

The needs of mothers before, during and after imprisonment

Summary findings from Workshop Series 1

Overview

Transforming Corrections to Transform Lives (TCTL) is an innovative collaboration, working to transform the lives of mothers in custody and their children.

Our vision is to co-create a new method of service provision for imprisoned mothers and their children, during custody and after release, that:

1. Creates conditions for families to thrive through a holistic system of practice that supports wellbeing and social inclusion; and
2. Demonstrates more effective and sustainable service provision that can be scaled up by governments.

Workshop Series 1

We conducted a series of workshops during December 2020 with 75 mothers across the four women's correctional centres in Queensland and 24 participants from various community stakeholder organisations.

Our aim was to develop a better understanding of the needs of mothers in prison and after release, and the kind of supports and system changes that are required to meet those needs.

This document contains a summary of the results from those workshops. Key findings are presented under the following three domains:

1. Life histories before prison
2. Mothers' needs in and out of prison
3. Suggestions made by mothers and stakeholders to better address imprisoned mothers' needs

1. Life histories before prison

1.1 Chaotic lives with social and economic vulnerability and trauma

Stakeholders and mothers described a woman's life before prison as "chaotic". The majority of the mothers had experienced family violence, a high level of drug dependency and co-morbid health conditions, including mental health conditions. Many came from deprived backgrounds, with histories of poverty, housing insecurity, unemployment, poor education, and childhood trauma. Many of the mothers were primary caregivers of their children and/or families. Managing children on their own, often without support, put them under great pressure and some reported using drugs to cope with their life circumstances. Several mothers reported that they turned to criminal activity as a survival mechanism and to provide for their children.

1.2 A cycle of offending and reoffending

More than half of the mothers had a prior history of imprisonment and they expressed concern about their children following their path into offending. Mothers reported that they did not get enough support from others and therefore they felt lost and trapped. They disclosed that adhering to parole conditions was challenging at times when they have so many things to manage. Failure to adhere to strict parole conditions was one of the reasons cited by women for re-incarceration.

*“Who has got my children?
That was my main concern,
who actually has my children?”
- Mother in prison*

2. Mothers' needs in and out of prison

Needs of mothers in prison

1. Related to mothers

- Mothers were stressed, scared and confused when entering prison. They felt guilt and shame and were concerned about losing their identity as mothers and their bond with their children.
- Mothers reported unmet health care needs, including dental care and mental health needs, and a lack of individually tailored counselling and follow-ups. A stakeholder added that health care is particularly challenging for women who are in prison for short periods.
- Mothers and stakeholders identified that women who are pregnant, have recently given birth, or miscarried, have specific needs including good healthcare and nutrition and a range of different kinds of support, including for breastfeeding.
- Mothers were concerned that they had fewer opportunities to make money in prison and more limited support from outside compared to men in prison. This made it difficult to maintain contact with children or purchase items for their children who were residing in prison with them.

2. Related to their children

- In the first few days, mothers' main concerns were the whereabouts and wellbeing of their children and getting in contact with their children. For some women, these concerns were ongoing throughout their sentence.
- Some mothers said that having a child with them in prison strengthened their bond with their child, while others were concerned that raising children in a restricted environment might delay the child's growth and development.
- Mothers and stakeholders identified a need for mothers to have assistance in communicating with Child Safety regarding their children.

3. Related to prison and its operations

- Mothers and stakeholders reported the existence of complex operational procedures, including excessive paperwork needed to make requests or access services. Mothers indicated that this caused long waiting periods to access existing services available in prison. Mothers also found such paperwork to be a disincentive to make applications for support or, for example, to apply to have virtual visits with their children.
- Mothers identified a need for more information about legal procedures, such as sentencing and parole, and how to get a release plan. Many mothers reported being unaware of their release dates, and any support services available.

Needs of mothers after release: Transitioning to a life after prison

1. Safe and stable accommodation

- The primary concern for mothers after release from prison was obtaining safe, secure, and adequately furnished accommodation for themselves and their children. They were concerned that being unable to secure adequate accommodation would place them at higher risk of breaching their parole conditions or re-offending as well as prevent them from caring for, or having visits from, their children.

2. Maintaining a normal and stable life

- Mothers suggested that a 'normal life' for a woman after her release would include reuniting and reconnecting with her children, getting a job, and taking positive steps in her life. However, some stakeholders mentioned that most of the women did not know what a 'normal life' looks like.
- Both stakeholders and mothers suggested that women lacked educational and vocational resources to initiate and sustain a good life for themselves and their families. They need support to enhance practical skills, such as meal planning, budgeting, preparing and submitting an application for a rental property, and obtaining their identification documents. Women also need help with travel arrangements to get home, and with contacting support services.

3. Facilitators and barriers to employment

- Mothers identified that securing employment is a pressing need after release. However, both mothers and stakeholders acknowledged that this would be difficult for most of the women, primarily because of their criminal history but also because of their typically low level of education, limited employment skills, and sporadic work histories. Mothers were concerned about how they would manage caring for their young children while working and felt that childcare was unaffordable.

4. Adjusting to the outside world

- Some mothers expressed feeling safety and relief upon entry into prison, as it provided them with an escape from difficult situations such as homelessness, violent partners, and drug dealers. Some mothers found it easy to adapt to the structure and relative stability of prison life. However, stakeholders indicated that because of institutionalisation, some women may find it difficult to adjust to independence and responsibility post-release. Women were equally stressed about going back to their previous lives if they are not supported well post-release.

3. Suggestions made by mothers and stakeholders to address imprisoned mothers' needs

In Prison

- Improved support for maintaining contact with family and children, including cheaper phone calls, better visit experiences, assistance in accessing virtual visits, and a tailoring of support programs and activities according to the age of children.
- Improved staff practices to engage meaningfully, constructively, and with empathy towards mothers. Enhanced capacity for staff to address cultural and gender-specific needs of women using a trauma-informed approach.
- Improved facilities and services to mothers who are raising a child in custody, including accessing healthcare services for their children in prison and access to teaching and learning materials to provide a stimulating environment for their children.
- Improved prison operations and facilities to provide a more welfare-oriented approach, reducing system barriers and procedures, and more information sharing, allowing better opportunities for change.
- Increased support for mothers to engage with Child Safety regarding their children. Stakeholders expressed a need for dedicated staff to assist women in navigating the Child Safety system.
- Empowering women to recognise their needs and involving women with lived experience in the mentoring and empowerment of women in prison, and providing one-on-one support.
- More opportunities for learning and skill development as well as employment opportunities in prison for making money.

Out of Prison

- Early and ongoing support with timely follow-ups, in a form that provides continuity through the prison sentence and into the community; each woman with a dedicated case worker.
- Expanding the capacity and scope of existing support programs and increasing the type and availability of family-focused services, both in and out of prison.
- Consideration of maternal roles and the enhancement of gender and culturally responsive services to provide holistic care and support, including counselling and healing.
- Developing a comprehensive and closely coordinated support mechanism to help women to adjust back into the community.

“We are all independent, strong women but everybody needs help. Chicks like us who are independent and strong but don’t like to ask for it. Set yourself up for a fall. Part of the problem is what to ask for. Hear from others who are shut down and then don’t ask. No one tells you. Have to ask the right questions to get the right answers.”
- Mother in prison

Reflections

1. There is considerable overlap in how both the mothers and community stakeholders identified the needs of mothers in prison. Two key challenges that were universally identified were: (1) finding safe and secure accommodation, and (2) affording essential household effects. Insufficient and inadequate accommodation prevents mothers from uniting with and caring for their children. Women expressed that resuming parenting is a key motivator for them to demonstrate positive behaviour in prison and to remain out of prison after release.
2. There are also some apparent differences between mothers’ and stakeholders’ views. For example, several stakeholders indicated that the women in prison do not want to find employment when they return to the community. However, most of the mothers mentioned that they wanted education or vocational opportunities to develop relevant employment skills and support in finding a job after their release. Mothers in prison also said that they want assistance and skills to start their own businesses.
3. Most of the mothers were focused on their immediate survival needs and found it difficult to articulate any long-term goals. Many felt they were unlikely to last more than a few months out of prison given the obstacles they faced with a criminal record and lack of safe and stable accommodation. Many lacked sufficient prosocial support networks to help them navigate their return to the community or help them in starting a new life.
4. Many mothers in prison expressed a desire for continuity of care and better co-ordination and interaction with community stakeholders to ensure their sustained engagement in support services and programs. Stakeholders also identified a need for better cross-sector collaboration.
5. Workshops provided some women with the opportunity to share information regarding prison facilities, procedures and other services. Women were appreciative that we consulted them and that their opinions and experiences were valued by the research team.



TCTL Research Team

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Contact us:

For more information on the Transforming Corrections to Transform Lives project, and to stay up to date with progress, please visit our website: www.transformingcorrections.com.au

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