

EXCLUSIVE NATIONAL QUEENSLAND PRISONS

New study aims to improve outcomes for mothers behind bars

By [Stuart Layt](#)

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By the time she turned 30, Kate (not her real name) had lived in 30 different houses, all with four young children in tow.

By her mid-30s, she was in prison, one of an increasing number of mothers who are being incarcerated in Australia.



A new Griffith University study will look at ways of better supporting mothers behind bars.
GREG HENDERSON

Transforming the lives of those mothers is the goal of a major new project collaboration between Griffith University and Queensland Corrective Services.

While no official figures are kept on how many women behind bars have children, it's estimated that more than half have dependent children aged 15 or younger.

Professor Susan Dennison from the Griffith Criminology Institute is heading the new project, which has been given funding for 18 months to look at where the system is failing incarcerated mothers and work with them to develop appropriate support systems.

"We're looking at what are all the needs of women in prison and their children and find out where their needs are not being met, and to fill those gaps," Professor Dennison said.

"The project will be a 'creation' model, so we will bring together not just our research but also all the departments and services women and children would be accessing, as well as women and their children with experience of incarceration."

Professor Dennison said she had spoken to Kate as part of her preliminary work on the project, and said her example, while extreme, was not unique among jailed women.

"Mothers in prison are very different to men in prison, they bring with them a whole history of victimisation, both child abuse as well as domestic violence, and they also have higher rates of mental health problems," she said.

"In Kate's case, she had her first child when she was 16, three more in her 20s, experienced intimate partner abuse from multiple partners and was in a near-constant state of financial distress."

Professor Dennison said mothers also struggle on release from prison, being less likely to have a stable home to return to that men, and needing more support to reconnect with their children.

There were a range of services available to women leaving prison, she said, however none could really handle the multiple needs many women had from child support to substance abuse assistance and safe housing.

Compounding this was the fact that children are the unspoken partners for much of these issues.

Kate's children moved school six times, and her eldest daughter witnessed much of the abuse she suffered.

"There's a whole lot of disadvantage that filters through not just in the mothers lives but in the lives of their children, that makes it really hard to have positive experiences in their lives," Professor Dennison said.

"All those things close doors - if you don't complete school, if you don't know how to form positive relationships, that really creates a situation where you're more likely to follow in the same footsteps as your parent."

Queensland Corrective Services Commissioner Peter Martin said for that reason, they were enthusiastic partners in the 18-month project.

"We know that having a parent in prison makes a child many more times likely than their peers to end up incarcerated themselves," he said.

"We are excited to be partnering with Professor Dennison and her research team to identify ways to better support women prisoners and their children to try to

break that cycle of incarceration."

The study will start in July, and after it has concluded it is expected the findings will be used for a trial by QCS, before a possible further rollout.

The project is being funded by a research grant from the Paul Ramsay Foundation and is being run in conjunction with the Griffith School of Nursing and Midwifery.



Stuart Layt



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