



COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR WOMEN LEAVING THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM



Most of the solutions to women's offending lie outside prison walls – in treatment for addictions and mental health problems, protection from domestic violence and coercive relationships, secure housing, debt and financial management, employment, education and skills development.¹

KW/LOOP Position

- Women exiting the criminal justice system face a range of issues when re-engaging with their communities. Individuals and community and service organisations can offer vital support to these women and their families to help them get back on their feet.
- Imprisonment has significant human, cultural, social, and economic costs, both short and long term, that are borne by individuals, their children, families, and communities as well as by government and society as a whole.²
- Prison is an ineffective sentencing solution for most women given custodial sentences. There is unnecessary over-incarceration of vulnerable women who experience a wide range of social, cultural and economic issues and who pose minimal risk to the community. Much more can be done to tackle these issues before imprisonment becomes the only option.
- The reintegration of women into society after a custodial sentence is a whole-of-government issue and requires community support.

Rationale

- 60% of women exiting NSW prisons are mothers but may have lost custody of their children. Many will have lost accommodation and/or jobs and may be estranged from their families while they are on remand or serving a custodial sentence. Women who enjoy the support of family or friends during this time are exceptions.
- Women can struggle to engage with others in their community or with community organisations and to ask for assistance. Engaging with these women by community members or organisations can be difficult because of their ongoing health issues, their need for privacy – for themselves and their children – and their desire to put their past behind them and resume their lives. They may experience shame and marginalisation as well as a lack of support from the community. All these factors contribute to the high rate of recidivism, of 40.2%. This is fractionally less than the reoffending rate of men at 40.8%³
- Not for profit community and service organisations have very positive results for the women they are able to support, but have stretched resources and need more funding, more volunteers and more in-kind donations to keep them going.

How individuals and communities can support women to stay out of prison

- Support organisations which work with women and their families affected by the criminal justice system. Make financial donations, volunteer and/or provide practical items such as clothing, toiletries, sanitary products, Opal cards, household cleaning products, books and phone cards. Organisations include:
 - **Women's Justice Network (WJN).** WJN advocates to improve the criminal justice system and delivers an evidence-based practical mentoring program www.womensjusticenetwork.org.au
 - **Miranda Project.** Working on both sides of prison walls, the Miranda Project provides holistic support including casework, group activities, access to victims counselling and connections with other key services. www.crcnsw.org.au/miranda-project/about/
 - **Shine for Kids.** SHINE offers a range of services and programs to support, inspire, nurture and empower the children of prisoners in building their futures. www.shineforkids.org.au
 - **Leap for Women.** Leap for Women assists women prisoners in realising and enforcing their human rights, in particular their rights in accessing justice. www.wlsnsw.org.au
 - **Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre, Marrickville.** This organisation offers free legal advice clinics for Aboriginal women. www.wirringabaiya.org.au

- **Indigenous Women's Legal Program (IWLP).** IWLP provide a service to Indigenous women across NSW through a legal advice line, case work, community legal education and law reform activities. They are guided by the Aboriginal Women's Consultation Network. www.wlsnsw.org.au/legal-services/indigenous-womens-legal-program
 - **Justice Connect.** Justice Connect organisation brings pro bono lawyers together to help people and organisations find legal solutions to their everyday problems. www.justiceconnect.com.au
 - **Samaritans, mid North Coast.** Offers the Recovery Point program which provides practical assistance and support to people in the Newcastle area who are leaving prison and/or alcohol & drug rehabilitation centres to re-engage with the community. www.samaritans.org.au/service/the-recovery-point/
 - **Deadly Connections** is an Aboriginal Community Led, Not For Profit Organisation that breaks the cycles of disadvantage and trauma to directly address the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the child protection and justice system/s. www.deadlyconnections.org.au
- Provide voluntary court support. Contact your local court for details.
 - Become a mentor. Contact Shine for Kids or WJN for details.
 - Sponsor the education fees and/or expenses for a woman wanting to improve her skills and re-enter the job market. Pay for a woman's accommodation bond or medical expenses.
 - Raise awareness in your community and fundraise for not for profit organisations that support women exiting the criminal justice system. For example, by organising a local fete or arts and craft fair, a sponsored event at work or school, or a fun run.
 - Volunteer at a not for profit community organisation or refuge, by providing, for example, legal advice, physio, hairdressing, office admin, social worker skills, yoga, art etc.
 - Lobby your local MP about what needs to occur to reduce the number of women in prison and to get a better deal for women affected by the criminal justice system. Contact KWOOP on issues to raise.

Context – Women in prison in NSW

- There were 946 women in prison in August 2019. It is understood that since then there has been a 20% reduction due to COVID-related changes in policing and court procedures.
- There was a 33% increase in the number of women in prison between 2013 and 2019. This was not due to an increase in criminal activity.
- 58% of imprisoned women were on remand or serving a sentence of 12 months or less.
- 32% of women in custody were Aboriginal. This compares to 2.9% in the population as a whole.
- Around 40% of Aboriginal women were on remand, that is, awaiting court for bail or sentencing.
- 60% of women in prison were mothers.
- Almost 24% of women in prison grew up in care and 14% said their parents had been in care as children. 18% of the children of prisoners in NSW are in out-of-home care.
- It costs approximately \$110,000 to keep a woman in custody for a year compared with approximately \$6,495 for women to receive support services in the community.

KWOOP Profile of women in prison in NSW, March 2020

¹ The use of the term Aboriginal in this document refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

² KWOOP Profile of Women in Prison Part A: A Snapshot, March 2020

³ BOCSAR NSW Reoffending Database 2000 to 2018