



# EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN LEAVING PRISON



*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.<sup>1</sup>*

## KWOOP Position

- Women affected by the criminal justice system face formidable restrictions and discrimination that can prevent them from accessing employment services and labour market opportunities. The removal of these barriers is key to reducing the number of women in prison and to reducing rates of recidivism.
- 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.
- 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.

## Examples of effective programs

- Sydney – Success Works offers career support workshops, coaching, resumé assistance, peer support and job placement for women affected by the criminal justice system. [www.sydney.dressforsuccess.org](http://www.sydney.dressforsuccess.org)
- UK – Working Chance helps women with criminal convictions to develop their employability and self-belief and find a job they can thrive in. They work with employers of all sizes across all sectors, finding jobs with real career prospects for thousands of women who would otherwise struggle in life and have a high chance of reoffending. [www.workingchance.org](http://www.workingchance.org)
- USA – Hope for Prisoners assists with re-entry by providing the formerly incarcerated long-term support and services as they work to reclaim their lives, families and standing in the community. [www.hopeforprisoners.org](http://www.hopeforprisoners.org)
- Singapore – The Yellow Ribbon Project (YRP) seeks to engage the community in giving ex-offenders a second chance at life and to inspire a ripple effect of concerted community action to support ex-offenders and their families. [www.yellowribbon.gov.sg](http://www.yellowribbon.gov.sg)

## Rationale

- Employment is one of the best predictors of post-release success for former prisoners.<sup>2</sup>
- Financial independence is critical in developing women's self-respect and strong families.
- A study of female offenders found that the most frequently reported reintegration need was assistance finding and keeping a job.<sup>3</sup> They need support with job searching, resumé, interview skills and applications.
- Females with a prior criminal history generally do not have access to labour market opportunities once released from custody, and subsequently are at greater risk of returning to criminal activity.<sup>4</sup>
- The stigma of a criminal record is often higher for women. Employers tend to regard female ex-prisoners even more negatively than they do males.
- Ex-offenders continue to be negatively judged by the community, even though they have done their time. These negative labels were perceived to reduce ex-prisoner job opportunities.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, partnerships between support services and willing employers can help change attitudes.
- It is almost impossible to know the number of ex-offenders seeking employment through service providers due to rules such as non-disclosure, privacy etc.

## KWOOP calls for

- A multi-stakeholder and government taskforce to be established to consider and drive the development and implementation of a long-term multifaceted strategy to reduce women's incarceration in NSW and address the lack of labour market opportunities for women leaving prison.
- A champions of systemic change program to be developed with leaders in government, business and the community, to advocate for and to develop strategies to end discriminatory employment practices.

## 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*

<sup>1</sup> Corston report (2007). A review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System. Home Office UK.

<sup>2</sup> Visher, Winterfield & Coggeshall, 2005 Ex-offender employment programs and recidivism: A meta-analysis.

<sup>3</sup> O'Brien and Lee (2006) O'Brien, P., & Lee, N. (2006). Moving from needs to self-efficacy: a holistic system for women in transition from prison. *Women and Therapy*, 29: 261-284.

<sup>4</sup> Butcher, Park & Piehl, 2017 Comparing Apples to Oranges: Differences in Women's and Men's Incarceration and Sentencing Outcomes.

<sup>5</sup> Graffam J, Giles M, Ollerton J et al. 2017. A Future Beyond the Wall. Improving post-release employment outcomes for people leaving prison.