

# Profile of Women in Prison

**2022-23**

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## **QUALITATIVE REPORT**

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## **Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners**

We want to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which this research was undertaken and pay our respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging. They are and remain the spiritual and cultural custodians of their land, and continue to practice their languages, beliefs and knowledge. Sovereignty was never ceded, and we are grateful to live, work and learn on Wadjuk Noongar country.

## **Acknowledgement of the participants, facilitators and research assistants**

We are most grateful to all the women who shared their stories with us and provided their time to help build an understanding of the profile of women in prison in Western Australia.

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The contribution of our research assistants, Lucy Long, Juanita Schaffa de Mauri and Tiffany Carpenter was invaluable in the analysis of this considerable amount of data and information.

## **Positioning statement**

This report aims to build a profile of women in prison, based on their stories as they shared them with us, reflecting on their experiences and through their voices. Engaging in prison research, we were confronted with the brutal reality of confinement, and how our current criminal justice system fails to break the cycle between victimisation and offending. The end station of a failing justice system is often the prison.

Regardless, we want to pay our respect to those people working in the system who are contributing every day to make an intrinsically negative experience, a little bit better. Engaging in prison research, we do believe that change is needed and possible. Being respectfully aware of the limitations that come with our position, we do commit to progressing sound and integer research. In capturing the stories of the women who live this experience and making them heard, we hope to contribute to evidence-based policy and practice.

Quote:

Interviewee: *And yeah, I just want to, I believe that jail in a way saves people, but it's a waste of life in a way.*

**Frequently used abbreviations:**

**ACE:** Adverse Childhood Experiences

**ADHD:** Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder

**AOD:** Alcohol and Other Drugs

**CALD:** Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

**CJS:** Criminal Justice System

**DOJ:** Department of Justice

**DCP:** Department of Child Protection

**DFV:** Domestic and Family Violence

**IR:** Imprisonment rate

**PLO:** Prison Liaison Officer

**UWA:** University of Western Australia

## Background to the research

A matter of (inter)national concern is the fast-growing presence of women in the prison system. While still small in numbers, they are growing at a faster rate than male prisoners. The same is the case for West Australia (WA): on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2022, women account for 9% of the WA prison population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). In 2022, the female imprisonment rate (IR) in WA was the highest (52 out of 100,000) of all Australia (average of 29), after the Northern Territory. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander female IR in WA was the highest (694) of all Australia (average of 411) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

In 2008, the then Department of Corrective Services (DCS) conducted the latest 'Profile of Women in Prison' survey – previous surveys had taken place in 2001, 2003 and 2005. The 2008 project provided a profile of women in WA prisons, based on quantitative information from the DCS 'Total Offender Management System' (TOMS) and qualitative semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of 64 women prisoners.

In 2018, we applied to the Research Applications Advisory Committee (RAAC) of the Department of Justice (DOJ)<sup>1</sup> to gain access to TOMS data to update this analysis. This report was limited to a quantitative analysis from the database, to compare the basic characteristics of the women in prison with these of 10 years ago.

Given the significant and ongoing increase of women in prison since the original dataset, we were invited by the WA Office of Crime Statistics and Research (WACSAR) of the DoJ to repeat the Profile of Women in Prison research. The main aim of this project is to build a current profile of women in prison and identify the drivers of women's' imprisonment and their needs, to inform future practices and policies.

The methodology of the current research consists of a quantitative and a qualitative component, this report reflects the qualitative component of the research.

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<sup>1</sup> On 1 July 2017, Machinery of Government changes resulted in the Department of Corrective Services and the Department of the Attorney General merging to form the Department of Justice.  
Tubex & Gately, 2024



## Methodology

### Design

This project was designed to explore the experiences of women currently serving a term of imprisonment in WA. Research aimed to explore experiences, insights and feelings are best suited to qualitative research (Lui, 2016). This study was seeking to understand the lived experiences of women before and during imprisonment and if they had returned to prison what contributed to their return. Qualitative methodologies enable the collection and analysis of detailed, in-depth information by leveraging the power of storytelling (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Liamputtong, 2013; Liu, 2016).

### Ethics Approval

Ethics approval was obtained from the UWA ethics committee: 2022/ET000865 and the DoJ Research Applications Advisory Committee (RAAC – Project ID 502).

The ethics approval processes included the development of a flyer, Participant Information Form, Participant Consent Form, an interview guide and distress protocol and is appended to this document as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. List of Ethics Appendices

<b>Women In Prison Sample</b>	
Participant Information Sheet	Appendix A
Participant Consent Form	Appendix B
Interview Schedule	Appendix C
Distress Protocol	Appendix D
<b>Service Providers</b>	
Information Flyer	Appendix E
Participant Consent Form	Appendix B
Service Provider Interview Schedule	Appendix F

### Participants

#### Sampling strategy

Census data obtained from the DoJ was used to determine the rate of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women, sentencing status (remand or sentenced) and number of prior imprisonments (i.e. No previous sentences, 1-10 previous sentences, ...) in each prison to permit a representative sample for the interviews. We aimed for about 10% of the women in each prison, with a stronger representation for some regional prisons due to the limited numbers and to ensure we could capture the local

situation. We provided the DoJ with those specifications and the number of women we aimed to interview in each prison.

Table 2. Women in prison by Indigeneity and Prison at census 2022 and total interviewed.

Prison/Remand Faculty	Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal	Total	Total Interviewed
<b><i>Metropolitan</i></b>				
Bandyup	90	91	<b>181</b>	<b>23 (12.7%)</b>
Boronia	6	66	<b>72</b>	<b>7 (9.7%)</b>
Melaleuca	100	74	<b>174</b>	<b>19 (10.9%)</b>
Wandoo	16	41	<b>57</b>	<b>5 (8.7%)</b>
<b><i>Regional</i></b>				
Eastern Goldfields	14	14	<b>28</b>	<b>10* (32.1%)</b>
Greenough	13	4	<b>17</b>	<b>9* (52.9%)</b>
Roebourne	12	-	<b>12</b>	<b>2 (16.6%)</b>
West Kimberley	23	4	<b>27</b>	<b>5 (18.5)</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>569</b>	<b>80 (14%)</b>

\* By the time the interviews took place, the female population had increased in these prisons, however the figures were correct at the time of census.

At the census date of 30 November 2022, 48% (n=275) of women identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander with the remaining 52% (n=294) non-Aboriginal Australian. Below we provide the division in our sample.

Table 3. Women in Prison sample by self-identified Ethnicity

Self-identified ethnicity	Number	% total sample
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait islander	35	43.75%
Australian	36	45.0%
New Zealander	2	2.5%
Māori	2	2.5%
Non-Australian (Polish, Chinese, Malaysian)	5	6.25%
	<b>80</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Recruitment Procedure

A PLO was allocated in each prison by the DoJ and they were given the sample requirements. These designated officers invited women to participate in the study. We had no control about who and how women were informed about the research and invited to participate, this seemed to be different in every prison. We also had no final control to what extent the participating women effectively matched the suggested criteria, as, if one of the initially approached women did not want to participate / was not available at the time of the interview, other women with a similar profile would be invited.

Those who chose to participate were brought to a separate room where confidentiality could be assured, in Melaleuca this was a secured room in the visiting section, in other prisons interviews took place in an office or the education room. The interview room at Bandyup was in a demountable building and the door was not allowed to be closed. The door was also next to an electronic gate where vehicles and pedestrians entered into another secure section of the prison. The interviews at Bandyup were paused when people and/or vehicles were let in to protect the privacy of the participant.

Time was taken to introduce ourselves and to explain the study aims and objectives to the potential participants. They were assured that their participation was voluntary, that the information they provided would be confidential and that their names would not be connected to the recording or transcript. They received a Participation Information Form (Appendix A) and the information was read / explained to them. This form also provided contact details for the principal CI and the UWA ethics committee. Potential participants were informed they could tell us as much or little as they wanted, and could stop and withdraw at any stage, at which point they could decide whether we could keep any information already collected. At this stage, some of the women decided not to participate, that was the end of the process for them and the PLO would be asked to invite someone who's profile responded to the same criteria. If they agreed to participate, they signed a Participant Consent Form (Appendix B) – specifying if they allowed for recording – and were given a participation code to allow them to withdraw their contribution at any stage of the project before submission of the final report via the PLO. We received ethics approval to obtain verbal consent in the event of literacy issues, however all consenting women signed the form. One participant agreed to the interview, but not the recording. In this case, notes were taken during the interview.

The interview was structured in such a way that initial questions focused on family background and life before interactions with the CJS, allowing the researcher to build rapport with participants. When participants became emotional, the interview was paused to provide time and comfort (water, tissues). Towards the end of the interviews, we acknowledged the strength of these women, which became very apparent throughout their stories. We would also express our gratitude for their contribution and highlight the importance of their involvement.

## Information collected

Metropolitan interviews were conducted by both Professor Tubex and A/Professor Gately, some of them in collaboration with an Honours degree UWA student. Regional prison interviews were conducted by Professor Tubex.

While we did have a list of interview questions for guidance (Appendix C), we used a narrative interview approach, encouraging the women to discuss their lived experiences. Women were asked about their life before interactions with the CJS started and how they started, their experiences while

in prison and their perspectives and needs after release. Interviews typically lasted between half an hour and an hour. With consent, interviews were audio recorded on DoJ approved devices and recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription company.

We were not allowed access to the TOMS data from the sample of women we interviewed as it was deemed too high a risk of re-identification, especially in the smaller regional prisons. Therefore, the information provided in this report is purely based on the interviews and the women’s understanding / version of what happened. Further, as we conducted narrative interviews, the women were in charge of what they shared with us or not. As a consequence, it is not because something was not explicitly mentioned in the interview, that it was not an issue in their lives, it was just not shared.

### Data analysis

The transcripts were divided over two research assistants, who read and independently coded them into themes, identifying potential quotes. From there, Professor Tubex and a Research Assistant made a matrix to organise the information into common themes and subthemes as outlined below. This matrix was further streamlined in a spreadsheet to better capture frequencies and similarities.

Table 4. Themes and subthemes

<b>Journey into the criminal justice system</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Main reason for (this period of) imprisonment (drugs, DFV, poverty)</li> <li>• Childhood and growing up (CSA, parental abandonment or neglect)</li> <li>• Motherhood</li> <li>• Domestic and family violence</li> <li>• Alcohol and other drug abuse</li> <li>• Mental health</li> <li>• Homelessness</li> <li>• Influence of family, relationships and peers</li> <li>• Low self-esteem and negative experiences in seeking help</li> </ul>
<b>Journey through the criminal justice system</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The loss of child custody</li> <li>• Experience with police and legal support</li> <li>• Experience of the prison</li> <li>• Prison as a safe place</li> </ul>
<b>Expectations and needs after release</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accommodation</li> <li>• Support with transition and throughcare</li> <li>• Employment</li> <li>• Special considerations for subgroups</li> </ul>

### Presentation of the findings

As explained in our positioning statement, we prioritise the voices of the women who shared their experiences with us in the presentation of the findings. In developing each theme identified above, we are led by what was shared with us as captured in the numerous quotes we use. The quotes are unaltered and unreduced as they are driving our reporting, and they are deidentified. To allow for some more detail to this narrative reporting, we do provide – in grey boxes – the frequency with which

these topics were mentioned in the interviews – if there are many, with some indication according to metropolitan / regional, Aboriginal / non-Aboriginal. However, the numbers in the boxes are only an indication of frequency, and definitely not an accurate representation of these women’s reality.

## Service Providers

In each prison location, Professor Tubex also contacted service providers working with women in prison and after release to invite their views about the main drivers of women’s imprisonment and changes over time (Appendix F). She managed to speak with two services in the Perth area (including 3 service providers), one in Geraldton (including 4 service providers), one in Kalgoorlie (including 1 service provider), and one in Roebourne (including 2 service providers). During her visit to Derby, the relevant service provider was attending a funeral elsewhere. These interviews were also recorded and transcribed, transcripts were sent back for approval and feedback.

Table 5. Service Provider Details

Location	Services	Service Providers
Metropolitan 1	Mental Health Program	3
Metropolitan 2	Women’s refuge	
Geraldton	Men’s FDV service and Women (FDV) victim support	4
Kalgoorlie	Family legal advice and family support for Aboriginal women	1
Roebourne	Alcohol and Other Drug Services	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>

## RESULTS SECTION

The interview prompts firstly invited women to share some background about their lives before prison: how they looked back at their childhood and upbringing, family, relationships and children, education and employment, and their first interactions with the CJS. It then progressed to life inside prison and their experiences of various elements of incarceration. Finally, we sought to understand how they perceived life after release and what would be needed for them to achieve a successful reintegration. The results section is presented in that order.

### JOURNEY INTO THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

- Main reason for (this period of) imprisonment

*Drugs: 27/54 metropolitan and 10/26 regional – 18 non-Aboriginal, 14 Aboriginal, 5 non-Australian  
Murder or manslaughter: 7/54 metropolitan and 8/26 regional – 11 non-Aboriginal, 3 Aboriginal, 1 non-Australian*

*Stealing: 5/54 metropolitan and 3/26 regional*

*Extensive experience with the CJS: 23/80 – 20 Aboriginal / Māori and 3 non-Aboriginal*

**Note:** *several women – particularly in Melaleuca prison – were not convicted yet, so the categories mentioned do not necessarily refer to a conviction.*

Many of the women reported on their pathway into prison in relation to drugs, in a variety of patterns. They reflected on their drug use as a reaction to the negative life events they had experienced, such as childhood trauma, including DFV as a witness and / or victim survivor. Many explained how the crimes were committed to provide for their own drug habit. In a few cases the women were caught trafficking drugs into the country – because of their CALD background, they faced particular difficulties and needs (see below). The second frequent reason was a crime (or an attempt) that resulted in the loss of a life. Some of these occasions were related to DFV, others were not.

Some women spoke of property crimes (that were not necessarily drug related), drink driving and breaches of bail / parole as the immediate trigger for their current imprisonment.

Throughout their stories, most women reported (substantial) drug use. However, as can be seen in the quote below, there is no straight cause for many of these women's imprisonment, as it is often the result of very complex lives on the outside.

*Interviewee: I tend to, well, I only got out last year in January 19, 2022. I've been homeless since I lost my house for 22 years. The first time I come into jail was for 22 months; alcohol and drugs got the better of me. I was living through a lot of trauma and depression from living in a domestic violence for 19 years.*

*Facilitator: So this isn't your first time in prison?*

*Interviewee: No. No. This is my third time actually. Since I lost my kids I lost my days and morals along the way as well so coming to jail it's – gave me clarity on knowing I did wrong. But it also gave me another big hole my heart because I took myself away from my kids where I need to do better.*

For nearly a third of the women interviewed (29%), interactions with the CJS were reported as a frequent and ongoing part of their life. Sometimes commencing from a young age, resulting in juvenile

detention and then transitioning into the adult system. This pattern was more prolific with Aboriginal women. They referred to the revolving door in and out of prison:

*Interviewee: Well, I first started out in juvenile. So I first went to Rangeview. I was at Rangeview when I was 11. Ever since then I've just been in and out jail.*

*Facilitator: So what happened – what – what did you go to Rangeview for?*

*Interviewee: So, stealing two motor vehicles, just, yeah, all that type of stuff.*

*Facilitator: Why did you do that?*

*Interviewee: So, I don't know, like, lots of times, like, if we had our parents not – not parents, but our carers there, but it's just – I don't know how to say it. No one to actually care for us.*

*Interviewee: Yeah. It's just, I don't know. I think it's because of the way I got brought up, my upbringing, because I'm doing the [CCC program] in here now and I'm only starting to come to terms of why am I like the way I am now? Why do I keep coming back to jail? And there's a lot of reasons why I keep coming back to jail and that's because I've been in and out of jail.*

- Childhood and growing up

*Upbringing by single mum / dad: 7*

*Upbringing by grandparents / auntie: 5*

*Explicitly mentioned child sexual abuse: 13/80*

Referring to their childhood, many women mentioned 'adverse childhood experiences' (ACEs), which they now understood had contributed to their lifestyle and offending behaviour. Many of the women described growing up in (sometimes large) single mother families – where the father was absent, often due to imprisonment – or with grandparents or other family members. Some women referred to situations of adoption or foster families.

*Interviewee: Like for ages I used to hate on my biological mother, like why would you give me away, out of all of your children I was your youngest and you gave me away. It's taken me years to accept that and to be grateful for that because I had something that my older siblings didn't have. I had a chance and an experience to know what it feels like to live in a house with a mother and a father. They didn't had Nan and Pop. Even though it wasn't my real mum and dad they were still my mum and dad, you know.*

There were frequent descriptions of DFV, drug-use, alcoholism, gambling and mental illness in their family of origin. For some women, ACEs included physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect (both emotional and physical). They described how these situations led them to leaving or running away from home as and escape and how this was at times interrelated to the uptake of drugs from a very early age (13-14 years old). The harshness of early homelessness often led to unhealthy accommodation and relationships.

*Interviewee: I left home at 15. I told my mum at 11 [about the abuse], she didn't do anything about it. She stayed with him and we continued to live in the house and he started doing it again. So I ran away at 14 – nearly 15 I think I was – and went and lived in a place called KYHP, Karratha Youth Housing Project. So I went and lived there for a few weeks. And I had a boyfriend who was much older than me. So he was nearly 20.*

Indigenous Australian women regularly referred to grandparents being part of the Stolen Generation, which impacted on the upbringing of their parents, and subsequently on them, continuing the intergenerational trauma.



*Interviewee: I feel, from my experience, that as a person because of the Stolen Generation, I'm like half of my soul because my grandmother was part of the Stolen Generation and this impacted on me culturally because it was taboo for my grandfather to teach me culture growing up. So it's hard.*

For some participants, this was part of their own lived experience.

*Interviewee: No, I've been in and out of jail from an early age, so from the age of 10. I'm one of the last Stolen Generations, a cluster of them. So I was adopted, taken from my mother, and sent to a white family in Perth, and they were very strict, very nasty. I run away from them and was on the streets. Started sniffing and doing stuff, rebelling, you know. Hanged around thieves. Became a mother at the age of 13, pregnant at 12, gave birth to my son when I was 13. Lived in a shed behind PMH hospital in Subiaco behind a – the Perth [unclear 2:17] school. I stayed in a shed. I didn't know how to get support or help or – didn't want to go back to my parent because they disowned me, my adopted parents. I lived in that hospital for two years without them knowing. I used to steal pins and nappies and milk formulas and prams and blankets.*

One Aboriginal woman described as a child how she understood her life would be.

*Interviewee: "my mindset was, I'm an Aboriginal person. I'm going to grow up, I'm going to have children to some alcoholic or some drug fuck. And I'm going to be, um, living on a pension, living in a homeless house and that's my duty."*

Looking at the broader family context, for the majority of the women they had partners / family members – mostly males – that also had been in contact with the CJS / prison. Particularly Aboriginal women would refer to family members serving sentences (in the same prison).

*Facilitator: Have your mum and dad been in prison?*

*Interviewee: Yeah, all their lives.*

*Facilitator: Have you got family members in prison now?*

*Interviewee: Yeah, I've got a lot. Well, in prison with Aboriginal people, we have a lot of family. So in prison, there's obviously a lot of aunties, cousins, sisters just everywhere.*

Further, there was frequent mention of other experiences of trauma, grief and loss: beyond the grief for family members that passed away due to natural causes, there was frequent mention of suicide, death due to violence, and the loss of children.

*Interviewee: Yeah, and at the moment we were – the three of us are going through loss. I've lost my niece and my brother's daughter passed away, only three days – four days ago now. My niece that we were just talking about that lost her partner, her brother passed away in a same similar way; was – took his own life.*

*Facilitator: Suicide. Yeah.*

*Interviewee: That was five days ago.*

*Facilitator: So you're trying to deal with all that at the same time.*

*Interviewee: Yeah, my cousin that's in for the violent – that's got two years; her mum's just passed away; six days ago.*

However, several of the women also had family members staying out of trouble, and some referred to a 'normal' upbringing in a stable family, them being the only one ending up in the prison. This could be the result of a longer engagement in criminalised behaviour, or a one-off disruption that ended them in prison – for some, with very long sentences.



*Interviewee: Well I just got out of prison, I was on parole and I breached, but I had a pretty rough childhood with my mum and dad breaking up and things happening to me when I was a child, just very hectic, and so I sort of rebelled, I was the black sheep in my family, everyone else – my sister’s a marriage celebrant so she’s not done anything wrong, made a commitment to the big man up there, and I’m – my mum passed away when I was in jail last time...*

*Interviewee: My brothers? No, no, no. My sister actually works for Corrections, on the outside, for ... and things like that. Like I said, I’ve just made stupid choices, do you know what I mean? It doesn’t make me a bad person, I’ve just made stupid choices. You’ve always got to have one black sheep in the family, I always say.*

- **Motherhood**

*Mother of children: 63 women explicitly mentioned children, ranging from 1 to 7 – in total, about 177 children were involved*

*14 women mentioned teenage pregnancies: several becoming mothers at the age of 15-16 years*

*13 women explicitly stated they had no children*

An overwhelming majority of the women were mothers (ranging from 1-7 children), some of them from a very young age. Only 13 women explicitly stated they had no children, sometimes due to being in prison for most of their fertile life. Children had often been taken away by child protection services and were at the time of the interview under the care of (ex-)partners or grandparents. While all mothers seemed to know where their children were, and most were still in contact with (some of) them, there was a pattern of women preferring not to have their children visit them in prison to protect them from this experience. Others were yearning to have contact but unable to due to caregiver reluctance to bring them for visits. There is also the concern about the impact of their imprisonment and absence on the kids, and the potential intergenerational trauma. The impact of the loss of children on the women is discussed later in the report.

*Interviewee: Yep I speak to them twice a week on Skype and then on the phone as well. My son I speak to him on the phone. It’s a bit harder for him that he’s so attached to me that visits are very horrible for him. When he leaves you can see his heart breaks every time. He thinks I’m just at work, it’s easier that way, it keeps him in a good head space and doing what he needs to do. I feel like if I see him too often, him being ripped away from me every time is detrimental to them, I think it’s traumatic to them as well at such a young age when he’s so attached to me. And because he was one when I came in you know.*

*Interviewee: It definitely just – only because like I know I’ve done the crime and I should be punished, but it’s ruined your life.*

*Facilitator: Right.*

*Interviewee: It’s ruined my son’s life. I expect now that my son will be the next rebellious – he will rebel now. His generation, like he’s going to be me, he’s going to grow up and rebel and be a rebellious teenager because of what I’ve done and because I’ve been kept away from him, 100 per cent it’s just going to be a cycle of going on and on and on.*

Whether these mothers had contact with their children or not, they were a paramount concern, about their children’s well-being and whether they would have a relationship in the future. Many blamed the impact of DFV on their ability to parent, and the decisions that had ultimately led to their imprisonment and separation from their children.

- Domestic and Family Violence

*Experience of DFV in their own relationship: 50/80 - 34/54 metropolitan and 16/26 regional – 19 non-Aboriginal, 29 Aboriginal / Māori, 2 non-Australian*

About 62% of the women reported DFV in one or more of their own relationships. Domestic and family violence directly and indirectly contributed to the women's' journey into prison. Many women described how they turned to drug and alcohol abuse as a coping mechanism to deal with the trauma of ongoing DFV. This eventually caused them to come into contact with the CJS for possessing and/or selling drugs or committing crimes under the influence of drugs. Indirectly, the violent relationship caused secondary trauma which they then had to cope with. Some women tried to defend their children – having to go down the same path, which resulted in their imprisonment.

*Interviewee: This was when I was 14, 15. When I ran away, and I was with him for a few years. Yeah. Yep. Then that's why when he would offer me drugs... I refused for so long, but I remember the first time. I remember the first time, taking speed, and it just made everything so much easier to deal with. He would come home and beat the crap out of me, and I would just take drugs, and wouldn't care. Then I would just take more and more drugs. More and more. Yeah.*

*Interviewee: Yeah. So yeah, straight away he started abusing me, I found it hard to leave because I did love him, I had feelings for him, I fell pregnant, I was 14 weeks and two days when he severely brutally bashed me, I ended up in North Perth Hospital going into premature labour and my baby couldn't be saved because she was too early. That is when I went backwards, got back onto the drugs because I couldn't deal with what I was going through.*

*Interviewee: I do feel sorry for myself sometimes, like, "Shit. I had a choice that day." But they didn't know about that choice at the time because I was going through domestic violence with my old ex. I didn't plan to drive. I was planning on escaping. I started to escape and I had no licence. So that's the only reason why. I panicked and I took a seizure in the ambulance. The panic button on a female with domestic violence towards a male, it's off. A big buzzer is going in your head, you know, you've got to put yourself safe first and make your kids safe. That's what I did for me and my kids that day and we actually had a crash because I panicked so much because I was in domestic violence. It traumatised my past and it still does.*

As said, surviving DFV was often linked to alcohol and other drug use, as described below.

- Alcohol and illicit drug abuse

*Mention of methamphetamine abuse: 41/80– 34/54 metropolitan and 7/26 regional*  
*Mention of alcohol abuse: 24/80 – 15/54 metropolitan and 9/26 regional*  
*Mention of cannabis abuse: 21/80– 14/54 metropolitan and 7/26 regional*  
*Mention of heroin abuse: 9/80– 8/54 metropolitan and 1/26 regional*

Alcohol and illicit drug use played a crucial role in the women's' stories. Methamphetamine were the most cited reason that women ended up in prison, while alcohol and cannabis abuse were also common (as well as all combinations). Heroin appeared to play a less significant role. For a lot of women, their habit started early (around age 14- 18) after being introduced by family members or friends, and quickly escalated from recreational or weekend use to complete dependency. The majority of women referred to their drug use as a coping mechanism to numb the pain of past or ongoing trauma, especially DFV, and other grief and loss, managing life in very difficult circumstances.

*Interviewee: Oh, I started doing drugs when I was young. So it became a recreational habit. So probably when I was about 16 or 17 I started doing the drugs. And then it was only recreational, like when I went out. And then it was on and off. And then what happened was I broke up with the father of my kids, my three kids, and I just went downhill from there. So yea, I think I just used it for a blocking mechanism. But in that time heaps of shit happened. Like I lost my house, I lost my kids and all that kind of stuff and then I just went to crime because it was just easier.*

*Interviewee: Yeah it does. I know I'm a smart woman and I can achieve my goals. But it's just been hard because I've had a lot of bumps along the way. Like I've recently just lost my mum and before that I was in domestic violence relationships. And before that I lost another family member. It's just when you are trying to get on the straight and narrow and something comes up in your life to make you go this way or go another way or go back to the drugs, because you can't handle it, it's too much to handle.*

Women also reported how drugs had been used to self-medicate against mental health issues, or reversely, had led to mental health issues.

- **Mental Health**

*Mention of depression: 16/80*

*Mention of suicidal thoughts / attempts: 10/80*

*Mention of anxiety: 7/80*

Mental health was closely related to the issues discussed above. Many women mentioned experiencing depression and anxiety, as well as suicidal thoughts and self-harm. There were other mentions of diagnosed neurodiversity such as ADHD and autism spectrum disorder (ASD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), psychosis from schizophrenia and/or drug use, and bipolar disorder. In many cases, mental and emotional struggles were triggered by a combination of past trauma which remained unaddressed and current compounding stressors, such as financial strain, family responsibilities or the loss of one or more loved ones. Imprisonment itself could also deteriorate the mental health of the women, prison being at the same time poorly equipped to deal with these problems.

*Interviewee: My mental health declined. Since then, because I was diagnosed not long after we separated, I've been diagnosed with bipolar, borderline personality disorder, ADHD and anxiety, all within the last three years. I didn't handle all that very well either. So with the kids, going to be on my own with the kids as well as my mental health issues, I turned to drugs essentially. And then I started selling drugs to support my habit, and that's essentially what led me here. Got caught for that.*

*Interviewee: I went through a lot of sexual abuse as a child and the feeling of I'm not believed, help me, which is the same in here, so it triggered everything again. Unfortunately there – there is counsellors here and they are good. But if you're in the middle of something and you've got a half an hour window and it's going to be locked down or something, they leave you raw, you know, you're thrown back in your cell with rawness. If you do have any thoughts of suicide or self-harm the first thing they do is throw you in CCU [Crisis Care Unit]. CCU is a cell with nothing. It doesn't help, it does not help, it feels like a punishment for having them feelings. I mean glad to say I have a care plan now where if I start feeling like I need to cut and I'm not coping they'll put someone in my cell with me.*

Unfortunately, for many women, the first time they had been diagnosed, medicated and/or treated for mental health issues was within the confines of prison. They commented on staff citing that had helped them to understand their mental health conditions and how they were linked to their drug taking. There were however also comments on general prison staff who lacked the training to understand the impact of trauma on these women.

*Interviewee: But none of the officers I think have been trained in trauma informed, they're not trauma informed. Because you can't have women who have been beaten and mistreated by men and then have a man in the [unclear 21:53] yelling at them. You're just women here.*

- Homelessness

Homelessness played a significant role in the women's journey into prison. For many women, the absence of stable housing became an issue from a young age, either due to the family situation, or because of running away from home or being in the care of the State. They described how homelessness and poverty had led them to committing crime out of economic necessity. Furthermore, being vulnerable (at a young age) and alone had led to them finding friendship and protection with others in the same position and / or ending up among the wrong crowd.

*Interviewee: I've been coming in and out of prison for the last 20 years. Yeah, I'm 41 now, so in and out of here. Yeah, it's just due to lack of housing, I've been homeless a lot. When I get out of prison, there's not enough support to set me up to get me back on track in my life. And it's just, yeah, getting out of prison with no support, no housing, no jobs.*

Once the 'revolving door' of going in and out of prison had started, housing remained a critical part of the problem. Without pre-arranged stable and secure housing, women leaving prison were forced to return to living on the streets, couch-surfing at a friends or family members – who are often using drugs and alcohol, or returning to a violent partner.

*Interviewee: No, not helpful, not supportive [returning to family on release]. They can't even help themselves. Do you know what I mean? They're all unstable, on drugs themselves and everyone else is on drugs or drinking and coming around. Everyone that does crime goes around to the house. There's no stability for myself, no accommodation. It's hard.*

- The influence of family, relationships and peers

The influence of family, relationships and peers appeared was for several women a significant factor in their history of use and abuse – leading directly or indirectly to their offending behaviour.

*Interviewee: But my dad was like, he grew pot and everything, so we started smoking pot. And he also gave me my first taste of speed wrapped up in a Tally Ho paper. He did want to inject it into my arm, but my boyfriend wouldn't allow him at the time.*

*Interviewee: I met my ex-partner, he introduced me to drugs and that's how I started using drugs and coming to prison.*

When anti-social behaviour or drug-use is deeply embedded in family or peer-group culture, personal relationships are a risk factor for (re)offending, and quitting also required to break away from this social network.

*Interviewee: It's difficult because I don't have the circle of friends; it's just all around. The circle of friends I do have are just all drug users or they're alcoholics. I don't have any friends that don't associate with that kind of stuff. So, I don't know, I've just got to break that cycle somehow.*

The lack of a safe network on the outside directly links into the importance of suitable accommodation and support on release to assist women to live independent, drug free lives.

- **Low self-esteem and negative experiences in seeking help**

While the women told their own stories, they often referred to other female prisoners in the same or similar circumstances. What became apparent through their stories was that these experiences had led many women to have low levels of self-esteem, trust and a reluctance to rely on others.

*Facilitator: No. What was the drug use about do you think?*

*Interviewee: It was definitely lack of self-esteem, 100 per cent. I guess that's where my uncle did affect me with the child abuse because I just – I didn't have – yeah, I had very low self-esteem.*

*Facilitator: So when do you think – so that idea about the self-esteem, that sounds like it was taken from you a long time ago?*

*Interviewee: Oh yeah, up until a point. I didn't have any and then what I did get back I got beaten out of me by an ex-partner, do you know what I mean?*

*Facilitator: Mm hm.*

*Interviewee: Life for chicks is harder than you think. Domestic violence is scarring...*

*Facilitator: Yes.*

*Interviewee: ...and when that relationship breaks up and you don't know what you're doing any more you don't know how to behave, how to look, how to dress, how to put makeup on any more because you haven't been allowed to. You're not allowed to smile in the street without getting flogged. These things that you've got to train yourself to be yourself again, to be a person again.*

Life had been pretty hard on almost all the women we spoke to, on all sorts of levels and stretched out over extended periods of time. When and where they did reach out for help, most doors seem to remain closed, except for the prison. This reinforced the need to be self-sufficient and created a lack of trust in support services and networks, and a lack of confidence in the [justice] system more broadly.

## **JOURNEY THROUGHOUT THE [CRIMINAL JUSTICE] SYSTEM**

- **The loss of child custody**

For many women, one of the most significant confrontations with government was with 'child protection' agencies. The loss of child custody to DCP (Department of Child Protection, now called the Department of Communities) or other guardians played a significant role in slipping into offending. Some women described how having children removed from their care was the catalyst for a series of poor and/or self-destructive decisions which ultimately led to their imprisonment. Other acknowledged that their DFV situations and/or drug taking behaviours had led to the loss of their children. Either way, having their children taken away resulted in the women experiencing a loss of purpose or significance.

*Interviewee: I was 17, yeah. Like I've lost three kids to the system. The last one I was doing everything right, they told me I was going to keep her and then they took her off me. I still did whatever they wanted me to do, because I was getting visitation five days a week and I was happy with*

*that. And then I fell sick and then when I called them to reschedule my access, they didn't start my access again. And they wonder why I fell off the deep end and went back to drugs. It's like I did everything I could with this one, everything that I could.*

*Interviewee: Yeah, yeah, I had a partner at that time, I was having my second – I had my second child, I was having my third, I had a house, I was on the methadone program, and then my kids got taken off me by DCP so that led to me doing more crime, doing more drugs, losing the house, me and my partner split up, and then just going straight to jail.*

*Facilitator 1: So why did DCP take the kids away?*

*Interviewee: Because my second eldest son was already in DCP's care and I was having another baby so they automatically stepped in and, yeah, took my son.*

*Facilitator 1: And that tipped your world around?*

*Interviewee: Yeah.*

Moreover, for women with young children, not having the ability to be present and raise their children while in prison increased their feelings of guilt and anxiety. At the same time, however, many women were motivated by their children and the desire to care for them to improve their lives by staying out of prison, quitting drugs or getting the help that they needed.

*Interviewee: Describing willpower for not drinking – “For myself is to have my kids in my life is – that was one of the – one of my willpowers is that if you want your kids in your life you know you’ve got keep that [can of beer] shut. “*

- Experience with the police and legal support

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many (26) of the women reported negative experiences with the CJS. There were several stories of negative experiences with police, particularly in cases of DFV. Some described incidents of reporting to police but receiving little regard or understanding about their situation, or the situation turning against them. This experience also contributed to a lack of trust and/or confidence in authorities and the CJS, thus reinforcing their reluctance to seek help when it was needed most.

*Interviewee: Well, if the police had listened when I first went about the abuse with [name]... I walked into the police station and my face was all bruised, my jaw was pushed out, my eye was pushed in, I had no hair on the back of my head, my shoulder was dislocated and a cop turned around and said, “Why? What did you do?” I walked out.*

*Interviewee: No I think that was my downfall. I didn't have trust in the law, I didn't have trust in the police to be able to reach to them. I was rebelling against the whole system on the fact of how they even allowed my children to be taken from the country fraudulently and how the system wasn't helping me. So I just kind of retaliated and went against them and being on drugs doesn't help your mindset you know.*

Furthermore, many believed they had received a lack of legal support, or legal support giving incorrect advice and letting them down. They described incidents of being persuaded to plead guilty to hasten the process and reduce sentences, or not being able to clearly articulate the incidents that led the criminal act which led to misunderstandings in the court environment.

*Facilitator 1: Did you have legal support?*

*Interviewee: Yeah, but they were – [laughs] I changed lawyers because they just wanted to chuck me in jail the first time, that cost me 10 grand so I had to sell a lot of my stuff, and then the second lawyer cost me another 10 grand, and then after that they told me I needed a barrister. So yeah, it got very expensive.*



*Interviewee: Legal Aid, yeah.*

*Facilitator 1: What are your experiences with them?*

*Interviewee: I've always went in jail, never had a chance on bail. I've been on bail from the police station and that, but every time in Court I've never had a chance, I've always been sentenced.*

*Interviewee: But [unclear 10:52] the ISO. I was told by the courts – the magistrate court – that I would get all the help that I needed, you know they would help me and I'm lucky that I didn't get time, blah, blah, blah. I got absolutely no help whatsoever. I was to go to Corrections once a week, once a fortnight and attend counselling. And the next step [unclear 11:10] I've been there for years and years and years you know?*

*Interviewee: No they just put – the intensive supervision order they just – you go in for an appointment with Corrections, they ask how you're going, you know you lie through your teeth,..*

- Experience of the prison

As the stories unfolded, women spoke about their entry to prison, coming down off drug use and the shock of incarceration. They spoke of good officers who handled with kindness and respect, but also discussed attitudes of staff who they felt did not help traumatised women. The biggest concern in the metropolitan prisons was the frequent, ongoing and lengthy lockdown periods. At the time of interviews West Australian prisons were facing staff shortages and this dominated many of the women's narratives of current prison experiences. The non-smoking policy in Bandyup will be discussed below.

*Interviewee: But coming into a situation where you have no control, there is nothing, nothing. You are told when to eat, you are told when to sleep, you are told – actually half the time you are not told anything, you are just locked in your cell with no reason why and you are told you will be unlocked when we will unlock you. So sometimes you're showering out of your basin because you don't think you're going to get a shower that night. Things have gotten a lot worse since the non-smoking. The women are becoming very violent and hostile..... But at the end of the day this prison's – it's going to end up being a riot or something.*

*Interviewee: More staff would mean less lockdowns. More staff would probably mean that staff would have the time to deal with women who don't play up. Because unfortunately the environment now is working on the case where the squeaky wheel gets the grease. So someone like me who tries to stick to herself, do her own thing, doesn't want to be involved in shit. If I'm struggling I can knock on that door for hours saying can I please talk to someone? I don't get the time of day because there's women going off left right and centre being locked down, ending up down the back, and like I said it's been worse since the cigarettes.*

As a result of this, women reported delays in processing forms and requests, including employment arrangements, access to (mental) healthcare, and enrolment in programs.

*Interviewee: For some of the girls their employers have probably pulled the pin because that process takes so long*

*Interviewee: I haven't done orientation, I don't know what programs I can do*

*Interviewee: It takes ages for forms to get put through... it's taken seven months just to get into a program*

*Interviewee: It's very hard to even see a doctor...I waited three months to even see a doctor*

Another major issue was the lack of meaningful activities /programs in the prison. Women described how they wanted to improve themselves and their chances for parole and successful integration, through education and programs but these were sometimes lacking.

*Interviewee:* about Melaleuca: There's a waiting list to get put on a waiting list. Half these girls come in and they're here for several - people like me have been here for nearly a year or even more than a year and can't do anything. We put our names down on a list and [unclear 8:01] list, they pick and choose whoever they want to put on it, it's kind of the luck of the draw whether you get into it or not.

*Facilitator:* So what do you see for these – this revolving door? How do you break that cycle from your opinion?

*Interviewee:* It's more education of how they can transition from here to there, you know. Sort of like the stuff that Boronia's got if we can actually get some of that education stuff for in here, because most of them don't even get the chance to go to Boronia.

Further, women expressed a lack of transparency and access to information for both orientation and post-release services.

*Interviewee:* But over there in Melaleuca I wrote so many letters to the superintendent, to security, everywhere, no, nothing. You know what they did, they cut me from job and they put me in the worst wing.

*Interviewee:* Yeah. Well, "What do I do now?" and then they're like, "Well, just try this. Try this. Try this" and it's like, "Well, how much...?" I put into the transitional manager about my charges over east over a month ago. I just want to know what steps I have to take to be able to sort my charges out or if I can sort them out in jail. I've heard nothing back from them.

- The need for access to culture and culturally appropriate programs

Loss of cultural identity was raised by some Indigenous Australian women as an added complexity to their journey into, and experience within the prison. Some women described an internal disconnect from their culture which felt like a part of their identity was missing. For some who had not been exposed to their traditional cultural background due to white interventionism, there was the desire to learn more about their culture and language through other Indigenous Australian women. This observation was also made with regard to the support offered within the prison, where some women highlighted the need for Indigenous Australian-led programs and approaches to rehabilitation in place of existing programs which are not culturally appropriate.

*Interviewee:* What would a white person know about a black fella. They wouldn't know nothing about Dreamtime, they wouldn't know how to be – I don't even know my identification because of white people.

*Facilitator:* Is that important for you to have that connection with your culture?

*Interviewee:* Yeah, because I don't want to be – I mean I've got black - I'm a black person with white ways, I can't be a black person with my black ways, I've got to talk like a white person, it is very annoying.

*Interviewee:* Yeah, it is, so I'm learning how to get to know my culture because I really don't know anything, to be honest. I'm starting to get to know the animals in Nunga, in my language, I'm doing cultural dance at the moment so I'm going to be the culture leader after the graduation that happens tomorrow. So, I'm going to prepare for that, yeah so, I'm also going to be getting out to learn about my culture a bit more with some of the Elders outside.

*Facilitator:* Yeah, do you think that's something that you missed?



*Interviewee: I think it's something that I is missing in me like that I feel like there's a whole there. I really don't know myself so that's the first place I've got to search.*

*Interviewee: My biggest thing is maybe getting [unclear 0:19:42.7]. Like I say, elder women to run a class in here and tell the girls our stories, just like a yarnning circle.*

- Experiences with specific prisons

We also asked the women about their experiences with the prisons they had been in. Below we provide an account for each prison we interviewed in, based on the feedback from the women (who had been) there.

### **Melaleuca**

Melaleuca prison houses women on remand and who are sentenced and has a capacity of 254 people. Women in Melaleuca prison described the difficulties of frequent and extended lockdown periods, which increased a sense of monotony with little chance of recreation. They spoke about the overcrowding, causing bullying and a lack of respect between the women. Given that women in Melaleuca are often on remand there was a sense of isolation arising from accounts of shock and trauma, a lot of waiting, and the difficulty of obtain information during that time and getting advice. Furthermore, women are unable to access any programs until they are sentenced. Women also cited the lack of support and difficulty of obtaining information. Despite these complaints the reports about staff included them being supportive, willing to listen and in general being 'really good'.

### **Boronia**

Boronia prison is a pre-release centre and caters for up to 95 residents. As all the women there had been in other prisons before, Boronia was experienced by most to be more homelike. As a pre-release centre Boronia allows for more freedom, the atmosphere was described as more 'laid back' and relationships with staff as respectful. Being a smaller facility and women living together in houses, there were reports of bullying, gossiping and bitchiness, but most reported on getting along well. They talked about hopes for release and how they saw the transition back into the community. Some believed Boronia provided a good support network while others felt there could be more, but overall feedback was positive.

### **Wandoo**

Wandoo Rehabilitation Prison is WA's first dedicated alcohol and other drug rehabilitation prison for women in custody. Specialist clinicians are contracted to provide treatment in this facility. The women described Wandoo as a 'gamechanger' for understanding the role and use of substances and many praised the programs and approach. However, this approach was also experienced as hard - like a 'boarding school', tough, structured with a lot of routine and busy - and confronting. The women believed it was 'in your face' with having to confront trauma and pain, one saying that while it has the ability for women to confront their issues, it can also be damaging. Another woman testified how she performed well while in Wandoo but struggled with the transfer into free life. Overall, the women commented they had gained growth and self-awareness from the program, believing it should have been made available to them earlier in their trajectory.

## **Bandyup**

Bandyup Prison is a maximum-security prison and houses women on remand and sentenced. The major concern was the constant and continuous lockdowns the women viewed as a result of the understaffing. They believed Bandyup was at a 'standstill', 'getting worse' and 'overwhelming'. Many saw this as a reason for the increase in bullying, poor living conditions, bad food, and toxic relationships. On the positive, some described Bandyup as having more structure than the other prisons they had been in, with more to do and study options when lockdowns were not so prevalent.

One of the biggest cited concerns in Bandyup Prison was the recent ban on smoking and inability to obtain cigarettes within the prison. While one participant (a non-smoker) agreed with it, and another one said that it forced her to 'give up' and made her feel better, most women complained that they were not well prepared for the ban. According to them the ban had several impacts, firstly it resulted in conflict and fighting among the prisoners as they came to terms with the withdrawal of nicotine and subsequent cravings. Given the ban also applied to the staff, many of the women found staff to have become more irritable, and short tempered. They described how they initially could obtain QUIT aids such as patches. However, those desperate for nicotine had started to break up the patches and mix it with tea leaves to enable them to smoke the contents. When this strategy was discovered, the women reported that smoking aids were no longer made available to them. Furthermore, they reported there was now an inability to obtain teabags. Due to the inability to legitimately sourced nicotine, they reported an increase in smuggling cigarettes into the prison either through visitors or from women coming from different prisons. Once it was known amongst the prisoners who had the contraband, it resulted in more fights and conflict. Some women were purposely trying to get transferred back to Melaleuca as they were still able to smoke in that facility. While some agreed with the concept of a smoking ban, they also believed there should be better planning, including a better transition to a total ban overseen by medical practitioners. Others flatly refused to accept that it was a plausible idea, noting that it was not an illicit drug and very much helped them coping within the prison environment.

## **Eastern Goldfields Regional Prison - Kalgoorlie**

Eastern Goldfields Prison is a regional prison which manages male and female prisoners. The women described the prison has been good in terms of structure and better material conditions. Of note was the positive way in which the women described the staff as treating them 'more like they are people' than in previous prisons they had been in. They commented that the officers communicated with them, and that they are calm and approachable. However, the main negative comment was on the lack of programs or activities to keep them occupied.

## **Greenough Regional Prison - Geraldton**

Greenough Prison is a regional prison which manages male and female prisoners. Most women described the staff as good and helpful. The main complaints were about limited food choices and a lack of access to a gym or other activities, with more noting a lack of access to programs and treatment which they felt was not helpful in preparing them for release.

## Roebourne Regional Prison

There was a limited number of women with experience of Roebourne regional prison, which is mainly hosting regional Indigenous men and women. The women noted the absences of appropriate cultural programs, and that having to go to Perth was a 'challenge'.

## West Kimberley Regional Prison - Derby

West Kimberley Regional Prison is s a purpose-built facility designed to support Aboriginal culture, kinship and connection to country, housing male and female prisoners, remand and sentenced. While the facility is viewed as more relaxed and open than other prisons and with friendly staff, the women spoke of physical discomforts such as a broken air conditioning and the need for a shade cloth to protect them from the sun. The women also discussed the lack of programs and activities which led to boredom and that everything 'gets cancelled' due to 'massive' staff shortages.

- Prison as a safe place

The idea of prison being 'a safe place', providing a higher level of physical and emotional support than was available to the women on the outside was regularly mentioned. In a practical sense, having access to daily needs such as three meals a day and a bed was for many women more achievable in prison. Even more concerning is that prison was described as the only available safe space in the strict sense of the word as not being exposed to violence.

*Interviewee: We've had our kids taken from us. We've - we have - live in abusive relationships where the only way to get away from it is to come into these places. It's kind of, yeah, safe for us in here.*

*Interviewee: My reflection of now who I am is I'm glad that I've seen to take responsibility for my action and then in the past before I came in I think I was young. That's all I knew, was to come to jail to feel a bit safe and protected. I was running from the people out there who were meant to care and love for me but when I did come to jail that was my past, this is now and this is what I want in the future.*

Further, women referred to prison as an opportunity to get away from exposure to alcohol and drugs, to get clean and improve their health.

*Facilitator: Do you think it's easier from the inside?*

*Interviewee: Yes, yeah, I do.*

*Facilitator: Because you're clean?*

*Interviewee: Yes, you're clean, you know, you've obviously got a lot of regrets about your past behaviour right there and then, and the only way is up, you know, whereas if you're out there it doesn't work like that, life gets in the way, yeah, everything gets in the way, you know?*

*Interviewee: Sometimes I think that when I came to prison it saved me. Like, I don't know, like it just – it saves me from either maybe having a bad shot one day and turning out like a vegetable or ending up in a car crash or getting – do you know what I mean, a high speed chase or doing something stupid that's going to get myself hurt.*

Some women expressed they had become adapted to the routine and lifestyle of prison so much that the outside world often felt too overwhelming and unattainable, very much describing the concept of institutionalisation.

*Interviewee: Then recently I've been in a year; I came back. I think I came back mainly just because of stability, like, I wasn't - outside was just - it was tough. I was struggling. I don't know. I didn't really think I was doing anything wrong but obviously I was so ended up back in.*

Regardless of the many referrals to bullying inside prison, for some, the presence of family and likeminded people provided emotional support which contributed to the perception of prison as a second home.

*Facilitator: So now being your first time in prison what do you think now?*

*Interviewee: Oh, it's just like a home away from home.*

*Interviewee: So I've only been back in Boronia for about a week and a half now but I know now that here is where I can deal with some of my stuff because I've got a good support network here, like Boronia's really good for that, you know?*

Despite complaints about the availability of programs, services such as counselling, drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, education courses and behavioural awareness programs, were found to be more easily accessible from inside prison.

*Interviewee: It's just finding the willpower to be able to do it, but I felt like I had to come back to jail to even get some sort of help because nobody ever really wants to help you.*

*Interviewee: And honestly I think being here is what I needed because I want to turn my life around completely. On the outside I didn't see any hope, I had no help. And in here I do. It's so stupid to think that you have to come to jail to get the help. Even when you are screaming for it.*

Overall, the women reported that the support offered to them in prison was very much inadequate but nonetheless better than what they could access on the outside. Others described how prison had broken a cycle and allowed them to rebuild their lives and become better people with more insight and understanding.

*Interviewee: Jail was the best thing that ever happened to me, as much as I was scared as hell when I came here.*

*Interviewee: Yeah. Jail sort of didn't break me. It sort of made me who I am today and I'm so glad that I love myself and even in here now my conduct in jail now is really different and I'm back into exercising. I'm eating well. I've sort of got to slow down on the smoking but I'm sort of putting myself first.*

Regardless the above, the women also referred to prison as the source of many frustrations, which causes a lot of pain and harm to themselves and others. Women spoke about the pain of being separated from their loved ones, particularly their children.

*Interviewee: I'm not, can I tell you about the systems fucked, excuse my language...*

*Facilitator: It's not new to me.*

*Interviewee: It is for someone like me, what do they hope to achieve by putting me in here and what am I to learn? Because I'm really you know what I mean, I'm with people that are whatever they are, sexual fucking whatever they are, but to come in here and know nothing what do they hope for me to learn from this really. I know I did wrong I know that so prior to me even coming here I've been to Serenity House for drugs, I got clean, I'm 160 odd days clean. I got a job and I told the people at my job about my stealing which they were fine with that.*

*Interviewee: Yeah, that's right. Two of the officers in here [unclear 0:18:25.9] the respect [unclear 0:18:25.9] we know that we're only prisoners to them, but we are somebody too on the outside. We are mothers, we are fathers, we are foster nanas and all that, you know.*

*Facilitator: Okay. So what about in here? What's the worst thing about being in prison?*

*Interviewee: Being away from family. It's the hardest thing. Me personally, being away from my daughter because I'm missing out on her first day at school, her first words and things like that. It's a lot. Also, losing people while you're in here because you can't grieve properly and you can't be with the family to grieve and stuff like that.*

## EXPECTATIONS AND NEEDS AFTER RELEASE

- Accommodation

When asked what would assist them in staying out of prison once released, the most frequently mentioned need was accommodation. Most of the women did not have a (safe) place to go to. There was a strong sense among the women that a safe place to call 'home' was crucial in preventing them from returning to DFV situations, removing them from the temptation of drug taking peers, establishing a routine, supporting employment, and providing the stability needed for successfully getting access to their children again.

*Interviewee: Well, you know, I've been in and out of various homes growing up all my life and it's been very hard to find a stable place for me and my son and I've tried to get all the support I could to get myself – yeah, my son and myself somewhere to stay, like for a place to call home.*

*Interviewee: I think housing is a big problem for me because I'm always living with family. I've been on the Homes West list for a long time. So it's just sort of living with family and going from house to house, not having somewhere for my son.*

*Interviewee: My main thing is stability, owning a house. I just need somewhere to call home that I feel safe in, that I can live in instead of – I've lived in houses and I've had a housemate but couldn't go back home because they had drugs. So you're trying to give up the drugs and it doesn't work. I've always found myself couch-surfing because nobody wants to give me a go.*

- Support

After accommodation, the next most discussed was the need for support on release and during a transitional period of adjustment.

*Interviewee: Support, you know, just seeing that just somebody's on your team, and listen, not to talk down and be judged, do you know what I mean?*

*Interviewee: And so any support around that and being able to live on my own and support myself whilst knowing there's someone there that if I need it, I can call. Which isn't something I've ever had.*

*Interviewee: Like, support. So like, if I had like, someone that actually was like very supportive and really cared about me. Or like, someone to say to, this is wrong what you're doing. Like, you know what I mean? Pull me to aside and say like, this is not the life that you want to live.*

Women talked about the need for early intervention:

- Facilitator: Do you think more should be done for people, like for yourself, when something happens in childhood there? What interventions could we put in place there?*
- Interviewee: Well that's what you need to do, you need to be open eyed, you know, you need to be looking for kids that are doing things like self-harm and self-hate and this. I started out with anorexia, do you know what I mean, and stuff like that, you know? Like it's all self-harm, it's all trying to hide yourself and be – you know, because you're hurting, you're hurt and you're hurting.*
- Facilitator: So it's looking out for those warning signs?*
- Interviewee: Looking out for the warning signs, watch your kids, keep an eye on your kids, especially – you know, because the people you trust the most are the most likely person to fuck with them, you know?*

Women who had previously been imprisoned described how the transition back into community can be brutal, leaving the structure of the institution and being on their own again:

- Interviewee: Yeah, Wandoo is good. But the thing about Wandoo is you get all the support and everything while you're in there and then when you get out, you feel you have nobody.*
- Interviewee: The transition was horrible. When I was in there, I felt safe but I didn't really think that I had it in me to be out and I spoke to my counsellor and I told my counsellor, "I got parole" because you're leaving a safe place where you can get support to the outside world where everything is fast and you've got to try and keep up with everybody.*
- Interviewee: I've been to rehabilitation at Wandoo. I completed that and got out about a year ago and I only lasted about three weeks and came back in. Then I applied for parole and went out again to rehab and ran away from rehab because I had no support. I had nothing, so I just didn't want to do it anymore. So I came back in here. I don't know, it just felt easier in a way.*

Reintegration was perceived to be particularly challenging because there are so many pieces of their life that need to be puzzled back together, and this in environment that is pretty competitive and unforgiving:

- Interviewee: So coming in jail it's so - it's a minor setback for a major comeback because I know I could do but my self-esteem's still at that low rate that I have to boost my self-esteem and get myself a job. Try and get myself a house and get my babies back. But in saying that it's very hard getting a house these days because I still have to pay off my vacated debt. In saying that the minimum rate for us Aboriginal girls, or incarcerated girls, is a very low sling because we get out and it's nothing. If we don't have a house or that support [overtalking 0:03:45] that more or less sets us up to fail.*

Therefore, support needs to be hands-on and looking at the full picture of the women's needs, beyond the material provisions:

- Interviewee: They've got no support here to help them plan. They're just being told, "This is what you've got to do. That's what you've got to do" and there you go. "Here's a piece of paper. It's got all your details on it" and that's it. That's all they're being given. Then they ask you for information for that, this and that, you know, "Who can I go and see when I get out?" and there's nothing here. No-one comes in to say, "Look, we're from such-and-such. We just wanted to come in to see if you might need any help with such-and-such", whether it's accommodation, whether it might be work. They've got Outcare and they do a brilliant job for both of those. But there just needs to be more of that, more things like, you know, "We might be able to help you do a course", you know, anything like that.*
- Interviewee: I didn't even need to do the crime that I was doing, I had heaps of – I had a lot of money and a lot of – I had everything but I just didn't have the support when I got out last time.*
- Facilitator: No.*



- Interviewee:* But because I didn't need accommodation and I didn't need – so that sort of helped, [service provider] wouldn't help me when I got out.
- Facilitator:* No.
- Interviewee:* In their eyes I didn't need their help but the first Christmas I had in five years I spent by myself. [cries]

While (most) women had had some contact with a (throughcare) service provider, others had no idea where to go and who they could access for help:

- Facilitator:* You need that support when you go out as well.
- Interviewee:* You do, yes. So when I leave that'll be one thing. I want therapy, counselling. A hundred per cent.
- Facilitator:* Where do you get that from?
- Interviewee:* That's the thing. I don't know.

What became clear from the women's perspectives was the need for an understanding of the home environment they had come from, the restrictive lives of imprisonment however providing boundaries and support, and then the transition to leaving prison into a society in which they were not welcome and had few resources.

## Employment

Finally there was the need for employment. While some of the women described previous professional careers, for most this was beyond the possibilities life ever offered and their income had mainly been derived from illegal activities or provided by abusive partners. For women who had been to prison more than once, regardless of previous employment history, the struggle in securing a job with a criminal record was clearly outlined.

- Interviewee:* ... find something where I can have the money and start actually saving and things like that. But to be honest I just – any job. Any job to hold me accountable. Wake me up in the morning, be responsible. Yeah.
- Interviewee:* Exactly. So getting a job is really something that needs to happen for us women in here. We need to get out and go straight to being employed somewhere. There should be a big facility or an organisation, there should be funding to support us with this kind of stuff in life. So that when we get out of prison we've got somewhere to go, we've got a life to go to when we leave here.

Most women expressed that employment was not only to provide an income and financial security, but also to create a sense of responsibility and accountability to stay on track, contributing to their identity and self-worth. In this way, having secure work may act as a protective factor against re-offending, having a multiplicity of beneficial effects outside of financial gain.

- Particular Subgroups

From the interviews, it was clear that some subgroups of women faced particular challenges because of their specific situation.

**CALD Women:** There were 5 women with a CALD background (3 China, Malaysia, Poland) who were serving (long) sentences in a WA prison – mainly for drug trafficking. They hardly spoke the language and referred to the cultural differences they were confronted with.

*Interviewee: Yeah. I'm Malaysian people. My life is horrible and then unhappy, painful. Everything bad for me. I with my family. Relationship not good. Friend, I just only one friend.*

*Facilitator: So when did you come to Australia?*

*Interviewee: I come to Australia. Just I need more money. So I'm trafficking.*

*Interviewee: How do I say? It's really hopeless for us, because – how I say? – okay, first thing is due to the language barrier, and then second thing is – so, I just say, like, female is coming to prison, most people because drugs, but as I know, most of the lady doing the drugs because one of them is money, and the second thing is the men. Most of we say – we still – in the Asian country, the woman still weak part from the relationship, so we say – we always follow what the man doing, or even men not really tell the truth for us. So, if we say something like that to the court, court not going to believe us.*

After serving their sentence, deportation is waiting for them. This was also the case for a women from New Zealand – regardless the fact her children live in WA (with their father).

*Interviewee: Yes, yes. I love Australia. I think Australia needs to adjust some of the policies like we stay in Australia and we work hard to build this country. We love this country and one little mistake that we're kicked out. We're kicked out from this country far away from our families. It's heartbreaking. But God can forgive people. Why the government, such a great government, can't give us a chance to say okay we'll give you a chance, you're welcome here but next time you do it again you're out? Yes. Everybody makes mistakes no matter it's big or we make serious mistakes. We came to jail. But doesn't mean that we won't change. We will change and there are a lot of girls will change. We learn this lesson. But just give us a chance to stay here with our family and we will try our best to build this country better. We're hard worker.*

**Life Sentenced Women:** We also spoke with several women with a life sentence, some of them would have, by the end of it, spend more time in prison than on the outside. Coping in the prison was harder for them, and prospects for release grim, due to the nature of the crime and the media attention that came with it.

*Interviewee: So you start feeling like you're - almost like a tree because, you know, the families come, they play around you, they make their imprint on you, but then they grow up and leave and you see their families grow up. It's sad because you see the girls come in and they leave and you mourn the loss of them as if they've passed away because you'll never see them again. Then their kids come in and you think - it's sad.*

*Interviewee: But at the same time don't make us feel like we're just recycled items, give us the benefit of the doubt and make us feel like we matter. Because I'm scared, I'm scared to even think about out there, part of me thinks I don't deserve to be out there.*

## **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN METROPOLITAN AND REGIONAL PRISONS**

From the visits to the metropolitan and regional prisons, I (Cl Tubex) was left with the feeling that regional prisons were somewhat more relaxed. Operating far away from Perth and none of them being maximum security, the local atmosphere seemed more friendly – as was also mentioned in the comments on individual prisons above. On the downside, in all four regional prisons, the section for women was only a small part of the bigger male section. As a result, programs were even more limited or non-existent, even when it comes to programs that are required for parole. For these women the



only option is to move to a metropolitan prison for the duration of the program, with as a consequence that they are far away from country, family and children, which was particularly uncomfortable for the regional Aboriginal women.

*Interviewee: Oh programmes, they've got a few programmes going on. Not really the important programmes that us girls need to be doing. Like, for our parole we have to do CCC and Pathways, which isn't available for the girls here [Greenough]. So they have to get sent off and do it elsewhere, which is a bit hard when they've got family and kids here. They've got like little education programmes, like maths and exploring persons and IT and stuff like that. But besides that, the big programmes that really make a difference in our reoffending and drug use and stuff, isn't really available for us here. Which is a bit sad. They do have it for the boys on that side, but yeah, just not enough girls to have anyone running it.*

*Interviewee: Another thing in here is we have to go down south for education courses, the CCC program. A lot of the females that are incarcerated in Roebourne are from the Western Desert, the majority of them. That's far away and they're not used to the city and the climate and stuff like that. They're illiterate and it's hard for them. It makes it harder in prison here. There's only 16 girls that can stay in prison here, so they're saying there's not enough girls for the program to run. We spoke to the girls and what we looked at is there's a work camp for the guys, so why can't they make a female a work camp for the females, to bring their numbers in so the CCC can be done here in Roebourne for people in the Pilbara, the Desert and stuff like that, because they need family connection business and stuff.*

## **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE 2008 RESEARCH AND NOW**

Due to a change in the methodology, we cannot make a reliable comparison to the 2008 survey. The 2008 survey collected quantitative and qualitative on a sample of 64 women – by a stratified proportional random sampling process with replacements, being representative of the total population on the following characteristics: ethnicity, age, security level, prison location and sentence status.

The current research reports on quantitative characteristics based on the total population of women in prison on 30 November 2022 and qualitative information based on a sample of 80 women who were selected according to ethnicity, sentencing status and previous imprisonment, however, due to the recruitment process as described above, changes might have happened. Further, over time the approach to research and methodology have changed and the current interviews were inviting the women's narrative instead of a question-led conversation. We also pointed out that for reasons of anonymity we were not given access to the TOMS data of the women we interviewed, therefore, when it comes to the comparison, we refer to the quantitative report.

Reading through the interviews in the current research, it is however noticeable that drug use, and more particularly the use of methamphetamine, is widespread and has a devastating impact on the women's lives, leading to addiction in a very short period of time. Further, the housing crisis WA is currently facing hits even harder on these and other vulnerable people, undermining one of the most basic needs for a safe and crime-free life. Finally, we were left with the impression that in this sample, there was dominant group of women, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who were facing serious problems in several aspects of life, often from a young age, and limited resources to avoid ending up in prison.

## VIEWS OF SERVICE PROVIDERS

Professor Tubex talked with 10 service providers spread over 4 locations and 5 services, each with their specific service expertise as outlined in the methodology section. They were asked about their views on the main drivers that lead women into prison and if they noticed changes over time.

The main drivers identified by the service providers included economic / financial struggle and a lack of support in the community. The latter related to many areas of need, particularly housing, mental health and alcohol and other drugs (AOD) problems.

*Metropolitan1: I think it's in my opinion how stressful life is with I guess this financial insecurity that most people are experiencing. ... Also we can't ignore the AOD use as well, which I guess financial security and drug use don't go great together and employment and drug use don't go great together and they don't go great together with family domestic violence either.*

*Kalgoorlie: When I say support, so there's not enough supports before prison, as in mental health, housing, alcohol and drug addiction, financial budgeting services and then when they're in prison, again, it's the same. There's not a lot of services for them to access.*

Housing was noted as a major concern by women in prison and this finding was mirrored by the service providers. Moreover, it was not only difficult to their clients but also affecting their staff.

*Kalgoorlie: But that's where we're at because there's no housing here. I've got clients and some of them have been on the waitlist for six years and still there's no end in sight. I talk to Housing quite often and we actually, and that's the other thing, we actually have a lot of empty houses here. We have a lot of empty houses in Menzies, in Laverton and in Leonora but we cannot get the tradies to come up. There's nowhere for the tradies to stay. ... We also have got a problem with keeping staff because there's nowhere for them to live. I, myself, was homeless for 11 months last year here. I used to have to drive nearly two hours every day to come to work and now I'm still doing that because I've had to move to Kambalda, which is 50 kilometres away and I drive in every day and home because I cannot get a house in Kalgoorlie.*

In addition to the instability caused by the accommodation crisis, the need for, and lack of mental health provisions was emphasised by several service providers.

*Metropolitan 1: Like society is changing in a way that people are more aware of mental health, even in the last five years I think there's been a lot of changes. But for some - so that's changed, but for some reason in this space, the Corrective Services space, it hasn't changed that much.*

Aligned with the stories from the women in prison, the service providers also believed that alcohol/drug use and other issues were as a result of difficult circumstances, rather than the cause.

*Roebourne: Well, I think that the main issue is that speaking from an alcohol and other drugs space, using AOD is a quick fix for a bigger problem. So for a lot of women here, DV is enormous and there's obviously intergenerational trauma and those types of things.*

*Abuse is very prevalent. So people do what makes them feel good so they can cope with what is not good.*

*It does make it bearable. But I suppose what really – for me, it's that understanding of if you take the AOD away, the problem is still there. So the AOD brings so much more. Let's put that aside and let's start to look at the problems you've got in the basket because whether you've got AOD or not, the problems aren't going anywhere. So it's then picking them apart.*

The service providers explained that what makes changing behaviour particularly difficult is the fact that for many of the women, their entire social context is also engaging in this kind of behaviour, and change implicates breaking with their family and peers.

*Metropolitan 1: I guess oftentimes, specifically with drug and alcohol use, their whole social circle, their whole life is that drug and alcohol use. So to cease using they'd have to be completely isolated from those people and break away. Then what we know about mental health is isolation leads to poor mental health or declining mental health. So it's almost like you have to give up everything.*

Service providers also noticed a substantial change in the pattern of AOD use. While some time ago cannabis was the biggest issue for women, this has now been replaced by methamphetamine, followed by cannabis and alcohol.

*Roebourne: Well, yes. Look, 10 years ago, cannabis was the main thing. When I lived here that long ago, there was very little methamphetamine. It's very, very big now. I think it would be methamphetamines, cannabis, alcohol. Alcohol was always an issue.*

Women in prison spoke about the difficulties of returning to FDV home situations and the experiences they had reporting violence to police. Service providers confirmed these experiences.

*Kalgoorlie: On another note, with the FDV side of things, a lot of our women and a lot of the clients that even come in here, they can feel failed by the system, by the police because I've had clients in here that have called the police multiple times for breaches of VROs, multiple times for help and they're not treated as priority. They're treated as a number, as a statistic.*

*I mean, the police themselves are understaffed here, they're under-resourced. They also probably get a bit complacent when we have continuous incidents happening at the same address with the same couple, but it only takes one time for someone to get hurt.*

Changes over time were referred to as a growing acknowledgment for the women that FDV is not acceptable, and that they can react.

*Roebourne: One thing that's starting to happen very, very slowly is the idea that DV is just a part of cultural life and I think women are starting to get a little bit more strong and they're starting to maybe fight back or jump in, like not accept some of these things that are happening to them.*

*Geraldton: Often with Aboriginal women we've seen a trend where long time victim survivors have turned to aggressors in their relationships and it also for me help to recognise that that's their own way of dealing with the threat responses.*

In that respect it was very helpful talking to the service providers working with men in a DFV context. They explained how difficult it is for men to open up about their issues, as they have been modelled violent behaviour and have been taught they need to be strong and admitting difficulties is considered a weakness. They again explained that alcohol and drugs are a way of dealing with difficult emotions and shame until it all becomes too much and inevitably explodes in violent behaviour.

*Geraldton: The notions of masculinity play into this as well. There's guys who, they don't talk because it's guys, we're supposed to be strong and tough and if you're strong and tough you don't talk about your feelings. So you can bury it and then you can bury it to the extent that maybe one night in the pub when something goes down and you're full of alcohol you might just glass a guy instead of having talked to someone 10 years ago about what was going on.*

*It's perceived as weakness and so when reality hits us and we have all these emotions that are stirring up inside us and we don't know how to deal with that, that's where drugs and alcohol can be the tool to help you through that time because we can't open up about it because our own family has deemed us weak.*

*Guilt and shame play a big role in these men as well. For the most part they don't want to be using violence but they're so ashamed of who they are and what they've done that they can't deal with those emotions underlying it and so they go into substance.*

The service provider working with women in the Barndimalgu FDV court in Geraldton referred to a practice they introduced to give the women a voice in the DV court process:

*Geraldton: So it prompted me to kind of initiate that practice where we submit the statements and originally I would have started just to submit statements to the court. The copies would go to the magistrate and prosecution and the defence lawyers, but with Barndi Court we want the opinion of the victims prior to the court process starting for the perpetrator. So I started to get permission from women to read the statements in the pre-court meeting. It gave an opportunity for their voices to be heard so they can explain the impact of family violence in their lives.*

*There's a one dimensional view of what safety looks like and what victims, survivors, want in their life. The recovery and healing can happen sometimes with the partner getting the support because even with relationship breakdown the connection, because they have children together, is still strong. So the healing for them means their partner or ex-partner getting the help through the court process, helping him understand his aggression and violence and his attitude towards her and also the blaming that the victim survivors go through.*

Several service providers emphasised that the situation is more problematic for women than for men, for several reasons: they do not have the same opportunities as men in prison; also after release the

offer is very selective and many women fall through the cracks; and the stigma of imprisonment seems to be bigger for women, particularly mothers.

*Metropolitan 2: I think there's a lot of stigma for women leaving prison so I think that can be really, really, really challenging to overcome that and advocate for clients and I do get quite passionate about that because there's a lot of stigma for women leaving prison.*

We also asked about the needs for the women they work with. Several service providers referred to the ongoing cycle of women getting into trouble, their children being taken away from them and the intergenerational problems that come with it. This reflected the immense sadness the women in prison told us about, and the need for this cycle to be broken so there can be change and hope.

*Kalgoorlie: I see quite often that we have children going into care and then they disconnect from their families. The mothers disconnect from their children and they don't have that culture, they don't have that bond. It sends them spiralling out of control because they don't have a voice when it comes to their children. Then they go to prison and they're separated, so not only children go to care, but mothers and fathers have got children that are in their care and they have that separation when they go into prison too. So there's no connection, there's no family and there's no cultural learning for these children, so they tend to feel disconnected and don't have an identity.*

*Metropolitan 1: I think it's that insight or that belief that they can - the hope, I think the hope is the main thing that they can do something else, because most of them so far it's not been their first order, it's not been their first experience in the criminal justice system so it's just rolled over, continued. But there has to be that break in the cycle that they then can see themselves out of that cycle.*

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As we started our narrative interviews asking women what led them into imprisonment, a whole cluster of interrelated issues unfolded. Drug use, particularly, was strongly related to the women's pathway into the CJS. However, drug use never came across as a stand-alone issue or a choice of life, drug use was a survival and coping mechanism for most women. For some women, a disrupted upbringing led them into confrontations with the CJS from a very young age, a pattern which was more outspoken with Aboriginal women. Disrupted childhoods included exposure to all sorts of abuse, as well as their own victimisation, which in turn led some to leaving home at an early age, getting involved with problematic peers, engaging in unhealthy relationships and being confronted with teenage pregnancies. For many women, interventions from justice and other government agencies came with a negative connotation, starting from an early age and being replicated in their own life and that of their peers and partners, contributing to their distrust of those who are supposed to be the regulators of our society.

The adult life of most of the women was dominated by two characteristics: motherhood and problematic relationships. Most women had children, and motherhood was both a source of sorrow, and a reason to keep going and do better. Children were a major priority in the women's narratives, regardless they were in contact or not. It was the hope that they could rebuild relationships and regain residency of their children that dominated the discussions about their future and release. Most of the women experienced DFV in their relationships and in several cases this was an ongoing pattern of severe violence. This cluster of intense emotional challenges, interrelated with drug abuse and mental health problems, led them into offending behaviour; directly or indirectly it turned the women into offenders.

Homelessness and poverty often added to the mix of challenges many women had to deal with, which became even more problematic after periods of imprisonment.

The already very daunting path through life that was the experience for most women we met in prison, was even more exacerbated for Indigenous women, as their histories had often been impacted by the Stolen Generation and ensuing intergenerational trauma, which led to early and frequent interactions with the CJS, as well as extensive confrontations with violence in their lives.

Breaking away from this pattern is made even more difficult by the fact that for most women, their partners and peers are also engaging in drugs and drinking, and making a clear cut leads to isolation and the loss of their social network. This is again more outspoken for Aboriginal women.

Based on the picture painted above, most of the women in prison who shared their stories with us were victims before they became offenders, they were survivors in circumstances that are beyond what one can cope with. Reaching out for help and support was not something that came natural to many of the women, and often confrontations with government organisations were negative, stopping them from trying themselves / next time. In that respect, they are 'criminalised women'. At a certain point, imprisonment seems the only solace, which is deeply problematic and unsettling.

But prisons are not meant to be a safety net for women in need and they are badly equipped to provide the services these women need in the best of circumstances. Adding to this an ongoing situation of



staff shortages and a limited offer of programs, is writing a recipe for disaster. In the regional prisons, where the women's section is part of a bigger male prison, the lack of access to programs was even more problematic and having to transfer to a Perth prison means being away from country, family and children. And still, for many of the women this situation was better than what they experienced on the outside. Prison was for far too many women the only place they could get away from violence, abuse, and drugs. A place that did provide them with a break from the complexity and stress of their life, could offer basic needs, some structure and service delivery.

Regardless the above, the women also referred to prison as the source of many frustrations, which causes a lot of harm to themselves and others. Women spoke about the pain of being separated from their loved ones, particularly their children.

Expectations and needs the women expressed for them to stay out of trouble after release from prison were scarily simple and rudimentary: shelter, support and some occupation / income. Accommodation was the most frequently mentioned concern, many of the women had no prospect of a safe place to go to after release, however crucial in preventing them from returning to violent situations, removing them from the temptation of drug taking peers, establishing a routine, supporting employment, and providing the stability needed for successfully getting access to their children again. After accommodation, the next mention was the need for support on release and during a transitional period of adjustment. This support needs to be hands-on and looking at the full picture of the women's needs, beyond the material provisions. Finally, there was the need for employment, not only to provide an income and financial security, but also to create a sense of responsibility and accountability to stay on track, contributing to their identity and self-worth. While some of the women described previous professional careers, for most this was beyond the possibilities life ever offered and a criminal record added to the struggle in securing a job.

## Conclusion

Nearly a decade and a half after the last qualitative Women in Prison project was conducted in 2008, the profile of women in prison is still very similar, if not worse. While life was problematic at the outside, the women we met in prison were very aware of what and where it went wrong in their lives, they were articulate in painting the picture of their journeys and the part they played in it. They displayed strengths throughout difficult lives and survived many circumstances which harmed them physically and emotionally. Every woman had dreams about leaving the prison door behind, but many were not confident they would never return. A supportive strengths-based approach is needed to sustain women in their endeavours to remain drug and crime free, build constructive lives for themselves and their loved ones, and to stop the revolving door back into imprisonment.

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## Appendix A – Participant Information Sheet



UWA Law School

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

#### **Profile of Women in Prison 2022-23**

WACSAR Criminal Justice Research Grant

**Researchers:** A/Professor Hilde Tubex (UWA) and Dr Natalie Gately (ECU)

**Contact:** [Hilde.Tubex@uwa.edu.au](mailto:Hilde.Tubex@uwa.edu.au) and [n.gately@ecu.edu.au](mailto:n.gately@ecu.edu.au)

Dear,

I would like to invite you to participate in the Profile of Women in Prison Project.

Women are the fastest growing subgroup in the prison population in Western Australia, and we are trying to find out what the main drivers are for this increase. Understanding this is important to inform the Department of Justice on how to better develop their practices and policies.

Therefore, I would like to invite you to be part of this research project and to participate in an interview.

In that interview you could talk about your life before prison, what led you into offending, your experiences of life in prison, and expectations for release. This could take about 30-60 minutes. Participation is voluntary and you can stop at any stage without reason of negative effects. In the case you want to withdraw, it is your decision what needs to happen with the information already provided. The interviews will be recorded if you agree to this, as it helps us to further analyse them. Your name will not be recorded and you will be given a code in case you want to withdraw and have your information removed from the data. All information you give is confidential, unless if you tell me about any illegal activity you are planning, in which case I am legally bound to report this. Data will be stored on password-protected computers at the participating universities, to which only the researchers will have access. They will be kept for 7 years as according to the university policy.

If you are willing to participate, please tell the person who introduced you to this research and they will contact me. I will then come and visit you in the prison at a convenient time.

If you have any further comments or questions after the interview, I will be around to answer them. For further information or complaints, please contact me on

[Hilde.Tubex@uwa.edu.au](mailto:Hilde.Tubex@uwa.edu.au)

This research has been approved by the UWA Ethics committee: 2022/ET000865

*"Approval to conduct this research has been provided by the University of Western Australia, in accordance with its ethics review and approval procedures. Any person considering participation in this research project, or agreeing to participate, may raise any questions or issues with the researchers at any time.*

*In addition, any person not satisfied with the response of researchers may raise ethics issues or concerns, and may make any complaints about this research project by contacting the Human Ethics Office at the University of Western Australia on (08) 6488 3703 or by emailing to [humanethics@uwa.edu.au](mailto:humanethics@uwa.edu.au)*

*All research participants are entitled to retain a copy of any Participant Information Form and/or Participant Consent Form relating to this research project."*

## Appendix B – Participant Consent Form



### **Profile of Women in Prison 2022-23 WACSAR** Criminal Justice Research Grant

**Researchers:** A/Professor Hilde Tubex (UWA) and Dr Natalie Gately (ECU)

#### Consent form for interview

I have read the information provided and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity and understand that I may withdraw at any time without reason and without negative effects.

I have been advised what data is being collected, what the purpose is, and what will be done with it upon completion of the research. I agree that research data gathered for the study may be used for publication.

I know that all information will be anonymous and my name will not appear on the transcription. All information I give is confidential. The only exception to this principle of confidentiality is if documents are required by law.

I agree that the interview will be audio-recorded but without my name on it.

Participant

Date

(Please note that as this document is not a contract between parties, it is not necessary that the researcher sign it. Nor is it necessary to have a witness.)

Contact details of the Researcher:

[Hilde.Tubex@uwa.edu.au](mailto:Hilde.Tubex@uwa.edu.au) OR [n.gately@ecu.edu.au](mailto:n.gately@ecu.edu.au)

*"Approval to conduct this research has been provided by the University of Western Australia, in accordance with its ethics review and approval procedures. Any person considering participation in this research project, or agreeing to participate, may raise any questions or issues with the researchers at any time.*

*In addition, any person not satisfied with the response of researchers may raise ethics issues or concerns, and may make any complaints about this research project by contacting the Human Ethics Office at the University of Western Australia on (08) 6488 3703 or by emailing to [humanethics@uwa.edu.au](mailto:humanethics@uwa.edu.au)*

*All research participants are entitled to retain a copy of any Participant Information Form and/or Participant Consent Form relating to this research project."*

**The University of Western Australia**

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CRICOS Provider Code 00126G

## Appendix C – Interview Schedule Guide

### DEMOGRAPHICS

- Place of birth
- Australian citizen
- Identify as Aboriginal / Torres Strait Islander
- CALD
- Age (bracket)

#### 1. Life before this imprisonment – tell me about:

- Accommodation
  - Where did you live
  - Who did you live with
- Children and family
  - Own children / in care

#### ***Earlier days: Life before – anything you want to share about your life before you got in touch with the CJS? Only prompts***

- Own childhood
- Education
- Employment
- Health
  - Mental health
  - Self-harm
- Relationship
  - How would you describe the relationship you were in before imprisonment?
  - Any issues?

#### 2. Triggers to offending: why would you say you got in trouble with the CJS? Prompts:

- Drug use / abuse
  - Related to offending
- Violence
  - Related to offending

#### ***What could have helped you in not getting into trouble / ending up in the prison system?***

#### 3. How do you experience life in prison?

- Have you been in prison before
- Experiences in prison
- Any relatives in prison
- Prison staff
- Other prisoners
- Prison activities
- Safety and privacy
- Relationships with the outside world
- What has been the worst thing about prison?
- What has been the best thing about prison?

#### 4. How do you see your life after release? Prompts:

- Planning
- What fears do you have about leaving prison?
- What would help you with those fears?
- What strengths do you feel you have that will help you when you leave prison?

## Women in Prison Distress Protocol

### Project ID 502 – Profile of Women in Prison 2022-23

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#### **In response to the condition:**

***Develop a distress protocol and outline how a culturally safe support service will be offered to Aboriginal Participants should they experienced psychological distress following an interview.***

We wish to advise the RAAC that we understand the inherent risks of this project and have considered our methodology and approach accordingly.

However, it is also important to note that from a strengths-based approach, participants may find the process of participating empowering. As (female) prisoners have little autonomy in their prison live, the women may feel that participating in the research is a cathartic and positive experience, rather than a negative triggering experience. It is therefore wrong to assume that all prisoners are vulnerable or unable to manage the limits of their own distress, which is why all prisoners should have the right to choose to participate. What is important is to ensure they can make an informed choice about their participation and to provide mitigating strategies to avoid and address distress, as outlined below.

#### **Prior to the Interview**

- Recalling events or explaining their current situation can be a source of stress for participants. To mitigate this, prospective participants are advised about the research and topics that will be discussed in the Participant Information Form, which will be handed to them when being invited to participate. With this information, they can make the informed decision -not - to participate.
- The content of the interview questions will be repeated at the start of the interview and potential participants will be advised not to participate if they don't feel up to it or if it might cause them too much stress.
- If the participant decides to continue, the informed consent will be signed.

#### **During and following an Interview**

- The interviewers are experienced in asking sensitive questions and being responsive to the women's demeanour when providing answers. Participants are given time to consider their answers and interviewers provide a non-threatening and judge-free reaction to sensitive content.
- At any time, participants can choose "not to answer". This allows participants to skip the question, but at the same time, respect their right to autonomy over how and whether they answer individual interview questions.
- If a participant does experience distress, the interviewer will stop for a while and ask if they wish to discontinue and stop the interview without any consequences.
- Both researchers have a degree in human science (social work and psychology) and over 20 years' experience working with forensic populations. They will be monitoring the emotional wellbeing of participants during the interview. They are experienced in interviewing Aboriginal people and have received specialist cultural training, so they can understand feelings of trauma and deal with them appropriately.

- After the interview, participants will be given the opportunity to debrief and time to unwind before returning to their cell.
- If needed, the prison has a counselling service with qualified psychologists, the researchers will ensure they obtain the details of these services when presenting to each individual prison.
- Interviews are conducted within the hours that these services are available. If an interviewer feels that a woman has been distressed, without breaking confidentiality they can ask for a counselling follow up for interviewees.
- The details of these services will be provided at the commencement of the interview.
- These strategies will be used for all women, but extra care and attention will be afforded to Indigenous participants.

A/Professor Hilde Tubex and Dr Natalie Gately

## Appendix E – Service Provider Information Flyer



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WESTERN  
AUSTRALIA**

### **Profile of Women in Prison**

**2022-23 WACSAR** Criminal

Justice Research Grant

**Researchers:** A/Professor Hilde Tubex (UWA) and Dr Natalie Gately (ECU)

**Contact:** [Hilde.Tubex@uwa.edu.au](mailto:Hilde.Tubex@uwa.edu.au)

Dear,

A matter of (inter)national concern is the fastest growing number of women in the prison system.

Given the fact that women are the fastest growing subgroup in the prison population in Western Australia, we are carrying out this research project to investigate what the main drivers are for this increase and if there are any changes in the profile of the women since we conducted the last Women in Prison Survey in 2008. Understanding this is important to inform the Department of Justice so they can better develop their practices and policies.

Therefore, as you are delivering services to women in prison, we would like to invite you to be part of this research project and to participate in a focus group with other local service providers to discuss what you see as the main drivers for women getting entangled with the criminal justice system, and any changes you have observed in their profile over time. We are also talking with women in prison, but we want to add your expert perspective based on your experiences with your clients.

I will be visiting ... **Place and time**. The focus group will take about 1-2 hours and will be organised at your convenience. The costs of the organisation of the focus group will be covered by the project (venue, coffee, tea, transport). The focus group will be recorded with your consent, without your name, and you will have the opportunity to read and edit the transcript.

If you are willing to participate, or if you have any further questions, please contact me on: [Hilde.tubex@uwa.edu.au](mailto:Hilde.tubex@uwa.edu.au)

This research has been approved by the UWA Ethics committee: 2022/ET000865

Looking forward to hearing from you,  
A/Professor Hilde Tubex, UWA Law  
school

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CRICOS Provider Code 00126G



## Appendix F – Service Provider Interview Schedule

### Profile of Women in Prison – Service Provider Interview Schedule

1. **Before starting note the agency, role and length of time in the field.**
2. How would you describe the profile of your female clients?
  - a. Probe: any differences in profile between Indigenous, Caucasian and CALD female clients?
3. What are, according to your experience the main drivers of women getting in touch with the Criminal Justice System?
  - a. Probe: differences according to above criteria
4. What do you think the increase of the number of women in prison is related to?
  - a. Probes (above) also crime types, SES, etc.
5. Have you observed any changes over time in the profile of women in prison? If yes, which ones?
6. What do you think needs to be done to address the growing number of women in prison?
7. In your opinion, what does a successful return to community look like?