The Report: The Pilot
WIPAN Mentoring Program
2009-2011

I want someone to talk to...
Acknowledgements:

Women in Prison Advocacy Network [WIPAN] would like to thank and acknowledge all the mentors and mentees who have participated in the WIPAN mentoring program.

To the mentors, your willingness to learn and support a group of marginalised and disadvantaged women sets a real and positive example for the broader community, our sincerest thanks to you all.

To the mentees, your resilience, strength and efforts to change have been truly inspirational. Thank you for your trust.

To Aly Murray, thank you for making sense of the data collected and assisting WIPAN to write this report.

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“I wanted someone I could to talk to. Having a mentor has been amazing support because I can open up and be myself. My mentor knows all my history and doesn’t judge me. I trust her; I’ve told her stuff that I haven’t told anyone else. She said I didn’t have to tell her any of that, but I felt I had to, I had to be honest and for the first time ever it has made a real difference in my life”. [Julie, WIPAN mentee 2011]
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In 2009 the Women in Prison Advocacy Network [WIPAN] secured a one off funding grant of $100,000 from the NSW Office for Women, and formally developed itself as a community organisation. As part of that development WIPAN initiated the pilot WIPAN Mentoring Program [WMP]. The WMP created a successful and practical approach to support women being released from prison to transition effectively into the broader community. The WMP did this by recruiting and training women from the community as volunteers [mentors], to mentor women newly released from prison [mentees].

The program and its results contribute to and support the growing body of evidence of successful gender responsive crime prevention strategies in Australia.

During the pilot from May 2010 to November 2011, thirty-eight female volunteers were recruited from the community and completed WIPAN’s Mentor Training program. The training was conducted in partnership with the Outreach Program at Petersham TAFE, and thirty-one mentors were matched with mentees.

The first WIPAN mentee was matched with a WIPAN mentor in May 2010 and is today living a crime and drug free life [August 2012]. Twenty of the mentees stayed in the program for two months or more and of these only one returned to prison. Of the eleven mentees who did not continue a mentoring relationship longer then two months, three returned to prison.

The Productivity Commission [2010] reported that the total operating costs per prisoner is approximately $100,740 per year or $276 per day. The pilot WIPAN mentoring program operated on an annual budget of $100,000, as such WIPAN’s operating cost per woman was approximately $4,200 per year. The cost of running the WIPAN mentoring program needs to be considered in contrast to the cost of incarceration. If the program prevented one woman from returning to prison for a year or more, then it has paid for itself. WIPAN achieved this and more. During the WIPAN pilot period 82% of the women who were engaged in the program for one year or more did not re-offend or return to prison. Given that 93% of these women were recidivists and/or serial recidivists, this is a remarkable outcome.

This report details theories and principles that underpin the WIPAN Mentoring Program in practice such as:

- The investment and reciprocity of mentoring as social capital;
- Institutionalisation leading to social isolation; and
- Community-led participatory prevention programs as best practice.

The section "Women in NSW Prisons" discusses the demographics and ‘low risk – high need’ profile of women sentenced and on remand, types of offences and the disproportionate number of Aboriginal women in custody. Gender differences highlight that women are entering NSW prisons at twice the rate of men and experience more violence, substance dependency, mental and physical health disorders and chronic homelessness than men, while also having unique needs as mothers to their children.

This report outlines referral and matching processes of the WMP. It examines the demographics of mentees and the prevalence of issues that mentees continually contend, such as: poverty and debt, regaining custody of children, chronic health conditions and lack of housing. The progress of each mentee in the pilot WMP is mapped on a graph, and mentee milestones are highlighted throughout the report. A case study illustrates the profound impact of mentoring in the life of a mentee.

The report provides the mentee survey results which support the overall report findings that the WMP:

- Makes real change and improvement to women’s lives through mentoring, by increasing their resilience to resolve issues, and their capacity to make and carry out constructive life goals.
- Is an economically valuable program and as a community-building model has assisted to reduce the recidivism rates of deeply disadvantaged women affected by the criminal justice system.
- Increases social cohesion in the community by connecting women released from prison with female volunteer mentors and community services.
- Has broad appeal to women in the community and those being released from prison.
Summary of key findings

The overwhelming majority of mentees felt that their needs were met within the mentoring relationship and believed that the mentoring relationship, in some way had helped them to stay out of prison.

The majority of mentees found mentoring to positively impact their social capital by improving their relationships and helping them to seek the support they needed within the community.

The mentees identified the first two months post release as being the most critical period for support and the time most likely that they will re-offend. The results indicate that even a short period of mentoring has a positive influence on a mentee transitioning into the community. The longer the mentoring relationship continues, the more likely the mentee will not return to prison.

There is a high demand for mentoring as evidenced by the high proportion of mentees who have self-referred into the program. The recruitment drives for mentors are quickly filled indicating community interest to engage in the program and with women affected by the criminal justice system.

One of the key and most important factors for WIPAN’s success is the mentees’ trust and respect of the organisation itself. Feeling a part of ‘something’, without judgement or fear has been a significant milestone for the women and their continued involvement. As such the mentees have expressed being inspired and empowered, as having a voice and a real sense of belonging, some for the first time in their lives. WIPAN’s direction and future is contingent on women affected by the criminal justice system being consulted and included in all areas of this unique and grassroots organisation.

The WMP is an economically valuable and cost effective program as evidenced when comparing the cost to mentoring women post release for one year to the costs of incarcerating women for the same period of time. Although this pilot period finished in November 2011 WIPAN has continued with its mentoring program, building social capital and strong support and partnerships with government departments, a range of community sector organisations and the broader community.

These and other findings of this report are highly encouraging indicators of an innovative program successfully investing in social capital, reducing levels of re-offending and building social cohesion in the community. WIPAN has found the demand for the program is stretching it’s current funding capacity.

For women in NSW affected by the criminal justice system to continue to receive the many benefits of the WIPAN mentoring, advocacy and community education programs, the organisation requires recurrent core funding.

Pilot WIPAN Mentoring Program 2009-2011
Recommendations

The results from the pilot WIPAN mentoring program strongly suggest it would be financially and socially beneficial for government to invest in further research and a larger scale women’s mentoring program. The WIPAN mentoring program can be considered as a key strategy in any future government action to reduce current rates of recidivism.

Based upon the findings of the pilot WIPAN mentoring program, WIPAN recommends to NSW Government that:

1. Recurrent core funding of $280,000 per annum be allocated to WIPAN to allow it to run and maintain mentoring, community education and advocacy programs for women affected by the criminal justice system in NSW; including a budget to complete an external and robust evaluation of the mentoring program;

2. The WIPAN mentoring program be expanded, allowing more women affected by the criminal justice system to be supported and to enable further accredited and specialised training for the WIPAN mentors;

3. Partnerships with TAFE NSW, Centrelink, mental health and drug treatment programs, Community Services and Housing NSW should be strengthened to improve job readiness and job placement, housing and self-sufficiency, appropriate treatments, access to children, and safety from violence for mentees and their children;

4. WIPAN should be expanded to train and officially certify other organisations and relevant government departments with its’ mentoring model and processes;

5. Further research be conducted, in collaboration with a university, to highlight the key issues for women exiting prison in the first one to two months, enabling them to establish mentoring relationships, partnerships and linkages in the community, to achieve stability as soon as possible; and

6. The WIPAN mentoring program continue its’ development to research and define mentoring best practices, analyse all aspects of the mentoring process, how it builds social capital, improves personal relationships, community cohesion and dismantles discrimination and stigma for women and their families affected by the criminal justice system.
Section 1: Overview of the program

Material in this report is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected by WIPAN from mentors and mentees over the 18 month period. Data sources include the initial assessment questionnaires, mentor surveys, weekly activity sheets, monthly debriefing and training sessions, referrals and mentor focus groups.

What is WIPAN?

The Women in Prison Advocacy Network [WIPAN] is an independent grassroots organisation governed by a group of women, including ex-prisoners, lawyers, academics and women from the broader community. WIPAN is dedicated to advancing the status and well-being of women affected by the criminal justice system; by addressing the many issues facing criminalised women both systemically through advocating for a fairer criminal justice system and individually through mentoring women. WIPAN operates from the experience and knowledge that by providing women with gender-responsive social support, recidivism rates and the prison population will be reduced.

Inspiration to form WIPAN came from the organisation Sisters Inside, which is based in Queensland. Sisters Inside Inc was founded by a woman ex-prisoner, Debbie Kilroy and is unique in that it takes its direction from serving women prisoners and ex-prisoners, thereby maintaining special trust and rapport with the very women in which it aims to assist. Sisters Inside is an independent community organisation, which exists to advocate for the human rights of women in the criminal justice system, and to address gaps in the services available to them.

WIPAN has this same uniqueness, ensuring women affected by the criminal justice system are involved and consulted in all areas of the organisation.

WIPAN was formally established in New South Wales in 2008 and its Director, Kat Armstrong, a woman ex-prisoner, was the joint winner of the Law and Justice Foundation’s Volunteer Award 2011 in recognition of her role in co-founding and leading the organisation.

Genesis

Upon electing an executive management committee, WIPAN was formally established in 2008 and set out to:

1. advocate for women affected by the criminal justice system;
2. provide practical assistance and support to women upon release;
3. empower and assist these women to achieve real life change; and
4. reduce the recidivism rates for women, resulting in a safer community.

From knowledge and experience WIPAN believed the most cost-effective program would be a mentoring program based on the successes of local and overseas initiatives. Previous local and successful initiatives, such as the Marrickville Council/Community Restorative Centre’s StAMP and the VACRO Mentoring Program models were frameworks that WIPAN partly drew upon in creating the WIPAN mentoring program. Although the WMP is different and unique in that it is a women only program recognising and responding to the gender specific needs of women affected by the criminal justice system.

There is a general consensus that the needs of women affected by the criminal justice system are different from, and more complex than those of men.

Upon receipt of a one-off grant through the Domestic and Family Violence Grants Program from the then NSW Office for Women, the pilot WIPAN mentoring program commenced for women affected by the criminal justice system. The WMP was aimed at providing increased levels of social support, social inclusion and reducing rates of recidivism. The program targets adult women who have exited NSW Correctional Centres and who are residing in the Inner Sydney and Western Sydney regions.

It took approximately twelve months to establish WIPAN as an incorporated, not-for-profit charity organisation; build relationships and partnerships, design and develop the mentoring and advocacy programs. By April 2009, WIPAN had recruited and trained the first group of mentors with Petersham TAFE and began promoting the program to women in prison and to organisations working with women post-release.
The WMP was developed in response to an identified post-release social support gap for women and is intended to assist and support women to stay out of prison. The program aims to prevent and reduce recidivism by providing positive social connections and support to deeply isolated women. It also offers an alternative to destructive relationships that contribute to women continuing their offending cycles. By recruiting and training volunteers from the broader community, the WMP begins to build local communities’ awareness and understanding of the complex issues associated with women’s involvement in the criminal justice system, and in so doing, increases social cohesion and positive community relationships.

The pilot ran for 18 months from May 2010 to November 2011, which is the period covered by this report. The WIPAN mentoring, advocacy and community education programs have continued although future operation, onwards of November 2012 are subject to receiving further funding.

**Success of the WMP**

In the 18-month pilot period WIPAN had 61 referrals, of whom 31 mentees were successfully engaged in the program and are represented in Table 1, page 15. Of the 20 mentees who stayed in the program longer than 2 months, only one returned to prison. The one woman who did return to prison was a unique case. She had served nine previous custodial sentences with less than 2 months in the community in between, before re-offending and returning to prison. This time she had completed the mentoring program and remained in the community for 14 months before re-offending and being sentenced. On returning to prison, the mentee initiated and resumed contact with WIPAN and now has a postal mentoring relationship. It can be concluded that the mentoring program had a positive impact, as this mentee had remained in the community for over a year, longer than any previous period after release, and sought to return to the program after relapsing, as she recognised its benefits.

This indicates that success is not simply defined by recidivism rates. Success may also appear as a gradual change in an individual’s wellbeing and reduced involvement in the criminal justice system. Of the 31 women who joined the program during the pilot, 11 did not engage beyond the first few contacts, and 3 of those women re-offended. However the 11 women who did not continue appear to have benefitted from their limited contact with the WMP, given a smaller percentage than expected has returned to prison.

From the engagement of the first mentee in May 2010, the WMP has regularly collected data for the purposes of analysis and evaluation. Quantitative and qualitative data collected by WIPAN from mentors and mentees included the initial assessment questionnaires, mentor surveys, weekly activity sheets, monthly debriefing and training sessions, referrals and mentor focus groups. Other measures looked at historical and present day risk factors for criminal behaviour. WIPAN is not adequately funded or equipped to conduct research and analysis, although will continue to collect the data necessary in which to have the program externally evaluated.

Our analysis of this information is intended to enhance our understanding of the social support needs of women exiting prison in the inner city and Western Sydney areas. Through this analysis we aim to understand the importance of social capital and mentoring in the lives of women transitioning into the community. We attempt to elaborate some of the gender-specific needs of women post-release along with positive impacts of the program and the personal milestones achieved by these women with the help of the mentoring relationship.

Eligible women were those over 18 years of age, who had recently exited prison, and were living in a geographically serviceable area. Women are ‘engaged in the program’ when they have been matched with a mentor and had at least 6 face-to-face meetings. WIPAN determined that where the mentee has been engaged in the program for 1-2 months, the mentee has developed an understanding of what the program entails and whether the program fits with their expectations and needs.
How can a mentoring program assist women leaving prison?

Prison is stable, ordered and continuous and fosters an environment of high dependence. Unfortunately this does not adequately assist women to prepare for their post-release life. Whilst a small number of women in prison get to attend pre-release programs, the majority of women do not get released with satisfactory supports in place. In comparison their release is usually characterised by turmoil, homelessness, random violence, poverty, uncertainty, stigma and isolation, [Borzycki 2005]. Women often form effective relationships and friendships in prison. However upon release, these close friendships are severed and women are isolated from the social networks they have developed inside, sometimes over years. Women prisoners emerge from an all-female environment often returning to a dysfunctional, often violent and male-dominated social situation or intimate relationships, which gives further support to the arguments for gender-responsive programs [Baldry 2010].

On leaving prison, rather than face loneliness, women tend to be drawn back to the company of ex-offending/ex-drug associates and dysfunctional relationships. Corrective Services NSW have identified a link between unhealthy relationships and recidivism, with the third greatest predictor of recidivism, after homelessness and substance dependency, being anti-social or criminal associates [CSNSW 2011, Brown & Ross 2010].

New South Wales has the highest recidivism rate for women in Australia with 42.2 percent of women in custody on 30 June 2011 having had a period of previous imprisonment compared with the national average of 38.2 percent [Hale 2009, ABS 2011].

Although there are education and other forms of rehabilitative programs for women in prison these are not available to those held on remand or those on short periods of detention. The majority of women imprisoned each year are in prison for less than 12 months and 30 percent of incarcerated women are on remand. Women on remand retain a high security rating until trial and have limited access to programs and courses. In this respect they are more disadvantaged than those found guilty of a crime, even though they are presumed innocent. If they are found guilty, and their sentence is less than or matches their time on remand, they are released without support or access to any of the rehabilitative or ‘correctional’ aspects of incarceration.

The above factors contribute to the sense of dislocation and social isolation experienced by the majority of women prisoners on release from prison. A bewildering range of support services are potentially available but not necessarily co-ordinated or easy to access for a woman who has become accustomed to life in an environment where every aspect of her life is controlled by others. Data from the initial interviews with WIPAN mentees shows that at the point of program intake, the majority of the women had no friends at all. They had no person to whom they could confide outside their antisocial associates.

The following quote from a WIPAN mentee illustrates this sense of isolation;

“When I began the mentoring program I didn’t have any friends my own age, I wanted someone to talk to, and someone who would listen to me, and someone who wouldn’t judge me ... I was in rehab & my life was uncertain, I was fighting an addiction, my husband was in prison and I had lost my daughter to DoCS, there was no light at the end of the tunnel.”

The aim of WIPAN’s mentoring program is to offer an alternative to seeking destructive relationships by directly addressing the severe isolation experienced by women exiting prison. Through a one-on-one relationship with a trained female mentor the mentee is provided with non-judgmental, practical and emotional support and guidance at a time of significant transition.
The mentoring relationship may include practical assistance - filling in forms, applying for educational courses, seeking stable housing - as well as support through modelling healthy relationships and encouragement and guidance in navigating positive life decisions. Mentoring seeks to build the social capital deficit of women exiting prison, increasing access to community resources and improving their overall wellbeing.

Establishing the WIPAN mentoring program [WMP]

During the six month start-up period from November 2009 to May 2010 a Project Officer was employed and the framework was developed for the WMP, as well as all administrative and operational policies and procedures for WIPAN as an organisation overall. Valuable assistance in developing the framework and protocols for the program was received from Professor Eileen Baldry from University of New South Wales, NSW Council for Social Services, Public Interest Advocacy Centre and Community Restorative Centre. The Petersham TAFE Outreach Program provided the venue and staffing for the initial mentor training and monthly on-going mentor development meetings. This was an intensive period of meetings with key stakeholders such as Justice Health, Probation and Parole, Corrective Services NSW and rehabilitation centres [particularly Guthrie House] and other organisations working with women post-release.

Where did referrals come from for the mentees?

The majority of the service referrals came from government and non-government alcohol and drug services, specifically the Justice Health Connections Program and Guthrie House. However it proved difficult to contact those women referred by the Justice Health Connections Program because they were unable to provide direct contact details for the mentees. The majority of women mentees who went on to engage actively in the WMP were those who self-referred. Out of 61 women who were referred to WIPAN during the pilot period, 31 were engaged in a mentoring relationship, 19 could not be contacted, and 11 were assessed but not matched with a mentor. The process of meeting and interviewing each of the women applying was extremely time consuming for the Project Officer but was seen to be essential to provide as much background information as possible about each potential mentee as a prelude to a successful match.

See Table 1: WMP mentee progress chart, page 15.

WIPAN mentees

- Most mentees were aged between 25 – 34 years old.
- Ninety three percent of mentees had been recidivists and serial recidivists.
- All mentees stated that their conviction was related to illicit drugs or alcohol.
- Secure housing is a dominant issue for mentees with 66% on the waiting list for NSW Housing and 38% released into transitional accommodation.
- Nearly all mentees have experienced at least one kind of trauma or victimisation, the most common being childhood sexual assault [59%]. Half of the mentees grew up in violent homes and a quarter of mentees have lived in violent relationships.
- Three quarters of mentees are mothers yet none were living with their children upon release.
- Ten percent of mentees identified as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.
- All mentees were on government benefits, with 83% also having outstanding debts post release, which included Centrelink and Housing NSW debts incurred prior to imprisonment.
- Most mentees have serious health concerns and co-morbidity, with 83% diagnosed with mental health disorders, 55% with hepatitis and 52% with other serious physical issues.

WIPAN mentors

- Two x 2 day training workshops were delivered by WIPAN in partnership with TAFE NSW.
- A total of 38 women recruited from the community were trained as mentors.
- The mentors ages ranged from 22 to 70 years old.
The mentors were made up of 80% in employment, 10% current students and 10% retired.

As a group the mentors attended a three hour training and support session every month. WIPAN held eighteen of these monthly sessions in partnership with TAFE NSW. Attendance at one year of sessions is a recognised component of a Certificate III in Workplace Training: Mentoring in the Community.

The Certificate III in Workplace Training: Mentoring in the Community was successfully attained by 26 mentors.

Defining mentoring

Mentoring as a term has links to ancient Greek mythology and exists today with multiple definitions across diverse platforms.

Mentoring Australia defines mentoring as “mutually beneficial relationship which involves a more experienced person helping a less experienced person to achieve their goals” [Mentoring Australia website 2012].

Elements of effective mentoring are described on the Mentoring Australia website as being:

- A relationship that focuses on the needs of the mentee
- Fostering caring and supportive relationships
- Encouraging all mentees to develop to their fullest potential
- A strategy to develop active community partnerships

WIPAN mentoring

WIPAN’s mentoring is the relationship between the mentor [a woman who has volunteered and is trained by WIPAN and TAFE] and the mentee [a woman recently released from prison and voluntarily seeking a mentor] and involves:

- Using one-on-one mentoring to provide women affected by the criminal justice system with the social support, skills and direction necessary to achieve positive and lasting change.

- Matching a mentee with a mentor who initiates and builds a voluntary non-judgmental relationship, based on trust and privacy to provide the mentee with practical, social and emotional support and direction at a significant time of transition.

- Acknowledges that each mentoring relationship is different and is guided by the interests and differences of the mentee and mentor.

The mentoring relationship assists women in their transition back into the community. Mentors have weekly face-to-face meetings with their mentees, and provide ongoing phone support between meetings. Through this, mentors offer the necessary social support, guidance and empowerment that enables real change in the mentees’ life.
**WIPAN mentoring program: a case study**

**Before mentoring**

Jenny [not her real name] is a 33-year-old woman who grew up in a violent home with migrant parents. As well as childhood trauma, Jenny lived in a violent relationship with a partner and experienced adolescent and adult sexual assault.

Jenny first started using illicit drugs at age 12, and was 17 when she first used heroin. When she was 19, Jenny had a baby boy who she mothered until her estranged sister took custody and care of her son when he was four years old. Jenny was diagnosed and treated for mental health issues including suicidal ideation, depression, self-harm, anxiety, and drug-induced psychosis. Jenny served four custodial sentences for fraud and theft, which were committed in order to support her heroin dependency. The longest period between sentences was three weeks.

Jenny was released from her last prison sentence into the Guthrie House program [a residential drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre] where she was told about the WIPAN mentoring program [WMP]. Jenny applied for the WMP saying she wanted a mentor “so I can talk to her about my goals and hopefully she’ll be able to give me guidance or advice”.

Jenny said her goal was to stop using drugs because she wanted her son back in her care.

**The mentoring experience – told by Jenny**

“I served 3.5 years and then was released into rehab for three months. In rehab I heard about one of the other girls having a mentor and I thought that sounded really good. I’ve never had anyone to talk to before. I have family but we never talk about things, only argue. The thing that really appealed to me was just having someone to talk to, like a sister, someone I look up to. I talked to WIPAN and they matched me with my mentor, Marie”.

“She’s wise and a really strong woman and takes action on things she believes in, like workers rights, she does lots of stuff. She’s been a good straight influence. Other straight people I know through work or growing up haven’t known that I’ve been in jail or other things I’ve done. I went through a stage after my release where I stuffed up. I texted Marie really late at night saying I was slipping. She called me first thing in the morning and we met up that afternoon. She gave me some advice on what to do, she didn’t judge me and was there straight away. If I hadn’t told her I think I could have really slipped and who knows where that would have left me. It’s knowing that I’ve got support, safe support, that helps and keeps me on track”.

“One of the things she does that really works for me is that she challenges my thoughts. It’s great to get another perspective and I really listen to what she has to say. She made me realise that there are consequences for my own actions and that I’m responsible for those consequences. She gives me advice but not in a way like “you should do this or that”. I know now its time to own it – to own my life. She’s awesome – I love Marie”.

**After mentoring**

Jenny and Marie’s mentoring relationship has continued for 12 months and is now coming to an end. In that time Jenny has not had a drug relapse or committed a criminal offence. This is the longest she has been out of prison since her first custodial sentence many years ago.

Jenny is now working full-time; she loves her job and has recently been promoted. She has stable and long term housing, is abstinent from drugs and the most important indicator of her success is that she has achieved her goal of having her young teenage son returned to her care.
Table 1: Pilot WIPAN Mentoring Program
May 2010 – November 2011

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Numbers refer to the 31 individuals in the WIPAN Pilot Mentoring Program.

- M: Mentees in WMP over 2 months
- J: Mentees in WMP under 2 months
- S: Return to prison
Section 2: Evaluation of the program

Referrals, mentors and matching

Of the 61 women referred to the WMP, the majority of the service referrals came from government and non-government alcohol and drug services [AOD], specifically the Justice Health Connections [JHC] program [21%] and the transitional rehabilitation centre, Guthrie House [25%]. However, the majority of women who went on to actively engage in the mentoring program were among the one-third who had self-referred.

The 19 women who were referred to the WIPAN program but not assessed were mostly those referred by Justice Health Connections program. These could rarely be followed up as the women did not yet have contact details or a mobile phone for JHC to provide to WIPAN. Of the 42 who were contactable, 31 were matched with a mentor and 11 were assessed but not matched, meaning that we have drawn on information from those 42 women to provide the results for this report.

The limitations in WIPAN’s infrastructure and staffing during the pilot period [WIPAN had only one full time staff member coordinating both the mentoring and advocacy programs] meant that WIPAN was unable to meet the demand for all referrals received, resulting in 11 women not being matched with a mentor.

A total of 38 women recruited from the community were trained as mentors over 2 separate intakes. Eighteen regular monthly mentoring training and support sessions were held in the pilot period, in partnership with TAFE NSW, with 26 mentors attaining the Certificate III in Workplace Training: Mentoring in the Community.

The mentors’ motivations in volunteering for the WMP included a sense of having been fortunate themselves, and wanting to help those less fortunate. They expressed a sense of fulfillment in being able to assist someone else [despite some occasional frustrations with the results].

The mentors are quite different from the mentees in background, with the majority being employed professionals whose jobs include genetic counselling, nursing, the public service and administration. Approximately 80% are employed professionals, 10% students, and the remaining 10% are retired. Ages range from 22-70 years old with the majority in the 35-55 age bracket. The mentors are therefore mostly older than the mentees but the matching process attempted to match as close to age as possible.

The matching process was based not only on age but also on the interviews carried out with both groups around their lived experiences and their expressed preferences. There were enough Aboriginal and Asian women in both groups to be matched, as well as on the basis of sexuality. Personal likes and dislikes were considered, for example a mentor and mentee who were both interested in art and Pagan spirituality were successfully matched.
It was possible to match for the inner city and the Western Sydney areas so that mentors did not need to travel long distances.

**Demographics and ethnicity**

The average age of the mentees is slightly younger than that of the NSW female prison population as a whole: just over half of the mentees in the WMP were between 25 and 34 years old compared with 40% of the general NSW female prison population. About 10% were under 25 years of age, which is comparable with the 11.6% of women in NSW prisons, where as the proportion of women in older age brackets are larger in the NSW female prison population with 48% aged over 35 years, compared with 36% of the WMP mentees.

Ethnicities of women in the WMP show a larger proportion of Anglo-Celtic women than in NSW prisons, with 66% identifying as Anglo compared with 52.5% overall. With 10% of women in the WMP identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, the number of ATSI women referred into the WMP is much smaller than the 30% in NSW prisons. Of the other mentees, 7% identify as Maori and 3% as ‘Arabic’, although these are not categories listed in the CSNSW Offender Profile Statistics 2010.

The majority of mentees have competent literacy skills with 94% stating that their reading and writing skills were average. Nearly 80% of the mentees completed Year 9 high school or higher; 3 mentees had only completed Year 7, while 2 mentees had completed undergraduate degrees. These levels of education are higher than those indicated in women prisoner profiles [Indig et al CSNSW 2010].

**Children**

Almost all the mentees had children, but none were living with them after their release and only 25% had contact since they had lost their children to state care when entering prison, and had little family or community support. A small number of mentees had visits with their children whilst in prison, who were brought in by foster carers.

After prison, women have to go through court to gain access to their children, starting with limited supervised access. The women need to provide strong evidence of change and ‘reform’ such as two years of clean urine samples, to obtain such access. To progress to regular unsupervised visits, let alone regaining custody, is an arduous journey to negotiate with Community Services and the criminal justice system, even with the assistance of agencies like WIPAN, CRC and Guthrie House.

WIPAN mentors have accompanied mentee mothers to court and DoCS meetings, written references under WIPAN’s auspice and have so far been able to help one women gain unsupervised access on weekends and two women to have their children returned to their custody. These are enormously important milestones for the mentees.

**Income and debt**

All mentees left prison unemployed with Centrelink as their only income, and none were subsequently employed or earning wages. Almost a third of mentees received the Disability Support Pension, reflecting the high rate of physical and mental health problems [71% on Newstart; against 29% on DSP]. In fact the numbers on the DSP should arguably be higher given the levels of illness and co-morbidity, however gaining access to the DSP requires medical and/or psychiatric assessments and confirmation of disability, which many women who cycle in and out of prison find difficult to obtain.
Table 2: Mentees drug use and crime

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentee has a history of drug dependency</th>
<th>Mentee has used drugs intravenously</th>
<th>Mentee believes crime was drug related</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>90</td>
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This is another area where mentors are trying to assist their mentees in the WMP.

At $254 per week, Newstart is patently inadequate to meet the cost of living in Sydney, while at around $400 per week, depending on subsidies, the DSP is still paltry. Adding to the financial strain of women post-release, 83% of WMP mentees left prison with outstanding debts to the State Debt Recovery Office [SDRO] for fines to Centrelink [usually for overpayments or unpaid advances], and for rent outstanding to Housing NSW. The debt is recovered in small amounts from the womens’ benefits, leaving them with very little to live on.

Drug use

All the women in the WMP reported histories of drug and/or alcohol dependency and most indicate that illicit drug use was related to their conviction, as is the case for most women in NSW prisons [Table 2: Mentees drug use and crime]. When mentees were asked if their crimes were related to drugs, 93% responded that their offence was committed because they were under the influence of drugs, or because they needed money to pay for drugs, or because they had no money, having just paid for drugs. Nearly two thirds [64%] of mentees reported first using drugs when they were 14 years old or younger. A quarter of mentees initially used drugs between the ages of 15 and 24 years and 8% were aged 25-34, with only 4% having been older than 35 when they first used illicit drugs.
The first drug of choice for mentees was evenly divided between heroin, amphetamines and cocaine accounting for nearly a third each [31%], while the remaining 7% preferred benzodiazepines. The WMP also found that a disproportionately high percentage of mentees report being on opiate substitution treatment programs [OSP: Table 3].

It appears irregular that 76% are on the opiate substitution program, when only 31% indicate heroin as their drug of choice. This could indicate that women prisoners have been prescribed methadone [maybe for pain management] when they had not previously used opiates, posing problems for those women, particularly on release. For example: long term side effects of methadone; becoming connected with heroin networks or drug and alcohol services when not having previously been involved; and needing to juggle their OSP dosing with family and other commitments. The limited options available for dosing in Newcastle mean that women are travelling to Sydney and back by train several times a week.

There is clearly a need for further investigation and for more flexible and targeted options to be available, given that all mentees had drug and/or alcohol issues, but with very different treatment needs for opiates, cocaine, alcohol and various types of amphetamine.

Housing

Housing and homelessness are key issues for women being released from prison. Mentees reported that the most difficult issue when trying to reintegrate into the community was the lack of access to suitable, long-term housing.

Housing support is not sufficient to meet the needs of those released from prison, with 66% of mentees being on the NSW Housing waiting list, but none able to exit prison into public or community housing. While half the mentees were released into private rental properties, 38% were released into transitional or supported accommodation.

Another significant issue reported by mentees when contending with housing and reintegration post-release is locating adequate identification to lodge housing application forms, apply for private rental or to set up bank accounts. This process can take months of submitting the necessary forms to obtain identification, while in the meantime chaotic circumstances are compounding and contributing to risks of re-offending. Mentors are able to assist with form-filling, support documents and personal advocacy.

These personal experiences accord with what is already known about the factors supporting women reintegrating into the community: that housing is crucial. Without suitable housing options, women are at an increased risk of cycling in and out of prison. These critical issues raised by women participating in the WMP prompted WIPAN to develop a discussion paper, “Dreaming of a Safe Home: Consumers and Community Workers’ Perspectives on Housing and Support Needs of Women Leaving Prison” [WIPAN 2012]. This paper is informed by what was learnt during the pilot WMP, consultations with service providers, and the perspectives of women post-release [a group who are generally marginalised in policy debates and/or consultations].

With so little affordable housing in Sydney and such a tight, highly competitive private rental market, options such as boarding houses shared with drug users may be the only choice that is affordable, and acceptable to the Rentstart program [and the Parole Board], in not

Table 4: Experience of sexual assault and domestic violence

<table>
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<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>-----------</td>
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<tr>
<td>SA in childhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Violence (in childhood)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SA in adulthood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV in adulthood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
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<td>Undisclosed</td>
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costing more than 45% of Newstart or other income. Anglicare Sydney defines housing costs of over 30% of income as constituting ‘housing stress’, and finds that less than 1% of rentals in Sydney are actually affordable for people on Centrelink benefits [Anglicare 2012; SMH 30 April 2012].

Since half of the women in the mentoring program exited prison into the private market, it can be inferred that almost all experience housing stress. Women tend to be the most excluded from housing, and the highest users of homelessness services [ibid].

**Trauma and victimisation**

Women offenders exhibit a variety of complex needs that are different from male offenders as a result of their personal histories and their pathways into crime [Covington 2007]. For example, the gender specific adversities women offenders face are typically related to their victimisation, including sexual violence, domestic violence and poverty, all of which can be attributed to inequalities of gender, race and class. This is clearly shown in the group of women who participated in the WMP [Table 4]. Most mentees have experienced more than one kind of trauma, the most prevalent [59%] being childhood sexual assault, and over a quarter [28%] had been sexually assaulted as adults. Close to half [49%] of the mentees reported growing up in violent homes and a quarter have lived, or currently live, in violent homes as adults. Only 10% of mentees reported not experiencing trauma of this kind.

The WMP found a significant lack of support services available to specifically address the various underlying traumas experienced by women in the criminal justice system. A new counselling program for women offenders is currently being trialed in Dillwynia Correctional Centre, funded by the NSW Attorney General’s department. When asked, the majority of mentees in the WMP were unsure if receiving counselling and/or starting treatment for trauma and victimisation, whilst serving a sentence in a prison, was the right setting in which to do so.

**Physical and mental health**

The general NSW female prison population experiences very high chronic health conditions [92%]. The highest incidence being in mental disorders with 86% of women having been diagnosed with psychiatric disorders [Butler & Allnut 2003]. The mentees participating in the WMP reflect these statistics with most reporting at least one kind of physical or mental disability and many listing multiple and chronic conditions [as noted above, 1 in 3 are receiving a Disability Support Pension].

Over half the mentees reported acquiring Hepatitis C through injecting drug use: some had cleared the virus by accessing Interferon treatment in prison, but this was not a high priority in the first months after release. The current combination treatment is complicated and causes tiredness and depression, which is probably not ideal when the mentees are trying to re-establish their lives.

Numerous studies have established that people with mild to severe mental health disorders and cognitive disability are over-represented in all areas of the criminal justice system and especially in prisons [Baldry 2008, Justice Health 2009]. The majority of women in the criminal justice system, and the WMP, report one or more diagnoses, but the lack of specifically designed and funded mental health services for women post-release is most probably a factor in the very high rates of recidivism.
Post-release, most women were too concerned with their basic survival to think about treating their mental health conditions. WIPAN mentors have been able to play a significant role in supporting mentees to address mental health concerns both informally, through conversations, and formally, through guidance and referrals. Mentors have also been called to emergencies, some critical: for example one mentee rang her mentor after attempting suicide through overdose. The mentor immediately called the Mental Health Crisis Team to meet her at the mentee’s house, where the mentee was found unconscious. She was taken to hospital and treated while the mentor stayed to ensure her well-being. This incident highlighted the importance and benefit of WIPAN’s mentoring training, especially the awareness of and knowledge of how to respond to such crises.

The mentoring relationship

In mentor surveys, the mentors reported that their preconceptions of prisons and prisoners had been unfounded, in that they immediately liked and quickly built a rapport with mentees. However, their expectations of the changes that could be achieved and the time needed to do so, for example, changing a long-term drug dependency, were unrealistic. At the same time the mentors were willing to support the mentees through relapses and returning to prison.

On the other hand some significant milestones were reached with mentees, such as staying clean from illicit drugs, access to children, and gaining computer skills. Whilst some prisons may provide computer-training programs, most women in prison need to work in the correctional industries as they require the funds in which to support themselves whilst in custody. WIPAN has been providing mentees with training on computers, IT, administrative and all round office skills training. This has been an added bonus for the WIPAN mentees, allowing them an opportunity to develop occupational skills in the WIPAN office, that they most times have never experienced before in their lives. It has given various mentees the confidence, self esteem and ability to then go on and gain structured and meaningful employment.

Individual mentoring sessions occur, on average, once a week and are always conducted in a public space such as a coffee shop or library. Some of the activities shared during the WMP were: going to the gym, doing volunteer work together [e.g. making World AIDS Day ribbons], and going to rallies.

Communication is usually maintained between meeting times by mobile phone.

The mentors’ weekly activity reports described what was discussed and planned. The concerns that mentees identified in the reports clearly show the complexity and inter-relationship of problems they faced when leaving prison. Accommodation issues hang over all mentees and are related to problems with family relationships, including custody problems. Relationship problems may be with partners, but also with parents and in-laws. Drug and alcohol problems clearly contribute to dysfunction, both on the part of the women and their partners/friends.

Finding a solution to one problem may actually make another one worse, for example, one mentee was worried that entering a drug rehabilitation program might mean that she lost her housing tenancy. As mentioned, some forms of accommodation, especially emergency provision and boarding houses, may force the women into close contact with drug users and suppliers. Meanwhile, when a woman deliberately cuts herself off from previous negative relationships on leaving prison, contact with a mentor who has no connection with her previous life or with the justice system is shown to help alleviate feelings of isolation and build new networks.
All of these mentoring roles are actually filling acute gaps in service provision for these women. Mentors give practical assistance by going to meetings with DoCS, court, Probation and Parole, counsellors and assist in so many other areas; helping with paperwork and financial difficulties, such as SDRO debts. In terms of alcohol and drug issues, mentors may go along to support meetings like Narcotics/Alcoholics Anonymous, provide resource guides, and advocate for access to drug treatment.

**Mentee milestones:**

- Many mentees stayed off drugs or stayed in a treatment program for the longest period of their adult lives;
- One mentor fast-tracked a mentee into a drug rehabilitation centre as she wished to withdraw from methadone [most rehabilitation clinics in NSW have long waiting lists];
- Two mentees successfully ceased methadone – a notoriously hard achievement;
- Three mentees were able to move to a local chemist for dosing, instead of a clinic where they would constantly run into former drug associates;
- For the first time in their adult lives, three mentees commenced full-time employment;
- Four mentees applied for educational courses at TAFE, were accepted and are now completing those courses;
- Two mentees had their children returned to their custody; and
- One mentee gained unsupervised access with her child.

**Survey results**

- Mentees reported that the mentoring relationship helped to increase their ability to cope in general, to have other healthy relationships, and to feel better within themselves;
- Mentees reported that mentoring helped with their transition into the community: they realised the importance of having someone in the community to talk to and overwhelmingly agreed that mentoring helped them to make positive changes in their life;
- A third of mentees felt that overall the mentoring improved their mental state;
- Mentees reported that their internal and external resources grew as a result of the mentoring program;
- The majority found mentoring to positively impact on their social capital by improving their connections with services and helping them to seek the support they needed within the community;
- While the majority of mentees had an understanding of what the mentoring program entailed on intake, others recall being a little vague. This may help explain the rate of women not engaging past the first four to eight weeks and suggests WIPAN could do more to inform mentees of the program’s intent and capacity;
- Almost all the mentees felt their mentoring relationship met some of their needs including: an inspiring role model, non-judgmental support, to be heard, to have a friendship that encouraged a sense of self-worth and belief, and establishing and fulfilling previously unthinkable goals. And not least – to stay out of prison.
Section 3: Theory and practice

Social capital and mentoring

WIPAN found that at the point of program intake, the majority of WIPAN mentees revealed having no friends at all. They had no person who they could confide outside of their antisocial associates [WIPAN 2012].

Mentoring provides positive social capital and offers an alternative to seeking destructive relationships by directly addressing the severe isolation experienced by women exiting prison.

Social capital ‘concerns the extent of trust, reciprocity, and mutual cooperation that are available to individuals and communities...’ [Brown & Ross 2010, 33 and see Goulding 2004, 45-53 and Pomagalska et al 2010, on ‘practical social capital’]. Brown and Ross also define social capital as a ‘key domain’ of desistance [2010, 33], whereby low levels of social capital are a key indicator of recidivism for women exiting prison. It has been argued that in order to assist women prisoners to develop healthy relationships, with themselves and others, they need to experience healthy ‘relationships that do not re-enact their histories of loss, neglect, and abuse’ [Brown & Ross op cit].

Mentoring is a broadly accepted practice of personal, professional and social development across diverse platforms. Formal mentoring is practised in professional settings [to develop professional skills, enhance teamwork, improve employee retention or increase capacity and acceptance of minority groups in specific sectors] and in community settings as exemplified by big sister/brother programs supporting ‘at-risk’ young people through the modelling of positive
life choices and encouraging healthy decision-making in a challenging world for young people.

Mentoring women post-release has been defined variously throughout the literature with a focus on role modelling, support and the general well-being of the ex-prisoner rather than the surveillance and compliant service delivery seen in other post-prison programs. Brown and Ross define post-release mentoring as ‘the pairing of adult offenders with members of the community with a view to bringing about positive lifestyle change’ [2010, 32, and Jolliffe & Farrington’s Rapid assessment of mentoring 2007; Megginson et al’s practical guide, 2006; and Salgado, Fox & Quinlan’s evaluation of Rhode Island, the longest running women’s program, 2011].

Elements of the relationship can include practical assistance [filling in forms, applying for courses, seeking housing] and indirect support [modelling healthy relationships, encouragement and guidance in navigating positive life decisions].

The mentor acts as a role model, while voluntarily providing the mentee with non-judgmental practical and emotional support and guidance at a time of significant transition in the mentee’s life. Each mentoring relationship is different and is framed by the interests of the mentee and mentor. Mentoring relationships are mutually beneficial as mentors gain a broader understanding of life issues and often express their feeling of making a real social contribution.

In the global context, various models of post-release mentoring have been attempted in the USA, Europe and Australia. Mentoring was run for male prisoners in Australia in the 1960s but faded after the professionalisation of the parole service.

Mentoring post-release is still gaining momentum internationally and in Australia. The longest running program for women exiting prison is in Rhode Island USA, founded in 1991. The evidence, literature and standards are still being built, although do demonstrate there are successful outcomes for the mentees when the mentoring is combined with an all round, holistic approach [CRC 2011; Trotter 2011, 263-263].
Institutionalisation and social isolation

Prison offers a mundane and ordered environment that fosters a high degree of dependence. It does not adequately help women to prepare for their post-release life. The transition period presents many challenges, uncertainties and isolation, [see Borzycki 2005, for a description of institutionalisation and post-release].

A woman who has become institutionalised may find it difficult at first to become self-directed. Rather than being directed by others they find they have to negotiate with the people around them. They have to re-learn how to take responsibility for their actions and manage their lives. Whereas previously their days in prison were completely structured, it may now be unstructured to the extent that time slips away as the person tries to decide what to do next and feels more and more incompetent and/or socially excluded.

Or they may go to the opposite extreme and try and cram into a day all the things they feel they should be doing, thus adding to their burden of stress. A mentor can assist by helping the mentee to set realistic goals in areas of home management, budgeting, employment, health and fitness, family and relationships, leisure, community activities. Assisting women to feel welcome and part of the community is essential and breaks down the barriers of social exclusion and isolation.

When transitioning back into the community, women are too often drawn back to the company of ex-offending/ex-drug associates and dysfunctional relationships, rather than face loneliness. Goulding [2004] recommends that services must address the social isolation experienced by women exiting prison. Mentoring is one approach to this by helping develop social skills, affirm equal status and establish positive relationships.

Best practice

The complex characteristics of the women affected by the criminal justice system, [mentees'] in this pilot clearly demonstrate the multiple and layered issues they face. These women are further disadvantaged by low self-esteem and weakened resilience. Agencies commonly provide services for singular issues, not the holistic and social support needed to address interlacing problems. Issues such as: cognitive and physical disability, mental health disorders, substance dependency, poverty, trauma and violence, homelessness, fractured families and single parenting, legal battles and the stigma and discrimination of a criminal record, require women to work with and coordinate services from multiple agencies and workers.

The theory and research on best practice principles of prevention models emphasises that prevention works best when it involves change from the bottom up: people and organisations acting for themselves, becoming more resilient and less vulnerable. But action at this level needs strong support to tackle the political, economic and cultural factors that have helped to cause harm in the first place. People need information, education, advocacy and strong leadership to understand and act upon the wisdom of prevention [Coote, 2012, NEF].

Cost benefits and proposal for WIPAN

The Productivity Commission [2010] reported that the total operating costs per prisoner is $100,740 per year or $276 per day. The pilot WMP operated on a $100,000 annual budget. The cost of running the WIPAN mentoring program needs to be considered in the context of the cost of not running the program. In the simplest terms, if the program prevents one woman from returning to prison in a year...
of operating, it has paid for itself. If it achieves greater levels of crime prevention it would be saving considerable public funds. If it cultivates social capital it would be a fruitful investment of public funds by an insightful and responsible government. The pilot WMP relied, and WIPAN continues to rely heavily, on in-kind support and skilled professionals volunteering their time. The minimum annual budget for the operation of WIPAN’s programs, including systemic advocacy, community education and mentoring, with a capacity of supporting 60 to 80 women per year, is $280,000. This budget would allow the program to:

- Engage three full-time staff: a mentoring coordinator, a policy and community education coordinator and the WIPAN director. These are minimal and essential resources for a strong and cost effective program.
- Fund specialised and ongoing training and support for mentors and mentees.
- Ensure the program can maintain all administrative and financial requirements, including rent, operational costs and vehicle costs (for reliable transport to prisons, mentee and mentor interviews, mentor support meetings, community events and other required activities).
- Make further investigations into what works to support women not to re-offend and ongoing improvements in the program, including an external evaluation to ensure and confirm its continued success.

The WIPAN mentoring program works in strong partnership with a range of services and the community broadly; acting as a bonding element in community strengthening and facilitating women’s access to community and services.

Effective Change cites research in their ‘Women and Mentoring Report’ [2012] specifically on community-based crime prevention strategies that highlight:

- The costs to the state of imprisoning mothers for non violent crimes.
- The social costs to children when the state imprisons their mother, including an increased likelihood of disengaging from education, employment and training and the potential future connection with crime and/or drug use.

Economic evaluations of successful crime prevention and community-based approaches conclude that even the smallest reduction in re-offending translates into significant savings economically and socially [Coote, 2012, NEF]. Not only is the economic and social burden on the community reduced, the community is augmented through the economic and social participation of the ex-prisoner in the community.

WIPAN is delivering a cost effective program for the community, with long term savings for the government. For every woman who remains in the community as a result of the WIPAN mentoring program, a significant saving is being made. Therefore recurrent funding is required to continue and expand the WIPAN programs.
Women in prison are generally regarded as ‘low risk – high need’ due to their mental and physical health conditions and histories of abuse. These health issues are directly related to the high levels of drug and alcohol dependence among female offenders and the cumulative effects of long standing domestic and sexual violence. Typically, women prisoners are characterised by: high levels of historical disadvantage and victimisation, repeat offending, nonviolent crime, homelessness and multiple short periods in detention [AIC 2010, Covington 2007; Victoria’s ‘Better Pathways’ report, 2005]. Women’s substance dependency is more closely associated with their criminality than it is for men, with women more inclined to use illicit drugs as a form of self-medication or as a coping strategy for psychological distress and/or historical trauma [Forsythe & Adams 2009].

In NSW between 1994 and 2004, the female prison population increased by 101%. This population peaked in 2009 at close to 750 and subsequently has declined [see ABS 2011 & CSNSW 2011 for detailed figures: the specific effects of policies, policing and mandatory sentencing are beyond the scope of this review]. On the 30 June 2011, there were 703 women in prison in NSW, and then as of May 2012, there were 650 in full-time custody.

These figures do not accurately reflect how many women experience the criminal justice system every year [Baldry 2010] due to the numbers being held on remand. Last year [2011], approximately 1,600 women were released from NSW prisons and nearly half were released from remand. Either they were found not guilty, they did not receive a custodial sentence, or the period of the sentence matched the period already spent on remand.

This high number of women held on remand, with restricted rights and access, remains an intractable problem. Thirty percent of the female prison population are held under a high security rating until trial, having no access to programs and courses. They are thus more disadvantaged than those found guilty of a crime, even though they have the presumption of innocence. If they are found guilty, and the sentence is less or equal to time on remand, they are released without support or access to any of the rehabilitative or ‘correctional’ elements of incarceration.

Aboriginal women accounted for 211 of the 703 women in custody in June 2011, a figure that is statistically disproportionate to the total NSW female ATSI population of 2.1% [Baldry & McCausland 2007; see also Loxley & Adams 2009, who find a link between Aboriginal women, alcohol and violent crime]. Meanwhile 42.2% of women in custody in NSW on the 30 June 2011 had a period of previous imprisonment, continuing NSW’s record for the highest recidivism rate for women in Australia, when compared with the national average of 38.2% [Hale 2009, ABS 2011].

To demonstrate the ‘low risk’ description of women prisoners, only 72 of the women in prison on the 30 June 2011 had offences serious enough to be heard in the Supreme Court and only 3 were classified as maximum security risks. Women are typically imprisoned for less serious offences than men and as a consequence receive relatively shorter prison terms, often serving less than a one-year prison sentence. From 1999 to 2009, shoplifting was the most common offence committed by NSW female offenders [15%], followed by non-domestic assault [9%], fraud [7%], drug use/possession [7%], and retaliatory domestic assault [5%] [CSNSW op cit].
The ‘high need’ description of women is best demonstrated by the findings in the NSW Inmate Health Survey [Justice Health 2009]. Characteristics complicating the lives of women include:

- Serious drug dependencies [91%], with the same majority convicted of a crime committed as a direct result of drug dependence. Women are twice as likely as men to report co-morbidity of drug dependency with other mental health conditions;

- One or more long term health conditions [92%]; a majority having mental health disorders and co-occurring disabilities. Prison is likely to exacerbate these conditions at the same time as our society continues to facilitate pathways into prisons and punishment systems for such vulnerable people rather than supporting their treatment and care;

- Having an intellectual disability [13%];

- Surviving sexual abuse [85%], while the actual number of women who have been physically and emotionally abused is thought to be higher [for further information on women prisoners' mental health issues see Baldry et al 2008, Forsythe & Adams 2009, MHCC 2010].

The current NSW Attorney-General, The Hon Greg Smith, was elected on a platform of reducing repeat offending and finding alternatives to prison for prisoners with substance dependency and mental illness. The NSW Government supported this election pledge in the 2011-2012 budget by announcing a second Drug Court in Sydney and a 300 bed facility for the treatment of drug-dependent prisoners [NSW A-G 2011].

It is not known how many women these new services will benefit; meanwhile several of the older prisons in NSW have been closed and the NSW government has continued or initiated several Law Reform Commission reviews, such as the review of the NSW Bail Act, and a review of mental and cognitive impairment in the criminal justice system, that have the potential to divert women from custody [WIPAN 2012].

Women are largely committing petty crimes that are related to addiction [including obtaining money for heroin or methamphetamine through theft, credit card fraud, prostitution/soliciting, small scale dealing and trafficking, and being involved in alcohol-induced violence];

- Women experience higher rates of infection with blood borne viruses, especially Hepatitis C;

- Higher rates of mental illness and self harm;

- Higher reported rates of past childhood and adulthood abuse;

- Women also face unique needs in the area of motherhood; and

- Women have higher rates of recidivism then men, with 58% having been previously imprisoned as an adult. Women have a 42% rate of recidivism within two years of release [see WIPAN 2011].

Gender differences in NSW prisons: summary

- Despite representing only a small proportion of the overall imprisoned population in NSW, women are entering prisons at twice the rate of men;

- Women have higher levels of substance abuse and drug-related offences than men;

- Women are more inclined to use illicit drugs as a form of self-medication, or as a coping strategy for psychological distress and/or historical trauma;


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