



RESEARCH, POLICY AND ADVOCACY UNIT

POLICY RESPONSE

The Impact of Drug-Related offending on Female Prisoner Numbers

**Jesuit Social Services submission to the Parliament of Victoria
Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee.**

June 2010

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to make the following submission from its experience as a community service organisation that works with female offenders who are either regular drug users or frequently exposed to drug use. As I am sure you are aware the focus of this inquiry targets some of the most disadvantaged women in our community who suffer from regular mistreatment and discrimination. This submission seeks to give voice to these women, and includes responses received from staff at our various programs including Connexions, Brosnan Youth Services, and especially the Women Integrated Support Program (WISP).

A) The impact of drug-related crime on the female prisoner population.

The impact of drug-related crime continues to increase throughout Victoria. In the Corrections Victoria Statistical Profile of the Victorian Prison System 2004-05 to 2008-09, of the female prison population on the most serious charges, 19.1% are for drug offences. We know that in terms of receptions, one of the most significant increases for women has been the manufacture/ cultivate drugs offence category. This data is supported by the Women's Health Victoria submission to the National Drug Strategy, in its statements that drug policy resulting in better outcomes for women in prison is especially important because 80% of women inmates are affected by drug related issues.¹

There are unique treatment opportunities to assist women who misuse drugs while in correctional facilities. For those women suffering from drug addiction who are arrested and placed in remand or in prison, the physical and mental impacts from withdrawal can be intense. Often the reliance on illicit drugs such as heroin can have serious repercussions for people who are forced to instantly stop using drugs. The use of methadone to help offenders overcome heroin addiction can be a useful short term method, though there needs to be more substantial detoxification treatment services.

The health impacts of drug use in prisons, is a long-term issue for Victoria. The 2003 Victorian Prisoner Health Survey revealed that 40% of women prisoners reported having hepatitis and 93% of those had hepatitis C. Women already suffering poor health can lose personal regard for themselves and indulge in more risky behaviour like sharing needles and having unprotected sex.

Finally, one of the impacts of imprisoning women for drug-related crime rather than addressing their substance misuse issues is that valuable resources are squandered locking people up rather than providing rehabilitation and support. As mentioned in the Smart Justice Fact Sheet "Breaking the Link: Drugs, Crime and Prisons",² the Victorian government spends almost twice as much money incarcerating 2,000 people with drug and alcohol related offences as it does on the more than 26,000 Victorians entering drug treatment each year. Sadly the impact of drug related crime will continue causing more criminal activity if the drug addiction issues are not confronted.

¹ *Women's Health Victoria*, Submission to the National Drug Strategy beyond 2009, February 2010, p.5.

² See Smart Justice Fact Sheet 10, "Breaking the Link: Drugs, Crime and Prisons", www.smartjustice.org.au.

B) The demographic profiles of women in custody for drug offences and the types of drug offences.

From our experience the most typical drug offences for women in custody are charges for trafficking quantities of illicit drugs such as heroin, speed, ice and marijuana. Possession of small quantities of drugs will rarely result in imprisonment, so female offenders are generally involved in dealing significant quantities. It is reported to our staff that within the population of women drug dealers there is a surprisingly high proportion with a Vietnamese background who are involved in large scale drug distribution.

Though we do not have the most recent demographic profiles of women in custody, previous research commissioned by Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia leading to the publication "Dropping off the Edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia", points to higher levels of crime in the poorer socio-economic suburbs of Victoria. The long established relationship between social disadvantage and higher rates of imprisonment is confirmed not only in Victoria, but also in other states in Australia. Imprisonment by its very nature disrupts individuals' life opportunities, reflecting limited education, unemployment, poverty, homelessness and associated social difficulties.

There are no figures we can find on same sex attracted women prisoners in Victoria, though we can infer from the general population that they use illicit drugs more commonly than heterosexual women. In Australia, same sex attracted women aged 22-27 years are significantly more likely to report risky alcohol use (7.5% compared to 3.9%), marijuana use (58.2% compared to 21.5%), and other illicit drugs (40.7% compared to 10.2%) than their heterosexual counterparts.³

C) Underlying causal factors which may influence drug-related offending and repeat offending that result in women entering custody.

Often for women living in hardship, dealing and using drugs becomes a way of coping and a source of income. Some of the underlying causal factors influencing drug-related offending stem from entrenched social disadvantage, unemployment, income inequality, homelessness and poor mental health. For young women, often when peers become involved in drug use, it leads to the group of friends getting involved, and the socialising patterns become linked to using illicit drugs.

The use of illegal drugs by women can be associated with experiences of trauma, including physical, sexual and psychological traumas. Women are known to misuse both prescription and illicit drugs for various reasons such as dealing with past trauma, relieving stress, and self medicating to deal with mental illness. These mental health issues can limit a woman's ability to attend and participate in drug treatment programs, which highlights the need for outreach services. Women who are socially isolated are at higher risk of depression and excessive alcohol consumption, self harm and suicide contemplation.⁴ It is estimated that around half of women undergoing drug treatment are victims of childhood sexual abuse.

³ Hillier, L., Turner, A., (2005) Writing themselves in again- six years on: the second national report on the sexuality, health and well-being of same sex attracted young people, *Australian Research Centre in Sex health and Society*, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

⁴ *Corrections Victoria*, (2003), Substance use treatment in Victorian Corrections, prepared by Forensic Psychology Research Group, the *Centre for Applied Psychological Research* and the *University of South Australia*.

For young and older women prostitution and drug use often go hand in hand. Women use drugs to numb them from the pain of sex work, which then pays for the drugs. Sadly, the “pimps” or managers of sex workers deliberately encourage a cycle of drug dependence. It is a concern that many women identify substance use as a way to cope with gender-based abuse and trauma.⁵ Our social workers also report that young women offenders have a greater chance of becoming involved in drugs if their parents have been. The inter-generational transfer of drug using behaviour seems to be a clear causal factor leading to drug use by the children of drug users.

Some rooming houses are known as sites for serious drug use, especially the privately run hostels. There are reports of young women being forced to share rooms with multiple people, and being exposed to illicit drug use without any interventions by staff. Secure housing free from the pressures of drug dealers and users is known to have a significant affect on reducing repeat offending by young women.

The final substantial underlying causal factor is the role of drug using partners influencing women. A woman’s involvement in drug-related offending has been known to stem from a partner being the primary offender. Also, the impact of domestic violence can seriously hinder a female’s capacity to make informed choices around drug use and offending.

D) Strategies to reduce drug-related offending and repeat offending by women, including strategies to address underlying causal factors.

- Gender-based strategies are needed to reduce drug use and its impact on Australian women. Properly co-ordinated strategies are required to ensure that the number of women abusing drugs is reduced and the treatment options are appropriate and accessible.
- Early intervention programs are seeing great results including the Dandenong drug court pilot program, and the CISP/CREDIT Bail Programs.
- A strategy adopted by Jesuit Social Services is implemented through the Connexions program which provides practical support and counselling to young people with drug issues and mental illness. The Connexions outreach service links young people with existing treatment programs and supports them through the treatment phase, as well as providing ongoing support in their reintegration to the community. We believe offering outreach services to young women on the streets is the most effective way of building relationships with drug users and gaining their trust.
- The Women’s Integrated Support Program (WISP) provides pre-release assessment and planning, intensive support and case management for females in the prison system in line with our strategy to reduce reoffending. Support is holistic and is provided predominately on an outreach basis. This program is delivered by a Consortium of the following organisations; Melbourne City Mission, VACRO, and Jesuit Social Services. The program targets all eligible females in the prison system, however Brosnan Youth Services focuses on the 18 to 25 age group.
- Support services such as Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous provide specialist experienced help from people who have overcome addiction in the past, and their services should be offered to all women offenders presenting with drug issues.
- A strategy to promote drug diversion programs would be more cost effective, humane and make our community safer in the long run than a law and order campaign to stop illicit drug use.

⁵ Willis, K., Rushforth, C., (2003), The female criminal: an overview of women’s drug use and offending behaviour, *Australian Institute of Criminology*.

- Education and training is needed to raise knowledge and skills of workers dealing with problematic female drug users. Development of the drug and alcohol workforce should be focussed on preventative measures, detoxification and rehabilitation, and more informed understanding of the causal factors for women. Also parenting education and information about foetal substance use effects, AIDS prevention and other STD's is important.
- To tackle the domestic & sexual violence issues behind a lot of drug use and related crime, strategies need to consider a holistic approach to help women address these issues in supportive environments.
- Housing that is supportive and safe would be the top priority for a lot of women who need to escape unsafe/ uncertain situations. Safe places for women to be – whether in refuges or within prisons – would allow women to deal with stressors, address drug use and their other issues.
- The most effective mental health support programs that work specifically with women usually involve 'peer support' situations, where they are able to provide and receive support to/from one another.
- Mentoring programs linking women in with other women who either have similar experience and background or are motivated in the right ways (and supported in important ways), are also effective.
- Strengths based approaches are important but also challenging for groups of women, appropriate boundaries around any group activities and appropriate facilitators are crucial for constructive and supportive results that help prevent re-offending.
- Facilitation for these types of groups is important – they typically need to be by female facilitators and have negotiated rules/ codes of conduct that the women themselves have participated in the design of.
- Women like to be involved in their own solutions so strategies should focus on this.
- Activities that provide women with recreational escapes and with any children they have alongside them are very positive, and often the informality is effective in helping not just the mother, also the children who are at greater risk from adult drug use.

If you require further information about this submission or the strategies outlined above, I encourage you to contact our office. I would also appreciate presenting to the Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee to elaborate any of the points if necessary.

For further information, contact:

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