



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Criminology

Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice

No. 709 January 2025

Abstract | The NSW Co-Located Caseworker Program was established to support women in custody who have children involved in the child protection system. Under the program, child protection caseworkers are 'co-located' in NSW correctional centres. We undertook a mixed-methods evaluation of the program by analysing data from Corrective Service NSW's Offender Integrated Management System and conducting 48 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, including 25 women in custody.

We concluded that the program is a well designed and much needed initiative of benefit to women in custody and their children. However, it could be improved by more coordinated case planning between Corrective Services NSW and child protection services and the increased availability of programs to help women in custody achieve their child protection related goals.

Supporting incarcerated mothers: A mixed methods evaluation of the NSW Co-Located Caseworker Program

Althea Gibson, Marc Rémond, Peta MacGillivray, Eileen Baldry and Elizabeth Sullivan

Introduction

Mothers in custody in Australia

For several decades, the number of women in custody has been increasing rapidly worldwide (Fair & Walmsley 2022). This global trend has been reflected in Australia, where the female prison population increased by 64 percent between 2009 and 2019 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020). In the March quarter of 2024, the average daily number of women in custody in Australia was 3,309 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2024), although this figure does not capture the number of women who enter and exit Australian correctional centres in a relatively short space of time (Baldry 2010).

First Nations women are over-represented in the female prison population in Australia, comprising approximately 45 percent of this cohort ($n=1,487$; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2024). This over-representation can be attributed to a complex interplay of factors, including the ongoing legacy of colonisation, systemic racism, intergenerational and collective trauma, and socio-economic disadvantage (McCausland & Baldry 2023; Newton 2018; Sullivan et al. 2019). Prior involvement in the child protection system is also linked to adult incarceration (Baidawi & Sheehan 2019; Yoorrook Justice Commission 2023), and First Nations children remain over-represented in child protection systems around Australia (Austin 2022; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2024).

A significant proportion of female prisoners in Australia are mothers of minor-aged children, and First Nations women in custody are more likely to be mothers than non-First Nations women (Australian Law Reform Commission 2018). In 2018, the 5th National Prisoner Health Data Collection revealed that 38 percent of prison entrants had children who were reliant on them for their basic needs, with women being more likely than men to report having dependent children (54% vs 36%; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019). In New South Wales, approximately two-thirds of female custodial episodes between 2015 and 2019 ($n=8,310$) involved women with children under 18 years of age, with approximately 60 percent of these children aged 0–10 years, 26 percent aged 11–15 years, and 12 percent aged 16–18 years (Lobo & Howard 2021). Most women involved in these custodial episodes (73%) indicated that their children were not living at home at the time of their entry into custody (Lobo & Howard 2021: 7).

While it is not clear how many mothers in custody have children in contact with child protection services, the limited information available points to a significant intersection between the corrective services and child protection systems. In New South Wales, for example, 34 percent of women entering custody between January 2015 and December 2019 indicated that one or more of their children had care orders at the time of their imprisonment, while 13 percent reported that the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ; formerly the Department of Family and Community Services) was the care provider for their children (Lobo & Howard 2021).

It is well established that women in prison have gendered needs that have historically been overlooked (Baldry 2010; Bartels, Esteal & Westgate 2020). Relevantly, lack of contact with children is a major source of grief and distress for incarcerated mothers (Baldry 2010; Dworsky et al. 2020; Melander 2020). Contact with children can help reduce the ‘isolation, loneliness and helplessness’ that many women feel upon separation from their children (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2018: 96), while good mother–child relationships can also help to motivate women to participate in rehabilitative programs (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2011). Children may also benefit greatly from increased mother–child contact, with research demonstrating that the adverse life consequences of having incarcerated parents may be ameliorated by strong mother–child relationships (Arditti & Johnson 2020). Further, and importantly, connection to family members is central to First Nations children’s ‘sense of identity, belonging and wellbeing’ (Davis 2019: 230) and should be supported whenever possible.

While legislation and policy in New South Wales support contact between children in out-of-home care (OOHC) and their families, in practice contact between mothers in custody and their children is often limited (Davis 2019: 328–329). Mothers in custody with children involved in the child protection system may also find it difficult to work towards child protection goals, such as restoration, or to participate in child protection case planning or court proceedings (D’Andrade & Valdez 2012; Halperin & Harris 2004). They may also have unique support needs upon their release from custody. Despite this, services and programs specifically designed for this cohort of women have been largely non-existent.

The NSW Co-Located Caseworker Program

The Co-Located Caseworker Program (CLCW Program) was introduced in January 2020 to assist women in custody with child protection related issues. A joint initiative of Corrective Services NSW (CSNSW) and Child Protection and Permanency, District and Youth Justice Services (a division of the NSW DCJ), the program ‘co-locates’ child protection caseworkers in women’s correctional centres to assist women with open child protection cases or children in OOHC. Uniquely, the program is available to women on remand as well as sentenced women.

The CLCW Program was designed to contribute to two of the NSW Government’s key priorities, as announced by the Premier in 2019: to reduce recidivism in the adult prison population and to increase permanency for children in OOHC. It also responded to recommendations from the NSW *Family is culture* review, which highlighted the need to improve child protection casework practice for Aboriginal children with incarcerated parents (Davis 2019).

After an initial pilot in the Emu Plains Correctional Centre, the program was rolled out to the Silverwater, Dillwynia, Clarence, Mid North Coast and Wellington correctional centres from July 2020. It ceased operating in the Wellington Correctional Centre between June 2021 and November 2022 as the centre was closed due to a mouse plague. It also ceased operating in the Emu Plains Correctional Centre in early 2022, largely due to the closure of the facility during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Co-located caseworker positions were filled by experienced child protection caseworkers employed by the DCJ, including several First Nations caseworkers. Initially, one co-located caseworker was assigned to each correctional centre, although by the time interviews were conducted for this research only one co-located caseworker was working across the Silverwater and Dillwynia correctional centres.

The evaluation

In 2021, CSNSW commissioned a team of researchers at the University of New South Wales and the University of Newcastle to carry out a mixed methods progressive and summative evaluation of the CLCW Program. The team was asked to address 15 questions about the implementation and effectiveness of the CLCW Program and the experiences of women participating in it, with a specific focus on the experiences of First Nations women (see *Appendix*). Data gathering and analysis were informed by social inclusion theory, as well as rehabilitative, strengths-based, First Nations cultural and women-specific perspectives.

Research methods

Quantitative data sources and linkage

Records of women who engaged with the CLCW Program between 1 June 2020 and 1 April 2022 were identified from co-located caseworker data, which form part of the DCJ datasets. Records from this dataset were internally linked with the Offender Integrated Management System controlled by CSNSW. Master index numbers were used to link the records from both datasets. After linkage, data were de-identified and supplied to the research team. These data included socio-demographic, criminogenic and health information for each participant in the CLCW Program. In addition, data were obtained relating to the numbers and ages of children to whom the CLCW Program participants were parents or guardians, and these children's care arrangements.

Quantitative data analyses

Descriptive statistics for nominal data are presented as counts and percentages. Continuous measures are presented as mean and standard deviation or median and interquartile range, as appropriate. Women who made up the study cohort were stratified according to two characteristics: First Nations vs non-Indigenous and 'on remand at release' (on remand) vs 'sentenced at release' (sentenced). Differences between these groups were assessed as follows: for continuous variables, the student *t*-test or independent-samples median test were used, as appropriate, while for categorical variables, the chi-square test was used. A *p*-value <0.05 was used to infer statistical significance. Data were analysed using SPSS software, version 24 (IBM Corporation, Somers, NY, USA).

Qualitative data sources and analyses

Data were also collected through 48 in-depth interviews with research participants from four groups (see Table 1). Interviews were semi-structured and explored research participants' knowledge and experiences of the CLCW Program, as well as their views about its operation and effectiveness. Women in custody were recruited through a protocol developed by the research team and CSNSW, while other research participants were recruited through a combination of snowball and purposive sampling techniques.

Interviewees	Participant group	<i>n</i>
Women in custody	Participant group 1	25
Women post-release	Participant group 1	2
Co-located caseworkers and casework managers	Participant group 2	6
CSNSW and child protection staff	Participant group 3	9
Non-government/community stakeholders	Participant group 4	6
Total interviews		48

Interviews with women in custody took place at the Dillwynia, Silverwater, Clarence and Mid North Coast correctional centres between late August and mid-September 2022. At least one First Nations researcher attended each interview, with approximately half the interviews being conducted by two First Nations researchers. The researchers adopted a motivational interviewing style, which involved taking time to establish rapport with each program participant at the start of each interview, and engaging in active listening throughout the interview to determine which issues program participants were comfortable discussing. While the interviews were semi-structured, program participants were offered the opportunity to ‘tell their stories’ and subject matter was covered iteratively and organically. A post-interview safety protocol was implemented, whereby one researcher contacted each of the program participants who indicated that they wished to have a wellbeing check after the interview via audiovisual link. During these post-interview conversations, several women indicated that they found the interview experience to have been both empowering and motivating. Of the 25 women in custody interviewed for the evaluation, 11 indicated that they were Aboriginal, while two were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

De-identified written transcripts of all the interviews were prepared by the research team and uploaded into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, version 12. Two researchers conducted a pilot coding process, looking for ‘patterns of shared meaning’ among the data (Braun & Clarke 2019: 592). A draft coding framework was prepared, and one of the researchers undertook qualitative content analysis of all the transcripts. The approach adopted was one of reflexive thematic analysis and, as such, the draft coding frame was revised and refined as necessary in a flexible data interpretation process.

The Evaluation Steering Committee

An Evaluation Steering Committee was established to ensure that key stakeholders, including members of Aboriginal-led and community-based organisations, were directly involved in the research process. The Evaluation Steering Committee also helped to ensure that the research team complied with the standards expected in Aboriginal social, emotional and wellbeing research and provided advice about various aspects of the project, including relevant research to draw upon, potential research participants and the framing of the final report.

Ethical approvals

The primary ethics body for this project was the Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council’s Human Research Ethics Committee (1910/22). Additional ethical approvals were obtained from the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Body (HC210987) and the Corrective Services NSW Ethics Committee.

Limitations

Several variables in the Offender Integrated Management System database are based on self-reported survey responses (ie answers provided by women when completing the Intake Screening Questionnaire upon entering custody) and as such are subject to potential recall issues. Further, as interviews were conducted over a relatively short period, the research team was not able to investigate the longer term views of women in custody about the program or explore the experiences of past program participants. Finally, COVID-19 lockdowns in the research sites affected the delivery of the program, limiting the ability of co-located caseworkers to access correctional centres and engage with women in person, which may have affected women's perceptions of the program.

Key findings

Referrals to the program

Analysis of data from CSNSW's Offender Integrated Management System revealed that 400 women were referred to the CLCW Program between 14 June 2020 and 15 March 2022. Referrals were voluntary and were made at the request of the women. Most referrals (54%) were for women in Dillwynia Correctional Centre, while 20 percent were for women in Mid North Coast Correctional Centre, 12 percent for women in Silverwater Women's Correctional Centre, six percent for women in Emu Plains Correctional Centre, six percent for women in Clarence Correctional Centre, and two percent for women in Wellington Correctional Centre.

The caseworkers, casework managers, CSNSW and child protection staff interviewed discussed how the program was promoted when it commenced. Posters were put up in correctional centres to advertise the program and women were informed about it at the regular Inmate Delegate Committee meetings. In some instances, co-located caseworkers also visited groups of women to introduce themselves and the program. Co-located caseworkers described how they generally received from the Services and Programs Officers (SAPOs) the names of women seeking to access the program, although they were sometimes contacted by the Justice Health and Forensic Mental Health Network (Justice Health) about pregnant women in custody. Occasionally, co-located caseworkers were contacted by external child protection caseworkers who had heard about the program and wished to get in contact with mothers in custody. Interviewees, including co-located caseworkers, described how word-of-mouth was a key way in which women found out about the CLCW Program, with one noting that if some women have success with a program, 'a lot of the girls will jump on it'.

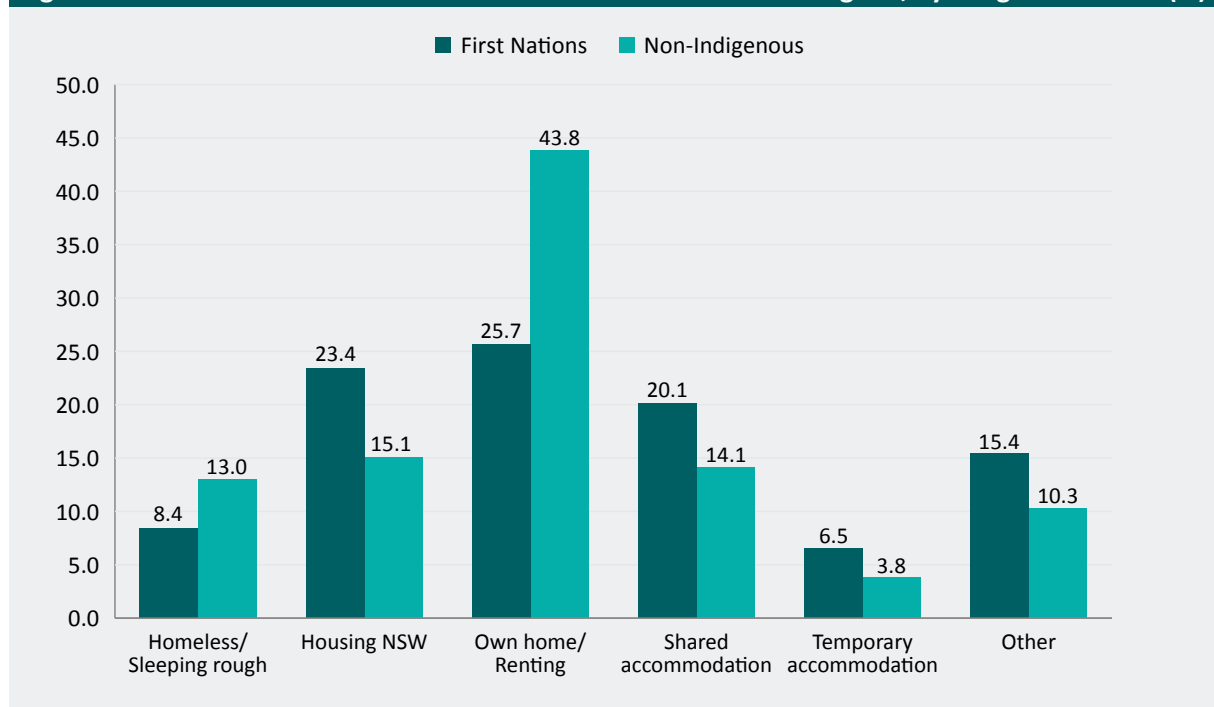
Participant demographics

Almost all women referred to the program had served a previous custodial episode ($n=396$) and just over one-third (37.8%) were on remand for the duration of their engagement with the program.

Of the 400 women referred to the program, 214 (53.5%) identified as First Nations, while one in five non-Indigenous women were from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. The age of program participants ranged from 18 to 55 years (mean age= 32.9 ± 7.2 years) and First Nations program participants were younger than non-Indigenous program participants (32.2 ± 7.4 years vs 33.6 ± 6.9 years, $p=0.045$).

Approximately one-third of women referred to the program (34.0%) reported living in their own home or private rental before entering custody, almost one in five (19.5%) lived in Housing NSW accommodation, and 17.5 percent lived in shared accommodation (see Figure 1). Non-Indigenous women were more likely to live in their own home or private rental before entering custody than First Nations women (43.8% vs 25.7%, $p<0.001$). Forty-two (10.5%) women referred to the program reported that they were homeless or sleeping rough prior to entering custody, and 118 (29.5%) reported that they would need assistance with accommodation after being released from custody.

Figure 1: Accommodation status of women referred to the CLCW Program, by Indigenous status (%)



Over one-quarter of women referred to the program (26.5%) reported being the parent/guardian of children under 18 years of age who were living at home, while almost three-quarters (73.5%) were the parent/guardian of children under 18 years of age who were not living at home. Approximately one in seven women (14.5%) reported that their children were in OOHC. Women on remand who were referred to the program were more likely to expect to have custody of their children upon release than women who had been sentenced (32.7% vs 20.2%, $p=0.06$). While a greater proportion of non-Indigenous women (28.4%) expected to have custody of their children after release than First Nations women (22.3%), this difference was not statistically significant ($p=0.166$).

Finally, over two-thirds of women referred to the program (69.5%) reported that they had a mental health condition, while 9.3 percent reported that they lived with disability. Almost one in 12 women also reported having self-harm risk factors.

Women's experiences of the program

Interviews with women in custody commenced with an exploration of the program's referral process and practices. When asked how they became aware of the program, many women described hearing about it via word of mouth. For some of these women, hearing positive accounts about the co-located caseworkers from other inmates was pivotal to their decision to engage with the program, and this was particularly the case for women who reported feeling distrustful of child protection services generally. For example, one program participant commented:

One case ... she's somebody that didn't want to talk to anybody because of the interaction she's had in the past and it was only after I've given my word and reassured her and I actually came with her to her first meeting and sat with her and given her the confidence ... she couldn't thank me enough after it was all over because it was a massive positive outcome for her and it couldn't have gone any better. She didn't expect it to go that well, it was exactly what she needed. And then that's also a person that can vouch to other people. So it's just spreading now ...

When asked their views about the program, many women emphatically described how it had benefited them and their children. For the most part, women enjoyed working with the co-located caseworkers, describing them as 'a huge help to everyone', 'amazing', 'very supportive' and 'trustworthy'. Several recounted how the co-located caseworkers advocated for them in a variety of situations, with one commenting that her co-located caseworker helped her to 'have a voice in situations that happen with the kids'. Some women mentioned the positive impact that the program had on the wellbeing of mothers in custody, with one observing that the program helped women 'do our time easier'. Women also expressed a clear preference for face-to-face interactions with co-located caseworkers, indicating that this was important for building rapport and establishing relationships based on trust, while many of the First Nations women interviewed wished to work with First Nations caseworkers.

During interviews, women described how the co-located caseworker had helped them with various child protection related issues. Many were grateful that the co-located caseworker had helped them to locate and re-establish contact with their children. One stated:

If it wasn't for them I wouldn't have gotten half the way I've gotten. And I'm thankful for that. Because honestly outside I wasn't getting anywhere. And in here I thought that I wouldn't get anywhere. If it wasn't for [co-located caseworkers] I wouldn't have this, I wouldn't be where I am right now getting AVLs [audiovisual link visits].

Other women appreciated receiving assistance to contact external child protection caseworkers, which was described as a difficult and time-consuming process. As one program participant stated:

... without the DCJ [Department of Communities and Justice] in here, we're constantly running around trying to find an [external] caseworker, trying to find a number ... trying to find the time, trying to find the money to make these calls ... if there's a middle man then it's easier.

Women also reported receiving updates about the location, placement and wellbeing of their children after engaging with the program, as well as information about court orders, restoration processes and practices, child protection care plans, and their legal rights more generally.

Importantly, some women described how they were able to raise concerns about the safety of their children in OOHC or family placements with the co-located caseworker, who was then able to make enquiries about the wellbeing of their children. Over one-third of the women interviewed for the evaluation indicated that the co-located caseworker had referred them to legal, mental health or other support services.

While all women interviewed for the evaluation agreed that there was a need for the CLCW Program, some expressed concern about delays they experienced accessing the program and dissatisfaction about the length of time between meetings with the co-located caseworker. Some women, including several First Nations women, also expressed frustration at not receiving any updates about their children, noting that some external child protection caseworkers were unwilling to engage with the program. First Nations women also made several suggestions about how to improve the CLCW Program, including delivering the program in group settings and incorporating Elders into the program design.

When discussing their needs and experiences more generally, several women observed that it was difficult to achieve their restoration goals while in custody as they were unable to access programs that addressed their parenting needs and goals. Many women were concerned about their housing on release, with comments including 'Where the hell do I stay?' and 'Where do you stay?'

Other views about the program

Co-located caseworkers, casework managers, CSNSW and child protection staff who participated in interviews were supportive of the program, unanimously agreeing that it was both necessary and highly successful. These interviewees described the program as ‘a great initiative’, ‘really beneficial’, ‘crucial’, ‘absolutely wonderful’, ‘a valuable program’, something that addressed a ‘massive gap’ and something that ‘just works’. Interviewees from CSNSW also observed that the program had improved their workplace efficiency, commenting on the utility of having a single point of contact to deal with child protection matters.

Previously, you may have spent a good couple of hours, potentially over a number of days, trying to track down what office manages somebody’s child ... So being able to have in the centre every week a consistent one source of truth is a huge like, I guess, relief. Like resources can be put elsewhere ... And it also for the women is reassuring and provides good confidence, so that has been a huge success.

Interviewees from non-government and community organisations also described the CLCW Program as a critical initiative that had the potential to be ‘a key driver for change’.

Many interviewees described how the program helped to improve women’s motivation and wellbeing. One interviewee commented that mothers in custody:

... don’t see that there’s any point to being on the straight and narrow or not going back to the violent ex-partner or not going back to drugs. You know, they’re often homeless and they’ve got no hope of getting their kids back because they can’t get a house that they can have the kids in, or the kids are on a track to adoption. And it just feels completely overwhelmingly hopeless ... But having that pre-planning while in custody for how everything’s going to go when they ... get out in relation to their kids is a motivating factor.

Co-located caseworkers confirmed that it was common to see a positive change in the demeanour, outlook and behaviour of women involved in the program, describing that they saw ‘boosts’ in women’s confidence and ‘overall kind of positivity’. They also observed that the program motivated women to engage with services to address mental health or drug and alcohol issues and commented that there was a ‘calmer environment’ in the correctional centres when women had good relationships with their children. In the words of one interviewee:

... you see the change in them, like it’s huge, and even the officers themselves talk about how much of a difference it makes for the inmate within the centre. They might, you know, be violent ... causing trouble within the centre and then completely shift and change. ... they’re happy, they’re engaging, [they’ve] got something to look forward to and they’re talking about their child.

Interviewees also described the benefits of the CLCW Program for the children of mothers in custody. Some co-located caseworkers described how they had worked with expectant mothers to organise family placements for babies born in custody, preventing their entry into OOHC. In some cases, when family placements could not be arranged, co-located caseworkers described involving pregnant women in custody in decision-making about their newborn babies. They also observed that through the program they were able to ensure more humane newborn removal practices by, for example, facilitating skin-on-skin contact between mothers and babies and helping post-partum mothers provide their babies with breastmilk.

Further, several interviewees described the profound impact of increased contact between mothers and their children on children's emotional and mental wellbeing. One interviewee observed that contact between a child and mother:

... could be all the difference in terms of a placement breaking down, to a child engaging well at school, to ... Aboriginal kids knowing who their family is, knowing which country they come from. All of these things are absolutely imperative to ensure the best outcomes for kids.

Interviews revealed the co-located caseworkers often carried active caseloads of between 20 and 60 women at any one time. One co-located caseworker commented that it was generally possible for her to see between five and 10 women a day.

Discussion

Women in custody with children involved in the child protection system represent a substantial yet largely overlooked subset of the women's prison population. Traditionally, these women have been required to simultaneously engage with the corrective services and child protection systems—two large bureaucracies with vastly different aims, policies, practices and organisational cultures. This can pose a significant challenge for women attempting to organise contact with their children, access prison programs that address child protection concerns, or plan for re-integration into their children's lives upon their release. Introduced in 2020, the CLCW Program was designed to ameliorate some of these challenges by increasing cross-system collaboration between CSNSW and the child protection division of DCJ in New South Wales.

The evaluation of the CLCW Program revealed that it was well received by women in custody, as evidenced by high self-referral rates and the positive views of program participants. The program was also seen as an extremely beneficial initiative by CSNSW and child protection staff, and non-government organisations. There were no difficulties in the implementation of the program, which had significant stakeholder 'buy-in' from the outset. Co-located caseworkers did, however, identify some aspects of the correctional environment that could be addressed to improve their efficiency, such as the lack of access to mobile telephones and correctional services data systems. They also observed that addressing impediments to women in custody maintaining contact with their children, including the high cost and short duration of telephone calls, would help women stay connected with their children during periods of incarceration.

The over-representation of First Nations women in custody in Australia is widely documented (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2024), and over half the 400 women referred to the CLCW Program during the study period identified as First Nations. Further, 11 of the 25 women interviewed for the evaluation were First Nations, with many expressing a clear preference for working with First Nations child protection caseworkers. As such, the inclusion of First Nations co-located caseworkers helped to ensure program acceptance and accommodated some of the cultural needs of program participants. There is scope, however, to redesign the program to include more culturally connected elements. For example, as suggested in interviews, the program could involve Elders to encourage, support and motivate First Nations mothers facing adversity.

The evaluation revealed that the co-located caseworkers performed a wide range of activities that far exceeded initial expectations of their roles and responsibilities. This demonstrates the diversity and complexity of the child protection related needs of women in custody, a cohort already widely recognised as having complex support needs arising from intersecting experiences of poverty, domestic and family violence, sexual abuse, housing instability, substance abuse, childhood trauma, and mental health disorders and/or cognitive disability (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020; Baldry 2010; Breuer et al. 2021; Day et al. 2018; McCausland & Baldry 2023, 2017).

Under the program, co-located caseworkers acted as a point of contact and source of information for both women in custody and external child protection caseworkers. In this unique role, they were able to complete tasks that incarcerated women and CSNSW staff found difficult, such as identifying and contacting external child protection caseworkers and ascertaining the location of children in OOHC placements. They were also able to assist external child protection caseworkers to locate and contact women in custody, including by supporting these caseworkers with practical issues such as booking audiovisual link visits or telephone calls with women in custody.

Importantly, co-located caseworkers worked with Justice Health to engage in prenatal casework with pregnant women in custody. While there is limited information about rates of pregnancy among Australian women in custody, 5.7 percent of Indigenous and 4.0 percent of non-Indigenous women admitted into custody between 2001 and 2011 in Western Australia were pregnant at the time of their incarceration (Dowell et al. 2018). Expectant mothers in custody have unique health and wellbeing needs and are often 'at the extreme end of the continuum of social disadvantage' (Walker et al. 2014: 8). Despite this, child protection casework with women in custody is limited, with many not being allocated a child protection caseworker and some only informed about whether they are able to access mother and child programs with their infants immediately prior to or at the time of birth (Bartels, Estel & Westgate 2020; Davis 2019). Interviewees noted that 'four or five' babies born to women in custody had not been placed in OOHC as a result of the casework undertaken by the co-located caseworkers. In these cases, the co-located caseworkers had worked with mothers to find their newborn babies suitable placements until the mothers' release from custody. In cases where babies had to go into care due to a lack of placement options, the work of the co-located caseworkers helped to reduce the shock and trauma associated with newborn removals (Davis 2019).

The evaluation concluded that the CLCW Program has potential important long-term benefits for women in custody. First, by increasing mother–child contact, the program has the potential to greatly improve the wellbeing, motivation and behaviour of women in custody. Data collected during interviews for the evaluation were consistent with these research findings, with several women in custody describing the severe anxiety they experienced after being separated from their children and other interviewees commenting on the noticeable positive changes in the women involved in the program.

The evaluation also demonstrated that the CLCW Program could have important benefits for the children of women in custody. In addition to the significant psychosocial benefits to children of increased contact with their mothers, the evaluation revealed that the CLCW Program provided an important mechanism for women in custody to raise concerns about the safety of the children in family or OOHC placements.

Although the evaluation was not able to investigate the long-term impact of the CLCW program on whether children in OOHC were eventually returned to their mothers, the program has the potential for positive restoration impact. Women in custody described how they had obtained information about restoration practices and processes from their co-located caseworker, and other interviewees described how several mothers involved in the program were on track to achieve restoration of their children post-release. In addition, co-located caseworkers regularly referred women in custody to external legal and support services, which could help women address barriers to restoration.

However, some women in custody were concerned about delays in having their referrals to the CLCW Program accepted and delays between caseworker meetings, highlighting the need to ensure there are enough co-located caseworkers to engage in thorough and careful casework with all women referred to the program. Many women in custody also expressed frustration at their inability to access the programs that child protection caseworkers had advised them to complete. There was also no indication that child protection caseworkers considered the adequacy of the CSNSW programs undertaken by women in custody during child protection case planning. The evaluation concluded that there was scope for improved coordination between CSNSW and the child protection division of DCJ with respect to case planning to ensure that women in custody could access child protection related programs. These programs should be trauma- and culturally-informed, and developed and offered within a gender-responsive framework (Bartels, Estéal & Westgate 2020; Bevis et al. 2020).

The evaluation also determined that greater involvement of the NSW Government’s housing service (DCJ Housing) in the CLCW Program could result in better outcomes for women and their children. It has long been recognised that women in custody struggle to access adequate and affordable housing upon their release (see, for example, Baldry & McCausland 2009; Baldry et al. 2003). The data analysed for the evaluation was consistent with this research, revealing that 10.5 percent of women referred to the program were homeless or sleeping rough prior to entering custody, and almost one-third said that they would need assistance with accommodation upon their release. Given that a lack of adequate and affordable housing options is a barrier to achieving child protection goals, the CLCW Program would benefit from the inclusion of representatives from DCJ Housing in the future.

Conclusion

The independent progressive and summative evaluation of the CLCW Program in New South Wales concluded that it was a well designed, effectively implemented and much needed initiative for women in custody who have children involved with the child protection system. All participants involved in the program were enthusiastic about the outcomes it had achieved for women and children in a short period and the possibility of its expansion and refinement in the future. The program demonstrates the potential to have far-reaching positive benefits for women in custody and children involved in the child protection system. It also has the potential to improve interagency coordination and collaboration between CSNSW and the child protection division of DCJ in New South Wales. The program may be improved in several ways if expanded, including by greater involvement of other services such as DCJ Housing and increased emphasis on the coordination of correctional and child protection case planning.

Funding

This research was funded by Corrective Services NSW, a division of the Department of Communities and Justice.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank everyone who volunteered to participate in or assist with this research, including the women in custody who volunteered to be interviewed and the members of the Evaluation Steering Committee. We also thank Kelly Austin from CSNSW and Mark Howard from Corrections Research Evaluation and Statistics for their ongoing assistance with the evaluation.

References

URLs correct as of October 2024

Annie E. Casey Foundation 2011. *When a parent is incarcerated: A primer for social workers*. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/when-a-parent-is-incarcerated>

Arditti J & Johnson EI 2020. A family resilience agenda for understanding and responding to parental incarceration. *American Psychologist* 77(1): 56–70. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000687>

Austin S 2022. 'Our kids belong with family': A look into institutional child removal. IndigenousX. <https://indigenousx.com.au/our-kids-belong-with-family-a-look-into-institutional-child-removal/>

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2024. Corrective Services, Australia: National and state information about adult prisoners and community-based corrections, including legal status, custody type, Indigenous status, sex. Reference period: March Quarter 2024. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/corrective-services-australia/latest-release>

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020. *The health and welfare of women in Australia's prisons*. AIHW cat. no. PHE 281. Canberra: AIHW. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/prisoners/health-and-welfare-of-women-in-prison/summary>
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. *The health of Australia's prisoners 2018*. AIHW cat. no. PHE 246. Canberra: AIHW. <https://doi.org/10.25816/5ec5c381ed17a>
- Australian Law Reform Commission 2018. *Pathways to Justice: An inquiry into the incarceration rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*. ALRC Report 133. Sydney: Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.alrc.gov.au/publication/pathways-to-justice-inquiry-into-the-incarceration-rate-of-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-alrc-report-133/>
- Baldry E 2010. Women in transition: From prison to *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 22(2): 253–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10345329.2010.12035885>
- Baldry E & McCausland R 2009. Mother seeking safe home: Aboriginal women post-release. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 21: 288–300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10345329.2009.12035846>
- Baldry E, McDonnell D, Maplestone P & Peeters M 2003. *Ex-prisoners and accommodation: What bearing do different forms of housing have on social reintegration: Final report*. Report no. 46. Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/46>
- Baidawi S & Sheehan R 2019. 'Crossover kids': Offending by child protection-involved youth. *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* no. 582. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://doi.org/10.52922/ti04138>
- Bartels L, Esteal P & Westgate R 2020. Understanding women's imprisonment in Australia. *Women & Criminal Justice* 30(3): 204–219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2019.1657550>
- Bevis M, Atkinson J, McCarthy L & Sweet M 2020. *Kungas' trauma experiences and effects on behaviour in Central Australia*. Research Report 03/2020. Sydney: Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. <https://www.anrows.org.au/project/kungas-trauma-experiences-and-effects-on-behaviour-in-central-australia/>
- Braun V & Clarke V 2019. Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11(4): 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Breuer E, Remond M, Lighton S, Passalacqua J, Galouzis J, Stewart KA & Sullivan E 2021. The needs and experiences of mothers while in prison and post-release: A rapid review and thematic synthesis. *Health & Justice* 9(31). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-021-00153-7>
- D'Andrade AC & Valdez M 2012. Reunifying from behind bars: A quantitative study of the relationship between parental incarceration, service use and foster case reunification. *Social Work in Public Health* 27(6): 616–636. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2012.713294>
- Davis M 2019. *Family is culture: Independent review of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHc*. <https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/children-and-families/family-is-culture/independent-review/media/independent-review-of-aboriginal-children-young-people-in-oohc.html>

- Day A, Casey S, Gerace A, Oster C & O’Kane D 2018. *The forgotten victims: Prisoner experience of victimisation and engagement with the criminal justice system*. Research Report 01/2018. Sydney: Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety. <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/the-forgotten-victims-prisoner-experience-of-victimisation-and-engagement-with-the-criminal-justice-system>
- Dowell CM, Mejia GC, Preen DB & Segal L 2018. Maternal incarceration, child protection and infant mortality: A descriptive study of infant children of women prisoners in Western Australia. *Health and Justice* 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-018-0060-y>
- Dworsky A, Fedock G, Schlecht C, Malcome M, Murray C & Hazel C 2020. Addressing the needs of incarcerated mothers and their children in Illinois. Chicago: Chapin Hall (University of Chicago). <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/PDF/Incarcerated-Mothers-FINAL-2020.pdf>
- Fair H & Walmsley R 2022. World Female Imprisonment List (5th ed). London: Institute for Crime & Justice Police Research, Birkbeck University. <https://www.icpr.org.uk/news-events/2022/world-female-prison-population-60-2000>
- Halperin R & Harris JL 2004. Parental rights of incarcerated mothers with children in foster care: A policy vacuum. *Feminist Studies* 30(2): 339–352. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20458967>
- Lobo J & Howard M 2021. *Women in prison: An examination of the support needs of women in custody with children*. Research Brief No 4. Sydney: Corrective Services NSW
- McCausland R & Baldry E 2023. Who does Australia lock up? The social determinants of justice. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 12: 37–53. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.2504>
- McCausland R & Baldry E 2017. Understanding women offenders in prison. In J Ireland, C Ireland, M Fisher & N Gredecky (eds), *The Routledge international handbook of forensic psychology in secure settings*. London: Routledge: 25–39. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315673073>
- Melander L 2020. Keeping connected while living apart: An exploration of a prison contact maintenance program. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 59(5): 267–284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509674.2020.1745980>
- Newton BJ 2019. Understanding child neglect in Aboriginal families and communities in the context of trauma. *Child & Family Social Work* 24: 218–226. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12606>
- Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2024. *Report on government services 2024*. <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2024>
- Sullivan EA et al. 2019. Aboriginal mothers in prison in Australia: A study of social, emotional and physical wellbeing. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 43(3): 241–247. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.12892>
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2018. *Introductory handbook on the prevention of recidivism and the social reintegration of offenders*. Criminal Justice Handbook Series. Vienna: United Nations. https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/18-02303_ebook.pdf

Walker JR, Hilder L, Levy MH & Sullivan EA 2014. Pregnancy, prison and perinatal outcomes in New South Wales, Australia: A retrospective cohort study using linked health data. *BMC Pregnancy & Childbirth* 14: 214. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2393-14-214>

Yoorrook Justice Commission 2023. *Report into Victoria's child protection and criminal justice systems*. Melbourne: Yoorrook Justice Commission. <https://yoorrookjusticecommission.org.au/topic/yoorrook-for-justice/>

Appendix

Table A1: Evaluation questions

Program implementation and effectiveness

Has the program been implemented as intended?

What is the journey of women who participate in this initiative?

What are staff (CSNSW and caseworker) perceptions of the service?

How does the case management intersect with other needs of women who are parents, such as housing, health etc? Does the role assist women navigate the system generally?

Is the program effective in connecting women to community-based services once they leave custody?

Women's experiences

How do the women perceive the co-located case managers?

What do women want from this service?

How would women consider success of this program?

What have you received as part of the case management service?

What knowledge have you gained as part of this service?

What have been the benefits to you as a mother from this service?

What has been the impact on the interaction with the justice system/CSNSW?

Aboriginal women's experiences

Have you been able to access cultural services through the case management service?

Were these services effective?

Were the services culturally safe?

Dr Althea Gibson is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Law and Justice at the University of New South Wales.

Dr Marc Rémond is a Research Fellow in the College of Health, Medicine and Wellbeing at the University of Newcastle.

Peta MacGillivray (Kalkutungu and South Sea Islander) is a Senior Research Fellow in Yuwaya Ngarrali, a partnership between the Dharriwaa Elders Group in Walgett, New South Wales, and the University of New South Wales.

Professor Eileen Baldry is Professor Emerita of Criminology in the Faculty of Law and Justice at the University of New South Wales.

Professor Elizabeth Sullivan is Research Lead Custodial Health for the Justice Health and Forensic Medical Health Network and Pro Vice Chancellor, College of Health, Medicine and Wellbeing at the University of Newcastle.

General editor, *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* series: Dr Rick Brown, Deputy Director, Australian Institute of Criminology. Note: *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* papers are peer reviewed. For a complete list and the full text of the papers in the *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* series, visit the AIC website: www.aic.gov.au

ISSN 1836-2206 (Online) ISBN 978 1 922877 74 1 (Online)

<https://doi.org/10.52922/ti77741>

©Australian Institute of Criminology 2025

GPO Box 1936
Canberra ACT 2601, Australia

Tel: 02 6268 7166

Disclaimer: This research paper does not necessarily reflect the policy position of the Australian Government

www.aic.gov.au