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Women Prisoners and Correctional Programs

Margaret Cameron

This paper discusses trends in the incarceration of women and intervention programs available to women in prison. The data demonstrate that incarceration rates for women have been increasing over the last decade and that women are often imprisoned for property, violence and drug offences. Correctional facilities in Australia, in common with many other jurisdictions, administer programs that address offending behaviour. Such programs, especially those dealing with behavioural and drug issues, are vital if prisons are to reduce recidivism.

Currently, there is considerable interest and creativity in the design and delivery of interventions for prisoners with drug abuse problems. However, although women are often unemployed at the time of incarceration and tend to be poorly educated, comparatively little attention is paid to employment and education programs. Engagement in education and employment are important for reducing recidivism.

This paper examines drug intervention programs and employment and education programs for women and finds that they are often delivered without consideration of their effectiveness.

Adam Graycar
Director

In any examination of women prisoners, the first point to note is that they constitute a small percentage of the total number of people incarcerated in Australia. In 1999, women constituted only about six per cent of the sentenced prison population.[1] Although few, the number of incarcerated women has been steadily increasing.

Table 1 shows the increase in the number of sentenced women incarcerated in the 1990s. In 1991, 607 women were incarcerated. In 1999 this had almost doubled to 1,124 (an 85 per cent increase).[2] In 1991, 9.2 women per 100,000 were imprisoned compared with 15.3 per 100,000 in 1999. As a rate per 100,000 of the population, the increase is about 66 per cent. The incarceration of women has occurred at a faster rate than it has for men. The population of sentenced men incarcerated has increased from 12,429 in 1991 to 17,208 in 1999. This constitutes an increase of about 38 per cent. The men's rate per 100,000 has increased from 194 to 240.5 (a 24 per cent increase).

The increase in the imprisonment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) sentenced women has been much greater over the period compared with other women. Non-ATSI women have increased in population from 503 in 1991 to 851 in 1999, representing

Table 1: *Sentenced prison population 1991–1999* [3]

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Total women	607	638	649	718	709	816	919	939	1,124
– Rate per 100,000[4]	9.2	9.6	9.6	10.5	10.2	11.6	12.9	12.9	15.3
Total men	12,429	13,067	13,334	14,280	14,720	15,071	15,603	16,179	17,208
– Rate per 100,000	194	201.1	202.9	214.6	218.3	220.3	224.8	229.6	240.5
Non-ATSI women	503	522	538	583	570	638	722	722	851
– Rate per 100,000	7.8	7.9	8.1	8.7	8.3	9.2	10.3	10.1	11.8
ATSI women	104	116	111	135	139	178	197	217	273
– Rate per 100,000[5]	103.9	112	104.8	124.6	125.5	158.9	166.6	173.7	206.5

Source: National Prison Census 1991–1999 (ABS) unit record file

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a 60 per cent increase. The rate has increased over this period from 7.8 to 11.8 per 100,000, representing about a 50 per cent increase. In comparison, and it should be kept in mind that the number is very low, the number of ATSI women incarcerated has increased from 104 in 1991 to 273 in 1999, an increase of 150 per cent.[6] The rate per 100,000 has doubled, from 103.9 per 100,000 to 206.5 per 100,000, and is now close to the rate for all men.

Table 2 examines the distribution of sentenced women imprisoned by Australian States and the levels of previous imprisonment. The numbers of women range from 17 (two of whom are ATSI) held in Tasmania, to 466 (86 of whom are ATSI) held in New South Wales prisons. In Western Australia and the Northern Territory, ATSI women constitute half and two-thirds, respectively, of the sentenced women. Previous imprisonment rates are an indication of recidivism, although offenders may re-enter prison for reasons unrelated to a prior offence. Nevertheless, the figures are important as they may indicate prisons' achievements in rehabilitating offenders. About 45 per cent of all women prisoners, and about 70 per cent of ATSI women prisoners, have been incarcerated previously. There appears to be room to focus on the women prisoners' offending and background with a view to effective interventions.

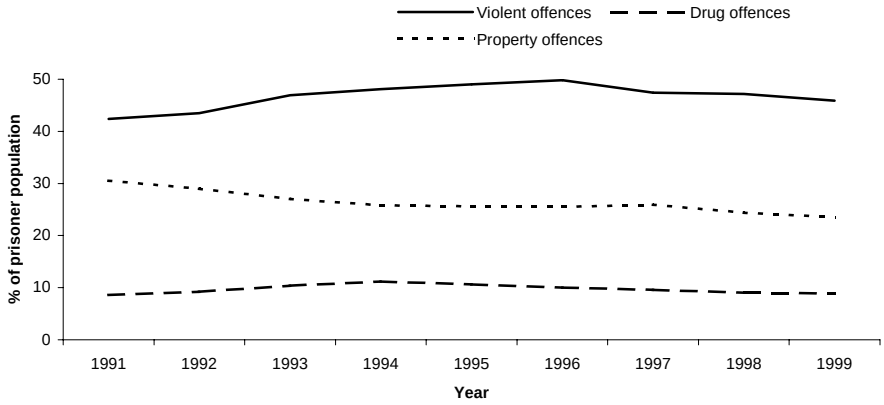
The major categories under which men and women are incarcerated are violent, property and drug offences. Violent offences include homicide, assault, sexual offences and robbery. Property offences include breaking, entering and stealing, fraud and misappropriation, and receiving stolen goods. Drug offences include possession and use of drugs, import and export of drugs, dealing or trafficking of drugs, and manufacturing and growing drugs. The National Prison Census (ABS 1999) records the categories under which sentenced offenders are incarcerated. However, it is not possible to accurately assess the full range of reasons why people are

Table 2: *Sentenced women prisoners known to be previously imprisoned in Australian States in 1999*

	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	AUST
Sentenced non-ATSI women	380	138	171	45	94	15	7	1	851
Previously imprisoned	155	82	78	24	30	6	0	0	375
– (%)	(40.8)	(59.4)	(45.6)	(53.3)	(31.9)	(40)	(0)	(0)	(44.1)
Sentenced ATSI women	86	6	62	10	92	2	15	0	273
Previously imprisoned	62	5	39	9	64	1	9	0	189
– (%)	(72.1)	(83.3)	(62.9)	(90)	(69.6)	(50)	(60)	0	(69.2)

Source: National Prison Census 1999 (ABS) unit record file

Figure 1: *Most serious offence perpetrated by sentenced men prisoners, 1991–1999*



incarcerated. Only the most serious offence is recorded.[7] Consequently, a person who is imprisoned for a drug offence that is not their most serious offence will not be counted amongst those incarcerated for drug offences. Thus, the prison census gives us the primary reason for incarceration.

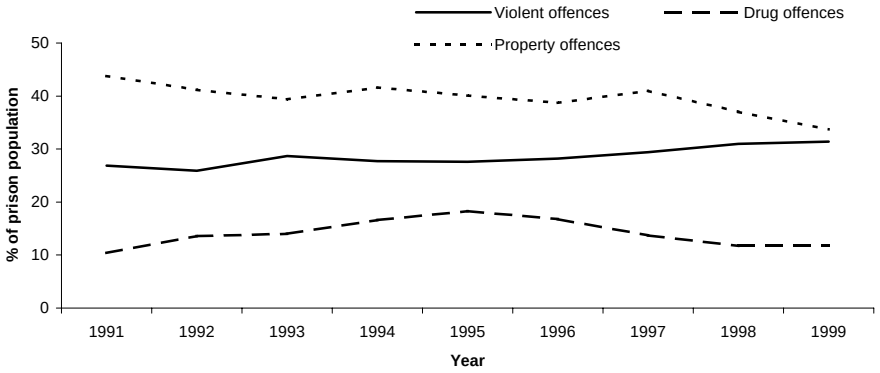
Figure 1 shows the percentage of the total sentenced men prisoner population incarcerated. Violence, followed by property and drug offences, are the primary reasons for men's incarceration. Roughly, between 42 per cent and 50 per cent of men incarcerated between 1991 and 1999 have been held for violent offences, while the percentage of men imprisoned for property offences ranged between 23 per cent and 31 per cent, and those incarcerated for drug offences has been about 10 per cent. Trend lines show an increase in the proportion of men incarcerated for violence, a decrease in incarceration for property offences, while those incarcerated for drug offences has remained stable between 1991 and 1999.

In comparison, Figure 2 shows that of the total, sentenced women prisoners are incarcerated for property offences, followed by violence and drug offences. From 1991 to 1999, between 44 per cent and 34 per cent of the women prison population were jailed for property offences, and between 26 per cent and 31 per cent of women were incarcerated for violent offences over the period. The proportion of women incarcerated for drug offences has ranged from 10 per cent to 18 per cent.[8] Between 1991 and 1999, the trend lines show a decrease in the proportion of women incarcerated for property offences, an increase for violent offences, and stability for drug offences.

While the offence categories are important in developing intervention strategies such as for illicit drug use, their effectiveness may be limited by offenders' chances of gainful employment. Unfortunately, background information on the educational levels of prisoners and whether they were employed at the time of imprisonment is not available. These questions are included in the National Prison Census questionnaire, however, they do not appear to be systematically administered. In some correctional institutions, for example, prisoners'

responses are recorded, while in others the questions appear to have been ignored completely. Nevertheless, education levels and unemployment are important to consider. Evidence presented to the New South Wales Standing Committee on Law and Justice shows that 60 per cent of the prison population is not functionally literate, and 48 per cent are long-term unemployed (NSWSCLJ 2000, p. 121; see also Alder 1994, p. 144).

Figure 2: *Most serious offence perpetrated by sentenced women prisoners 1991–1999*



In Victoria, in the year ended June 1999, 76 per cent of women prisoners had commenced schooling at secondary level, but only 20 per cent of women prisoners had completed secondary, tertiary or other post-secondary education. Approximately 80 per cent of women prisoners were unemployed or not part of the paid work force prior to incarceration (Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner 2000a). These data suggest that incarcerated women are often poorly educated and poorly prepared to participate in the work force. Intervention in these areas may be effective.

Interventions

Interventions in the prison setting are important if correctional institutions aim to rehabilitate offenders and reduce the numbers of offenders re-entering prison. Drug intervention programs are important for women, considering that part of the prison population is commonly incarcerated for drug offences, although not all of the offences concern consumption of illicit drugs. However, the effect of these interventions is limited without efforts to encourage women to become self-supporting through education and employment programs.

Drug Abuse Programs

Drug abuse programs are currently topical, especially as there is great interest in diversionary programs to keep people out of prison. A recent strategy that addresses the limits of incarceration as a response to drug-related crime is the drug court (Freeman, Karski & Doak 2000). Drug courts aim to divert both men and women offenders The elements of the New South Wales drug court program are:

- treatment;
- social support and the development of living skills;
- regular reports to the court; and
- regular urine testing (Freeman, Karski & Doak 2000, p. 2).

The program is run over 12 months and has three phases. During the program, participants are expected to stablise their lives by not using drugs to address health issues, and to cease criminal activity. Ideally, they consolidate their situation and develop life and job skills, and finally reintegrate fully, becoming financially independent. Early analysis of the data indicates a high success rate—only 13 per cent of participants have been sentenced for an offence committed while on the program (Freeman, Karski & Doak 2000, pp. 2–3, 13).

While diversionary programs appear promising, there is still a role for programs in the correctional setting, and they may be effective in reducing recidivism. The evaluation of programs in Canadian prisons shows that prisoners treated for drug abuse are less likely than untreated drug abusers to return to custody (Dowden & Blanchette 1999, p. 21).

Little is known about the effectiveness of Australian programs. These range from drug and alcohol counselling to methadone programs (sometimes integrated with other courses). Methadone programs have not been available at all prisons. They were first offered in New South Wales prisons in 1986. Prisoners have reported that methadone programs are not effective on their own because they do not address the reasons for behaviour associated with drug dependence (Hampton 1993, p. 111). Prisons have been shown to be ineffective at addressing drug issues, in part because of insufficient staff numbers (SCIPP 2000, p. 72).

A promising approach to combating illicit drug use has been implemented at the Metropolitan Women's Correctional Centre in Victoria by a contracted service provider, Caraniche Pty Ltd. In conjunction with drug counselling that supports the methadone program, the Caraniche program includes core courses in drug awareness, drug education and Alcoholics Anonymous. Other courses are available on a number of subjects, depending on the needs and interests of the women (Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner 2000b).

Metropolitan Women's Correctional Centre has a residential unit separate from the main prison population, which houses 10 prisoners who participate in intensive drug group and individual counselling. The counselling occurs in the morning; in the afternoon the participants are involved in work and education. The program runs for three to four months, after which the prisoners are reintegrated into the mainstream prison population (Caraniche Pty Ltd undated). The program has not been evaluated for its effect on offender recidivism and its success may depend on the support available to prisoners upon release.

There are a number of directions to consider when implementing

drug abuse programs. These include whether there should be different programs for people with different levels of substance abuse (Peachey 1999). Are women's reasons for drug abuse different to men's, and does this have policy implications for program design (Henderson 1998, p. 582)? Are programs developed considering the needs of ATSI women? Should programs address underlying issues, such as victimisation (Welle, Falkin & Jainchill 1998, p. 162)? Australian jurisdictions could consider a new development in the United States, known as re-entry drug court, which monitors a prisoner while incarcerated and once released. The court aims to provide appropriate and continuing treatment, and accountability for program delivery. Pilot programs conducted in Nevada found a recidivism rate of only 14 per cent. The report does not say to what period the recidivism rate applies (Tauber & Huddleston 1999, p. 18). An example to consider from the United Kingdom has been developed by the Rehabilitation for Addicted Prisoners Trust. This is a 12-step substance abuse treatment program, based on abstinence, incorporating support services to enable addicts to achieve and maintain recovery and lead law-abiding lives. The program has been assessed for accreditation by the United Kingdom's Joint Prison / Probation Accreditation Panel (2000, p. 10), which considers it promising. The program will be studied in 2001 to compare reconviction rates of participants with a control group.

Employment and Education

Currently, case management and the direction of prisoners into treatment programs appears to be the dominant approach to managing prisoners. While treatment programs, such as those for drug abuse, are important if prisons are to reduce re-offending, education and employment are also important for limiting the use of illicit drugs (Butzin et al. 1999). Further, unemployment is a predictor for recidivism, although little is known about the impact for women (Gendreau, Goggin & Gray 1998, p. 18).

Traditionally, and currently, correctional staff may favour particular approaches to the management of women in correctional facilities that do not include education and employment. Regimes in prisons have traditionally reproduced stereotypical roles where women learned to "cook, sew and do other domestic tasks" (Smart 1976, p. 140). Studies of women's incarceration have often reproduced these values by overlooking the role of education and employment (Dobash, Dobash & Gutteridge 1986, p. 162). In spite of this, some prisoners regard educational classes highly and consider job training necessary for reintegrating into society (Carlson 1997, p. 168; Garcia Coll et al. 1998, p. 23). Prison employment and vocational or apprenticeship training has been shown to reduce short- and long-term recidivism for men and women. In fact, the outcomes were better for women in a United States study, as only 19.3 per cent returned to custody compared with 31.6 per cent of men. However, of those women who did reoffend, they did so sooner than men—within 647 days compared with 811 days (Saylor & Gaes 1996, pp. 12–14).

In Australia, women may be employed in the daily operation of the prison (for example, working in the kitchen or the laundry). They could also be involved in a prison industry. While employment for women in prison is often linked to traditional notions of women's domestic role, the work can be of a wider nature. In South Australia, for instance, women prisoners train guide dogs (South Australian Department of Correctional Services 1998). In New South Wales, women may be involved in building maintenance and landscaping projects (SCIPP 2000, p. 70). However, employment programs have not been evaluated to test their effectiveness in preventing recidivism. No formal consideration has been given to the needs of ATSI women.

Some prison employment can be effective in the prisoner's transition into the community, although research in the United Kingdom indicates prison work should be relevant to jobs available outside (Hamlyn & Lewis 2000, p. 91). In Australia, the Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee (Tierney 1996, p. 60) has observed that in-house catering staff benefit most in their vocational development. Prisoners working in these positions can study towards formal qualifications. Challenges for prison management exist to develop industries that train people to work in areas demanded by the labour market (Tierney 1996, p. 61). It is unclear from the enquiry if management in Australian women's prisons are encouraging the vocational training of women or identifying labour market demands.

A number of questions arise about what constitutes effective elements of employment programs (Gillis 2000, p. 14). How important is the routine of work in prison for teaching women to work regular hours and make the transition from prison to working in the community (Hamlyn & Lewis 2000, p. 43)? Are prison-run employment programs as effective as those offered in the community (Gillis 1999, p. 39)? Are there creative ways of preparing prisoners for the transition to employment? For example, one prison in the United States has experimented with offering "mock job fairs". In preparation for release, the prisoners undertake job-search training. At the fair they make enquiries about employment opportunities and undergo interviews with employers who volunteer their time (McCollum 2000).

Educational programs are available to prisoners, either through internal or external providers (such as TAFE). In Western Australia, for example, a comprehensive range of programs is offered, depending on the educational and vocational needs of the current prison population (Ministry of Justice 1998, ss. 61–64). They range from special needs education to primary, secondary and tertiary education, vocational

education and specialised programs. In Victoria, training plans develop pathways to allow prisoners to continue in a particular field of study as they move around within the correctional system. The pathways provide links to the work force and to education after release (Oldfield 1999).

While correctional services make opportunities available, women in prison are often slow to take up education and training opportunities. The Review of Education and Vocational Training in Adult Correctional Facilities in Western Australia found that women "are either of the 'mind' that they will be welfare-dependent all their lives or, less often, that the 'man in their life' will be the provider" (Joint Western Australian Department of Training and Ministry of Justice Taskforce 1997, pp. 13–14). An additional concern for many women is that they are often sole parents who, upon release, have children to care for. Research also shows that women prisoners and correctional officers in the United States hold to the stereotype that women do not need to work (Schram 1998, p. 261).

At the Metropolitan Women's Correctional Centre in Victoria, prisoners participate in educational courses for a number of reasons:

- to do something constructive with their time;
- to improve their knowledge and skills;
- to avoid going to work;
- to avoid the politics and violence of the prison environment; or
- because it was recommended by the Prisoner Classification Board (Oldfield 1999, p. 13).

Women may need to be encouraged to view themselves as legitimate participants in the work force in order for them to develop their vocational skills.

Courses in personal development often take precedence over vocational training. However, courses that develop self-esteem or help women on welfare make ends meet may not alter factors in criminal behaviour or the acceptability of crime (Bonta, Pang & Wallace-Capretta 1995, p. 291). The Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee (Tierney 1996, p. 11) suggests that life skills, literacy and numeracy could be taught in the context of vocational programs.

An issue to consider when making vocational training and the reduction of recidivism a priority is the structure of work in prisons, which may deter women from participating in education and vocational courses. In New South Wales, the amount women receive for working is higher ($50–$60) than the amount received by women undertaking education ($15) (SCIPP 2000, p. 80). The difference is significant, according to Hampton (1993, p. 65; see also SCIPP 2000, p. 80), who says that the money received when undertaking education is insufficient to pay for weekly necessities such as shampoo, conditioner and hygiene products. Property policy can also be a barrier to educational achievement, as books and materials may not be permitted in cells (Hampton 1993, p. 65).

Few programs have been evaluated in Australia. Research on the effectiveness of educational programs for women suggests that education has a significant rehabilitative element. However, to reduce recidivism, women need financial and social support once released from prison (Semmens 1996, p. 30). One program that has been evaluated is the Recidivism and Open Learning Education (ROLE) project, offered to ATSI people. In 1996, the Commonwealth Government funded the trial of flexible, self-paced learning for Indigenous offenders in prison, offered over a one-year period ending in June 1998 in five South Australian correctional institutions (DETYA 2000). The pilot program consisted of literacy and numeracy education through art. A study of the program was conducted considering recidivism six months after implementation. The evaluation found that an open-learning style of education is not suitable because many Indigenous prisoners do not have the skills required for independent learning. To be successful, courses need to be culturally appropriate and tutors need suitable expertise in literacy and numeracy, and in Indigenous education (DETYA 2000, p. 3). Although the pilot project had a very low participation rate, recidivism rates for participants were half those of the control group (DETYA 2000, p. 4). The implications of this program for ATSI women are unclear.

Conclusion

While the number of women in prison is low overall, the population has increased significantly during the past decade. Women are often incarcerated for violence, property and drug offences, and they appear to be characterised by low education and unemployment. Systematic data collection is not undertaken on education and employment in the administration of the National Prison Census, and this is an area that should be addressed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The examination of data indicates that women can benefit from drug rehabilitation, vocational training and relevant employment experience, although it is very hard to rehabilitate a person in the prison environment. In the mid-1970s, a pessimistic assessment of rehabiliation programs by Martinson asserted that "nothing works" in correctional treatment (Cullen & Gendreau 2000, p. 119). However, recent reassessment using methods of meta-analysis has found that offender treatment programs do reduce problem behaviour (Cullen & Gendreau 2000, p. 137). In Australia, it is unclear whether drug abuse treatment and employment and education programs for women are effective, and which ones are more effective than others.

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Notes

1 The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) collects data on all detained prisoners, including those on remand. This paper discusses prison programs, and so focuses on sentenced prisoners.

2 A Kendall's rank order correlation test for trend (tau-c) shows a significant increase between 1991 and 1999 (Conover 1980, pp. 256–60).

3 The period 1991–1999 was chosen because of limitations on estimating the ATSI population prior to 1991.

4 Figures taken from the *Estimated Resident Population by Sex and Age, States and Territories of Australia* series (ABS cat. no. 3201.0).

5 The ATSI population is based on numbers received directly from the ABS, and uses the high level estimates as seen in ABS (1996).

6 A Kendall's rank order correlation test for trend (tau-c) shows a significant increase between 1991 and 1999 (Conover 1980, pp. 256–60).

7 The ABS defines the most serious offence (MSO) for sentenced prisoners as the longest sentence in the "current episode" for a single count of the offence, regardless of the possible result of any appeals, and regardless of whether the sentence for that offence has actually expired at census date. Where sentences are equal, or the longest sentence cannot be determined, the MSO is the offence with the lowest Australian National Classification of Offences code. There are some State and Territory variations:
   - South Australia bases the MSO for prisoners who have breached parole and returned to prison on the original episode plus any new offence(s) committed while on parole.
   - In Tasmania, the MSO is the offence for which the prisoner has received the longest aggregate sentence in the "current episode" for all counts of that offence (ABS 1999, p. 118).

8 Other categories of offence include driving and traffic offences (3–4% over the period) and offences against good order (7–13% over the period), which include breaches of sentences (including fine defaulting) and prostitution.

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