



Understanding the needs of children and young people who experience maternal imprisonment

Summary findings from Workshop Series 2

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, sustainable service provision that can be scaled up by governments.

The project commenced on 1 July 2020 and is expected to take 18 months for the development of the model of service provision. The co-creation process includes conducting a series of workshops with mothers in prison and various stakeholders across the correctional system, state government and the not-for-profit sector.

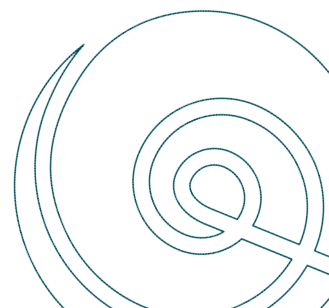
This document contains a report on the results from our second themed workshop in the series, held in April 2021. Workshop participants were stakeholders whose services interact with, or directly support, children and young people in the community who have experienced maternal imprisonment.

Workshop Aims

In order to best support the wellbeing and social inclusion of children experiencing maternal incarceration, we needed to better understand current systems supporting these children. Our workshops aimed to:

1. Develop an understanding of the needs of children and young people who experience maternal imprisonment.
2. Bring stakeholders together to explore available services and supports for children and adolescents who are impacted by maternal incarceration.
3. Identify issues and barriers around cross-sector collaboration.

We can work on networking mum, networking [the young person] and doing all that kind of stuff to have [them] have an education and do what we need to do to set them on the right path.
- Stakeholder



Conceptualising child wellbeing and social inclusion

Our framework for highlighting how maternal incarceration impacts on the wellbeing of children and young people is informed by the work of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). Six key developmental areas known as the Nest Action Agenda (ARACY, 2014) framed the discussions in our workshops. These include:

- Being loved and safe
- Being healthy
- Learning
- Contributing and participating
- Access to material basics
- Development of a positive sense of culture and identity

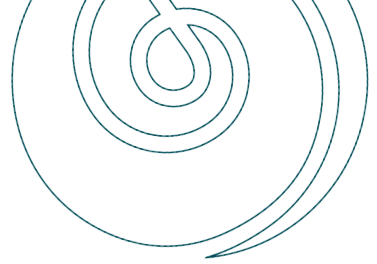
Workshop Method

We developed four scenarios as stimuli materials. Each scenario detailed the experience of a fictional child with a mother in prison and described a series of negative consequences experienced by the child that were directly or indirectly a result of maternal incarceration. They were constructed by drawing on the data gathered from mothers in prison during Workshop Series One (December 2020) and the practice experience and knowledge of the research team. Using these scenarios, four small groups of professionals discussed:

1. Available services, policies, processes, or programs that would promote the child's wellbeing;
2. New services, policies, processes, or programs that are needed to support the situations experienced by the child; and
3. How the child's wellbeing could be improved across six developmental domains.

The workshop included participants from across the government sector, including corrections, youth justice, child safety, police and education, as well as not-for-profit service providers who work with children and young people who are, or may be, affected by parental incarceration. The workshop was well attended with robust participation from all invited parties. Most participants felt that the scenarios were realistic and familiar to them based on their own experiences with children and adolescents who have had an incarcerated parent. Discussions were audio recorded, reviewed, and analysed.





Key Findings

The five key findings from this workshop are described below:

1. Mutual benefit to stakeholders and the project

Participants provided important information to researchers on the availability of services that can support children and adolescents who experience maternal incarceration. They also helped identify where there were gaps in these services and discussed their understanding of the level of knowledge within the practice community about the issues that are faced by this population. There were also benefits of participating in the workshop for the stakeholders. Many participants shared information with others to solve ongoing issues or clarify perceived barriers present within and between their organisations. For example, connections were made regarding useful resources, training for stakeholders who are unfamiliar with the correctional system, and access to prison visits. Some problems were able to be directly addressed on the day, such as support for the non-familial guardians of children and adolescents to facilitate visits to their mothers in prison.

2. Barriers to information exchange

One of the key systems and service gaps raised by most participants was the siloed way of working in government and non-government agencies and the barriers this creates for information exchange about children and young people affected by maternal incarceration. Participants stated that barriers to information exchange across services, and sometimes within services, hinder well-timed, targeted or holistic support that has the potential to improve the wellbeing of the child or young person. Many participants suggested that barriers exist due to legislation and privacy laws, but there was no shared understanding of where the flow of information stops and what exemptions exist for sharing information. Most participants perceived that the barriers to information exchange are external to the agency they worked for or are immovable due to legislation.

3. The need for a single point of contact to enable navigation of complex systems for children and young people

Many participants believed that having a central point of contact for families who experience incarceration was the solution for the barriers in information exchange and to the siloing of services. Most participants indicated that they believed that navigating the complex systems that children and young people become involved in when their parent is imprisoned requires a form of case management support. There was a general agreement that this should be an independent service that is not provided by any one of the agencies represented at the workshop.

4. The timeliness of interventions for families impacted by incarceration

In reflecting on the negative outcomes presented in the scenario stimulus material for the workshop, many participants expressed that these negative outcomes could have been lessened or avoided if there were more timely interventions for the families who experienced maternal incarceration. While some recognised that there were issues that required complex systemic changes, many recognised a role for their agencies in providing intervention and support at a much earlier point in the lives of these children and adolescents. Concerns were raised by the representatives of the tertiary systems, such as child safety, youth justice, and those who provide residential care services to children and adolescents, about the lost opportunities to avoid entrenchment within these systems. Representatives from education and the police recognised that they were often the first point of contact for these families and may be an appropriate referral point for early intervention services, but this would require further resources and/or training.

It's a domino effect really. You can just see how one thing leads to the next, to the next and it all happens generally pretty rapidly.
- Stakeholder

5. The areas where services can reduce the impact of maternal incarceration on the six domains of children and adolescents' wellbeing

Healthy	Learning	Loved and Safe	Material Basics	Participating	Culture and Identity
<p>Recognising that the children who have experienced maternal incarceration may have unequal access to health care, the participants suggested the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make use of the general nutritional support available for children, such as school breakfast programs.• Improve education and professional support for mothers to support the healthy development of their infants through breast-feeding education, increased access to a variety of healthy foods for children who reside with their mothers in custody, and access to resources that support the child to reach developmental milestones.• Improved mental health services available to mothers who are incarcerated by providing better access to a wider range of professionals that take a whole-of-family approach. For example, family counsellors and mediators.	<p>Recognising that the children who have experienced maternal incarceration often have barriers to learning, the participants suggested the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improved support for schools and support staff to understand the association between trauma, maternal incarceration, and learning and behavioural outcomes. Including support for embedding trauma-informed practices within the classroom.• Reducing the use of suspensions or exclusions and creating an environment where children and young people are comfortable in seeking support.• Flexibility in learning options for children who have difficulty adjusting to mainstream schooling. Ensuring fair and equal participation in education.• Improved opportunities for mothers to engage in their child's education. Such as, holding parent-teacher interviews in prisons via video-link and sending children's report cards to mothers.	<p>Recognising that the children who have experienced maternal incarceration may have attachment issues and separation from family, the participants suggested the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greater support for mothers and children in staying connected. Including improved processes for non-familial guardians to support children to visit their mother.• Supporting both mothers and their children to maintain a healthy relationship with caregivers. Including more support for mothers to communicate with caregivers about their child and improved processes for caregivers to visit mother and discuss child's needs and progress.• Supporting children and young people to stay connected to siblings.• Keeping the child's routine as normal as possible by considering alternatives to moving children out of their communities.	<p>Recognising that the children who have experienced maternal incarceration may not have access to material basics, such as stable accommodation, the participants suggested the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Offer children and young people access to safe and supported accommodation.• Use programs that provide access to school equipment, uniform, shoes, and books.• Provide children with the tools, such as sports uniforms and equipment, that they need to participate in activities of interest to them.	<p>Recognising that the children who have experienced maternal incarceration may have barriers to participating and difficulties in having their voices heard, the participants suggested the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support children and young people to engage in structured activity with positive peers. Including providing the practical and financial means for them to attend these activities.• Allowing children and young people to have a voice and some control over what happens to them.	<p>Participants agreed that culture and identity should always be taken into consideration when offering support and services to children and young people. They advocated for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Using available services but checking with families that they are culturally appropriate for them.• Allowing for culturally appropriate birth plans and parenting support within the prisons.• Recognising and fostering the strengths of children and young people.

It frustrates me in our women's centres that we don't have better Child Safety relationships. We literally should have a liaison officer.
- Stakeholder

Reflections

1. Most participants recognised the interconnected nature of the six wellbeing domains. However, unless they had experience with children and young people with complex needs, the participants had some difficulty articulating specifically how maternal imprisonment may impact wellbeing outside their realm of practice.
2. Most participants expressed a desire to learn more and to make changes within their services to better support the children and young people who have experienced the incarceration of a mother. Many participants believed that they would have done things differently to the service providers represented within the scenarios but recognised the barriers that these service providers would be experiencing, especially in relation to information exchange and understanding of the impacts of maternal incarceration on families.
3. During the discussion, stakeholders were able to quickly recognise which organisation should be the first point of contact based on prioritisation and urgency of needs of children and young people. Therefore, there is a general understanding amongst the stakeholders of the core business of each agency. However, there were instances throughout the workshop where stakeholders were not aware of specific services offered by the different agencies.
4. Participants agreed that it is important that services work towards building the capability of families who are impacted by maternal incarceration and that any such work should include asking children and young people what they need.
5. Participants identified the substantial downstream costs to government, families and communities of not providing adequate support to vulnerable families early in their system involvement.

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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