WOMEN IN CORRECTIONS: GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

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Introduction

In 1978 a report on a prisoner in Fairlea Women’s Prison in Victoria read as follows.

Mary
8:05 Opened cell. Had shower, cleaned teeth.
8:30 Cleaned her cell, also shower room.
10:00 Morning tea given.
11:00 Visit by Miss Miller, Miss Holland.
11:15 Given hand mower and broom. Did some mowing while complaining loudly.
11:50 Lunch given, dropped plate on floor of cell.
1:00 Opened cell. Mary cleaned up mess. Worked steady at mowing grass. Swept path.
   Worked really hard.
3:45 Had shower. Tea given. Locked in.
4:15 Water offered but refused.¹

Since this report in 1978 much has changed in the management of women’s prisons in Victoria. Prisoners now have more access to rehabilitation programs, counselling and education. In the last two decades the number of women being detained, convicted and incarcerated has also increased dramatically and the profile of the women who are in prison has changed significantly. However, one thing remains the same. The question of how to provide a best practice response to our women’s prison population is one that still challenges us. Women constitute a small minority of the total prison population and there is a risk of their being overlooked or being perceived as having a lower priority in the provision of services and programs than their male counterparts. We are still learning how to respond appropriately to the specific needs of women offenders. The opportunity created at this conference to share knowledge on how correctional programs and administrative practices can best meet the unique needs of women in a manner that recognises their diversity, is one which I warmly welcome.

As the Commissioner for Correctional Services in Victoria, I am responsible for:
• Providing leadership to the Victorian Corrections System
• Providing policy advice to Government on correctional service issues
• Strategic planning and policy development for the whole adult corrections system in Victoria
• Setting service delivery standards
• Monitoring the performance of prison operators in Victoria both public and private
• Sentence management (assessing and classifying each prisoner.)

In my presentation today I intend to address nine key issues which include:
• Sentencing trends in Victoria
• Women in Community Correctional Services (CCS)
• Profile of women in prison
• Key features of a good quality correctional service response

• Approaches to the management of women prisoners
• Dealing with the issue of drugs in prison
• Maintaining links with families and children
• Pre release and post release support
• Women and leadership in Corrections.

**Sentencing Trends in Victoria**

In the last two decades the number of women imprisoned worldwide has escalated dramatically. In Western nations, women prisoner populations continue to grow at a rate substantially greater than men’s. At the same time there has been a developing awareness that correctional services are not meeting the specific needs of women offenders. The 1999 Australian Bureau of Statistics Prison Census revealed that female inmates make up 6% of the Australian prison population. This represents a 3% increase from the 1997 census.²

There are two women’s prisons in Victoria. The maximum security Metropolitan Women’s Correctional Centre was until very recently the first privately managed women’s prison in the world outside the USA. However, on 3rd October this year, as a result of persistent and repeated service delivery failures at the Metropolitan Women’s Correctional Centre, the Minister for Corrections carefully considered my advice and determined that the state must intervene under the Corrections Act (Emergency Powers) to stabilise the prison. The prison is now being managed by CORE- the Public Correctional Enterprise. There are some unique issues arising from this experience. One of the issues that became apparent was the confused management philosophy and the lack of clarity of the disciplinary regime enforced at the prison. I will explore some of these issues later when I look at approaches to the management of women prisoners. At this stage negotiations are taking place regarding the long term status of the contract between the private provider and the Government.

The other women’s prison in Victoria is Tarrengower prison, an innovative minimum security women’s prison in rural Victoria. In total there are just over 3,200 prisoners in Victoria who are housed in 13 different prisons. There are also 7,000 offenders serving Community Based Orders who are supervised from more than twenty community correctional centres.

Despite recent and continuing growth, Victoria has maintained a relatively low imprisonment rate in comparison with national and international trends. 1998 was the fourth consecutive year in which Victoria’s overall crime rate was the lowest of all of the state and territory jurisdictions in Australia.³ Reflecting this outcome, Victoria’s imprisonment rates are also consistently the lowest in Australia. However, in line with national trends there has been a substantial increase in the Victorian women’s prison population. This growth can be attributed to an increased number of offenders being sentenced to prison and increasing sentence lengths for serious offences. Other factors influencing increasing prison population and receptions in Victoria include increased police activity in relation to drug related crimes and more short term custodial sentences being given.⁴ The trends in Victoria’s women’s prison population are consistent with the national picture. For example, women prisoners comprise a relatively small proportion of the Victorian population and account for about 6%.

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⁴ Department of Justice Victoria *Annual Report 1998-1999* p.20
of the prison population, consistent with the national trend. Likewise, the data reveals that between June 1995 and June 1998 the number of women prisoners in Australia increased 35%. In Victoria during the same period the number of women increased 32%.

The rise in population creates serious problems for the prison system’s capacity to accommodate these women. In the short term, provision has been made for temporary beds and ‘double bunking.’ However, such short term solutions are unsatisfactory. There are a number of implications which arise from operating a prison system with this level of overcrowding. These include an increase in incidents, compromised placement decisions because of reduced placement options, rising tensions among prisoners due to space constraints and strain on prison infrastructures such as programs, visits, industries and health services.

Another serious issue is the number of women being held in police cells as a result of limited prison beds. At any one time there may be between ten to fifteen women in police cells waiting for prison beds to become available. The cells are designed for prisoners to stay in for a period of two to three days. In fact, women have been held in police cells for up to three weeks. The conditions in police cells are not appropriate for women to be accommodated in for long periods of time. The fact that women are being held in police cells waiting for prison beds to become available is a major concern.

In general, women prisoners are disadvantaged by the nature of their small numbers. Nearly all jurisdictions in Australia have limited placement options for female prisoners and in some jurisdictions women’s facilities are still housed within male prisons. Due to the limited placement options available, women’s prison sites need to be multifunctional to meet the variety of needs of the women prisoners. The implications for the design of women’s facilities are significant, as we do not have the numbers to adapt individual prison sites to a particular population type as we do in the male system. Further, women do not have access to the same range of on site facilities that are available in many of the men’s prisons. In the Victorian women’s prison system there is no prison hospital or Acute Assessment Unit as there is in the male prison system. Another issue relates to the fact that the design of many women’s prisons tends to understate security needs. For example, in the induction unit of the Metropolitan Women’s Correctional Centre there is only one call button available for prisoners to call staff. This may not be sufficient to protect vulnerable and first time prisoners who are locked in with more experienced prisoners in the induction unit overnight. Unfortunately idealistic planning around the security needs of women does not tend to take into account genuine security needs emerging partly as a result of a more drug affected population.

The Victorian Government maintains a policy commitment that prison should be the sentence of last resort for non serious offenders and that alternative sentencing options and early intervention programs should be available and should be developed to create a balanced continuum of criminal sanctions. However, forecast growth continues to show an increase in Victoria’s imprisonment rate.

**Co-ordinated Reducing Offending Strategy**

In order to address some of these issues, the Victorian Drugs Policy, Crime Prevention and Corrections Sub Committee of cabinet has been asked to develop a whole of Government strategy to reduce offending. This is in response to a desire to reduce levels of crime in Victoria and to respond to the rapid demand growth on Victoria’s correctional system. The

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reducing offending strategy has important links with the Government’s social policy agenda to strengthen social exclusion. The strategy aims to identify key subgroups within the offender population and respond appropriately and effectively to their characteristics and needs. The strategy has been framed to reflect the emerging profiles and characteristics of young and adult offenders and to forecast growth in custodial numbers.

There are a number of elements to the development of a coordinated reducing offending strategy including:

a) The development of a juvenile justice strategy
b) The development of a number of diversionary options to ensure that prison is seen as the option of last resort and that the progression of offenders further into the criminal justice system is minimised
c) The provision of effective rehabilitation programs in prison, and
d) Pre release and post release programs to assist successful integration into the community.

My Office is also currently in the process of developing a rehabilitation framework which will examine ‘what works’ principles for effective intervention. As part of this project we will be looking at gaps in the current offending behaviour programs available in prisons and where possible attempting to rectify these gaps.

Women’s Correctional Services Advisory Committee

In order to address those issues specific to women, a Women’s Correctional Services Advisory Committee will be established later this year to provide expert advice and analysis on gender specific issues in corrections, including best practice approaches to post release support for women prisoners. The committee will maintain independence through an independent Chair and through a broad cross section of both Government and non Government representatives.

Women in Community Correctional Services (CCS)

I would now like to examine the issues facing women in Community Correctional Services. The majority of women in the criminal justice system are on community based orders. As at 30 June 2000 there were 1,132 women on community based orders in Victoria. On the same day there were 198 female prisoners in custody. The number of women on community correctional orders far outweighs the number of women who are incarcerated, however, little analysis has been conducted on the characteristics of women on community correctional orders and their specific needs are often overlooked. The main focus of my paper today is on women prisoners. This is partly due to the lack of information and research that has been conducted on the needs of women in community correctional services. The specific characteristics of women involved with community correctional services is an area in need of further research and policy development.

As with the prison population, the majority of women sentenced to orders supervised by CCS have drug or alcohol dependency as a causal factor. The lives of many women on community based orders are characterised by issues such as family violence, unstable accommodation, limited support networks, health problems, unemployment histories, contact with child

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6 Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner, 30 June 2000
7 Department of Justice Victoria, Review of Community Correctional Services in Victoria: A Draft Report to the Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner 13 October 2000 Appendix 2 Vol 2 p.97
protection services and poor financial management. Child care may be an issue for women engaged in community work. While Victoria adopts a flexible approach in relation to primary carer responsibilities, international evidence illustrates that child care arrangements may still be an overarching concern of mothers on community correctional orders.8

Most of the women who progress through to the prison system have had prior contact with community corrections. The high rate of women breaching community based orders is a major issue. Of a sample of women in custody taken in September 1999, 56% had breached at least one community order.9 In the year 1999-2000 the total breach rate by males and females for all community correctional orders was 30.1%.10 The number of deaths occurring while people are on CCS orders is also highly disturbing. Between January 1999 and January 2000, fifteen women on community correctional orders have died. The majority of these deaths were a result of drug overdose.11

Currently in Victoria, a review of the role, functions, responsibilities and structure of community services is being undertaken to clarify the role of CCS in the criminal justice system and to identify the current needs and challenges of the offender population including women.

Profile of Women in Prison

It is important to have a clear understanding of the complex profile of the women who are coming into contact with the criminal justice system. International and Australian studies indicate that most women offenders have a background of extreme social and economic disadvantage. Factors such as unemployment and substance abuse impact on the lives of many women prisoners. Histories of family violence and sexual assault are also strong themes in the lives of these women. It is imperative that in our provision of services to these women we acknowledge their histories and understand the reasons they come to be incarcerated.

In Victoria, data relating to the most serious offence for which women prisoners were charged or sentenced as at 30 June 1999, suggests that women are most likely to be in prison for property related offences (35.2%) followed by offences against the person (18.4%) and drug offences (18.4%). This profile is very different from the men’s offending profile. Data from the same period suggests that men are most likely to be in prison for offences against the person (34.0%) or property offences (24.5%). Drug offences were the most serious offence for only 12.5% of the men’s population during the same time period.12 Given that imprisonment is seen as an option of last resort in Victoria, the Victorian women’s offender profile is very different from jurisdictions such as Queensland where admissions of women for fine defaulting have a significant impact on the correctional system. For example in October 1999, 35 women were admitted to Queensland prisons for fine defaulting, amounting to 30.43% of all offences.13 The Victorian imprisonment rate is only about half the national rate per 100,000 adults. In June 2000, 10 women in Victoria were in custody per 100,000 compared with a rate of 18 per 100,000 in New South Wales and 35 per 100,000 in Western

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8 Barker, Mary Community Service and Women Offenders University of Bristol Faculty of Law 1993 p. 6
9 Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner, 2000
11 Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner 2000
12 Ibid. (Inset)
13 Women’s Policy Unit, Department of Corrective Services Queensland, Profile of Female Offenders Under Community and Custodial Supervision in Queensland 2000 p.14
Australia. Victoria has the lowest female imprisonment rate of all Australian states. This means that Victoria tends to have a much ‘tougher,’ higher risk population in prison than in many of the other states.

Of a sample of women in custody taken in September 1999:
- 56% had breached at least 1 community order
- 36% presented with psychiatric issues
- 15% were on methadone programs prior to imprisonment
- 24% had partners in prison for drug related offences.

Of all women received into custody only 15% in this sample had no prior contact with community corrections or prisons. In general the recidivism rate for women is extremely high with almost 61% of Victorian women offenders having been in prison previously.

Of those women undergoing custodial sentences, as at 30 June 1999, 69.4% were serving a sentence of under twelve months. Age distribution data in Victoria indicates that 34.1% of women prisoners were under 25 years of age. Employment statistics also illustrate that nearly 80% of women in prison were unemployed or not part of the paid labour force at the time they were initially received into prison. Women also had poor education levels. Only 76% of women reported having undertaken some secondary level schooling and only 20% had completed secondary, tertiary or other post secondary education.

Statistics show that substance abuse is an issue for a large number of women prisoners. Of first time offenders, 68% report drug abuse prior to imprisonment. This increases to 92% of women who are serving a second or subsequent sentence. More recent data indicates that all of the women prisoners under 24 years of age identified drug influence as an issue relating to their imprisonment.

Women offenders also tend to enter prison with a history of poor health. Both nationally and internationally women prisoners report health problems at twice the rate of male prisoners. The most frequent health problems among women prisoners are drug and alcohol addiction, poor dental care, gynaecological diseases and chronic health problems. The mental health of female offenders is also characterised by high rates of depression, anxiety disorders and personality disorders, particularly borderline personality disorder.

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14 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Corrective Services 4512.0 June Quarter 2000
15 Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner, 2000
17 Ibid. (Inset)
18 Ibid. (Inset)
19 Ibid. (Inset)
20 Ibid. (Inset)
21 Department of Justice Victoria, Draft Submission to Drug Policy Expert Committee August 2000 p.31
22 PIMS Data Warehouse, Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner June 2000
23 Martin, Jennifer “Mental Health Needs of Women Prisoners: Policy Implications ” Just Policy No. 18 April 2000 p.33
24 Ibid. p.33
What emerges here is a picture of the female offender as a recidivist, imprisoned for non violent offences, undergoing short sentences with significant drug abuse issues, as well as multiple risk factors for self harm including histories of substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, depression and multiple dysfunctional relationships.

**Key Features of a Good Quality Correctional Service Response**

In light of these issues what then are the key features of a good quality correctional service response? Women have been offending for many years now and yet we are still struggling to identify the key elements of a best practice corrections response.

In 1980, the United Kingdom established the HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, an independent body to report on the condition of prisons and the treatment of prisoners. One of the key tasks of this body is to undertake a planned inspection program at prisons comprising a number of full inspections each year. The framework for inspection of quality is based on four criteria of a ‘healthy’ prison. In assessing the performance of individual prisons, this approach provides for an holistic evaluation of the overall ‘health’ of a prison as follows:

1. **The weakest prisoners feel safe**
2. **Treating prisoners with respect to promote self-esteem and model desirable behaviour**
3. **A full, constructive and purposeful regime that provides a range of opportunities for self improvement and staff skills that actively encourage prisoners to utilise these opportunities**
4. **Strengthening family links and provision of resettlement training to prevent reoffending.**

A healthy prison is also vital to staff well-being and it is important to foster an environment where employees feel safe and are treated with respect. These criteria are considered to represent the key criteria required for quality service delivery outcomes in correctional services in the UK. They are equally relevant to the evaluation of correctional services in Australia.

In addition to these criteria I believe the following are a few essential components of a best practice response to women offenders. These components merely form part of a bigger picture and are by no means a definitive answer to the questions we are discussing today.

- Greater support upon entry into prison
- A comprehensive induction program
- Daily case management
- Peer educator and prisoner listener schemes
- Greater provision for visits
- Mentoring programs
- More incentive based programs
- Anti bullying strategies
- Intensive pre release and post release support programs.
Approaches to the Management of Women Prisoners

I would like to move on now to the issue of the management of women prisoners. In order to understand the context in which the management of prisoners occurs, it is important to fully realise the nature of staff-prisoner relationships and the role they play within the prison. One pertinent comment from the United Kingdom Home Office states:

“At the end of the day, nothing else that we can say will be as important as the general proposition that relations between staff and prisoners are at the heart of the whole prison system and that control and security flow from getting that relationship right. Prisons cannot be run by coercion; they depend on staff having a firm, confident and humane approach that enables them to maintain close contact with prisoners without abrasive confrontation.”

Some of the recent studies by Alison Liebling investigating the role of prison officers and prisoners are extremely useful, particularly in the context of the management of women prisoners. Liebling maintains that there is a consensus among prison staff that their work consists mainly of grey areas with small areas of clarity, despite the existence of an increasing number of rules and regulations. There are constant tensions between common sense and the rule book, between ‘what works’ and ‘what is right.’ The diversity of circumstances encountered in prison make the use of discretion both inevitable and necessary. However, there are no explicit principles and guidelines to aid staff in the exercise of the discretion they hold. Often prison officers develop a knowledgability, a practical consciousness which enables them to make decisions without necessarily being able to verbalise how each decision is made. Studies of relationships raise interesting questions about what shapes staff-prisoner relationships, who shapes such relationships – is it officers, prisoners or management or a combination and to what degree? Without giving some attention to such questions, it is impossible to reach any proper understanding of what it is to ‘get it right.’

With this in mind, Liebling and Price describe a situation in Britain where recent accusations of appeasement by staff and conditioning by prisoners has led to a renewed concern for ‘boundaries.’ Several studies show the officer as caught between the demands of the management subculture and the prisoner subculture. The job of the prison officer to:

1. Maintain secure custody in a context where people are held in confinement against their will, and
2. Provide prisoners with care and humanity

can often place officers in irreconcilable positions and leave staff holding apparently contradictory and inconsistent views. Relationships between officers and prisoners are not straightforward and contain complex power dynamics. Proximity can have its dangers in such relationships- as well as its rewards.

The complexity of the staff-prisoner relationship becomes significant in an analysis of the management needs of women prisoners. The literature suggests that a different managerial approach is required for women who are more concerned with interpersonal relationships and

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27 Liebling, Alison and Price, David “Staff- Prisoner Relationships: A Review of the Literature” Prison Service Journal No.120 November 1998 p.4
28 Ibid. p.5
29 Ibid. p.5
30 Ibid. p.5
likely to express emotion differently from men. The capacity to respond to expressions of emotion, open communication with offenders, and a less authoritarian manner have been cited as important factors in the management of women prisoners.\textsuperscript{31} Staff must have sufficient time to interact with women and help them deal with problems. Training is also required in suicide prevention, preventing self harm (which is relatively high among female offenders), as well as dealing with bullying and meeting the specific needs of mothers and children.\textsuperscript{32} One UK report suggests that a degree of informality between staff and prisoners will assist new prisoners to adjust to prison life.\textsuperscript{33}

The key issue then is how does one balance these management requirements with the secure containment of prisoners? According to Liebling and Price “Officers require good observational, analytic and social skills... the boundaries of their relationships with prisoners may need to be finely drawn- relationships can go wrong by being too close, too distant, too rigid or too flexible.”\textsuperscript{34}

However, meeting the emotional needs of women as well as managing the increasing violence within the female prisoner population is a complex and potentially contradictory task. The potential for stand-overs and assaults between women prisoners is high. Increasingly violence is becoming common in the female prisoner population. Current indications suggest that in light of changes to women’s patterns of crime and the impact of chronic substance abuse, the proportion of difficult to manage prisoners will continue to increase. One ex prisoner comments:

“I’d encountered violence in my life but the reality of violence perpetrated by women upon other women was a new and often very ugly experience. Even though you may learn to accept it as part of the daily life of an unreal and insular community, I could never come to terms with the ferocity and brutality of some of it.”\textsuperscript{35}

She continues:

“Violence is a part of prison culture: however, I believe the approach by prison management and prison officers toward women held in prisons certainly plays a major role in whether that violence escalates and becomes an ongoing part of that culture. The education of prison officers... toward understanding the reality of these women’s emotional and physical histories and their level of well being is an integral part of changes that need to occur in order for the women to gain insight into their own behaviours and beliefs so they can modify or change them.”\textsuperscript{36}

Some of the experiences at the Metropolitan Women’s Correctional Centre in Victoria highlight the difficulties relating to the management of women prisoners. The maximum security women’s prison was designed to be an open plan facility with no formal separation between mainstream cottage units. It was believed at the time that this design would enable

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Morash, Merry, Bynum, Timothy and Koons, Barbara Women Offenders: Programming Needs and Promising Approaches in US Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice Research in Brief, Office of Justice Programs, August 1998 p.1
\item \textsuperscript{32} HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons for England and Wales Women in Prison: A Thematic Review London Home Office 1997 p.80
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid. p.81
\item \textsuperscript{34} Liebling, Alison and Price, David “Staff- Prisoner Relationships: A Review of the Literature” Prison Service Journal No.120 November 1998 p.4
\item \textsuperscript{35} Shanahan, Lauren “No Winners Here” in Cook, Sandy and Davies, Sue Harsh Punishment: International Experiences of Women’s Imprisonment Northeastern University Press Boston 2000 p.14
\item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid. p.15
\end{itemize}
women to interact and mix in small communities in an environment which was more suited to them. However, since the prison was built in 1996, the women’s profile has changed significantly, with the number of women escalating dramatically and an increasingly violent population profile. In light of these changes, the flexibility of the prison design has actually not been to the advantage of the women. In fact, managing the prison with no formal separation between the mainstream cottage units has been extraordinarily difficult, for instance in controlling incidents that occur between prisoners.

The way in which we should be approaching the management of women prisoners is an area that we have not yet got right. We are still struggling to find the right balance between offering support, listening to women, addressing their specific needs and at the same time ensuring the security of the prison and the safety of other prisoners and staff. The training of correctional officers is a critical issue in this regard and there is some question as to whether six weeks of training is sufficient for correctional officers. It is imperative that there are good role models and mentors in the system and that adequate supervision and quality assurance systems are in place. There also needs to be a level of vigilance in management that is applied consistently. For example, conducting disciplinary hearings months after an incident has taken place will not give rise to a consistent management approach.

**Dealing with the Issue of Drugs in Prison**

Data indicates that the level of drug use occurring in the women’s prison system in Victoria is of significant concern. This is in spite of barrier control and efforts to prevent drugs entering the prison. In 1999-2000, 9099 visitors were searched across the Victorian prison system through the use of Passive Alert Detection (PAD) dogs. Approximately one third of all these searches were conducted at the Metropolitan Women’s Correctional Centre (MWCC), more than any other prison in the state.\(^{37}\) In spite of this, the results for random general illicit drug use during the same period at MWCC were the highest of any other prison in the state.\(^{38}\) In part this may be attributed to the performance difficulties experienced by this prison. Another issue specifically related to women is the ease with which drugs can be concealed internally and brought into the prison. The level of overdose occurring at the Metropolitan Women’s Correctional Centre from August 1999 to August 2000 was also the highest of any other prison in the state with 45.83% of all prison overdoses in the state occurring at this prison.\(^{39}\)

The high levels of prescription medication taken by women prisoners is also an issue of serious concern. In the year 1999-2000, 48% of all urine samples collected at MWCC and 30.4% of all samples collected at Tarrengower prison tested positive to medication. In comparison, in male prisons, only 10% of returned urine samples on average tested positive to medication.\(^{40}\) Drug testing reveals that the Metropolitan Women’s Correctional Centre has the highest level of benzodiazepine use of any maximum security prison in Victoria.\(^{41}\) One group of self reporting prisoners indicated that the most common drugs used by them were cannabis, heroin, methadone, benzodiazapines and home brew.\(^{42}\)

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\(^{38}\) Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner, September 2000

\(^{39}\) Ibid.


\(^{41}\) Ibid. p.18

\(^{42}\) Department of Justice Victoria, *Review of the Victorian Prisons Drug Strategy* September 1999
Currently prisoners receive an identified drug user status (IDU) for a range of drug or alcohol related offences. The conferring of an IDU status results in the imposition of sanctions upon the prisoner which are applied to each IDU level. These sanctions include receiving restricted access to contact visits, being required to participate in drug and alcohol programs and receiving restricted classification options to maximum and medium security prisons. It has been argued that women experience the loss of contact visits differently to men, particularly in relation to access to their children, that they require a greater level of incentives to remain drug free and that they are more difficult to engage in treatment than men. These are issues that need to be taken into account in the development of policy initiatives relating to sanctions imposed upon women. Further, the limited placement opportunities available for women means that where men can be classified to a medium security prison as a result of their IDU status, the only option for women is the maximum security Metropolitan Women’s Correctional Centre.

In order to address some of these concerns, my Office is currently redeveloping the Victorian Prisons Drug Strategy. A review of the strategy conducted by KPMG in 1999 indicated broad support for the strategy but raised the need to consider the aims of managing drugs in prison consistent with harm minimisation principles, given the difficulty of achieving a drug-zero goal within prisons. We are at the point where harm reduction measures must be integrated within Victoria’s correctional drug policy to reflect community developments in the management of substance abuse. In response to the review of the Victorian Prisons Drug Strategy and Government policy initiatives, my Office is undertaking a redevelopment of Correctional Drug Policy.

The redevelopment of the correctional drug policy will look at:

- The development of diversion options to imprisonment for drug dependent people
- The development and piloting of a range of drug treatment pre and post release programs
- The implementation of an expanded methadone program so that all prisoners have the option to either commence methadone during incarceration or prior to release. Prisoners already on methadone programs will be able to continue the program on entry into prison
- The development of policy initiatives for managing the current Identified Drug User (IDU) system in a way which better balances the goals of safety and deterrence with the reality that drug dependence can often be a chronic relapsing condition
- The development of treatment programs addressing the abuse of prescription drugs
- The development of guidelines for GP’s in the administration of psychotropic drugs.

**Maintaining Links with Families and Children**

Approximately 75% of women who enter prisons in Victoria have dependent children.43 For most women, prison entails separation from their children and for many, the welfare and future of their children remains a constant source of anxiety during imprisonment.

Helen Barnacle is a former prisoner who at the time she was sentenced was given the longest drug related sentence of any woman in Victoria. She is now a psychologist, drug counsellor and prison reform campaigner. She was also the first female prisoner in Victoria who was able to keep a child in prison beyond the initial one year age limit. She writes:

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“When Ali first left the prison at the age of four, I would think about her all day, every day from the moment she would be getting up in the morning to the moment she’d be going to bed. I used to imagine her getting dressed for school without me. I used to see her laughing little face at the school ground… I used to imagine someone else reading her a story in bed at night before she went to sleep. I used to imagine someone else getting “Ted” and “blanket” for her. I nearly went mad thinking about her and what she was doing. I had to find another way to cope. I had to find a way of not thinking about her all the time, of not being consumed by her absence. I had to find a way to fill that black, emotional hole…”

Mothers in prison face multiple problems in maintaining relationships with their children. The distance between prison and children’s homes, lack of transportation and limited economic resources compromise a woman’s ability to maintain these relationships. Because of their relatively small numbers and therefore less prison sites, women are also more likely to be held at a considerable distance from home and in locations which are difficult to access. This creates great hardship for the significant proportion of women who are primary carers of children or other relatives.

In Victoria, children are able to stay with their mothers in prison up to school age where it is deemed to be in the best interests of the child. At any one time there may be between five and eight children in women’s prisons in Victoria. However, although many women do not want to be separated from their children, many do not believe that prison is an appropriate place for their children because of the level of violence that can occur and the lack of opportunity for the child to develop and be stimulated.

Victoria is the only state in Australia which operates a formal residential visits program, the purpose of which is twofold:

1. To support and maintain a prisoner’s close relationship with their child
2. To support and maintain a prisoner’s longstanding relationship with their partner and/or adult family members.

The program has the longer term objective of assisting prisoners to prepare themselves for reintegration into the community. The program allows families to spend quality time together in an area which provides privacy to the prisoner and her visitors. Family visits are conducted at both the Metropolitan Women’s Correctional Centre and the Tarrengower women’s minimum security prison. At Tarrengower a private bunkhouse is available for weekend visits for a maximum of two nights and three days. A school holiday program is also undertaken at Tarrengower which allows mothers to have their school age children stay with them in their accommodation unit for up to four days.

Currently at the maximum security women’s prison in Victoria, children on general visits are restricted to the visits centre. I understand that in the past children were given freedom of access to the whole prison facility. This change in practice occurred in 1998 at MWCC and can be attributed to the occurrence of a number of serious drug related incidents involving

children. The impact of the drug culture on women in prison has been such that the unwritten code of honour that may have been present in the past and meant that women did not involve their children in drug related incidents cannot be guaranteed today. This creates a dilemma and makes it difficult to be more flexible in arrangements where contact with children is concerned. It is certainly not ideal to restrict children to a visits centre. Prison visit centres tend to be fairly sterile environments which are not particularly conducive to enhancing positive parent child interactions. There is scope for improving prison visit centres and making them more child friendly.

It has been observed that separation of women from their children can have a negative impact upon long term rehabilitation objectives and that disruption to the role of mother can impact negatively upon self esteem.48 Similarly, for children, normal developmental stages and growth milestones can be affected by the trauma of imprisonment of a parent. Many children experience disruption in care when their mother is imprisoned and may experience multiple placements, foster care and loss of the family home.49 The link between imprisonment of a family member and future offending behaviour is significant.50 Women’s connectedness with their children and their families is an important aspect of the women’s offending profile which we need to respond to in the provision of appropriate programs and services.

**Pre Release and Post Release Support**

Another issue of serious community concern relates to the number of deaths that are occurring post release. Release from prison and the months immediately following have been identified as traumatic, highly stressful and a time when women are at risk of significant harm. In Victoria between 1987 and 1997, 93 women have been identified as dying shortly after release from prison.51 Currently in Victoria less than 11% of females are released with parole supervision.

In order to understand women’s post release mortality, it is important to contextualise it in relation to women’s circumstances prior to, during and immediately following imprisonment. One female ex-prisoner remarks:

“It’s so hard to get out in the real world and cope especially when you are expected to just walk out of jail and just get on with your life. You have not dealt with any of your problems, (that) got you there in the first place.”52

Traditionally, it was not seen as the role of correctional services to take responsibility for offenders post release and in the past our attempts to assist women reintegrate into the community have been minimal. We spend on average $55,000 a year to keep someone in prison and only about $300 a year upon release. However, this attitude is gradually changing as it becomes increasingly clear that structured pre and post release support has a crucial role to play in intervening in a cycle of recidivism which results in almost two thirds of offenders reoffending and returning to the system.

48 The Forensic and Applied Psychology Research Group, University of South Australia


50 Ibid. p.83


52 Heinrich, Leah “Somebody’s Daughter” *Warrnambool Standard* Saturday 3 June 2000
One female prisoner describes the sense of alienation and isolation commonly experienced prior to release:

“I remember back to how I felt when I was first locked up four years ago, how isolated and scared I was not knowing what was ahead of me. Dreading getting unlocked of a morning, having to pull on a brave face as if nothing affected me just to get through the day. I had great difficulties trying to get my head around that I would have to do this for the next four years. Well today I have just under ten days to go and those same feelings of isolation and being scared have resurfaced, but this time it’s not about being locked up, it’s about getting out…”

The displacement experienced by this woman at having to return to a community she may never previously have felt a part of, highlights the crucial need for us to facilitate better reintegration through intensive pre and post release support programs. Lack of suitable housing has also been identified as a major issue for women exiting prison. The lack of an effective welfare response within prisons means that many women experience housing related problems or become homeless due to the lack of information or advocacy whilst they are in prison. My Office is currently working with the Office of Housing to develop initiatives which improve outcomes for people who are at risk of homelessness upon exiting the prison system.

In Victoria, Somebody’s Daughter Theatre Company has been a tremendous support for women leaving prison, providing them with a reason to survive on the outside. Somebody’s Daughter started in Fairlea Women’s Prison in 1980 and is comprised primarily of women in various stages of post release. It provides a forum for women to share their experiences, giving them a voice and the opportunity to make connections in prison that translate into connections upon release. The group has produced a number of powerful pieces about life in and outside prison. One ex prisoner who plays in the latest performance “So Full of Brave,” which was performed in Melbourne only last month explains;

“Its my life… I wrote the lines and saying them is like talking to a counsellor only better.”

“My major problem was what to do. All my life has been about drugs and crime. I couldn’t get a job and dress proper because I didn’t know how… if it wasn’t for Somebody’s Daughter I don’t know where I’d be.”

In Victoria a number of initiatives have been developed to provide greater support during the transition from prison to the community:

Women’s Community Transition Unit

Preliminary work has begun on the specifications of a new 20 bed women’s community transitional unit, in metropolitan Melbourne. The facility will provide support for women before and after they are released from prison and will develop linkages to the wider community. Women will be provided with opportunities to develop the skills they will need to settle back into the community and will also be case managed for six months after release.

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55 Ibid. p.38
56 Rachel Ward in Mascall, Sharon “A Roller-coaster of Reality Checks” The Age 26 September 2000
57 Rachel Ward in Topsfield, Jewel “Easy Option Just Adds a Bit of Drama” Melbourne Times 4 October 2000
Post Prison Release Program

A further initiative aims to strengthen post release support for women for whom substance abuse is a significant feature in reoffending, relapse and overdose. In this program, a multidisciplinary team comprising alcohol / drug and welfare expertise will be established to jointly develop individual case plans and work with women at least six weeks prior to their release from prison. The case plans will identify accommodation, support and treatment goals relevant to each offender’s post-release circumstances. In addition to this pilot program four other proposals are being developed targeting other populations identified as vulnerable to reoffending, relapse and post release overdose.

Women and Leadership in Corrections

I would like to move on now to address some of the issues faced by female staff in corrections. A picture of myself and administrators at my level from various other jurisdictions both local and international reveals the reality of women in leadership positions in the Corrections system; they are few and far between. In Corrections, high ranking women prison officers are something of a novelty. In Victoria, not one of the thirteen general prison managers at present are women and only two of fifteen operations managers across the state are women. In the Security and Emergency Services Group (SESG) who perform security operations across the Victorian prison system, only two of thirty-five operations staff are women. However, women are currently better represented at executive levels in my Office, with three of eight executive members being women. I am the highest ranking woman that the Corrections system has ever had in Victoria. All my predecessors have been men. In comparison, as at 30 June 2000, 26.1% of executives in the Victorian public service were women. The representation of women in executive positions across the public sector is significantly higher than in the corrections system alone.

The Corrections system remains a male-dominated area. While women prison officers have been granted formal legal equality, they have not attained substantive equality. To begin with, women prison officers are in the minority. In 1997 only 13% of prison officers in Victoria were women. The majority of these were in the lowest ranks. Women were originally accepted into prison management because their supposed innate feminine characteristics were considered suitable for nurturing and rehabilitating women prisoners. Stereotypical constructions of women officers persist today, and marginalise women who wish to work in Corrections. Such stereotypes include perceptions about women’s physical inferiority which supposedly jeopardises prison security, as well as the potential for romantic alliances with male prisoners.

In fact, interviews with female prison officers have found that circumstances in which physical force is required are virtually non existent and that in situations of conflict the use of oral communication skills were most suitable for diffusing confrontation. One of the key skills required as a correctional officer is the ability to use power and authority justly and fairly, and the ability to make discerning judgements under pressure. Alison Liebling makes the point that the key role of law enforcement agencies is often peacekeeping and the avoidance of conflict, rather than the use of force. Women are well suited to exercise the authority and professional judgement required in such situations.

59 Sefton, Sarah Stereotypical Constructions of Women Prison Officers: A Barrier to Substantive Equality, Unpublished Masters Thesis LaTrobe University May 1998 p.20
60 Ibid. p.131
One female prison officer has remarked:

“(I)t is certainly not evident in the work in the prison system that we are equal. In fact sometimes it is more evident that we are not… We haven’t been there all that long so there are still a lot of officers who are from the old system and just don’t agree with us being there.”

It is important that corrections is seen as an exciting career choice for women, that women are supported and encouraged in their skill development and that opportunities are made available for advancement. However, it appears that discrimination continues to linger in the work practices and cultural norms that pervade the corrections system. Moving forward on this issue will certainly be a challenge for the next decade.

Conclusion

Corrections is now and always will be a complex area of social policy with a myriad of grey areas and few clear answers. We have come a long way in the last twenty years and yet at the same time not very far at all. We are still unclear on what constitutes a best practice response in the management and rehabilitation of women offenders.

An examination of the profile of our women offenders reveals a population largely imprisoned for non-violent offences undergoing relatively short sentences, with serious substance abuse issues and with backgrounds of extreme social and economic disadvantage. Identifying and addressing the specific needs of this population and breaking a cycle of recidivism continues to be an ongoing challenge for all jurisdictions.

To conclude, the words of an ex prisoner are particularly thought provoking:

“My experience of prison is best defined as a journey through a maze: the evolution of a battered woman from victim to healed individual to peer counsellor / activist / journalist. Mine is a story… of finding the courage to take small determined steps into self esteem and empowerment; of learning to trust, to allow oneself to be guided and mentored…”

The challenge for us is to make this possible for not one, but for many of the women who find themselves in the corrections system. The opportunity today to share ideas on how we can move towards this goal is one that I am sure we all value greatly, and I look forward to hearing what other speakers have to say on this issue.

Thank You.

62 Ibid. p.120
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