all initial interviews with the women held there, Nyandi Prison was closed down. It has since been replaced with a new low security facility for women – Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women. Several key initiatives have been implemented in the new facility. These are highlighted in the conclusion of the report.)

Greenough

Researcher: Brenda Hodge

Greenough Regional Prison is a medium/maximum security facility which holds mostly male prisoners but also has a small number of women who live in a separate unit. Occasionally, Greenough has been used as a stop gap to house women sent from Bandyup because of overcrowding. At the time of the interviews the majority of the women in Greenough were Aboriginal.

The Greenough researcher, Brenda Hodge, had on previous occasions entered Greenough Prison as an Independent Prison Visitor from the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services. She felt in that capacity she had been viewed as 'the enemy by staff and administrators' and had all sorts of obstacles put in her way. She was, therefore, pleasantly surprised to find that her entry to the prison as a researcher was relatively smooth and pleasant by comparison. In the following paragraphs, Brenda relates her experiences of her conversations with the women.

I rang the women's superintendent and made an appointment to go into the prison to interview the women. As the interviews (with recorder) had already been approved by Head Office, there was not much they could do about it. Greenough Regional Prison admin are very security conscious, always over the top, very much into shielding 'their world' from the outside world.

I was pleasantly surprised then, when the women's superintendent escorted me to the female block, called all the women in from their work areas and introduced me. I spoke to them as a group, explaining my reason for being there, and assured them that all interviews were completely voluntary and confidential.

The first lot of interviews was held in the prison library, which is adjacent to the female block and part of the recreation area. This was a comfortable area for interviews and reasonably quiet. A lot of the prison's 'suspect' areas are bugged these days; I don't know whether the library was or not. After lunch I was given the visits area to use. I was told it would be better, but not for whom. The visits area is fully fitted out with security devices, but whether the interview was recorded or not, I don't know ... I felt we were being watched. There is nothing to base this suspicion on – only my gut feeling. There was a lot of noise coming in from the reception area, gates slamming, vans coming and going. The noise echoes up into the visits area.

The following day I finished the interviews back in the library. One woman was very distressed; she thought I was a psychologist and could help her with her emotional problems which mainly stemmed from family issues. I was depressed myself by the time I left.

Broome & Roebourne

Researcher: Kathryn Trees

Roebourne Regional Prison is a medium/maximum security facility which holds mostly male prisoners but also has a small number of women who live in a separate unit. Broome Regional Prison is a minimum security facility with the male/female divide similar to that of Roebourne. Both prisons consistently hold more than eighty per cent Aboriginal prisoners.

The researcher, Kathryn Trees, was known to the women and the prison authorities as the Independent Prison Visitor from the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services. Following, are her experiences of the 'in prison' interviews.

For the interviews I just went into the women's yard at both prisons and told the women what the research was about and asked if people were happy to talk with me. The women were just very happy to talk about their families. At Broome I went in and sat on the floor in the cells with the women. The superintendent came around at one point to see where I was and to see what I was doing. He was quite shocked to see that I was sitting on the floor with the women and it was very clear from his demeanour that he felt that was not appropriate. He asked me if I would like a chair. However, I had no problems with sitting on the floor and just carried on. I appreciate the hierarchy in the prison system and note the responsibilities of staff, however, I don't feel that things should be any different or less for the prisoners and so I always behave accordingly. Anyway, at the end of the day, I was able to carry out all of the interviews with the women in both prisons without any problems. I was also able to take messages from the women to their families. This was particularly important for both the women and their families as phone calls and visits are almost impossible due to the remoteness of some of the communities, lack of reliable transport and lack of phones.

One of the problems that arose in terms of the theme of the research was that there was no appropriate facility for the women to have their babies in the prisons with them. Officially Roebourne claims to have a mother/baby facility and Broome does not. However, Roebourne's facility wasn't operating and hasn't all the time I've been going there. When I was there doing the interviews one of the women at Roebourne (not a participant) had to leave her baby in

her community because she was told she couldn't have the baby with her. Later on another woman I spoke to was told she couldn't have her baby with her either. Also, in Broome Prison there was one woman there who had a baby she was still breast feeding and she couldn't have her baby with her. So neither place is set up for mothers with babies and that is a real problem for the women.

Follow-up interviews

Researchers: Dot Goulding – metro area, Kathryn Trees – Pilbara and Kimberley areas.

Although thirty women in the metropolitan prisons had been interviewed, only seventeen metropolitan follow-up interviews were completed. The remainder of the women could not be located within the required time frame.

The majority of the follow-up interviews took place in the homes of the women or their families, most of these becoming social occasions with several family members present. Several also took place in cafes and two came about when the researcher bumped into the women outside Central Law Courts, Perth, where they had been appearing in court because of parole breaches. On one occasion, the researcher arrived at a family address for an appointment to find the family had already moved house.

Some of the general issues surrounding the difficulty of follow-up interviews were expressed by Brenda Hodge who (in relation to Greenough) commented that:

There were several reasons for not doing follow-up interviews. Firstly, some of the women were sent back to Perth to be released – one overseas. Secondly, a few women were not due for release. The third and most important reason is that once prisoners are released they don't usually want to do interviews or have any form of white officialdom in their lives – especially not in the family home (if they have one) ... Aboriginal people in particular (most of the women in Greenough are Aboriginal) are suspicious of anything that is put in writing about them. They are happy to talk about social and family issues with someone they trust ... the women I interviewed would have agreed to do it in prison but once out it's a different story. Once released, they resume their place in large extended families with relatives and often violent men, none of whom want 'whitefellas' butting into their business. Once out of prison they just want to get on with life and that's understandable.

In contrast to the relatively short distances covered to talk to the newly-released women and their families in the metropolitan area, the follow-up and family interviews in the Pilbara and Kimberley regional towns and remote Aboriginal communities covered around 15,000 kilometres by the end of the research. Much of this on dirt tracks in remote areas. In addition to the difficulties imposed by the vast distances involved, it was not always possible to pre-arrange appointments because of families moving around between towns and communities and the scarcity of landline phones in many of the remote communities. Despite these difficulties, Kathryn was able to conduct seven follow-up interviews of the original eight participants in Broome and Roebourne Prisons.

Family interviews

Dot Goulding interviewed twenty-one family members of the women held in Bandyup and Nyandi. Nine of these were non-Aboriginal family members and twelve were Aboriginal. The families were originally contacted by phone, having previously been given information about the research by their relatives in prison. All but one of the family interviews took place in family homes, with several follow-up and family interviews being conducted within the same visit. This was always at the request of the participants. Most of the interviews with the Aboriginal families involved several family members and took, on average, two to three hours to complete. One of the family interviews eventually took place by telephone after several unsuccessful attempts to arrange a meeting. Indeed, most of the family interviews in the metropolitan area actually took place on the second or third pre-arranged appointment.

In the Pilbara and Kimberley areas Kathryn interviewed in-depth twelve family members of the original eight women, although she spoke with many more family members who were anxious for news of the women in prison. In the remote North West Kathryn had to drive alone in very isolated areas, in country she was unfamiliar with and had to negotiate entry to several remote communities to talk to family members. This was a gargantuan task, and she sometimes felt at risk as she was driving alone over unfamiliar dirt tracks in the vast North West. Further, from the perspective of the Aboriginal people who lived in these communities, Kathryn, a white woman driving a four-wheel drive, might look suspiciously like a government official. So entry to these remote communities was always fraught with difficulties and had to be negotiated with the utmost care.

Despite these difficulties, Kathryn was able to give much back to the women. She would take messages from the women in prison to their families in remote areas, take photos of family members for the women, arrange for phone calls and visits between families and, in three cases, she was able to ascertain whether the communities were willing to have the women back safely upon their release.

Reflections on the research process

One of the prime considerations of research of this nature is that one should 'promise nothing one cannot deliver, and wherever possible give something back, using the research as a tool for productive social change'. In 'promising nothing that you cannot deliver' the researchers were careful not to raise participant expectations regarding what the research might do for them in terms of prison life. In attempting to 'give something back', they were not able to return nearly as much as given by the women. However as noted above, Kathryn Trees was able to give reassurance to the women and their families by relaying messages, arranging phone calls and taking family photos to them in prison. In addition, the principal researcher, Dot Goulding, met with the focus group of women at Bandyup on a regular basis, reporting on progress and issues related to the research. In the spirit of using this research as a tool of advocacy, the researchers also lobbied on the issue of shackling female prisoners during childbirth and other hospital and medical appointments.

In this respect, and overall, the researchers attempted to combine scholarly study with an attempt to initiate positive social change within the prison system (Irwin cited in Ross & Richards: 2003). Barbara Owen, Professor of Criminology at California State University succinctly articulates the broader field to which our research was diverted. It represents, she says, the attempt to combine advocacy with 'the need to describe the struggle of women who live behind prison fences' (Owen cited in Ross & Richards, 2003: 246).



Chapter 3

The women in prison



Female prisoners are not a homogenous group. There is no woman in prison in Western Australia today who could readily present as the stereotypical prisoner or even be thought to be 'representative' of the general female prison population. Reports such as the Profile of Women in Prison: Department of Justice WA Report (2002) can give some fundamental information about age, level of education, ethnic background, numbers of children, history of abuse, drug use and so on. But this type of report produces accounts designed to give a wide-ranging overview that will provide a basis for policy review and tends to hide the complexities and difficulties of both the characteristics of female prisoners and their experiences of prison life. Our research suggested the existence of six distinct socio-economic and cultural groupings of female prisoners. These groupings are not mutually exclusive and have some issues common to all of them in terms of the effects of imprisonment, some issues common to more than one group and some which are exclusive to a single group. For the purposes of the research, these groups can be visualised as six circles, each overlapping the others in some manner. At the same time it is also important to keep in mind that the women represented in these circles have many different life experiences and as many different ways of dealing with them.

In this representation, Groups 1 through 4 form distinct socio-cultural clusters. The remaining two groups – the foreign national women and the life sentenced women - come from diverse socio-economic and cultural groups but have problems specific to their groupings as well as problems in common with the other groups. In particular, the foreign nationals, women imprisoned whilst on visitors' visas to Australia, endure extreme familial and social isolation by being incarcerated in a foreign country.







The women serving life sentences did not formally participate in the interviewing process. Rather, they made up the focus group that generously assisted in the formulation of the questions and provided ongoing consultation for the project. These women are required to live their lives – socially, economically and culturally – for the foreseeable future within the limited confines of Bandyup Prison. Without their assistance this research would undoubtedly have been more difficult to carry out and less rich and meaningful in content.

Fig.1: The six groupings



Fig. 1.

The rest of this chapter provides an overview of the overlapping experiences of each of these groupings of women prisoners. The women's quotes will appear highlighted in the colours of the relevant grouping as they appear in Fig 1. These are:

Group 1: yellow	
Group 2: turquoise	
Group 3: tan	
Group 4: rose	
Group 5: green	
Group 6: lavender	

Group one

This grouping consists of mainly younger women, from 18 – 35 years, who have tenuous or non-existent family connections, no stable living arrangements, move in and out of prison regularly, are marked by histories of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and harbour serious substance addictions. The only real socio-cultural connections for these women are to their peers whose lives are similarly chaotic. Tanya's lifestyle is typical of the women in this group:

My family won't have nothing to do with me. They don't talk to me and I've got two children and they won't even talk to me either ... I moved around a lot and I've done nearly sixteen years jail all up ... I use drugs you see, that's been my life ... I haven't had a stable home for a long time ... I've been doing drugs – heroin – since I was eighteen ... I actually had my first hit in here (Bandyup) and I've been doing drugs ever since.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

Thus, physical and emotional violence, sexual abuse, violent crime and chronic homelessness are all commonplace in the lives of the women in this grouping. Prison is often a place where life takes on some semblance of structure and 'normality', where drug use is reduced if not stopped, threats of violence are limited, where the women have a roof over their heads and can eat regularly. Although they generally do not want to be there, the women in this group often view prison as a respite from the hard reality of their lives. In terms of stigma, loss of position and relationships, prison has little impact. Indeed, for some of the women a term of imprisonment may be seen as a rite of passage, able to convey some form of socio-cultural status within their peer group.

Loss of their material possessions upon being sentenced to a prison term can be catastrophic for these women, as they generally live in conditions of extreme poverty. This is illustrated in the case of Dawn, a heroin addict serving a sentence for armed robbery. When she was sent back to prison on a breach of parole, Dawn lost her flat, clothes and other personal possessions. She explained, 'I don't know where my stuff is. I'd say I've lost it all by now ... as it stands now, I have nothing except the clothes I wore in here and I have nowhere to live ... There's nothing I'm looking forward to – no home, no money – what's there to look

forward to?' Clare, back in prison on remand after recently being released, was also concerned about her home and furniture. She told of her predicament in this way:

I was just brought in here and had no time to arrange anything with Homeswest. I've been here ten weeks now and I've lost my house and all my furniture and personal stuff. How am I expected to start again on \$145 a week? It just fucks with your mind knowing that you're going to lose everything again and knowing you can't do nothing about it.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

Some of the women in this group have children in state or family care. Becky, whose children are wards of state, said 'my kids are in foster care ... they were taken off me when they were little. I was using (heroin) very heavy then and was out of it most of the time so I didn't look after them properly ... I don't see my kids at all but I think about them a lot, especially when I'm in here and I'm clean'. Eve is a 25 year old mother of two young children. Her story is similar, 'I didn't really live anywhere. I lived everywhere. I was on the streets just floating around ... I'd sleep here and there, wherever. I've done that for about ten months, since the last time I was in here. After I had my children taken from me I didn't care anymore'.

In our research, all but two of the women in this grouping were non-Aboriginal. Their crimes ranged from drug dealing through to burglary and armed robbery (more violent in nature than those committed by the women in the other groupings, except for those serving life sentences). In research terms, the women in this grouping present difficulties in terms of collection of follow up information as they are extremely hard to locate after release because of their itinerant and disconnected lifestyles.

Group two

This group is made up of urban Aboriginal women. In our research they ranged in age from 18 – 45 years. While their lives are typified by social and economic marginalisation from the dominant culture, they generally have strong kinship ties and remain consistently connected to their families and communities with little or no stigma or shame attached to their imprisonment. Typically, Nina's family ties are strong. She described her family situation this way:

I belong to the Noongar community ... I was really upset the first time I came to prison, leaving my kids and that really hurt me but I've got two cousins in here so I hang with them a lot ... My mum and my brothers and sisters are my closest friends. I'm lucky that they'll always support me and my kids. They don't think I'm a bad person because I'm in jail.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

Often exposed to entrenched family violence, with well-documented family histories of dispossession and the removal of their children, these women, who are under-educated in Western terms and frequently suffer from alcoholism and/or drug addiction, characteristically return to their immediate or extended family upon release regardless of violent situations. Yvonne said that when she left prison she would go home to her husband:

... even though he gives me a hard time. He's very violent. He's done time for bashing me but he's got my daughter and I have to go back if I want to see her. Where else would I go anyway? He only hits me when he's been on the grog – it's not like it's all the time.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Many of the women in this group have several children who are state wards in care of other family members: grandmothers, aunts, siblings. Irene has ten children, all state wards in custody of family members. She would like to have them back but thinks this is unlikely in the near future. Irene described her experiences thus:

I've got ten children and that's a lot of hard work on my mum and dad ... My baby was taken at birth. Welfare took her ... I thought the stolen generation was a long time ago but they're still doing it now. My children have been taken from me and they're under state care in my mum and dad's custody. They've got the whole nine and my uncle's got the baby.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Typically, and like the first group, these women are likely to be repeat offenders, with their offences most often being non-payment of fines, driving under suspension, and the 'trifecta' of drunk, disorderly and resist arrest/assault a public officer. (While their offences are less serious, there are certain similarities with the first group in terms of repeat offending, displaying tendencies to violent behaviour, returning regularly to prison).

Although, their lives might seem chaotic from a conventional western view, they have a strong kinship connectedness which is not severed or tainted by imprisonment. For them, imprisonment does not generally present major issues in terms of loss of status and relationships. The implications for material belongings may also be lessened by their extended family networks. However, a very major concern for the women in this grouping is often loss of a Ministry of Housing home when rent arrears accrue while the woman is in prison.

In terms of follow-up data collection, the women from this grouping present difficulties associated with moving around between various extended family members upon release and an inherent reluctance of family members to give any information to unknown researchers.

Group three

This group consists of middle class women who have completed school, have some form of trade, tertiary or professional qualification. Many of them may own or be buying their own homes and be in paid employment immediately prior to their prison terms. Their offences are often employment related – stealing as a servant, embezzlement, social security fraud or similar 'white collar crime' for example. This may involve large sums of money; in the case of this study sums between \$7,000 and \$900,000 were involved. The women in this group are generally first-time offenders, since few go on to re-offend. Like their counterparts in groups one and two, the women in this group may have experienced violent and otherwise abusive relationships. However, unlike the women in the first two groups, upon entry to prison the women in this grouping experience high levels of culture shock and shame, combined with loss of social position and personal possessions, including the family home. Pippa's experience was typical of the women in this group:

I've lost my house while I've been in here ... I had a mortgage but the bank only gave me three months ... so they foreclosed on the mortgage and the house gets auctioned this Sunday ... Any money left over at settlement goes directly to my ex-employer in court ordered restitution.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Feeling out of place, intimidated and fearful for their safety when first imprisoned, the women from this grouping tend to recognise, seek each other out and socialise together while in prison and upon release. They rarely reoffend and return to prison. Upon release, they often find that family relationships have at best grown more distant and at worst broken down completely. Prison is more or less 'unspeakable' among their social cohorts and the women in this group often feel extremely alienated from family and friends when they are released. Cher spoke about this:

It's been so clear that certain people in my own family don't trust me anymore ... My own mother has been particularly bad with this sort of thing, saying things like "Don't go into the city shopping unless I'm with you" ... She gets cross if I meet up with any of the women from prison, and the truth is I feel most comfortable with them – they understand what it's like to be in prison. Unless you've been there you have no idea.

(CHER: FOUR MONTHS AFTER HER RELEASE)

The stigma and shame attached to being in prison is thus a major issue for these women, many of them suffering from ‘jail paranoia’ when they are released. Jail paranoia is best described as the ‘everyone who sees me will know I’ve been in jail’ fear which haunts these women. Alice outlined this phenomenon when, after a few months out in the community, she said:

I often feel I’ve got “ex-prisoner” stamped on my forehead. I often think people know and I’m paranoid about seeing officers when I’m out or visitors who might recognise me. I feel that’s happening to me all the time.

(ALICE: FIVE MONTHS AFTER HER RELEASE)

In this study, the women within this group presented no difficulties in terms of collecting post-release information. They tended to seek stable accommodation arrangements, were willing to talk about their experiences and often had some ambition to make a contribution to change the nature of women’s imprisonment in a positive manner.

Group four

This group consists of Aboriginal women from the regional towns and remote communities in the north west of Western Australia. Specific local cultural practices and the tyranny of distance impact severely on the ways in which these women experience imprisonment. Like their Aboriginal sisters from the metropolitan area, there is no stigma or big shame attached to being in prison as such. Nevertheless, certain crimes against family or community members may attract harsh additional punishments such as banishment from a community or loss of a child to another family member to replace a deceased person. The children of the women in this grouping are almost invariably cared for by another family member and, there is continuing fear of government officials taking children into state care. Like the women from the first three groups, many of the women in this group have histories of family and/or relationship abuse.

In this grouping, the family members of the imprisoned women could see no logic in sending mothers to jail. This was illustrated in the case of Bindi, a young mother of three small children, who was taken to Broome Prison on remand – more than a thousand kilometres from her home – after causing the death of her partner when he threatened to kill her children. Both Bindi’s and her partner’s families were devastated at the loss of the young man, but recognised that she had been defending her children. Neither family could see any good reason why Bindi should not remain at home with her children who had already suffered the loss of one parent. Bindi’s uncle described how her family felt:

We just want her to come home. They (her family) are very sad. I’m very sad (he was crying).

Her father added, We have to get her out of there. What will we do? How is she? She has two twins and we all just want her to come home and look after those two twins.

Many of the women held in Roebourne, Broome, Greenough and Eastern Goldfields Prisons live in communities more than a thousand kilometres distant, so visits and phone calls are rare and the women are socially isolated and suffer from homesickness. The situation is even worse if, for any reason, they are transferred to Bandyup. For example, Sandy, who is unable to have any contact with her family and who came from a community in the Eastern Goldfields spoke of her sadness in this way:

I feel homesick. I’m not from here ... I want to go back home. I’ll be good from now on. I been thirty five days here now and I’m getting the homesick ... I got no visit here. I’m very sad. I want to go back to Boulder. That’s near where my family is ... I’m a long way from my home here.

(BANDYUP PRISON).

Like their urban Aboriginal counterparts, the women from this group have strong kinship ties. The negative aspect of this is that they may face payback or traditional punishment upon return to their communities. This could involve a flogging or even threats of death. Bindi for example, because of the nature of her offence, expected that she would be beaten by her partner’s family when she returned to his community. Mary, too, had committed a violent offence against a family member and was concerned that she might face payback when she returned home. She described her circumstances in this way:

We were all drinking. I don’t know why I did it but the knife was just there and I stabbed him. He had on a padded shirt so he wasn’t hurt bad but he had to go to hospital ... I used to clean his mother’s house but I don’t think I’ll be allowed back there ... I’ll need to find out before I get out. I need to know if it’s safe for me to go back.

(ROEBOURNE PRISON)

The women in this group are particularly likely to experience cultural conflict and misunderstanding within the prison system. An incident affecting Jodie, who comes from a remote North Western community and had her young baby with her in the prison nursery when she was on remand in Bandyup, illustrates this. On one occasion, when told by an officer to clean up the nursery, Jodie asked if someone could be sent to help her so she could look after her baby. However, the officer implied that she was lazy and told Jodie that his own daughter could do housework and look after her baby at the same time. In recounting this incident, Jodie told us that she had:

... a cultural responsibility to my husband's family to see that nothing happens to the baby. I wanted to have someone to keep an eye on my baby while I cleaned. He's moving around and getting into things now ... if anything bad happens to my baby my husband's family will kill me. Really and truly kill me - dead. That officer, he doesn't know that. His culture is different from mine and he thought I was just being lazy asking for someone to help.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

In terms of collecting follow-up data, the women from this group presented particular difficulties. Most obvious was the time and expense involved because of the vast geographic distances that had to be covered to locate the women in their towns or communities.

Group five

The fifth group is a small group in relation to the total prison population. It is made up of foreign national women, imprisoned in Western Australia as Commonwealth prisoners within a state run prison system. The women come from diverse social and cultural backgrounds and experience the most extreme social isolation, being held in prisons in a foreign country, often without common language or cultural practices. Emma, a black South African woman, described how she felt when she was sentenced to serve a minimum of five years in prison:

At first it was really, really hard ... I wanted to commit suicide ... The pain it was just too much and I couldn't face the reality of my life – being in prison in a foreign land and not being able to see my son and my mother. To die seemed a better choice then. You have to understand that this was my first time offending and it was my first time in prison. I thought "Oh my God how will I be able to survive this place for five years", you know.

(NYANDI PRISON)

As well as their familial, social and cultural isolation, these women are often unable to communicate effectively with prison staff and other prisoners because of language difficulties. This aspect alone has serious implications for their basic care and wellbeing. Mai, a Malaysian woman, spoke of her problems when she first arrived at Bandyup Prison:

... when I first come my English was really poor and they did not have any translator. Nobody give me any information. They say, "do this, do that" so I do not understand much because at that time my English was very poor. So I did not understand the information pamphlet with all the rules. I was very frightened at that time and I could not understand anything.

(GREENOUGH PRISON)

Because they are Commonwealth prisoners in a state run system, the women's imprisonment is funded from a different source. This usually means that they are not entitled to access the programmes and vocational education available to the general prison population unless they pay separately for them. Emma explained how this works: 'I have to pay \$2500 for my diploma course. As a foreign national I cannot get free education so I have to pay for my studies out of my wages which are \$35 per week'.

Group six

The sixth group is made up of life-sentenced women. In Western Australia, the women serving life sentences come from a diverse social, economic and cultural background and a broad age-range. Some have young children, some have children who are no longer minors and some have never had children. Many will spend 15 – 30 years in prison. Their social lives exist entirely within the confines of the prison for the foreseeable future and they can have little or no input into the lives of their children or other family members. Their crimes include such things as murder and wilful murder. In terms of this research, there were no primary participants in this group. However, a group of women with life sentences did meet regularly with the principle researcher every few months throughout the project, providing advice on issues, wording of questions and support for primary participants after interviews if needed. These women had very varied experiences in terms of lifestyle prior to imprisonment. Apart from the fact that all of them had histories of physical and/or sexual abuse and many had been diagnosed with some form of mental illness, they shared little else except that they face the prospect of growing old behind bars in close physical proximity to each other.



Chapter 4

The major issues



The interviews and focus groups revealed a number of key issues shaping women's experience of imprisonment. All of these affected the women's ability to reconnect with family and/or community upon release. This chapter is devoted to the discussion of these issues, as follows:

- Concerns about children
- Homelessness
- The threat of deportation
- Mental illness, including psychological and/or psychiatric conditions
- Drug addictions
- Alcoholism
- Histories of abuse
- Self Harm and suicide
- Social isolation

Before discussing the issues, we provide a brief account of the number of times the women had been in prison and how this affected them.

The prison experience: newcomers and old timers

Research indicates that a different and more paternalistic logic often underpins the sentencing of women compared with that of their male counterparts. Hudson (2002: 23) maintains that '... for female offenders, the "justice" they receive is more to do with **who** they are than **what** they have done' (emphasis in the original). That is, their sentencing is more related to their 'social characteristics and their construction as caring or neglectful mothers, faithful partners or promiscuous sluts than to their crimes' (Cook cited in Hudson, 2002: 23). Wilkie (1993: 81) found that 'females are much more likely than males to be the subjects of unfavourable pre-sentence reports', which are often used to their disadvantage by magistrates and judges when sentencing. Overall, studies focusing on gender-specific sentencing support that, compared with men, women generally receive heavier sentences for equivalent first offences, thus 'being accelerated up the sentencing ladder' and that women, having started 'half-way up the tariff, ... escalated to custodial sentences more quickly than men, who were more likely to start their sentencing "career" with a fine' (Hudson, 2002: 23).

Olivia's case may well be indicative of this phenomenon. A first time offender found guilty of social security fraud, Olivia described her court experience in this way:

When the magistrate sentenced me to prison I just couldn't believe it. My lawyer told me I'd get a fine or community service because I'd never been in trouble before ... I'd told my husband I was going out for a doctor's appointment. He had no idea I was in court ... I just screamed and shook and fell to the floor when the judge told me I was going to prison ... I just wanted to kill myself ... I couldn't get beyond that ... They kept me in the crisis care unit at Bandyup for a week ... that was my introduction to prison.

(NYANDI PRISON)

More than half of the women within this study were first time offenders who had received custodial sentences. For example, Alice, convicted on stealing as a servant charges, was remanded in custody. She spoke of her introduction to prison:

It was just pure hell ... I know it's stupid now but I thought "there's murderers in there and they'll get me" ... they (prison officers) knew I was suicidal and put me straight in CCU (Crisis Care Unit) in a strait-jacket with no underwear. I felt so degraded when I had to strip and shower in front of officers ... I got so upset and they threatened to handcuff and shackle me. I felt so humiliated.

(Did you ever see other women shackled?)

Yes. When I was in Bandyup there was one girl who was misbehaving and they shackled her and handcuffed her and just threw her into this cell. It was so awful to see and hear ... it was absolutely terrifying.

(NYANDI PRISON)

In all, twenty-seven women in this study were there for the first time as sentenced prisoners. Two had previously been in custody on remand but had been subsequently found not guilty and released. One of these, an Aboriginal woman from a remote community, had been held in custody on remand in Bandyup for two years before being found not guilty. It then became apparent from trial transcripts that the investigation had been flawed and someone else had committed the crime for which she was imprisoned thousands of kilometres from her family and community.

Against this, twenty-five women had served more than one term as sentenced prisoners. Eight had served two prison terms and seventeen had served between three and seven prison terms with many of them having spent additional time in custody on remand on several occasions. This group of women often viewed imprisonment as an occupational hazard, a lifestyle glitch; the revolving door that took them in and out of prison with monotonous regularity. Val, for example, who was aged 26 had been imprisoned on several occasions:

This is my fourth prison term. The others were all short-term sentences but this was a bit more serious and I've served more than two years already ... I've done more than five years all up, including this term. By the time I get released I'll have spent six years in jail.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Glenda has also been in prison 'four or five times before'. She spoke of her first time in prison, saying:

I was absolutely terrified then ... It was so horrible and you don't know what to expect. You get out of the van and they take you to reception, shower you and more or less delouse you ... but you get used to it and the fear of prison goes and it's hard to remember why you were ever scared ... sometimes I think this is the only community I belong to. I don't know where I belong ... that's a lot of the reason why I've come here I reckon, why I done the speed and then the heroin.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

Broadhurst and Maller (1990) have found that one out of three non-Aboriginal and two out of three Aboriginal women will return to prison, noting that it takes, on average, approximately twenty-three months for non-Aboriginal women and sixteen months for Aboriginal women to be returned to prison. In this study, Bella, an Aboriginal woman from a remote North West community, had been in prison many times. She had a problem with binge drinking and regularly offended when drunk, resulting in multiple arrests and many short prison terms:

I been in lots of times ... alcohol is my big problem and I usually end up in here ... I'm pretty used to it, just pretty much resigned to it I suppose. This time I knew they was looking for me on a warrant so I just walked into the place and let myself in at Broome Prison and said "Look I heard you were looking for me". Then they let me come down here for a funeral.

(GREENOUGH PRISON)

Concerns about children

Imprisonment inflicts a decisive rupture on existing family and community ties, with serious social consequences. When mothers are sent to prison, a number of different people may care for their children. If this is not coordinated by the mother and/or the arrangements are left too vague or uncertain, the mother's anxiety – exacerbated by feelings of loss – is likely to increase. All of the mothers within this study expressed ongoing concerns for their children's wellbeing. They spoke variously of the pain of enforced separation, the fear of their children being harmed in some way, and their powerlessness to help children who were sick or otherwise experiencing problems. These concerns were usually compounded by feelings of guilt and fear of being seen as bad mothers.

Twenty-nine of the women in the study were mothers, although only seventeen of these were the primary care givers for their children immediately prior to their current term of imprisonment. Seven of the women had children who were wards of the state, some in foster care (all non-Aboriginal mothers) and some state wards in the care of other family members (all Aboriginal mothers). The remaining five women were mothers of older children who live independently in the community. In addition, several of the women, although not biological mothers themselves, had been care-givers to other

family members, looking after various close relatives including step-children and extended family.

Helen, in prison for the first time on a traffic offence, was responsible for her six children aged from six months to twelve years before she went to jail. Although her sentence is short – just over four weeks – being sent to prison has caused family hardship:

I've never been away from my kids before ... I've got six kids; three of them go to school and three of them don't ... Being in prison really impacts on your kids in lots of areas such as schooling, care and just everyday life, especially the three little ones who I really miss and they miss me. My brother is looking after them in the day and their father when he comes home from work but I stress because I know I look after them best.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Pippa's story provides an example of the kind of arrangements that may occur when a mother who has day-to-day care for children goes into prison. She has four children, ranging in age from five years to twenty-two. The two youngest children were living with her and the two eldest children already lived independently when she was sent to prison. Her nineteen year old daughter went to live with her elder sister and the five year old was being cared for by Pippa's father.

My father probably bore the brunt of me coming to jail. He's been looking after my youngest daughter who's five, running her to and from kindy four days a week and he's 65. It's been really hard for him ... I've been on my own since my youngest was eight months old so we're really close and, of course, I miss her a lot. I'm so grateful to my dad – this has really strengthened our relationship and he brings my two youngest in to see me every week without fail.

(NYANDI PRISON)

On the other hand, Yvonne's four children were already wards of the state in the care of various family members before she was imprisoned for the third time for driving whilst under suspension. In spite of the fact that she did not have custody of her children, Yvonne worries about their welfare constantly. Her ex-de facto has her youngest daughter and he does not take the baby to visit her in jail. Yvonne was upset by her situation and expressed her feelings in this way:

My baby daughter turned three yesterday. My ex-de facto's got her and he won't bring her in to see me. He could've at least brought her in for her birthday yesterday. I don't know what's going on with her and I worry about her so much. I can't ring up or nothing. His family won't answer the phone to me. It's really hard ... I miss all my kids.

(NYANDI PRISON).

Clare, who is in prison on remand and facing her fifth prison term, has a seven year old daughter and an infant son, both state wards in foster care:

My daughter's been in foster care since she was small. Someone from welfare brings her in to see me ... I had a baby eight weeks ago but welfare have got him.

(Why don't you have him here in Bandyup with you?)

I'm on remand and get sentenced next week. I'm hoping I'll get him in here if I get a custodial but if I get a non-custodial I'll have to do a parenting course through Family and Children's Services before I can get custody ... one of the joys of being a heroin addict, government departments and substances control your life.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

Collectively, the mothers in this study had seventy-three children under the age of sixteen years. Ten of the women said they would have child custody issues to deal with upon release and most of these felt they would have to attend the Family Court. This would be to regain custody from a relative and/or to undertake some form of parenting skills course prior to regaining custody of their children from the state.

Several of the participants also had family obligations to elderly parents, grandparents, younger siblings and other dependent family members. For example, Janelle, an Aboriginal woman from a regional town was primary care giver to her elderly grandmother prior to being imprisoned.

I always help with nanna. We live together in the same house and I take her to all her hospital visits. I don't know who is helping her now. I'll help her when I get out.

(ROEBOURNE PRISON)

Homelessness

Some of the women in the study (fourteen) had experienced chronic homelessness since childhood. That is, they had often lived on the streets, spent much of their time out in the community trying to find sustenance and/or negotiate a bed for the night, and in general terms regarded themselves as long-term homeless. On the other hand, several other women in the study (ten) had histories of reasonably stable accommodation, only losing their homes when they were sent to prison.

Many women due to be released from prison have dubious arrangements regarding accommodation and often leave prison simply hoping that the promised flat, room, bed or floor space is still available for them. Consequently, they often face the prospect of homelessness or inappropriate, insecure and inadequate living arrangements. Where accommodation is provided by prisoner welfare groups and other service providers, demand always outstrips supply. Furthermore, those women who are able to get supported housing face time limited tenancy restrictions and have to vacate such accommodation after a relatively short

period. This is usually within three months in the case of Outcare assisted accommodation, or six months in the case of the Women in Transitional Housing (WITH) scheme, which is coordinated by Ruah Women's Support Services. This disruption is often very unsettling for women who are trying to reconnect and stabilise their lives after a term of imprisonment.

Chronic homelessness

Ongoing homelessness was a recurring problem for fourteen (27 per cent) of the women in the study. Never having experienced settled home lives themselves, they had no real concept of what a secure established home might be, describing when asked, the quintessential cottage with a picket fence, neat garden and well behaved children playing with a loving mother and father, 'like you see on the telly'. In contrast, their collective experience was marked by moving around from place to place, escaping with or without their mothers from violent and otherwise abusive relationships, living in conditions of poverty, irregular attendance at multiple schools and general social and emotional instability.

Eve's itinerant lifestyle, both prior to and after prison, was typical of those women who regularly experienced homelessness:

I haven't got a proper place to live. I'm moving between this place and a few others ... I've had to get in contact with all the people I used with. Well I had to so I've got a place to sleep and I can only stay for a few nights so as not to outstay my welcome anywhere ... if you don't have a place to stay then you don't have neighbours to help, do you?

(EVE: TWO WEEKS AFTER RELEASE)

All but one of these had been homeless or were experiencing unstable living arrangements immediately prior to being imprisoned. The single exception had gained tenancy of a flat before she was rearrested on an old driving under suspension charge, thus breaching her parole conditions. She lost all of her personal possessions and tenancy to the flat upon her re-imprisonment.

Jill has lived on the streets since she was thirteen and has been in and out of prison since she was eighteen. Her family live in the eastern states and she has had little contact with them over the past twenty years. One month after her release from prison she was renting a room in a house owned by a family whom she describes as 'Christians who see me as their good deed'. Jill described how her life is right now:

I've got to stay off the gear if I want to stay out so I figured it would be good to stay here till I got somewhere away from all me old mates that I used with but I've got nothing in common with these people, they're born again Christians. I'm like a hermit in me room here. They don't understand what my life's been like ... you're talking to someone who's slept under bridges and lived in derelict houses ... I haven't contacted my old friends yet but I feel like a spare prick at a wedding here, although I feel bad saying that.

(JILL: FOUR WEEKS AFTER RELEASE)

Poverty is a major factor associated with homelessness and all of the women who reported having no stable living arrangements had experienced ongoing financial hardship or destitution. Loss of personal possessions upon imprisonment was particularly difficult for the women who experienced homelessness as they were unlikely to be able to replace the necessities of life upon release. Fourteen of the women lost all of their possessions when they went to prison – clothes, furniture and other personal items such as jewellery and photos.

Becky has been in prison several times and has experienced the loss of her home and her possessions on more than one occasion:

It looks as though my flat will be up for grabs since my de facto has done the runner ... the flat will be history and my gear with it ... we've got a VCR, a TV and a stereo and all my clothes in there ... Anyways I'll probably lose the lot but that's happened before – shit happens.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

Women who lost their homes upon imprisonment

Ten women, just under one fifth of the participants, lost their homes within weeks of being in prison. Four of those lost Ministry of Housing rentals, two lost private rentals and four lost mortgaged homes (to court-ordered restitution payments and/or mortgagee sales).

Maxine, an Aboriginal woman and mother of three young children, lost her Ministry of Housing rental and all her furniture when she went to prison. Loss of her home snowballed into further losses such as personal possessions, furniture and her car.

Well I couldn't pay my rent because I was in jail and I couldn't do nothing about it ... Homeswest took out all my furniture and got rid of it. I didn't know they was going to do that ... I only found out after it happened ... Now I owe them a debt for rent so they won't give me another house and my car got taken too because I couldn't make payments from jail so now I have a HP debt too – a car to pay for and no car.

(GREENOUGH PRISON)

Beth also lost her Ministry of Housing home and some of her possessions:

The stuff from my house got spread around my relatives but I don't know who's got what ... my fridge is on my mum's back veranda and she's got my table and chairs so I'll get those back ... I'll probably have to get some stuff like beds and that from St Vinnies. I think my TV and my video's been hocked ... I probably owe Homeswest hundreds by now – maybe even a thousand so I'll have to stay at mums till I can get it sorted.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Beth was also worried about loss of her home because Family and Children's Services had become involved, telling her that her mother's home was not big enough for her and her two children to live there. She was concerned that her children would be taken into care and added: 'that'll happen over my dead body ... I was in care when I was a kid and my mum was sick in hospital ... they used to hold my head in a bucket of water when I pissed the bed. I hated it'.

Threats of deportation

One of the four foreign national women who participated in the study had already been deported to her country of origin at the time of writing. The three remaining foreign national participants will also be deported upon release. Deportation is especially problematic for prisoners who are classed as permanent residents of Australia born overseas but without benefit of Australian citizenship. Four of the participants within the study fell into this group and were flagged for possible deportation upon release. Each of these women plus several others who approached the principle researcher in Bandyup Prison (not participants in the study) had received letters from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, flagging them as persons not of good character and liable for deportation to their countries of birth. The countries in question were England and New Zealand.

Three of the women had lived in Australia since they were small children and had been educated and socialised as Australians. Two of them had children born in Australia to Australian fathers. Unsurprisingly, being threatened with deportation, and the consequential long-term separation from family, caused immeasurable angst for the women, who, because they were in prison, had little or no access to information regarding immigration law. Stories circulating around the prisons about women who had already been deported regardless of the fact that they had Australian children, whom they had been made to leave behind exacerbated their concerns.

Glenda was particularly affected by threats of deportation as she had two Australian children in custody of their Australian father and was almost eight months pregnant at the time of her interview. She spoke of her dilemma thus:

I've had papers from the Department of Immigration cancelling my visa. I had no idea I had a visa, I mean I've been here since I was two years old and I'm 26 now. I can't remember living in New Zealand. I've always thought of myself as Australian ... I've always lived here in my entire memory. Now they've told me I've got to leave Australia, I've got no rights here anymore ... I'm so scared they'll take me away from my children and I'll never see them again and from my mum who has cancer. She's so worried too and that doesn't help her condition ... It's been a shock to the system. I can't believe it's happening. I've only got one uncle in New Zealand and he molested me when I was a kid staying at his place on holiday. I don't know anybody else there.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

Glenda had entrenched drug addictions, a long history of criminal activity and was already serving her fifth prison term. The Act covering her deportation threat did not take account

of the fact that she had developed her addictions and offending behaviour patterns while being socialised and growing up as an Australian.

Jill, also a repeat offender with an entrenched drug habit, was similarly flagged for deportation. At the time of her interview she had been resident in Australia for thirty-two years, sounded Australian, felt Australian, and had no known family in her country of birth. She described her feelings about the prospect of being deported to England.

I got a letter flagging me for deportation to England. I've lived here since I was eight years old and I've just turned 40 this year. I've lived here for 32 years. How could I live in England? I've got no one over there. It's a foreign country to me ... so they want to send me to a foreign country to become their problem. If they deport me to England that'd kill me. I would die if I had to leave Australia.

(JILL: FOUR WEEKS AFTER RELEASE)

Pippa, a first time offender in her forties and mother of four Australian children also received a deportation letter. However, prior to going to prison Pippa had been employed within a legal environment and was able to ascertain that she would not be deported:

When I got the letter I thought this can't be right ... I came over here from England as a small child with my parents on an assisted passage in the sixties. I've been here forty years, married here, had all these Australian kids – they can't just chuck me out and separate me from my kids. So I got hold of the information I needed, only because I knew how to, and found the precedent is that if you came here as an assisted migrant prior to 1974 when the scheme stopped then you can't be deported. So I won't be deported ... but the jury's still out on those who came here after 1974 which is probably most of the women in here that are affected.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Grace had been living in Australia for more than ten years. She was not married and had no children, although she had been living in a de facto relationship for much of that time. Grace was deported to England shortly after her release. At the time of writing Glenda, Jill and Pippa are still living in the West Australian community. Jill and Pippa are both covered by the 1974 assisted passage precedent and will not be deported. However, Glenda is still uncertain of her future, having the threat of deportation to New Zealand still unresolved.

Mental illness

The prevailing research indicates that women arrive in prison with significant levels of emotional disturbance and mental illness. Butler and Allnutt (2003: 14) point to high levels of diagnosed mental illness among women prisoners in New South Wales prisons with seventy-eight per cent of sentenced women and ninety per cent of women at reception (unsentenced) affected. In this study, thirty-nine women, or seventy-five per cent of the participants said they had been diagnosed with a psychological and/or psychiatric condition. Their conditions ranged from affective disorders such as clinical depression through to bipolar and severe psychoses such as schizophrenia and antisocial personality disorder.

Most of these women were on prescribed medication for their psychological and/or psychiatric conditions at the time of imprisonment. Those who had been expecting a prison term had the opportunity to take their medication with them to the prison but those who had expected to return home from court usually arrived at prison reception without their prescribed medication and without proof of prescription. However, regardless of whether the women had their medication with them or not, most of them said that they were taken off their prescribed drugs by the prison doctor and left to endure withdrawal symptoms or given a substitute medication. This appeared to be common practice and was a significant concern for many of the women. Alice described her experience of this:

When I first got to Bandyup I was on **** (named drug: recording unclear) and they just cut me off it and put me on Evanzar ... it was like going cold turkey. I was just like a druggie coming off heroin ... for about ten days I couldn't sleep ... I just felt so low, so bad that much of the time I just wanted to kill myself.

(Did you get help when you felt this bad?)

No, I was scared to ask for help because of the way they treat you. For example when I first got there (Bandyup) they had me in a strait-jacket in a padded cell basically. And I was locked up like that for 24 hours a day.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Fran was diagnosed with severe clinical depression prior to her first term of imprisonment. She said that she told the doctor and nurses at Bandyup she was on antidepressant medication:

... but I've never been assessed either here (Nyandi) or at Bandyup for any psych condition whatsoever. I told the doctor and the nurses but no one checked with my doctor on the outside ... The doctor here just seemed to think I wanted antidepressants and the nurse and the counsellor told me that even if the doctor on the outside had prescribed me antidepressant medication the doctor in here would override it ... I've had no help with my depressive condition – no medication at all – and considering the trauma I've been through with the accident and coming in here I feel I should have had some decent medical assessment.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Several months before her incarceration, Olivia had been hospitalised because of severe depression and was diagnosed with multiple psychological and psychiatric problems. She was still under treatment for these conditions when she was given a custodial sentence for her first offence.

Six months before I went to prison I had a nervous breakdown. I was an in-patient at the Perth Clinic for four months and only out of that institution for six weeks before I went to prison ... I've been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, post traumatic stress disorder, severe anxiety and borderline manic depression ... When I was sent to Bandyup I was on several different medications.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Despite the apparent reluctance of the prison authorities to prescribe medication, antidepressants were, in fact, prescribed for most of the women in the study at least at some point of their prison experience, especially during times of extreme emotional trauma. Glenda had a second trimester pregnancy terminated whilst in prison on a previous sentence. She said that she requested the termination when she was eight or nine weeks pregnant, but because of institutional delays the procedure took place when she was fourteen weeks pregnant and that, when she went to hospital, she had to be induced. The process was very traumatic:

I actually had to give birth and was shackled to the bed the whole time ... It started to happen the fourth day after I was induced and it went on for two days ... all this time – six days – I was shackled to the bed ... I ended up doing the whole thing on my own and I saw everything ... that's why I ended up going in to psychiatric treatment because I was so traumatised after that. I was upset. It was so horrible ... I've been on antidepressants on and off since then ... when I came in this time I was on antidepressants but they ignored me when I tried to get them to keep me on the same meds. They took me of all medications and I just had to get on with it.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

Seven of the women reported that they were taking prescribed medication for various forms of psychoses. Maxine explained that she had been prescribed Largactil for a while:

... it made me feel like a zombie and I'd get this needle and be out of it for a week ... I seen one of the women zonked out her brain on the Largactil, shuffling around like she was wearing ankle chains. I most probably was like that too but I can't remember much about it.

(GREENOUGH PRISON)

Wilma is an Aboriginal woman with a complex yet familiar family history. Her extended family has been shattered over several generations because of the forcible removal of many children. She has lived in various institutions and foster homes for most of her life, suffering emotional, physical and sexual abuse along the way. Wilma says she has lost count of the number of times she has been in prison both as a sentenced prisoner and on remand. She has been diagnosed with severe clinical depression and is almost constantly medicated for her condition, mentioning that her medication is always changed when she goes to prison.

I've been in here and Bandyup so many times you'd think they (the medics) would know what happens to me when they change my meds. I get paranoid and arc up is what I do ... My past is what made me depressed and that ... I was brought up here mostly (Perth) and I thought I was Noongar but then I met one of my real sisters and she said we was born up north near Meekatharra. I'm not sure what tribe I'm from but me and my sisters and brothers were taken when we was babies.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Prisons are evidently inappropriate places in which to house the mentally ill, unable as they are, to provide necessary treatments and supports. In addition, the disturbing reality of prison life, with its sudden disruptive impact, is likely to exacerbate psychological and/or psychiatric conditions and there is some disturbing anecdotal evidence to suggest that prisons may, in certain respects, be becoming substitutes for mental hospitals, largely because of the trend, in past decades, towards deinstitutionalisation and the consequential closure of psychiatric institutions (Beyond Bars: Fact Sheet 9). Yet, at the time of writing, there is no formal assessment tool used across the board at prisoner reception centres which diagnoses specific mental illness amongst those entering prison. In addition, there is only one mental health nurse employed at Bandyup Prison, the maximum security facility which houses all women on remand; the group deemed most at risk of self-harm or suicide (Harding, 2002: 74).

Drug addiction

Whilst drug addiction is often viewed as a consequence of histories of abuse it can also ‘mimic, trigger or exacerbate symptoms of mental illness’ (Butler & Allnutt, 2003:49). More generally, it is symptomatic of many social and emotional ills, including abuse, deprivation, homelessness and social isolation.

Twenty-seven women, fifty-two per cent of the participants, acknowledged that they used illicit drugs on a regular basis. Of these, two stated that their drug use was recreational only. The recreational drugs of choice were marijuana, speed and ecstasy. Twenty-five women said they had serious substance addictions. These were to either heroin and/or speed, as well as prescribed drugs such as dexamphetamines, ‘benzies’ and various other ‘uppers’ and ‘downers’. All of these women stated that their drug use was directly related to their criminal activities. Sometimes they offended while under the influence of drugs, sometimes in order to pay for drugs and most often both. Val described her experience with entrenched drug addiction.

I have a long history with drugs – twelve or thirteen years. You name it and I’ve shot it up my arm ... I’ve lost a lot of friends. I’ve lost seventeen friends to drugs, mainly overdoses. It’s very sad and it would’ve been me too if I hadn’t come in here this time. I know this for certain. I was hurtling down that self-destruct road so fast.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Glenda acknowledged using a variety of prescribed drugs, amphetamines and, most recently, heroin. She had almost completed her sixth prison term:

Up until recently I always used amphetamines. It’s only the last six months I started using heroin. My mum was a heroin addict for most of my life so I didn’t use that for years. I think I started using it because my partner at the time used heroin and we used together ... I’d offend to get money to buy speed and then when I was speeding (under the influence of speed) I’d offend too. Same with heroin.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

Kelly has had an entrenched heroin addiction for almost twenty years. She has been in and out of prison on several occasions, committing robberies to feed her habit and whilst under the influence of drugs.

I offend to get them and I offend while I’m on them. I have a major habit ... me and my partner of 11 years both ... we always used together and looked out for each other. He died last August and I went to his funeral from Bandyup ... it was the hardest time of my whole life ... I knew that person for 18 years and my life was with him ... I feel this horrible sort of disconnectedness ... I got no reasons to be here at all now, no reason to live at all ... what plays on my mind is that the one time he really needed me I wasn’t there to look out for him ... my hopes for my release? ... the overdose is looking pretty good right now.

(GREENOUGH PRISON)

Drug use was evenly distributed amongst Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women in the study. Generally, the crimes for which these women were imprisoned ranged from stealing, burglary through to armed robbery.

Alcoholism

Like drug addiction, alcoholism is often closely linked to histories of abusive and violent relationships. Fourteen women, twenty-seven per cent of the participants, said that they had problems with alcoholism or heavy binge drinking. All of these women committed their crimes whilst under the influence of alcohol. Their crimes ranged from driving under the influence (often while also under suspension for previous drink driving offences) to unlawful killing and murder. Ella is serving her fourth prison term. Her offences include non-payment of fines, driving under suspension and assaulting a public officer. She recounted that: ‘I got diagnosed with depression and psychosis brought on by the drink. When I get drunk I get violent’.

Janelle is an Aboriginal woman from a regional town. She has a problem with binge drinking and spoke of her situation with alcohol in this way:

I was drinking. I drove without a licence while I was drunk. I never use gunja (marijuana) but I gamble – everyone gambles - and one day I won \$2000. I’m going to do that alcohol course when I get out but I only drink sometimes. If I wake up not drunk then I don’t drink that day.

(ROEBOURNE PRISON)

Beth also spoke of offending while under the influence of alcohol and said she had also offended to get alcohol:

Well it’s the grog that’s the problem because it’s when I’m drinking that I get behind the wheel and drive over the limit ... I don’t drink every day, just pension day and weekends ... When I got done for stealing the grog I was sober as, but I wanted a drink and had no money ... I don’t want you to think I drink all the time but when I do I get pretty pissed and don’t know what I’m doing.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Gladys has a problem with binge drinking. She has strong kinship connections and an itinerant lifestyle, moving around the North West living with various extended family members, sometimes living in one of several remote communities, sometimes in a regional town. She recounted how she had:

... been in jail five times. It's always when I've been drinking. I'm not going to drink no more because when I drink I go walkabout and I get into fights and that's how I get into trouble ... I want to go to Darwin when I get out because my de facto's in Roebourne (prison) and I don't want to see him. He's violent. See these scars, that's where he's cut me.

(BROOME PRISON)

Three of these women also used illicit drugs on a regular basis. Beth described how she acted when she was both drinking and using drugs: 'if I mix the speed and the grog I get messed up. I have been known to get nasty and start fights so I don't use the speed anymore because it gives me the paranoia'.

Histories of abuse

As already indicated, female prisoners have inordinately high rates of histories of violent and otherwise abusive relationships. Often their lives are characterised by a series of violent relationships, ranging from various forms of childhood abuse, including sexual abuse, through to current and ongoing familial and/or relationship abuse. These may be characterised by any combination of emotional, physical or sexual violence. Rita's case is typical:

I was in a very abusive relationship ... He has punched me to the ground and kicked me unconscious ... a couple of times he tried dragging me down the road and pushing me over a bridge where I'd have landed on nettles and rocks and broken bottles and been dead for sure. I've been black and blue all over. He stopped for a while when I was pregnant ... basically he started again when I came out of hospital with my baby.

(GREENOUGH PRISON)

Forty-two women, or eighty-one per cent of the participants, acknowledged histories of family and/or relationship violence, including both physical and/or sexual abuse. The actual number may be higher since many of the women did not define general slapping, the occasional punch or pushing around as physical abuse; rather physical abuse usually meant a sustained beating, punching and/or kicking. Mandy, in prison for the first time on non-payment of fines and burglary, spoke of the nature of her relationship with her de facto:

He has hit me a bit before, nothing serious though. He only used to push me around and once he gave me a black eye, but that was when we was on the drugs. He was sorry for what he done and I know he loves me. It's going to be different this time.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

Mandy went on to talk about the issue of self blame which several of the women raised during discussions about violence in relationships. She put it this way:

Anyway he only ever hits me because he loves me. If he didn't love me why would he bother? He'd just go out and find someone else and the truth is I used to try and jealous him up so I probably deserved it anyway.

(Can you tell me what you mean by 'jealous him up'?)

Play up to other fellas, just try to make him jealous and that's usually when he hit me.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

Several of the women thought that they had provoked violent attacks from partners, thus accepting the blame for their injuries. Irene spoke of her experiences of violence throughout her fourteen year relationship.

I would get off on the speed and get abusive, you know, foul mouthed and that and I wouldn't cook or clean or do anything so he would slap me a bit. Then I'd give him shit.

(Did you hit your husband?)

Shit no, he'd have killed me if I lifted my hand to him. But I screamed at him and abused him and I knew he'd end up smacking me about so I should've just shut up. I just used to push him and push him till he snapped.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Pippa had also endured years of physical and emotional abuse from a violent partner:

I've had to have domestic violence counselling in here because of my history of DV with my ex ... they try to relate my gambling addiction to the DV but I'm not sure ... I've been really depressed and low in my life because I was getting hit but couldn't see any way out ... then he (ex partner) hit my 14 year old daughter so hard he nearly took her head off her shoulders. Then he went to work on night shift and I phoned my dad to come and get me and I took off with the kids in the middle of the night.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Although Pippa eventually escaped her abuser, she did not leave the violent situation until the violence escalated, directly affecting her daughter. Many of the women affected by situations of family and relationship abuse remained in violent situations because they expected little else, took on the blame for the violence perpetrated against them and/or felt they had nowhere safe to go. Twelve of the women said they would most likely be

returning to violent relationships upon release. (The researchers felt this was an underestimation as several women claimed that their partners had learned their lessons and had promised not to hit them again).

Self harm and suicide

Women in prison are likely to suffer from social disadvantage, under-education, under-employment, histories of family and relationship violence (including sexual abuse), high incidence of mental illness, and alcohol and substance addictions (Allen, 2000: 147, 161). In reflecting on this, Salomone (2002: 2) comments that, prison environments are ‘... unsupportive at best and at worst, brutalising, adding to the traumas already experienced by a vulnerable population. It is no mystery then that research indicates that suicide ideation is common among the general prison population’.

Although deaths resulting from suicide are less frequent amongst female than male prisoners in Western Australia, incidents of repeated self harm appear to be substantially higher. The actual number of incidents of self harm is difficult to calculate with any degree of precision because there is no accurate reporting mechanism in place (Allen, 2000: 172, Harding, 2001: 22). However, the research indicates that compared with men ‘women in prison consistently report higher incidence of suicidal thoughts and more frequent suicide attempts’ (Salomone, 2002: 2). The majority of the participants in this study acknowledged having had serious suicidal thoughts and twenty-four women had actually self harmed on several occasions. This is supported by figures from the British prison system indicate that ‘1 in 6 women prisoners in the UK self mutilate. The comparable numbers for male prisoners is 1 in 100. Women tend to turn their resentment inwards towards the self’ (Eaton, 1993: 52).

There is evidence to suggest that self harming behaviour is a reliable indicator of subsequent serious suicide attempts (Allen, 2000:168). Indeed, Liebling (cited in Allen, 2000: 168) suggests that self harm is ‘a continuum along which one step may prove to be the first stage of a pathway of despair’. While, with only very few exceptions, women prisoners rarely achieve successful suicide attempts whilst in custody, they are likely to be more successful in those endeavours soon after release. Aungles (1994: 207) found that the ‘death rate of people serving community corrections orders was six times that of people of a comparable age group, with the most common cause being suicide, and the most common period being a few weeks after release from prison’. To this, we add the fact that the ‘mortality rate for women on parole is three times higher than that for men’ (Ogilvie, 2001: 3).

No questions regarding self harm or suicide attempts were included in the study yet twenty-four women or 46% of the participants reported self harm issues. That is, they had actually self harmed or self mutilated in some way, most often by ‘cutting up’, slashing their arms and wrists, with one woman claiming that she and a friend in prison had made a pact to cut each other up. Twenty-one women said they had attempted suicide on at least one occasion, this by overdosing on illicit or prescription drugs, slashing their wrists or trying to hang themselves, seven while still in custody and eighteen within days or weeks after release. (Some women reported suicide attempts both in prison and soon after release.)

During a previous prison term Clare had her baby with her in prison but had to give her up to state care immediately after her first birthday. She described how she felt:

... when they came and took my baby from me I wanted to die. The pain was so unbearable. It’s impossible to describe how bad it feels. Anyway I had to leave her at the gate and my mate was waiting for me with a hit (heroin). If I couldn’t have found some way to dull the pain I know I’d have died from it. I really just wanted to OD but there wasn’t enough and my mate was watching out for me.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

Dawn had also self harmed on several occasions while in prison. She described one incident that occurred during a previous prison term:

I tried to kill myself the last time I was in here. I’d just had enough. You just get like that in here ... I slashed up big time (shows a seven inch scar on her arm). They threw me down the back (punishment cell) and treated me like shit. They called the doctor in and stitched me up and they didn’t numb my arm or nothing. Look at it – they didn’t even do it properly ... they didn’t give me nothing, no medication, nothing. Just put me in punishment down the back.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

During the planning stage of the research project two women (not participants in the project) died by hanging in Bandyup Prison. One of these was an Aboriginal woman who had served several short prison terms and the other, a non-Aboriginal woman, was a life sentenced prisoner with a history of serious psychiatric illness.

Social isolation

Social isolation is a problem for most women as they exit prison. In general terms, the community is unfriendly to them and they often feel they cannot return to previous family situations or familiar neighbourhoods. In addition to this, it is difficult for women to integrate successfully into mainstream society because of their institutionalised state and the stigma of imprisonment; consequently they struggle to find any kind of place for themselves in the wider community. Joining social groups such as mother’s clubs, arts and craft groups or other specific interest groups means that the women face difficulties in disclosure and acceptance, as they are seen to have stepped outside the social norms relating to appropriate behaviour for women. Because of these factors, they are often compelled to seek acceptance with other ex-offenders, increasing their likelihood of remaining isolated and in many instances within abusive relationships. This is often underpinned and made worse by their limited experience of positive relationships, social networks and social interactions.

Anne's case is typical of the isolation experienced by many newly released women. She described how she felt after her release from prison:

Sometimes you feel so lonely and isolated and hopeless that death looks very inviting. It's the flat emotionless feeling you get when you contemplate taking your own life. I've been there on several occasions. Sometimes the loneliness is self imposed but it's hard to relate to others when you feel so ashamed and worthless.

(ANNE: SIX WEEKS AFTER RELEASE)

Participants were asked about their feelings of isolation in relation to family, community and society in general. These questions were asked in both the pre- and post-release interviews. The answers we received varied considerably in relation to the six main groupings described in Chapter Two.

Of the sixteen urban Aboriginal women only two reported feelings of isolation from family both prior and subsequent to being in prison. One of these was Tina, a 20 year old Aboriginal woman with two children in custody of other family members. Tina, herself, had been in and out of custody since she was twelve. She described her feelings to Brenda:

My family don't know where I am or nothing. My family always treated me like shit ... they won't give me bail ... I don't have no contact with anybody. I don't get letters or make phone calls. I just stick to myself in here ... I came to talk to you because I needed someone to talk to. You've helped me already, just listening. I really needed someone to talk to right then. I feel like I'm going to cry.

(Brenda, interviewer: I think I'm going to cry too. I know just what it's like to feel like this).

(GREENOUGH PRISON)

All of these urban Aboriginal women said that they felt shunned by, and isolated from, the wider community both pre- and post-release. Ella, a thirty-five year old Noongar woman illustrated this:

I wouldn't bother wasting my time looking for a job. I'm on single parent benefits but even if I wasn't no one would give me a job ... I'm Aboriginal and I've been in prison. That's two strikes against me. Even before I had kids and done time I couldn't get a job, just because I'm Aboriginal.

(SIX WEEKS AFTER RELEASE)

The ten Aboriginal women from remote and regional communities had different experiences in relation to social isolation, with those from regional towns saying they felt some degree of community alienation whereas the women from remote communities said they experienced none. However, all of these women felt totally cut off from their families and communities whilst in prison. This

was largely due to the impossibility of families getting to visits because of the great distances between prisons and communities and/or towns. Bindi, a nineteen year old mother of three, was being held on remand in Broome Prison, more than a thousand kilometres from the remote community that is her home. She spoke of missing her family:

You know I have twin boys. They're three. My little girl lives with my aunty. I miss them all so much and I miss my mum and my gran too. I usually look after my gran. She will be missing me ... When you go to see them can you tell them I'm okay. I'm worrying about all my family

(BROOME PRISON).

Adding to the problems of vast geographical distances, phone contact was sporadic at best for these women. Often it was non-existent because the communities generally had one landline phone, ensuring that the women had difficulty getting through to family members within the duration of a timed prison phone call.

The four foreign national women experienced extreme social isolation and personal loneliness whilst in prison. They, of course, were imprisoned many thousands of kilometres from their families, communities and culture. Emma was most concerned about her separation from her son and her mother:

I see the other women with their families at visits and it makes me think of my family in South Africa, my son and my mother who I have not seen for three years now ... My son was a small boy of ten years when I last saw him. He will be a young man of fifteen before I see him again. I just hope he can forgive me for the hardship I have caused.

(NYANDI PRISON)

All of these women expected to be accepted back by their families and local communities after release. In addition, each of them said that being imprisoned in a foreign country meant that their local communities would generally be unaware that they had served time in prison and this would make finding paid employment easier upon their return.

Many of the twenty-two non-Aboriginal women endured ongoing homelessness, abusive relationships and itinerant lifestyles. They experienced general social marginalisation as well as isolation from family while retaining social contact with peers within their recognised drug communities. Eve's case was characteristic. She said:

I have no standing with my family and they have no standing with me. I've disowned them ... My family relationships are non-existent ... I'm a loner really ... except I contact an old girlfriend that was in here with me before. She helps me out and I help her out. We watch out for each other.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

While social isolation is a significant factor in the lives of many women as they exit prison, loneliness is especially acute for those women who choose to relocate to different areas in order to sever relationships either with violent partners or with peers with whom they have previously been involved with drugs and/or crime. Jill, for example, was renting a room in a house in a suburb she was unfamiliar with:

I got a room in a house with this woman and her husband but I don't know nobody around here. I've got my name down with Homeswest for a townhouse or a duplex so I can get a dog. I think if I've got a dog I won't feel so alone. I'm looking forward to that.

Finally, eleven middle class women, mainly convicted of white collar crimes, had not experienced significant family isolation or social marginalisation prior to imprisonment but were likely to experience both upon release. Cher described her first few weeks of freedom:

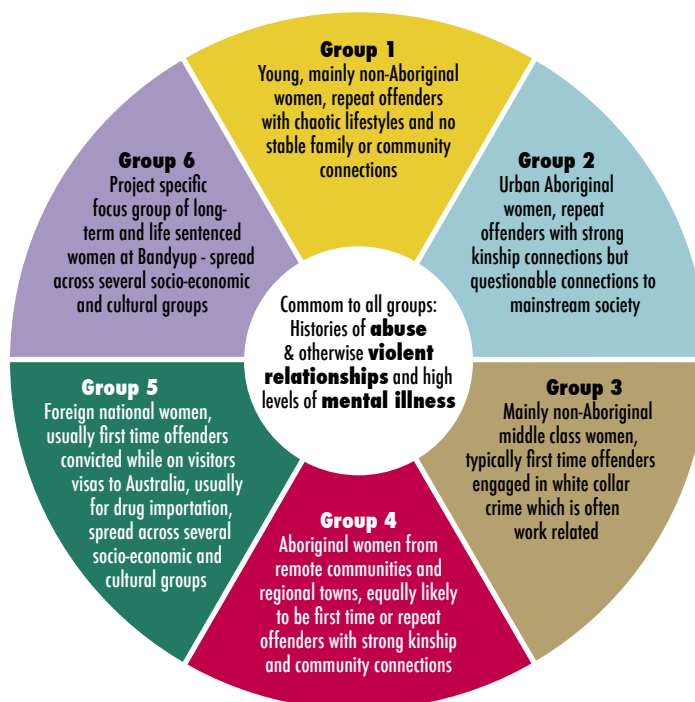
I don't socialise now or go out to pubs or that. Well apart from having no spare money, I don't like to mix with other people because I always think they know about me ... Some of my so called close friends won't talk to me now. Those who do just don't understand how I feel now. I'm different. Prison has really changed me.

The narratives of these women indicate that social isolation is a multifaceted issue with different implications between and within ethnic and cultural communities. Thus our research suggested that the impact of imprisonment for Aboriginal women from regional towns and remote communities was quite different from the experience of Aboriginal women from urban Aboriginal communities. Whereas the ten women from remote communities all

experienced extreme social isolation from families and community during their prison terms, their personal experience of general social marginalisation was low since their socio-cultural experience was locally centred and culturally specific. On the other hand, the Aboriginal women from urban communities (mostly Noongar women) found that the impact of their separation from families and friends was usually lessened by regular family visits and phone calls. However, similarly to the young women with chaotic lifestyles from Group 1, the urban Aboriginal women suffered significant levels of general social marginalisation from the dominant culture. In contrast, the middle class women were unlikely to have experienced general social marginalisation prior to imprisonment but, upon release, many expected to be avoided by their peers and some thought they might be shunned by their families. Finally, the foreign national women, although significantly socially isolated while in prison, all expected to be accepted back into their families and communities when they returned home.

Issues common to all six groups

The women's accounts also indicate that there were two major issues which affected all of them, regardless of class, age, geographic location and ethnicity. These were: (a) histories of abusive or otherwise violent relationships (including sexual abuse), and (b) mental illness: diagnosed psychological and/or psychiatric conditions. Additionally, drug and/or alcohol abuse, when combined and viewed as substance abuse, and consequently a factor acknowledged by thirty-eight women (73 per cent of participants), occurred across all six groupings, rates being lowered in Group 3.





Chapter 5

Family perspectives



While researchers have given scant attention to women's imprisonment, they have all but ignored the role of prisoners' families within the penal system. The particular paucity of research focusing on the families of female prisoners is a vital gap as far as women prisoners are concerned, given their primary role in nurturing and caring. In this study, we tried to rectify this by talking to family members wherever possible. Thirty-three of the family members who were contacted agreed to be interviewed. Of these, twenty-four were Aboriginal and nine were non-Aboriginal.

This section discusses the three main stages of imprisonment as they affected the families of the women who participated in the study. These are:

1. From court to prison, being sentenced or remanded in custody: dealing with anxiety and confusion.
2. Doing time: families' experiences of imprisonment through prisoner/family contact.
3. Post-release: families coping with life after prison.

From court to prison: dealing with anxiety and confusion

The immediate forerunner to imprisonment occurs within the court system when prisoners are either sentenced to a term of imprisonment or held in custody on remand to await trial or for sentencing. For the families of those sentenced or remanded in custody this is generally a time of extreme anxiety and confusion. There is no comprehensive information system available within the courts to assist the families of the newly imprisoned. Hence, the family members interviewed for this study all reported feelings of anxiety, anger, fear and/or helplessness at this stage in the process. They felt that their existence was ignored by the criminal justice system and that this was evidenced by an almost total lack of information which was their major concern. Pippa's father who was looking after his granddaughter, Pippa's five year old daughter, remembers how he felt when he heard Pippa had been sent to prison:

I felt sick to the stomach ... the older kids went to the court and rang me up afterwards and told me she'd gone to jail ... I had to explain to my little granddaughter that her mum wouldn't be home to look after her ... I tried to find my daughter and rang the wrong place. I think I rang Nyandi but she weren't there and they told me to try Bandyup. Then I rang Bandyup and they told me she were there and I found out about visits and booking and such ... From memory, I must have sounded very upset.

Janelle's family had no idea she had been arrested and taken to Roebourne Prison. They thought she was missing and were terribly anxious. Janelle's mother told us how she felt at the time:

They (police) didn't tell us she had gone to the regional (Roebourne Prison). They just went to her house and took her in the middle of the night ... I didn't know where she was and I was crying for her. A policeman came and told us late the next day. They should have told us right away so we didn't think she had an accident or something ... Janelle tried to get the prison to phone us but they wouldn't let her.

Helen's family were quite unprepared when she was sent to prison for driving under suspension and non payment of fines. They had expected her to be given a fine and be at home when her three other children returned from school (Helen had the three younger ones in court with her). So when she was taken from court directly into custody, there was an immediate family crisis. A court volunteer cared for her children until her family was contacted and arrived to collect the children. Her prison sentence caused major disruption in the longer term as her brother had to move into the family home to look after the children as Bob, her husband, worked full time. Both Bob, and Helen's brother, Clive, wanted to talk about how her being in prison affected them:

Bob: I knew she'd been driving without a licence but she doesn't drink or use drugs so I didn't really worry and I didn't know she'd been caught before so I was really surprised she got sent to jail

Clive: She never told nobody she'd had fines she didn't pay so that's why she went to jail. She had to get the court volunteer to ring me to pick up the three youngest from court because the judge sent her to jail. Then I had to round up a car with a baby seat.

Bob: I work Monday to Friday so Clive had to come and mind the kids and get them off to school. I was on edge all the time at work because the two babies cried when I left every morning.

Clive: Yep the youngest missed her mum and cried - was hard to settle. I'm glad she's back - I'm not a very good mother and it's criminal that she got sent to jail for such a petty thing.

Overall, when a relative was picked up by police on a bench warrant or return to prison order, or was otherwise sentenced to a prison term or remanded in custody, many of the families had no way of knowing in which prison their family member was held, when they would be permitted any form of contact or even where to find information regarding either of these. This lack of assistance and information provided to families at the beginning of the prison experience is particularly concerning given the important role they play in caring for the prisoner's children and their pivotal role in successful reintegration upon release. Indeed, Kemp & Porritt (1980: pp1-3) contend that:

Research indicates that continued family contact will play an important part in neutralising the institutionalising process for prisoners ... It has also been demonstrated that prisoners without family contact during incarceration are 6 (sic) times more likely to become recidivists than those who maintain family ties.

Doing time: families' experiences of imprisonment through prisoner/family contact

In the West Australian prison system contact between prisoners and their families takes place through correspondence, phone calls and, most importantly, social visits. The following discussion touches on all three forms of contact, addressing the major issues from the families' perspectives. At the outset it should be mentioned that two major concerns haunted most families. First, the issue of prisoner/family contact as a tool of control, for example, loss of contact visits as punishment, and second, the intrusive forms of surveillance to which they were subjected as visitors, particularly strip-searches.

Correspondence

In some instances, letters, cards and postcards are the only regular communication between the women and their families and, as such, correspondence becomes an important factor in maintaining relationships. For families who do visit regularly, letters are an important extension of visits, acting as a means of communication during the weeks, months or years of enforced separation. Letters can also be the means by which a 'bad visit' may be resolved, thus easing tensions which may otherwise be carried on to the next visit. However, all prisoners' correspondence is subject to censorship. That is, prison officers in day-to-day contact with the women read all incoming and outgoing mail. And when the women and their families are aware that letters are read by prison officers the process of written communication can become stifled or contrived, losing some effectiveness as a means of communication. Fran's partner described his feelings about having his letters read by prison officers:

It sucks really. You have to be careful what you write about. For example if Fran was pissed off at an officer or that, she couldn't write to me about it. Same thing for me, if I'd been told off by an officer for sitting too close at visits – which has happened before now – then I couldn't mention it in a letter to her even if it had caused us a big problem – which it did. They either wouldn't give her the letter or big bits would be blocked out. It kind of defeats the purpose of writing don't you think?

Clare's de facto was also concerned about how letters were dealt with in the prison system. He put it this way:

We've been together off and on for about 15 years - but it's more off than on if you know what I mean ... Clare having the heroin addiction puts pressure on us and she just takes off. Anyway when she comes in here it's usually when we've split up and she writes to tell me to visit her. I get her letters okay but she never seems to get mine ... I know she's in a lot of trouble in prison, and I think the screws don't give her my letters to mess with her mind ... it causes us problems because sometimes she thinks I'm lying.

Twelve of the family members who were interviewed reported corresponding regularly. Of these, eight expressed anger at having their letters read by prison staff while the remainder felt that censorship of letters was necessary and therefore an acceptable practice. The other family members did not send or receive correspondence, apart from birthday or Christmas cards. Three of these said that they would not correspond specifically because of the censorship of mail.

Telephone calls

Within the West Australian prison system, telephone calls are classified as a privilege rather than a prisoner's right. Consequently, the privilege of placing a phone call may be withdrawn as a form of punishment, a practice which doubles back as a punishment on the woman's family. While the removal of privileges as punishment is generally rule-driven and systematic – that is, specific prison offences will usually attract particular punishments – the loss of phone calls is usually at a prison officer's discretion. This makes it an uncertain as well as a powerful mechanism of control over the women.

In most prisons, the women cannot receive incoming calls – although this may also be subject to prison officer discretion, especially in the regional prisons which hold high numbers of Aboriginal women from remote communities where families have limited access to landline telephone systems. In addition, women in prison cannot make calls to mobile phones. This is particularly problematic for the increasing numbers of families who do not have landline telephones because of their economic circumstances (many opting for the prepaid mobile option) and/or their remote location.

Theoretically, the number of phone calls the women are permitted to make is restricted only to the amount of money they have on their phone cards and the times when they are locked down in their cells or at work or study. All phone calls automatically terminate after a ten-minute period, with thirty seconds notice being given before the call cuts out. In addition, all prisoner-initiated phone calls are preceded by a verbal warning that the call is from a prisoner at the relevant institution and that if the listener does not wish to receive the call then she/he must hang up. The verbal warning has proved to be problematic for some women who, for various reasons, have decided not to disclose to family members the fact that they are in prison. Grace, for example, has an elderly mother in England who is unaware that she is in prison.

I can't phone me mum at all because of the hassle of the announcement about this being Nyandi Prison. She can't phone me for the same reason so it's impossible for me to talk to me mum ... I had to send her a letter saying I was going to work right out in the bush for six months with no phones or mobiles ... even the letter worried her because there was no stamps on the envelope ... She's seventy-seven now but she's all there and I get so worried about her but if she knew I were in prison she'd get sick with worry. It would kill her I reckon.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Tracey's mother, Deb, spent eight months in prison. During this time Tracey, kept the home intact, looking after her younger sister and brother while also caring for her own toddler. In the midst of all this she found the monitoring of phone calls extremely difficult.

It was really stressful for me when mum was in jail. There I was expected to keep everything together and my dad left home to live with his girlfriend when she went to jail and I had to tell her that on the phone ... I didn't know what else to do ... Anyway, mum got shitty with me and yelled down the phone about not telling her business to all the prison officers and that. She was so angry. I didn't really know till then that they listened to everything ... that was a really terrible time and I was confused about what to do when I had a problem with my brother or sister playing up and needed mum's advice ... I stopped talking about everything except the weather after that.

The families of the Aboriginal women from remote communities had little or no phone contact with their relatives in prison because the often had access to only one landline phone, typically situated at the reception office. Consequently, their relatives were unable to call them within the ten minute duration of a timed prison phone call. When Bindi was held on remand in Broome Prison, more than 1,000 kilometres from her community, her family were repeatedly unsuccessful in their attempts to contact her. Kathryn Trees, the researcher who spoke with Bindi in prison and then visited her family at the remote community, said that the family were overjoyed to hear news about Bindi but that they desperately wanted to be able to talk to her, to tell her about the situation at home:

Bindi's brother: We can't get to talk to her ... we called the prison but we don't know if she's getting our messages ... we want her to know that Johnny's (Bindi's deceased partner) family want her to come home, want her out of jail ... there's no payback, they just want her home with the twins.

Bindi's grandmother: Why have you locked her up? She was just protecting her children like any mother should do ... We need to talk to Bindi to tell her to tell her story because we know she feels she should be punished. You need to tell her lawyer she has to tell her story. We can't get to talk to her on the phone. We are really worried. She's a good girl, doesn't drink or do drugs.

Bindi's family never managed to get direct telephone contact with her throughout her six months in prison. This was particularly worrying as they were unable to visit given the vast distance involved and the remote location of the community in which they lived, they were unable to visit. The experience was traumatising for all of them.

Family visits

There are two types of social/family visits in West Australian prisons; non-contact visits and contact visits. Non-contact visits are a right while contact visits are classified as a privilege and may be removed as a form of punishment and behavioural control. Non-contact visits take place in a cubicle where the women and their visitors are separated by a solid barrier, usually of Perspex or toughened glass. Some form of speaker system is generally in place to allow spoken communication, although these do not always work efficiently and visiting groups often have to shout in order to be heard. When visiting the non-contact visit area at Bandyup, the principle researcher noted several open hand imprints either side of the glass barrier; symbols of the poignant attempts of the women and their families to have some semblance of physical contact.

The move from contact visits to non-contact visits is generally imposed as a form of punishment for various in-prison offences, most usually for drug use. Although it may also occur on the suspicion of drug use, as when the drug detection dog indicates that the visitor may be carrying or may have been in contact with drugs.

Glenda's mother spoke of her experience of being put on non-contact visits. She speaks for many other families who, when visiting, also may be subjected to particularly exploitative methods of control by prison authorities (Aungles, 1994: 122).

It was always awful for me to go and visit. I would get strip-searched all the time when the dogs would sit on me. I'm an ex-heroin addict myself and I'm on prescription drugs for pain for my cancer and other prescribed drugs which come out in my pores so the dogs sit beside me and I got strip-searched and put on non-contact visits all the time. They never ever found anything on me but I still felt nervous every time I visited.

Contact visits take place in a communal visiting area where the women and their family/friends are not separated by a solid barrier and are allowed a limited degree of physical contact. Given the stark contrast between contact and non-contact visits the threat of loss of contact visits is a major tool of control over the women and their families.

There are, nevertheless, certain procedures to which all family members remain subject when they arrive at Bandyup. For example, it is normal practice for them to check in at the Family Support Centre. All items such as keys and bags are left in lockers and visitors are not permitted to take personal possessions such as children's drawings or family photos in to visits. In other words, all that signifies the personal is left behind. Indeed, for prisoners' families the journey from the car park to the visit area involves a swift transition in status which culminates at the visits area where visitors and prisoners alike are subject to a system of close and personal surveillance.

Visitors are generally processed into a prison via the use of hand-held or walk-through metal detectors, hi tech surveillance cameras, mirrors, the physical presence of prison officers and drug detection dogs. Until recently, families, including children and babies, were liable to be subjected to strip-searches in West Australian prisons. A strip-search involves being taken to a room

where, in the presence of two officers the visitor is required to remove all clothes, underwear, shoes, jewellery and even dentures. Pippa described her distress when her daughter was strip-searched prior to a visit at Bandyup:

My daughter was strip-searched when I was at Bandyup ... she was absolutely horrified ... they called me for a visit and then told me my daughter had to be strip-searched. I told the officer to tell her not to let them do this, to go and sit in the car, to go home ... they strip-searched her anyway and then she came out and sat on my lap and cried ... it was the most humiliating experience of her life and mine ... She was so upset and I was really angry. I was hurt for her because she's not a prisoner, I'm the prisoner ... she was terrified to come in and see me after that.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Beth's mother mentioned how the threat of strip-searches affected her state of mind prior to visits:

I was never actually strip-searched myself but I seen a woman get taken away to get stripped. She was crying and shaking when she came back out to the visit room. She left the visit early because she looked ill ... I felt so sorry for that woman. I tell you right now I would just refuse to let them strip me or my grandkids. I would walk out of there and I wouldn't visit again. Beth would just have to do it hard with no visits.

Although several of the family members interviewed for the study had been strip-searched prior to attending social visits, within the time span of the research project the Department of Justice implemented a policy change and visitors to prisons in Western Australia are no longer subjected to this procedure.

Simply going in to a prison as a visitor may often be an experience fraught with apprehension. In addition, coming into the prison from a world of relative freedom is a stark reminder of the restriction and confinement that characterises prison life. Helen's husband spoke about this when asked how he was treated by staff during visits:

The prison officers were usually okay with us but I saw them two or three times going up to couples and telling them off for kissing or sitting too close. Then if the woman or her visitor got angry and spoke back it'd get worse. I saw someone being made to leave a visit because his woman shouted back at the officer. She was angry for being told off but it seems the officers can get angry and shout but not the prisoners or their visitors.

Simply getting to visits was at best difficult and at worst impossible for many Aboriginal families given their poverty, unreliable cars, and the lack of public transport. In the case of the families who lived in regional towns and remote communities the vast distances between home and the prisons made visits impossible. Janelle's mother and daughter spoke of this:

(Mother) We don't visit. We got no car to get there. The kids haven't seen her for a year. We get news from other fellas when they come out. They always stop here and tell us how she is but we can't get to see her and we miss her a lot.

(Daughter) Yeah, you know, other people in the regional tell us how she is. We're going down for a funeral and we want to see her then.

(Unfortunately the family did not manage to get to the funeral or to visit Janelle in Roebourne Prison because of transport problems.)

Sam's Auntie spoke of the impact that her niece's imprisonment had on the family, explaining how Sam's children sometimes lived with her, sometimes with her daughter and sometimes with their father. She mentioned how important family contact was but how difficult it was to get to visits. She had only managed to visit Sam once.

It's difficult for me to get to visits because I don't have a car ... I've got Sam's kids some of the time – well me and my daughter look after them and their dad has them most of the time. They want to go visit their mum of course but that's too hard for me to do and their dad won't take them, though he's got a good car. He won't visit her. Anyways, if my son drops me off to visit then I have to get a bus and a train home then we have to walk a fair bit – maybe three or four kilometres from the train station. It takes me two hours all up just to get home, so I only went the once.

Kate's mother lives more than 100 kilometres from the prison. Like Sam's auntie, she had trouble getting to the prison for visits. She was also concerned about conditions in visits at Bandyup.

I only visited her once because it's a long way down to Perth and my car is old and unreliable on long trips. I didn't much like going into the prison and the sniffer dog sat by me so I was strip-searched which was shameful. I didn't go back after that.

(Was that because you were strip-searched?)

The problem with just getting to Bandyup was always there and the time I went I got a lift from a cousin who was visiting her daughter. I could've gone again with my cousin but visits were horrible ... all the other visitors sitting so close you could hear everything they said, the officers going around telling people off for sitting too close, Kate getting angry because she was shamed they'd stripped me. I didn't feel I could go again. I went to pick her up though – when she got out.

Post-release: coping with the return of the family member

If families are given little or no assistance at the beginning of the imprisonment process and subjected to intense forms of surveillance during her prison term, what is expected of them when their relative is released?

Most prisoners in West Australian prisons are released on parole. That is, they are released from prison but are still classified as prisoners under sentence and, as such, remain the legal responsibility of the Department of Justice. When they are nearing their parole date, they are normally assigned to a community-based corrections officer. They must then provide evidence that they have somewhere appropriate to live and certain community supports in place. It is at this stage that the family, who was both irrelevant and invisible at the start of the imprisonment process and subsequently viewed as potentially subversive during family visits, now becomes strategically important within the system (Aungles, 1994: 111).

At the point of release, families are expected to take on the responsibility for their, by now, institutionalised relative who is likely to experience the many problems associated with release from prison. Research has shown that institutionalisation invariably adds to the already existing social and emotional problems of people as they exit prison. Hampton (1993: 159) explains it this way, '... when you're released to face your old problems, you have even fewer resources than before in terms of housing, friends or sense of self, with the added stigma of being an ex-prisoner'. Yet it is to the families that the prison authorities now look to provide support systems and solutions to the ex-prisoners' problems. Carol's daughter outlined some of the problems she expects to face when her mother is released.

Mum needs a serious reality check about her job prospects and what she'll do when she realises how hard it's going to be for her on the outside. She's done these certificated courses inside and thinks she's going to get a job as a carer in an old folk's home and she's in prison for stealing from her last job. She's got an Outcare supported flat but I think we'll probably move interstate when she finishes parole. She's lost all sense of reality though. It's a good job. I'll be able to help her. The sad thing is she's never got any help for her gambling addiction which is the main reason she's in prison.

Beth's mother also expressed concerns about her daughter's release. She was particularly worried about Beth's problem with alcohol abuse.

She drinks far too much and she gets nasty and starts fighting. I'm not strong enough to stop her and she needs help – AA or something. She didn't get no help with her drink problem in jail so how am I supposed to help her? All I can do is give her a place to live so Family and Children's Services don't take her kids off her.

In sum, the study found that the women's families did not feel that they had much significance or were valued in any real way by the prison authorities. They felt ignored at the start of the imprisonment process, subjected to excessive surveillance during custodial terms, and exploited as rescuers at the end phase of imprisonment. While they typically provided much in the way of practical and emotional support to the women throughout their prison terms their capacity to assist was ignored until release was imminent. It was then that they were essentially left to pick up the pieces and, by this time, many felt that the problems had escalated beyond their control given the effects of prison life.



Chapter 6

Disconnecting/reconnecting



The desire to belong, to receive and give support and to feel connection with others is a fundamental human need, and a common measure of our wellbeing and quality of life (Gilligan, 1988: 5, Wilkinson, 1996). It was in this respect that the study set out to look at the impact of imprisonment on women's familial and social connectedness, to somehow gauge the levels of disconnectedness brought about by a term of enforced removal from family and society. However, the notion of familial and/or social disconnection caused by imprisonment presupposes a prior connection of some substantial degree. This was not always the case with the participants in the research and this finding has enormous implications for the women's wellbeing, the management of women in prison, programmatic intervention and post-release service delivery.

Some of the participants in this study, most notably the young women with chaotic lifestyles (Group One), had no stable familial or conventional social connections. These young women largely live disconnected lives and often have no sense of belonging to either family or mainstream community and consequently have no real personal investment in either. This usually means little or no motive to change. Similarly, the women from urban Aboriginal communities (Group Two), although having strong kinship and community ties, have little sense of belonging to the dominant culture. They have no emotional or cultural investment in mainstream society and, like the young women with chaotic lifestyles, they generally feel no real will to conform to wider society's norms and values. In contrast to the women in these two groupings, the middle class women (Group Three) and Aboriginal women from remote communities (Group Four) had fairly strong family connections and a strong sense of belonging to their particular societies. Their personal investments in reconnecting to community upon release produced a strong motivation to remain crime free and/or to conform to relevant community norms and values.

The following discussion expands on these points.

Group one

Many of the women in this group had never experienced what they thought of as 'normal family life'. Where there was a connection with family it was tentative at best and unlikely to provide either emotional or practical supports. Dawn's experience illustrates this:

I've been in and out of prison for about ten years ... with a heroin addiction and the lifestyle that goes with it – well you go way down in your family's estimation and I'm not allowed to go to my mum's house if her bloke's there. I know my mum still loves me but she gave up supporting me years ago and she won't visit me in here or even when I'm out so we hardly ever see each other. So now my family is just my partner who is on remand waiting sentence so she could be in here with me next week.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

Any feeling of connectedness to wider society was extremely rare for the women in this group. This meant that many felt no sense of belonging either to family or the broader community. Clare was a case in point:

My family? It's pretty much fucked you know ... my mum died when I was very young so I can't remember her and my dad moved around a lot for work so I'd get sent to relatives who didn't want me and then I'd end up in foster homes ... I've got a brother too but I haven't seen him for nearly twenty years and have no idea where he is or what he does, even if he's alive ... I never belonged to any clubs or groups or had anything to do with my neighbours. I just hang out with my friends – we all use and we all look out for each other.

(BANDYUP PRISON)

Within this socio-cultural group, only one family member wished to be interviewed. This was Clare's 'more-off-than-on' boyfriend of fifteen years standing. He spoke of Clare's attempts to reconnect with her daughter when she was released from prison on previous occasions.

She comes out of jail with big expectations – she thinks she'll get her kid back but then welfare come round and for whatever reason she can't see the kid that day – maybe there's no one to bring the kid or they want her to do some mothering course – whatever – to her it's just another knock back. So what happens then is she goes on a real downer, her using gets out of hand again, she disappears and then eventually I get a call from Bandyup. That's pretty much how it goes.

While six of the women in this grouping are mothers, at the time of writing only two had custody of any of their children. One was Glenda who had custody of her youngest child who was born weeks after her release from prison. Her two older children are in their father's custody. Bridget, the other mother with custody (this time of her young daughter) has been out of prison for almost two years but has felt it necessary to move to another suburb to avoid the friends she previously associated with. The move was to avoid drug use and her previous criminal lifestyle. She explained:

I had a heroin habit and I had to get away from all the people I used with so I could stay clean. I found out I was pregnant when I went to jail and had my little girl in there. That was the single thing that made me determined to give up smack ... I was very lonely because although I got this house which is very nice, I didn't know no one around here and I kept myself to myself because coming off drugs doesn't make you too ready to be sociable ... Well I still have my daughter and I'm still clean but I'm really, really lonely.

Of the four remaining mothers in this group only Clare has regular supervised visits. Becky, Eve and Tanya have no contact with their children.

The social and economic circumstances of the women in this group do not change greatly after a prison term. Poverty underpins each of their lives; lives which are generally characterised by a sense of hopelessness and ineffectiveness. Upon release they are faced by a series of demands which require significant coping skills which, if they ever had them, have been removed through the process of institutionalisation.

Policy issues and directions for women in Group one

The women in this group are particularly damaged and vulnerable. Programmes and service delivery need to reflect the women's very significant needs, particularly with regard to mental health issues, homelessness and drug addictions. An intensive long-term commitment and acknowledgment of the fact that decades of harm cannot be turned around in a matter of months is vital. Ongoing stable funding is required to ensure continuity of service past the current Department of Justice cut-off point of six months post-release care up to a more realistic three year term.

Group two

As already indicated the urban Aboriginal women within the study had very strong family connections and equally strong connections to community but felt actively excluded from mainstream society. By and large, they felt that they did not fit into the dominant cultural frame, and were controlled and punished rather than supported by it. Irene, for example, maintained that her life was totally controlled by government departments. The Ministry of Housing had terminated her tenancy and taken her home, the Department of Community Development had taken her children, the Police had travelled with her in the ambulance when she was about to give birth and had taken her baby 'the minute after she was born', and the Department of Justice had imprisoned her and taken her freedom.

She said that the Department of Community Development also told her that:

... I had to leave my de facto to get my children back and I said, no I'm not going to because they're his children too. I said if you're going to help me then you've got to learn to help him too ... there's no way that I'll give my de facto up. We've been through the hardest of times of domestic violence and nothing will ever come between us again ... He went to jail the same day as me. I can't adjust to the outside world without him and I don't think he can without me. I mean he's learned to abuse because his foster family abused him ... I can't forgive none of them white government departments for what they've done to me and my family and hundreds of other Aboriginal families.

(NYANDI PRISON)

Sam has four children in the care of various family members. She has a particularly close relationship with her grandparents, who brought her up:

I miss my kids a lot ... my family and me are very close – the best of friends ... they won't disown me or nothing like that because I'm in jail but it's caused hardship for my grandfather me being here. My grandmother has cancer and she's in hospital right now but I used to help him care for her ... my community (Noongar) won't think bad of me for being here neither so I'll just get out and go back to my family and help my grandfather again.

(NYANDI PRISON)

When Beth was released she went to live at her mother's home. She was finding it hard to adjust to her mother's close supervision of her and her children. She described how she felt after six weeks out of prison:

It's okay here because me and the kids have two rooms but me mum's pissed off with me and watches them car keys like a hawk ... the kids are happy and secure here but I'd like another Homeswest place but I owe them over \$2000 in arrears ... I didn't think it was that much – so we'll be here for a while ... the kids do what me mum says and not what I say which pisses me off. I'm their mother but there's still a bit of blame on me for going to jail and leaving them – like I had a choice.

Aboriginal women often bear sole responsibility for holding together their families and local communities, under circumstances negatively impacted by past and present socio-economic and cultural dispossession (Salomone, 2002: 3). For some of them imprisonment is a fracture, a dislocation in their lives. However, for the Aboriginal women in this group, like the women in Group one, prison simply exacerbates a process begun on the outside since 'the denial of the right to act as agents on their own behalf is not new to them. They are accustomed to acting in response to the expectations of others' (Eaton, 1993: 80). The social and economic circumstances of the women in this grouping are not changed greatly by a term of imprisonment since poverty underpins their lives.

Policy issues and directions for women in Group two

Acknowledgment of the value, diversity and richness of their culture should be a priority in any programmes and/or service delivery for this group of urban Aboriginal women. All such programmes should be formulated by appropriately qualified Aboriginal people with a particular familiarity with Noongar traditions and the general lifestyle of urban Aboriginal women. As is the case with Group 1, long term, intensive programmes and service delivery is fundamental to any degree of successful reintegration. Mental health services should be delivered in a culturally sensitive environment.

Group three

In contrast to the first two groups, the middle class women from the dominant culture, imprisoned for 'white collar crimes' experienced prison as a life-changing event. In terms of degrees of connectedness to family and wider society, their experiences are diametrically different from the women in Group one and with regard to wider society, vastly different from the women in Group two. Prior to imprisonment these women generally had reasonably strong family connections and were usually accepted within wider society, having all the material trappings of the dominant culture – a job, stable accommodation, a car and so on. Hence, imprisonment changes their familial and social situation immediately and dramatically. Thus, the women in this group experience severe emotional trauma associated with damaged or broken relationships as well as loss of social position. Anne's case is typical:

My family broke apart when I went to jail. My marriage broke up ... I had a good job with a lot of responsibility but I lost that. With that went much of my standing in the community ... Apart from my sons and my daughter I've avoided everyone I knew prior to jail. My life is now in two parts – pre-prison and post-prison. It's like chalk and cheese ... I get racked with shame and guilt ... I would rather die than go back to prison.

(ANNE: SIX WEEKS AFTER RELEASE)

Darla, whose offence was also work related, reinforces this notion of loss:

Most of my close friends were from work and they won't talk to me ... My fiancé broke off our engagement and our house had to be sold to pay my restitution so he never wants to speak to me again ... It's like being a social leper, especially for a woman. A man might get away with it by being seen as a bit of a larrikin – that might even be attractive – but a bad woman is just that – a bad woman

(DARLA: SIX MONTHS AFTER RELEASE).

The material circumstances of the women in this group are, of course, affected adversely by imprisonment for they have much to lose. Immediately prior to imprisonment most of the women in this group had been in full time employment, had family support and led relatively comfortable middle class lives. Judy's experience is a case in point. She described how her life changed after her release:

Well I've been out for six months now and it's been so hard, much harder than I expected. I haven't been able to find work ... I'm trying to live off unemployment payments but it hardly covers the rent on my unit. I get some rental assistance but it's still hard to live day to day. When the money and the food runs out I just have to hang out till my next payment goes in ... I suppose my expectations were really my over optimistic fantasies. I thought I'd get a job easy because I've got good skills but my past just keeps on rearing its ugly head and the 18 months I spent inside – well it's hard to account for that. I could lie I suppose but that's what got me into trouble in the first place. No my life's not good right now and I'm feeling more hopeless than hopeful.

For the women in this group the prison experience often meant loss of the ability to act as constructive citizens, thus invoking a passive state of being which, when combined with loss of effective agency, typically plagued them throughout their sentences and well into the initial stages of lives back in the community, effectively delaying their ability to reconnect.

Policy issues and directions for the women in group three

Programmes for this group need to address the high incidence of gambling addictions and antidepressant dependence, should be locally based, meet individual needs and circumstances and address mental health issues. In addition, many of the women in this group felt that they would benefit from professionally facilitated self-help groups which provide practical supports such as assistance with employment and rebuilding self confidence.

Group four

The Aboriginal women from regional towns and remote communities who participated in the project all experienced high levels of family and social isolation but were never emotionally disconnected from their families or communities whilst in prison. Bindi's family were overjoyed to hear news of her from the researcher who visited them in their community near the Northern Territory border. Her brother and sister-in-law said how difficult it was to contact her at Broome Prison:

We've been trying to phone her but it's been hard getting messages through because the officers don't always understand how hard it is for us to phone from here ... Bindi's mother is over at *****'s (Bindi's deceased partner's parents) to help with the funeral and sorry business ... There's no problem for Bindi coming back here. We all miss her and nobody blames her. We just want her home with us.

When she was released, Bindi spent her time on parole at her community looking after her twin boys. Her deceased partner's family have sent his sister to help with her twins, a strong symbolic message that there is peace between the two families. Kathryn Trees explained how important this was: 'There is a strong cultural sense of payback in the communities so Bindi could have at least expected to be beaten but it's just not going to happen and this sending of her dead partner's sister to help her was recognition of that'.

In most cases, the family and community connections of this group of women were once again reaffirmed on their release. There was, however, one exception. Jodie is serving a prison term for unlawful killing of her partner, the father of her children. Whilst Jodie is welcome back safely to her own community she cannot visit her partner's community. In addition to this her brother-in-law and his wife now have Jodie's baby. Her brother-in-law explained the circumstances:

Jodie won't be able to come here because she will be hit and flogged.

(Kathryn: But she would like to have a share of her baby).

Well, as you know she owes us the baby. The baby will stay with us. He's our baby now. She's taken a life. That baby will replace that life.

(Kathryn: Will you let her see the baby and, if you will, how will this happen?)

We will take the baby to Jodie's parents at their place and we will leave him with them. Jodie can see him then. We will then pick him up and bring him home here with us. She can't come here to see him because it won't be safe for her here.

Ten months after that conversation with Jodie's brother-in-law Kathryn Trees returned to the Kimberley region, this time to Jodie's country, to find out how she was settling back into her community after several months of freedom. Jodie's community lies almost halfway between Broome and Kununurra, the closest town is Halls Creek. On her arrival, Kathryn found that 'the people were amazingly welcoming' and already knew why she had come. They told her that Jodie had gone into Hall's Creek and would be back in the afternoon. While waiting for Jodie to return, Kathryn went to speak with her extended family at the community centre. She spoke with several people and heard that Jodie was settling down well, that there was no problem for her in the community, that she was in good health and that she wasn't drinking. In particular, Kathryn wanted to find out whether Jodie had been able to see her baby who had been claimed by her husband's family. The family explained:

She's back and there's no problems here. She's got her two older boys in the house with her.

(What about the baby, is she able to see him?)

He's three now and the other family have been bringing him down here to visit her all the time. He still lives up there with them but they've been coming here regularly so there's no problem. It's right that they (the other family) should have him.

(How does Jodie feel about that?)

She's happy with that. She got her two other boys and she's seeing the little fella. We're real happy that you went and spoke to the other family that time. Jodie is happy. There's no problems.

Jodie did not return to her community that afternoon as planned. Because of the community's car sharing arrangements, she had travelled in a second car that diverted to another destination. Kathryn explained that this is just the way of life in the communities where material comforts are rare, housing is basic and almost everything is shared. She described Jodie's living arrangements in this way:

Jodie lives in a basic asbestos three bedroom house with one bathroom. There are dozens of people living in that house, at least twenty and that's pretty normal in the communities. There are parents, brothers, sisters and all their children living together in the one house. There's no furniture, only a couple of plastic chairs and mattresses on the floor to sleep on, no beds. They don't have water heaters but the water's always hot up there anyway. Most of the people don't have fridges so you can't get cold water and there are only a couple of cars which is why Jodie couldn't get back, someone else took her place in the carload. This isn't a dry community, the petrol station sells alcohol and from time to time there's a lot of drunkenness which is why there is a cage of sorts around the veranda of Jodie's house - cyclone fencing - to keep people out when they're drunk.

While Jodie is truly connected to her own community, her relationship to her youngest son and his father's family presents impending problems as her cultural obligations extend beyond her immediate area into that of her husband's family's country. As things stand, her husband's family's anger appears to be diminishing, but she would be rightly concerned about going to his country. Payback is always the family's option and any such action could take years to manifest. Kathryn provided details of what Jodie might expect:

Even though the family have said they won't hurt Jodie, it would only take some drinking to be involved for attitudes to change. It's not as if she can just stay in her own country either. Take funerals, for example, she has a cultural obligation to attend the funerals of her husband's family. Right now she couldn't go in safety to a funeral and her absence becomes another failure to fulfil cultural obligations and so the resentment builds up. So, when a funeral comes about that's going to be a real test for her. In general terms, payback means that the person who committed the crime

would have to go to the victim's family's country, meet the family and then they may be speared or beaten, certainly being hospitalised as a result. It is a serious thing. However, once payback is enacted then the issue is laid to rest. All blame is totally gone – on both sides.

While the social and economic circumstances of the women in this group are not as affected by imprisonment as those of many others, they are subject to local cultural protocols and practices as well as the procedures of mainstream western justice. In effect, this leaves them exposed to a 'double punishment', a situation that has been well-recognised for some time but still awaits any kind of satisfactory resolution.

Policy issues and directions for the women in Group four

In looking at policy issues and directions for the women in this group, particular consideration ought to be given to the huge part that absolute poverty and destitution play in the lives of most of the Aboriginal people who live in these remote communities, and how these in turn contribute to high rates of Aboriginal imprisonment. It seems almost pointless to address criminal justice based rehabilitation programmes for the women when their communities lack even the most basic of services and third world conditions prevail. Rehabilitation cannot be effective unless these conditions are addressed as a priority.

That said; service provision and programme delivery are particularly difficult for the women in this group. Vast distances, lack of coordinated service provision and general 'whitefella' ignorance of local cultural protocols all impact on the women's access to assistance. Because of these factors, service provision needs to be based on full collaboration between government departments, non government agencies and the communities themselves, with adequate ongoing funding and realistic supports in place.

Further, the courts ought to acknowledge that most remote Aboriginal communities give priority to local traditional law and punishment protocols, almost guaranteeing that some form of 'double punishment' occurs where both mainstream and local justice are applied. In this study it was found that this was a relatively common occurrence and it is recommended that consideration be given to a review of policy regarding local Aboriginal law.



Chapter 7

Discussion and
future directions



The criminal justice system is the target of much public, political and media criticism. The courts and prison system attract particularly harsh censure, often unfairly. Whilst it is not the aim of this study to defend current criminal justice procedures, it was apparent throughout the research that most of the women participants within the study and, by implication most women in prison, had been failed at a community and social level, and by several government departments and related institutions, long before coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Having endured histories of abuse, developed high levels of mental illness and addictions to illicit and prescription drugs, alcohol and gambling, women enter prison in an already fragile and insecure state.

The prison system cannot fix these social and emotional problems. Indeed this study, along with many others, suggests that prisons usually serve to make bad situations worse, further damaging the already fragile. Any strategies to redress this situation must therefore look beyond the prison itself. Hence, the most significant and oft-repeated recommendation for change relates to the overuse of imprisonment as a tool of crime control. Certainly, imprisonment has become the tool of first resort in Western Australia, with incarceration rates currently at an all time high (Department of Justice Monthly Graphical Report: August 2004) and women's imprisonment rates growing at more than twice the rate of men's (Australian Bureau of Statistics, AusStats 4517.0). This upward trend continues despite the fact that the crimes women commit are generally 'physically less dangerous and socially less injurious' than those of their male counterparts (Carlen, 2002: 4). In this light, the argument that prevails above all others is that imprisonment ought to be regarded as the punishment of last resort, used only after all other options have been explored.

The following discussion highlights the issues faced by the women in this study and makes recommendations for change.

Concerns about children

Of the twenty-nine participants in this study who were mothers, twenty-four had children who were minors. Collectively, the women had seventy-three children under the age of sixteen. For the majority of these children, imprisonment has meant an almost total separation from their mothers. (Two of the participants had their babies with them in Bandyup, one had her baby with her in Nyandi, and one of the post-release participants had kept her baby with her in prison until she was released when the baby was several months old).

At Bandyup, babies can only stay with their mothers until the babies are twelve months old. At that age, they must be sent to carers outside the prison. This is a troublesome and troubling situation because while the overriding consideration should always be the best interests of the child, most research indicates that 'the separation of women prisoners from their children can have a negative impact on long-term rehabilitation' (Salomone, 2002: 3). The mothers in this study, regardless of their custodial position immediately prior to incarceration, remained deeply concerned about their children's wellbeing, becoming deeply stressed when their children were ill or troubled. During the time-span of the project the researchers were made aware of several women whose teenage children were experiencing serious crises. These crises ranged from children being expelled from school, facing criminal charges, teenage pregnancies through to being victims of serious crime. It was clear that the mothers of these children felt helpless to support them in any meaningful way and suffered accordingly.

Under current policy, special mother/child visits are restricted by age to pre-school children. Older children can only visit their imprisoned mothers during normal visit hours in the family visit area which is often overcrowded and has strict rules of physical contact. These conditions are less than ideal for the intimate nature of mother/child relationships. Further, reception procedures and the ambience within the visits areas at Bandyup and the regional prisons, are not welcoming, nor are they conducive to the needs of children.

Finally, particular mention should be made of the plight of those foreign national mothers held in West Australian prisons, whose children are in a different country. Only one of the foreign national women within the study was a mother and her distress at being so far from her child was obvious. In the circumstances of the foreign national mothers, wherever possible, it is recommended that:

1. Special provision ought to be made to find out about the child's circumstances in order to assure the mother that her child is being cared for.
2. Wherever possible, and circumstances permitting, arrangements should be made for regular contact via phone calls and correspondence between the mother and her child.
3. Mothers should be consulted regarding the possibility of extradition, thus having the opportunity of serving their sentence in countries of origin, closer to family.

In relation to mothers who have babies and/or children in prison, it is recommended that:

1. All prisons holding women should include the establishment of a suitable environment in which women can care effectively for their children, consistent with community standards.
2. Programmes should be introduced within the nursery environment, provided by appropriately trained staff.
3. Consideration should be given to raising the age limit from twelve months to pre-school age, thus cementing the mother/child bond and lessening the likelihood of emotionally traumatic separation.
4. Prison authorities should take into consideration that some Aboriginal women, although not necessarily birth mothers themselves, may have been primary care givers for children of family members, thus retaining ongoing cultural obligations towards those children.

In relation to mothers whose children remain in care of family or state authorities in the community, it is recommended that:

1. Frequent and extended contact should be available to all children up to sixteen years.
2. Visits areas should be reassessed and upgraded to be more 'child friendly' in order to allow women and their children to engage in play.
3. Security procedures should always be discreet, avoiding institutionalised practices such as searches and terminating visits when a child or mother needs to use the toilet.

The researchers acknowledge that many of these initiatives have already been put in place and are working effectively at Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women. However, the standard at Bandyup and at the regional prisons is low and ought to be lifted significantly. Currently, the women held at these facilities are discriminated against in terms of quality and quantity of mother/child interaction.

Homelessness

Without some form of secure housing to rely on it is impossible to concentrate efforts on positively changing one's lifestyle. Yet many women are released from prison to situations where, on an almost daily basis, their priority on waking will be to find somewhere to sleep that night, making any attempt to reconnect with their family, establish community links or find employment close to impossible. In this study fourteen women experienced recurring homelessness and a further ten women lost their homes during their prison terms.

The availability of adequate and stable housing is therefore a necessary component of any effective rehabilitation process. Against this, current service provision in this area is grossly inadequate, with demand for supported housing constantly outstripping supply and being subject to tenancy time constrictions of three or six months. On top of this, Ministry of Housing waiting lists generally take years rather than months to elicit the offer of a suitable home.

For these reasons, it is recommended that the Ministry of Housing make available emergency housing in which, with certain conditions and supports in place, the women are given the opportunity to achieve permanent tenancy. When the women attain permanent tenancy the Ministry of Housing can then release these particular homes from the agreement with the Department of Justice. New houses can then be found to replace them for the next emergency situation.

It is recommended, in relation to minimising the problem of ongoing homelessness, that:

1. The Ministry of Housing, in collaboration with the Department of Justice and relevant post-release service providers, make available adequate emergency housing for women exiting prison.
2. Support, on an individually-assessed needs basis, be provided to assist the women resettle into their homes and communities.
3. Where the women keep to tenancy agreements and conditions, that they be given permanent tenancy of their new homes and that these dwellings be replaced with additional emergency housing.

Deportation threats

In this study there were four participants who feared deportation. In three of these cases this meant a total break with the community in which the women had grown up and reared their children. Enforced deportation in this manner will mean sending someone to a country and culture which is foreign to them, where they have no social or family connections and where they are almost destined to fail.

In terms of deportation threats to permanent residents of Australia it is recommended that:

1. Where there is proof of long-term residency in Australia, established social and family relationships, especially parent/child relationships and where untenable pain and hardship would result if these relationships were fractured, that deportation is not an option.

Mental illness

High levels of mental illness were found amongst the women in the study with seventy-five per cent of participants reporting some form of mental illness, ranging from depression through to severe psychoses. This prevailed regardless of the women's socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. There are many explanations for the high proportion of mentally ill women in prisons. These include chronic homelessness, substance abuse, lack of appropriate community diversionary programmes as sentencing options, the deinstitutionalisation of psychiatric patients and the high incidence of arrests of the mentally ill (Butler & Allnutt, 2003: 49).

Prisons, furthermore, are simply not equipped to respond to mental illness and assist prisoners in this respect. The situation is made worse by the fact that there is a fundamental conflict between the priorities of health care systems and those of prison systems. Within prisons 'security considerations have always prevailed over all others ... and reasons can always be found for not implementing some new way of doing things or for delaying change' (Allen, 2000: 7). The custodial priority of security over 'the prisoner', therefore, is almost always in conflict with the health care priority of the clinical needs of 'the patient', ensuring that health care practitioners within prisons are 'obligated to operate in accordance with the correctional ethos' (Butler & Allnutt, 2003: 50).

In relation to female prisoners and mental health, it is recommended that:

1. Appropriate screening and treatment programmes exist both at the point of reception and for those who are sentenced.
2. Where women are in receipt of prescribed medication prior to imprisonment, that prison-based health care professionals discuss treatment with the prescribing doctor before changing or withdrawing medication.
3. There is a comprehensive overhaul of prisoner health care to ensure that the mental health of prisoners is treated in complete accordance with community standards both in initial diagnosis at the beginning of imprisonment and ongoing treatment during sentence.
4. Suitable diagnostic tools such as those recommended by the National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (NSMHWB) and the recent study of psychiatric morbidity in New Zealand prisons should be implemented in all prisons.¹
5. That prison health services be removed from the Department of Justice and placed in the hands of a separate entity which receives adequate, stable funding, enabling it to provide health care to prisoners that is equivalent to health care in the community (Allen, 2000: 7).
6. Women charged with relatively minor and non-violent offences who are found to be mentally ill should be diverted out of the criminal justice system to community treatment programmes.
7. Those found to need involuntary psychiatric treatment, are unfit to stand trial, or found not guilty of an offence by reason of diagnosed mental illness should be held in secure treatment facilities rather than prisons.

¹ (According to Butler and Allnutt (2003: 10) both Australian and New Zealand studies utilised 'the Composite International Diagnostic Interview [CIDI]' together with a psychosis screener. The advantages of using the NSMHWB instrument are threefold: (1) it enables direct comparisons to be made with both national and international community samples, and (2) it generates both ICD-10 and DSM-IV diagnoses, and (3) it is computer-based and can be administered by a layperson following training).

Addictions

Within this study twenty-seven women reported having entrenched drug addictions and fourteen claimed to have serious alcohol abuse problems, with several of the women having problems with both alcohol and drugs. In all, seventy-three per cent of the participants reported substance addiction (drugs and/or alcohol). In addition, seven women said that they had serious gambling addictions. Regardless of the nature of the addiction – whether related to drugs, alcohol or gambling, for example – it was directly related to the criminal activity and subsequent imprisonment of many of the women in this study.

The prison system, however, tends to punish addictions rather than deal with them therapeutically, and some of these responses, as well as being totally inadequate, cause unnecessary distress. Thus, for example, many women with drug addictions are left to cope with the symptoms of withdrawal unassisted when they arrive in prison. This is unacceptable practice which is inherently dangerous, causing unnecessary pain and discomfort to the women.

In relation to addiction problems it is therefore recommended that:

1. On admission to prison, where drug addiction is flagged, there should be a uniform medically-supervised detoxification process. Additionally, where newly admitted women are already on methadone they should be able to access the previously prescribed dose.
2. Programmes be coordinated seamlessly from pre-release programmes in prison through to post-release in the community, where the likelihood of relapse increases.
3. Treatment programmes be comprehensive in nature, adequately funded and easily accessible.
4. Such programmes should address all forms of drug addiction, including prescription drugs, and alcohol and gambling addictions.

Histories of abuse

With only a handful of exceptions each of the women in this study had endured histories of emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse. Many will leave prison to return to situations where they are at significant risk of frequently escalating violence, as are many of their children. In addition to the personal danger that women face in violent situations, their ‘continuing involvement with negative male influences and subsequent abuse cycles will block successful completion of any programme’ (Carlen, 2002: 135). It should, therefore, be a priority of government to implement strategies to attempt to break cycles of family and relationship abuse. One of the key factors of the measurement of success of any rehabilitation programme is its ability ‘to break the inter-generational pattern of abuse and crime’ and to find out if programmes which engage mothers have ‘a positive impact on the daughter’ (Carlen, 2002: 136).

In addition, violence restraining orders offer little concrete protection for women in violent relationships particularly when many of the women take on the blame for their abuse. Programmes designed for survivors of abusive and otherwise violent relationships are insufficient, in and of themselves, to change patterns of abuse and should be paralleled by programmes designed to diminish levels of violence and the need to control in the perpetrators of such abuse.

In relation to the issue of abusive relationships, it is recommended that:

1. Secure halfway houses with round-the-clock supervision to be established in both metropolitan and rural areas where women nearing release and those women serving short prison terms can serve out their sentences in an environment more aligned with community standards and positive familial and social interaction.
2. Programmes directed at social skilling and personal empowerment to be delivered within the halfway house situation. It is recognised that prison environments are not suitable for empowerment processes, being largely disempowering and controlling in nature. Such programmes should also be available in the community post-release.
3. Information regarding domestic violence, relationship violence and sexual abuse be made readily available in all prisons holding women. This to include contact information to help-lines and refuges.
4. State-wide establishment of comprehensive and culturally appropriate programmes for perpetrators of all forms of relationship violence. These to be court ordered where perpetrators present in court on related charges.
5. Violence restraining order legislation to be strengthened to provide better protection for women and children escaping violent situations.

Self harm and suicide prevention

Self harm and suicide are among the most difficult issues that the prison authorities face. They have many complex contributing factors often external to prisons, but likely to be exacerbated by the life crisis which imprisonment signifies. In the case of women in prison in Western Australia, successful suicide attempts are said to be rare but, as previously indicated, two women in West Australian prisons (not participants in this research) put an end to their lives during the period in which this research was undertaken. Further, according to worldwide research as well as to the women in this study, self harm and self mutilation in women’s prisons are common occurrences. In this study twenty-four participants, forty-six per cent of the sample, reported having self harmed or self mutilated, with twenty-one women, or forty per cent of the sample, having attempted suicide on at least one occasion, not necessarily while in prison.

Whilst acknowledging that there is no single or even combination of responses that can totally eradicate self harm or suicide, certain strategies ought to be put in place to minimise the risk. The recommendations, therefore, include:

1. Developing an effective screening system for the identification and management of women at risk of suicide or self harm. This should be administered at reception for both remand and sentenced women and should be repeated during the sentence and just prior to release.
2. When prison intelligence is aware of traumatic events involving family members, upon prisoner transfer to another institution or any other significant life crisis that the women may experience, counselling and other practical supports should be implemented as soon as is practicable. These should include access to Prison Counselling Services, the Prison Chaplain, extra visits, extra phone calls and access to outside welfare and advocacy services.

3. The use of observation cells in crisis care units, in these circumstances should, be kept to a minimum as the degree of sensory deprivation may well serve to increase emotional stress and/or depression levels and there are usually no therapeutic arrangements in place in these areas.

Social isolation

Women prisoners, having been excluded from society and held within the narrow social confines of the prison, are released to face the world 'disoriented and disempowered' (Eaton, 1993: 55). Consequently, their lives are often defined by exclusion and ineffectiveness which, upon release, can manifest in their inability to cope with the series of demands imposed by parole and other statutory reporting requirements, and an inability to relate effectively with others. Thus the practical aspects of social isolation or loneliness most usually manifest themselves after release when the problems associated with this issue are dealt with by post-release service providers and/or community-based service officers. That is, if they are dealt with at all.

Loneliness is a problem for many women as they leave prison, particularly where their families are unsupportive and the community is less than welcoming of them. Many of the women in this study faced the prospect of loneliness and social isolation even where they returned to families, feeling somehow stigmatised by their experience of prison and unable to relate to others who had not shared that experience. These women often found relief from loneliness by contacting peers that they knew in prison. Where the women were able to join social, sporting or other community-based groups, they were then faced with problems of disclosure and subsequent acceptance or rejection.

There are few post-release supports in place that deal specifically with social isolation and loneliness, with programmes which address drug rehabilitation, anger management and alcohol awareness attracting funding priority. Loneliness is simply not recognised by the authorities as a 'real problem' associated with recidivism – the factor by which programme success or failure is generally measured. However, this study found that many women who felt socially isolated returned to abusive relationships, recommenced associations with peers they had used drugs and committed crime with and, generally, placed themselves at high risk of resuming offending behaviour patterns.

In light of this, it is recommended that:

1. Both non-government agency service providers and community-based service officers be resourced to address the issue of social isolation. Case workers need to incorporate pro-social activities into service provision by arranging social outings, locating and accompanying the women to local social, sporting and community groups, in order to assist in alleviating loneliness and re-establishing positive relationships and social skills.
2. Recognition that loneliness is usually at its most intense during periods of community celebration and at night, thus increasing the chances of personal crises 'out of office hours'. Service providers should, therefore, be funded to provide after hours emergency assistance.
3. Individual institutions to interact more openly with the communities in which they are situated. This may help to counteract negative stereotypes of women in prison and to promote pro-social relationships with people other than prison staff and peers.

Global recommendations

Responding to socio-economic and cultural diversity

This study suggests that the West Australian population of female prisoners is not homogenous but rather based on (at least) six distinct socio-cultural groups. These were identified as:

1. Young mainly non-Aboriginal women, repeat offenders with chaotic lifestyles and no stable family or community connections.
2. Urban Aboriginal women with strong kinship connections but questionable connections to mainstream society, often repeat offenders.
3. Mainly middle class women, typically first time offenders engaged in white collar crime which is often work-related.
4. Aboriginal women from remote communities and regional towns with strong kinship and community connections, equally likely to be first time or repeat offenders.
5. Foreign national women convicted while on visitors' visas to Australia, usually for drug importation. They suffer extreme social isolation and are spread across several socio-economic and cultural groups.
6. Long-term and life sentenced women, also spread across several socio-economic and cultural groups.

At present, policy and programmes do not adequately respond to this diversity. For example, the expectation that six months' drug rehabilitation and conditional access to time-restricted accommodation is going to turn around the damaged lives of women with chaotic lifestyles, entrenched addictions, histories of abuse, offending behaviour and no sense of belonging except to their co-dependent peers is, at best, unrealistic and, at worst, setting the women up to fail. Likewise, imposing programmes and service delivery based on white middle class norms and values is never going to turn around the lives of repeat offending urban Aboriginal women. Diverse approaches, appropriate intensity of interventions and reasonable length of service delivery are fundamental to the women's successful reintegration to their families and communities.

It is therefore recommended that:

1. Women in prison are assessed for rehabilitative programmes and service delivery based on the socio-economic and cultural groupings as defined in the study, with suitable flexibility to allow for individual difference.

Specific suggestions in this respect are found throughout Chapter Six at the end of the sections dealing with each socio-cultural group.

Developing an integrated and effective model of programmes and service delivery

Because of the many and complex issues affecting women in prison it is unrealistic to expect that the prison authorities can effectively resource all necessary rehabilitative interventions. Instead we need a programme and service delivery model which allows for a meaningful collaboration of government and non-government agencies aimed at providing an integrated service to women and their families. Such a model should be centred on client needs and not modified to suit departmental and service provider needs as is often now the case. Inadequate funding and scarce resources underpin many current difficulties, with programmes often limited to an unrealistic timeframe of three months pre-release and six months post-release service delivery.

Although some women exiting prison will benefit from short-term interventions, many will need ongoing assistance for a more realistic period of up to three years – in particular the women from Groups One and Two.

Adequate and stable funding sources are required in order to develop effective and supportive services. It is also vitally important that service providers and government departments do not view the women in isolation. Rather, programmes need to promote belonging and connectedness, seeking to find new connections where there may only be disconnection. And any model needs to be flexible enough to encompass the cultural diversity that exists within the Western Australian situation.

In this respect it is recommended that consideration be given to adapting the New Zealand Strengthening Families Strategy for Western Australia. This model was initiated by Dame Margaret Bazley in response to the high numbers of children in New Zealand previously seen to be at risk of entering the criminal justice system. (<http://www.strengtheningfamilies.govt.nz/about.htm>)

The model has certain important features which could work effectively in Western Australia. These include:

- Working collaboratively in order to coordinate across government departments and non-government agencies. Using a single case worker to liaise between all agencies and the client/family, thus avoiding confusion through conflicting advice from multiple agencies.
- Building relationships of trust with the caseworker, including empowering practice which means family/client concerns are taken seriously, culturally sensitive practices are used, and family/client are kept informed.
- Saving on service duplication (only one caseworker driving to and from client/family home, coordinating services, thus being more cost effective).
- Accountability (accurate records kept, client and service provider accountability, outcome committed).
- Secure, adequate, ongoing funding to ensure effective practice, together with knowledge sharing, training, supervision.
- Client focused, empowering practice (family/client concerns listened to, focus on family/client needs, culturally sensitive practice, family/client kept informed).
- Takes into consideration the need for 'out of hours' service during times of crisis.

Summary

The problems faced by the participants in this study are typical of the problems faced by most women who have experienced imprisonment. Whilst in prison, their lives are characterised by exclusion from society and disconnection from families, friends and communities. Upon release they face an often unwelcoming world where reconnecting effectively is, at best, difficult and, at worst, impossible. This study has sought to illustrate the difficulties faced by women in prison. It has also sought to contribute substantially to the gender-specific knowledge base necessary for effective policy review and legislative change in the area of women's incarceration.

Finally, I would once again like to thank all of the participants in this study; the women in prison, the newly released women, their families, the focus group of women from Bandyup, and the focus group of newly released women, each of whom generously spoke about their experiences of imprisonment. I would also like to thank the women and children from Boronia Pre-release Centre who kindly allowed us to display their artwork in the report. Thank you so much.

Dot Goulding



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