Women in Prison: Where are we going?

Female imprisonment rates have dramatically increased over the last two decades at state, national and international levels. This paper reviews women's imprisonment in Australia and looks at sentence management and programs, highlighting the critical issues which impact daily on female inmates.

The relatively low numbers of women inmates over the decades have led corrections administrators and the rest of the criminal justice system to obscure and disregard the particularities of women's imprisonment (Hampton, 1993; Alder, 1994). Table 1 charts the increasing rates of female imprisonment in Queensland while Table 2 highlights the dramatic increase of incarcerated women since 1991.

Year (June)	Daily Qld. Average of women prisoners*
1976	34
1980	52
1985	67
1986	82
1988	111
1989	117

* prisoners on work release included in daily average numbers.
Table 1: Data derived from Australian Prison Trends (1993).

Correctional Centre	1991/92	1992/93	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96
Brisbane Womens	53	64	71	83	94
Townsville Womens	18	18	17	18	27
Total	81	82	88	101	121

Derived from QCSC Table 2: Annual Reports 1994/95 & 1995/96

Characteristics of women inmates
In 1978 most of the prisoners were convicted of relatively minor offences such as fraud, minor thefts (eg, shoplifting) and good order offences (eg, prostitution). The 'typical' woman inmate of the '90s was: serving her first sentence or remand period in gaol: most commonly in prison for property offences; unemployed: most likely a mother, not married or in a de facto relationship; likely to have been victimised through male violence (ie, rape, sexual abuse, incest, etc); and, of low educational standing (based on Australian national figures 1990. Total Women in Custody: 778).

Presently in the Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre there are 147 inmates. The majority of these women are aged between 20 and 40 years. Twenty-eight (28) of the 147 women are Aboriginals or Torres Strait Islanders. Eighty-five (85) percent of female inmates are mothers of young children, who prior to being sentenced, were more often than not the heads of single households (Farrell 1996). The Aboriginal women's imprisonment rate was and still is significantly higher than non Aboriginal women. The most frequently committed offences by Aboriginal women are non-payment of fines, drunkenness and social security fraud - crimes of extreme poverty. It is noteworthy that incarcerated women in 1997 are much more serious offenders than those in 1978. In Queensland today, women convicted of homicide, assault, robbery or drug trafficking make up over 70 percent of the female prisoner population. Moreover, women prisoners are much more likely to have an

alcohol or drug problem. According to Wilkinson & Saunders (1997), the major sources .of income for regular heroin users include property crimes, prostitution and illegal activities, such as shoplifting, fraud and armed robbery, with the average heroin addict needing an annual income of over $250,000 a year to sustain the habit (most of which is acquired by drug dealing or theft).

Why are women being incarcerated at *such an incredible rate?*
Easteal (1992) cites the following factors as contributing to rising .female imprisonment: a trend towards lengthier sentences for 'women; 'Truth in Sentencing' legislation; a higher proportion of women on remand; and increased frequency of drug offences. Drug trafficking and property crimes carry greater minimum sentences than the types of offences for which females used to be primarily imprisoned for, such as prostitution, drunk and disorderly.

Current law and order debate
Harsher law enforcement and penal policies reflects the prevailing mood of the general community toward offenders. Two major problems facing Australian governments in the criminal justice area are prison overcrowding and the enormous cost of keeping people in prison – forcing governments to seek alternatives to imprisonment. The political imperative of governments in fashioning penal policy is to some extent in conflict with their economic imperatives (Weatherburn 1991). To introduce any scheme as an alternative to imprisonment invites the response of 'going soft on criminals' both in the political and media arenas. Media portrayal of the community as dissatisfied with the courts for being too lenient and the criminal justice system for being 'soft' are misleading and inaccurate. Moreover, this perception of public attitude has inhibited politicians in implementing reform measures within the system. Surveys of public opinion tend to show that public opinion on sentencing does not differ too much from that of the courts, since when presented with the full set of circumstances about an offence and the offender, members of the public tend to select sentences similar to those handed down by the courts (Walker & Hough 1988; Wilson et al 1986). The most expensive criminal sanction available to the courts is that of imprisonment. Non-custodial sanctions were introduced with the intention of reducing the rate at which people were being sent to prison, which in effect produced a net widening effect whereby non-custodial sanctions in practice seemed to end up being used not as alternatives to custody but as alternatives to sanctions and fines. It would appear that non-custodial penalties have not been effective in reducing the use of imprisonment by magistrates (Weatherburn 1991). Interwoven in the political and mass media approach to criminal justice is, first, the notion that dramatic events are the important issues and second, the false notion that victims of crime are some discrete group who will be comforted and mollified by the increased punishment of the offender (Stoneman 1991:203) The recent sacking of the Queensland Parole Board by State Cabinet is a case in point. The sacking followed an incident in which a convicted rapist - who was allowed unescorted leave to attend drug and alcohol counselling - allegedly raped two women three days after absconding. Further action included Attorney General(Qld) Denver Beanland introducing changes to the Penalties and Sentences Act to force violent offenders sentenced to 10 years jail or more to serve at least 80 percent of their sentences A review (near completion) will implement tougher guidelines for the release of violent prisoners. Formerly, all criminals were eligible for parole after serving half of their sentences. Under interim guideline principles, offenders serving 10 years or more, or who have breached a re-integration order, will not be granted further release within a minimum of two years - nor will remissions be granted. Long-term inmates will not be granted re-integration orders until they have completed six months in an open security environment. Prisoners serving long sentences for violent crimes will not be released until the review is completed. Changes to the Judicial Review Act will in effect stop prisoners having the right to legally challenge board decisions. The new board will be required to consult Police Commissioner (Qld) Jim O'Sullivan on applications for release by violent prisoners serving more than five years. Such legislative changes are knee-jerk reactions carrying serious ramifications for the corrections system (ie increased retention rates of prisoners

and a demand for more and larger prisons). It is a focus on crime prevention strategies which needs to be adopted. The implications for women inmates are far reaching as women tend to enter a guilty plea so as to return to their family as soon as possible. Many Queensland female inmates are feeling quite despondent, 'tarred with the same brush' as their male counterparts. Their release dates are now in limbo, their sentence future very different from when they first entered their plea.

Issues experienced by women inmates

Two major problems affecting incarcerated women are the loss of love and family, and the lack of meaningful training programs. Although a number of issues are consistently raised in the various reports and studies which have been conducted In Australia on women's prisons – including the plight of Aboriginal women in custody whose imprisonment rate is significantly higher than that of non Aboriginal women; inadequacy of educational and vocational training; the difficulties of women who do not speak or read English; the classification systems; and pre and post-release services (Alder 1994:146) - this article will focus in particular on parenting and health issues of incarcerated women.

Parenting Issues

Unlike the 19th Century convict women, for women to have their children with them in prison is a privilege to be applied for and won by the mother, rather than accepted as appropriate and natural for the families concerned. Women in Australia are punished not only for the offence, but also for betraying their children and womanhood. Effectively, they receive a double sentence – the first of imprisonment and the second in separation from their children (Benjamin 1991). Whilst there are some programs in some prisons allowing children to stay with their mothers, the majority are for infants and all places have to be applied for. This applies equally to women on remand, as unconvicted women are also separated from their children for long periods (Benjamin 1991). The media frames this issue in the context of whether mothers ought to keep their young children with them in prison. This is a contentious issue and one about which women prisoners themselves have mixed feelings (Alder 1994; Bloom 1993). Children of incarcerated mothers experience special problems. Most children of inmate mothers live with relatives, particularly maternal grandmothers, during their mother's imprisonment. However, some children are placed in non-relative foster homes and institutions. In some cases, siblings may be separated by out-of-family placements. Immediate and long-lasting psychological effects include: peer relations and school performance may suffer, the mother-child relationship may be permanently damaged, and the child may be placed at greater risk of future incarceration by the criminal justice system (Bloom 1993). Research shows that most women with older children told their children what was going on while those with younger children tended to not tell their children because they felt their children were too young and would experience negative reprisals from playmates (Baunach 1992). Those inmate mothers who do have their children with them experience a different set of problems - ie, the importance of the mother to maintain her prison duties and not be perceived as privileged; the difficulties of institutional pressures in having 24 hour responsibility of child care such as problems of general childcare facilities and nutrition (Farrell, 1996). The Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre (BWCC) was built in 1975 with facilities for 83 inmates. The Queensland Corrective Services Commission (QCSC) holds no fixed upper age limit for the child who is to be accommodated with the mother. Nevertheless, the majority of mothers complete their sentence or are paroled before their children reach the later preschool years. As such, the child prison population in Queensland remains relatively small (Farrell 1996:107). Farrell contends that policies within the Queensland correction system, at a theoretical level at least reflect some recognition of the importance of attachment for the inmate mother and her child. This is evident in the QCSC policies allowing children to reside in custody at both Women's and Helena Jones Correctional Facilities. There are, however, no purpose-designed facilities for inmate mothers and their children to maintain secure attachment and engage in play. Another shortcoming, according to Farrell, is the lack of balance in policy terms between the

needs of the child in custody and the needs of the mother for participation in programs which will promote her rehabilitation. This inadequacy is not peculiar to Queensland and is also evident in Victoria (Farrell1996: 110-112).

Health Issues

Many women who are in prison are illegal drug users. While some enter prison still addicted to drugs, others become addicted while in prison (Alder 1994:145). Most reports on women's imprisonment both in Australia and overseas comment on the extensive provision of legal drugs medications and treatment in large doses. The offering and withholding of these drugs forms part of the punishment and control methods in women's prisons. Many studies, especially in New South Wales and Victoria, have concluded that prison populations contain a substantial proportion of intravenous drug users (IDUs). This conclusion is supported by the following data: the proportion of prisoners reporting a history of drug injecting is around 50 percent; and the proportion of IDUs reporting a history of imprisonment is around 40 percent (Crofts et al, 1996: 17). Two studies of female prisoners, in New South Wales and Victoria, found that at least half reported heroin use (Crofts et al 1996: 18). About half of the inmates with a history of intravenous drug use report injecting in prison (one third to over three-quarters) and about three-quarters of these report sharing injecting equipment (60 to over 90 percent). These studies provide compelling evidence that high levels of risk behaviour occur in prison (especially sharing of injecting equipment) and that they are not declining. It can be assumed that these high levels of risk behaviour are likely to continue unless the prison environment is made less conducive to HN transmission by the introduction of preventive strategies that have been shown to be effective in community settings (Crofts et al 1996:27). Suicide and self-inflicted injury are another feature of the women's lives in prison, with unofficial reports of attempted suicide and self-mutilation quite common. Moreover, the extent of self-inflicted injury is even greater if one includes consideration of the eating disorders of bulimia and anorexia, which are more prevalent in prison than in the outside community. Whilst the issues of self-mutilation and suicide are complex, the extent of these in women's prisons has in part to be accounted for by the prisoner's "feelings of anger, hostility and impotence that results from institutionalisation" (Alder1994:145; Hampton 1993). There is some debate as to whether the high rate of self-harm is a result of general overcrowding, poor conditions, lack of contact with family, the presence of excessive amounts of illegal drugs with dangerous withdrawal effects, sex for favours (where women in desperation for a phone call or drugs can find themselves trading their bodies with unprofessional or predatory male officers), or a combination of them all (Hampton1994). However, such behaviour by women also needs to be considered in the context of the generally inadequate health, welfare and counselling services available in women's prisons. Nationally, women prisoners still tend to be accommodated in unsuitable prisons, with overcrowding a major problem. Classification, work and program opportunities generally remain far more limited than those available to male prisoners. The prospect for the future of women in prison is more grim than for male prisoners. Male inmates are afforded better opportunities to learn meaningful, marketable skills during incarceration than their female counterparts (Baunach 1992:106).

Management strategies and women inmates

Correctional management is an area characterised by change. In the 1960s, rehabilitation was the key; the '70s saw the emergence of the 'nothing works' philosophy and a move towards deterrence and humane containment as the motivation in sentencing. The methodology of the 1980s consisted of incapacitation and deprivation of liberty. The late '80s was characterised around the world by home detention, electronic monitoring, drug and alcohol surveillance and intensive supervision programs. The 1990s philosophy that has emerged has roots in all of the former philosophies (King 1991). A Public Sector Management Commission Review of the QCSC identified specific problems facing women in prison – women prisoners are disadvantaged by current security classification procedures and limited alterative correctional settings, and women prisoners have a range of special

health, program and social needs which are insufficiently addressed by current services, policies and procedures (Public Sector Management Commission, 1993:143). The most obvious indicator of disadvantage is that most women, regardless of their security classifications, serve their sentences in maximum security settings with the only current alternative being the Albion correctional centre. Under these conditions, there is limited incentive to work towards good behaviour and program achievement. Moreover, the policy review recommended that commission policy on sentence management not apply to women and that a separate system of management based on individual behavioural and risk assessment be developed. This is in place. The report outlined problems with accommodation which included inadequate facilities for women with children, lack of adequate weatherproof visiting facilities, lack of separate facilities for long-term offenders and remandees, insufficient facilities to enable a range of programs to be run concurrently, and lack of space for outdoor recreational opportunities. Another issue highlighted was the limited work opportunities at both Brisbane Women's Prison and Townsville, and the provision of skills not relevant to labour market opportunities. This is of significance given that almost 85 percent of women in prison have dependent children or relatives. With the exception of offenders located at Albion, release-to-work programs for women occur very rarely. More flexible visiting arrangements have recently been addressed. The gender balance of correctional staff at the centre can be problematic. In 1993, 30 percent of officers were male, presenting practical difficulties when there were insufficient females to undertake special duties (ie. Strip searches). Policy recommendations included that the proportion of male staff not exceed 20 percent in a women's facility (Airton 1995:145).

Queensland CorrectiveServices Commission (QCSC) Sentence and Case Management

The aim of current QCSC sentence management policy and procedures (presently undergoing an update) is to provide a framework to manage prisoner's sentences in "a consistent objective manner which minimises public risk through structured individual opportunities for offenders to correct their offending behaviour and achieve their effective reintegration into the community" (Airton 1995). The sentence management process manages the prisoner's sentence according to an established plan which incorporates legislative requirements, individual risk factors, individual behavioural factors and individual need factors. The sentence management process includes the following stages: admission, system and centre induction, security, behavioural and needs assessments, initial sentence plans, and regular sentence plan reviews. Case management is a process whereby the individual needs of a prisoner are addressed and then feed into the sentence plan with specific intervention and management strategies, including the assignment of responsibilities for the implementation of these strategies. Upon reception into a placement centre, a case plan is developed for every prisoner serving a sentence of nine months or more. When a prisoner is serving a sentence of less than nine months, but is identified as having special needs, a case plan should be developed. Wherever possible, the sentence management and case management processes occur simultaneously. Case plans must also be developed with maximum participation by the prisoner, who must be advised of all decisions made in relation to implementation of the plan. A case officer is nominated for each prisoner to assist case plan implementation and the prisoner must be advised of the nominated case officer. Implementing the various aspects of the case plans requires the nomination of responsible officers and allocation of duties according to specific roles. The team consists of the sentence management coordinator, an intervention specialist and a case officer (adapted from QCSC Sentence Management Policy and Procedures, 1993).

Core Programs

The QCSC defines core programs as interventions which address the most frequently identified need areas within the offender population; are operational in all correctional centres, community corrections centres, the WORC program and community corrections regions; are standardised in terms of format and content; and, are recognised to be the official QCSC program to meet the identified need. The Queensland Corrective Services Commission surveyed all custodial centres and

all community corrections areas to determine which offending behaviours or influencing factors should be targeted as a priority with respect to the development of standardised intervention programs. The results of this survey indicated that correctional staff believed the areas that should be targeted were programs for cognitive skill deficits, substance abuse problems and skills for managing anger and violence. The core program on cognitive skills training is structured to include four modules, each of 10 hours. This program provides offenders with skills and strategies in the areas of self control critical reasoning, social perspective taking and interpersonal problem solving. The substance abuse core program is a 10 week program designed to provide offenders with the skills to analyse their own using behaviours and is also a pre-requisite for offenders progressing to longer, more intensive relapse programs. The anger management core program is also a10-week program based around a cognitive-behavioural theoretical model. It provides offenders with the information and skills necessary to examine their own previous behaviours and to develop alternative non-violent strategies for dealing with similar situations in the future. These core programs are currently implemented in the BWCC. Types of programs offered to female inmates in Queensland prisons appear quite diverse, catering for many special needs categories. Complementing these programs at the BWCC are clerical/computer oriented courses; food technology modules; foundation nursery programs; literacy programs; courses designed specifically for Murri and Aboriginal women; programs targeting women's health issues, and a range of art and craft courses.

Women inmates and the need for light at the end of the tunnel
Achieving economic independence through employment can play a vital role in reducing crime within our community (Hampton 1993; Henson1991). Programs and useable skills are real issues for women inmates. Most female offenders are ill prepared for entering the workforce upon their release (Alder, 1994; Hampton 1993). Rogers (1992) attributes this to the fact that many women, especially those in the extremely disadvantaged segments of society, are seldom encouraged to excel academically, much less to gain basic education. Therefore, such individuals commonly view life in a dead-end fashion, captives of an "endless procession" of menial jobs. For many of these women, personal achievement may pose a threat to their interpersonal relationships with significant male figures. Many continue to be taught dependent behaviour patterns while, conversely, failing to learn ambition, discipline, and other characteristics to get ahead. The primary focus should be to provide opportunities for women to participate in programs which cater for their individual needs and meaningfully occupy their time rather than to rehabilitate them. Accordingly, women prisoners need to learn how to become confident, independent, educated, and employable - sufficiently so, to enable them to earn a living to support themselves and their children (Rogers 1992:139). Many of the early prejudices and myths about women in prison still remain. A fundamental change in attitude and approach is required in the development of a strategy for women in corrections. On the one hand, we need to stop seeing women as a trivial group within the corrections system. On the other hand, we need to avoid falling into the trap of adopting the principle of parity. Programs for women offenders should reject the notion that the norm should be based on the experiences of male offenders, Wynne-Hughes (1988) advocates three sound key policy objectives in a strategy for women in corrections. These include limiting the numbers in prison, providing credible alternatives to prison and delivering innovative prison-based programs that cater for the special needs of women prisoners, comprehensive criminal justice strategy for women offenders and prisoners that integrate both community-based and effective prison-based programs. The strategy must be underpinned by sound philosophical and legislative bases, and supported by the necessary administrative structures so that the courts and the community will have confidence in the corrections system (Wynne-Hughes 1988). It follows that punishment (non custodial or custodial) given to individuals as a result of them committing an offence needs to address the skills shortages of the individual so that upon release their chances of actively participating in the workforce and the community at large are increased. While employment is not the sole factor that will keep people out of prison, it needs to be

addressed. With incredibly high recidivism rates for both women and men inmates, the need exists to ensure that alternatives to incarceration, or activities undertaken while incarcerated, provide individuals with skills to enable them to achieve an economic base as well as to participate in their community (Alder, 1994, Hampton1993, Henson 1991).

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