

Women in prison: An examination of the support needs of women in custody with children

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AIM To develop a system-level profile of the characteristics and support needs of women with children in NSW prisons.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Two-thirds of female custodial episodes between 2015 and 2019 (N = 12,900) involved women who had children. Among this group, 73% were not living with any of their children prior to imprisonment, and fewer expected to have custody of their children upon release. The number of women with and without children in prison increased over time, which was largely driven by increases in remand episodes.

Women with and without children had a range of severe and complex needs, often involving mental health and other disabilities, underemployment, unstable accommodation, and prior involvement in the criminal justice system. The most commonly identified domains of criminogenic need for both groups included alcohol and other drug use, finance, and leisure and recreation activities.

Indications of family disruption or dysfunction were common. At the same time, most women with and without children identified family as their primary prosocial support upon release. Women with children also frequently reported reliance on relatives for the care of their children while they were in prison.

Relative to women without children, women with children tended to have more complex familial and marital dynamics as well as needs in domains of employment and finance. Women with children were also more likely to be Indigenous. Underlying this distinction, women with children living at home appeared to have a less severe profile of risk and needs across multiple indicators compared to women with children not living at home.

We concluded that most women in prison are mothers, emphasising the importance of support services that address and are responsive to women's needs involving children. These needs are likely to vary depending on whether women have custody of their children, and issues relating to alternative care arrangements or reunification are relatively common. Whereas women with and without children have complex support needs they also tend to stay in prison for brief periods, indicating that support may be best oriented towards accessing community services and other principles of throughcare. While in prison it is also critical to address the significant stressors associated with women's separation from their children and support the continuity of their contact and care.

INTRODUCTION

Women are among the most vulnerable people in prisons in Australia and overseas. The last two decades have seen a substantial increase in the number of women receiving custodial sentences in Australia, despite women making up only a small proportion of the total prison population (Kilroy, 2016). There are indications that this trend has been driven by increases in the number of women being placed on remand (Strathopoulos & Quadara, 2014).

Recent trends have been accompanied by an increasing number of studies seeking to understand the experiences of women in prison. The available evidence suggests that women tend to have unique pathways to involvement in the criminal justice system and a specific gendered set of needs. Women commit less serious crimes and receive shorter custodial sentences than men, although are also more likely to receive multiple custodial sentences (Stathopoulos & Quadara, 2014). They are more likely than men to have extensive histories of victimisation, experience socio-economic disadvantage such as housing insecurity and unemployment, and use drugs as a maladaptive coping mechanism (Flynn, 2013). The complexity of women's needs is pronounced among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who are particularly overrepresented among women in prison (Bartels, 2012).

An important additional consideration is that many women in prison are parents. Whereas male offenders are also often parents, women are more likely to be the primary or sole caregiver for their children (Flynn, 2013; Rossiter et al., 2016; Stanley & Byrne, 2000). While in custody, separation from children has been identified as a major stressor for women that has the potential to aggravate their criminogenic and non-criminogenic needs. Factors such as uncertainty about children's care arrangements in the community and avenues for ongoing contact have been associated with negative impacts on mental health, substance use behaviours, and reoffending outcomes (Bartels, 2012; Bartels & Gaffney, 2011; Flynn, 2013; Stanley & Byrne, 2000). Prisons are also rarely conducive environments for maintaining relationships with children, and can contribute to contact difficulties through features of architectural design (e.g. small outdoor areas and lack of privacy during visitation), rigid visiting procedures (e.g. strip searches), and proximity to the child's home (Flynn, 2013; Kilroy, 2016; Rossiter et al., 2016; Walker, 2018).

Having children also introduces unique support needs for women following release into the community. Reintegration into the community is a particularly stressful time. Navigating services that address women's complex intersecting needs such as substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence, employment and housing support can be an overwhelming experience, particularly since a number of these services were organised for them while they were in prison (Flynn, 2008; Stone, 2013; Stone et al., 2015; Walker, 2018). These challenges are likely to be compounded by and have interacting relationships with meeting the needs of their children, such as safety; housing; schooling; physical and emotional support; and routine care arrangements (Flynn, 2013; 2014; Perry et al., 2009).

In this regard, the relationship between women's support needs and parental status may vary as a function of whether they live with or have custody of their children. Women who have been imprisoned are at high risk of losing custody of their children, either formally or informally (e.g. Dowell et al., 2018). This may introduce different, and additional, strains associated with managing alternative care arrangements and meeting the obligations related to gaining custody or visitation rights through formal community services.

The aim of this study is to develop a quantitative, system-level profile of the characteristics and support needs of women in prison who have children in NSW. To do this we examined recent trends in custodial intakes for women across prisons in NSW. We then explored demographic features of women in prison and their children, in addition to women's sentencing characteristics; situational and familial factors at the time of entry into custody; and criminogenic and other reintegration support needs.

To better understand the unique offending pathways and needs of women in prison who are parents, we compared characteristics of these offenders to women in prison who are not parents. We also conducted subgroup comparisons between women in prison with children who were and who were not under their care at the time of entry into custody.

It is intended that this study will assist in informing appropriate interventions to support women with children while they are in custody and following release into the community, including those under development as part of the Premier's Priority to reduce reoffending among prisoners in NSW.

METHODS

The sample for this study was derived from all NSW custodial episodes involving a female entrant that commenced between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2019. Data were extracted from the Corrective Services NSW Offender Integrated Management System (OIMS). Relevant variables extracted from OIMS included the prisoner's demographic and offence records; custodial episode details; results of risk assessment on the Level of Service Inventory - Revised (LSI-R: Andrews & Bonta, 1995); and various indicators of needs gathered by the Intake Screening Questionnaire (ISQ), which is routinely administered to prisoners in NSW at the time of their entry into custody.

The initial extraction produced a total of 13,118 custodial episodes involving women for the study period. Following the exclusion of records with missing parental status data, a total of 12,900 valid episodes remained for analysis.

For the purposes of this study, key variables of interest included whether women had children, and whether the child or children were under their care. Each of these variables was determined through a series of items on the ISQ that asked if they were the parent of any children under the age of 18 years who was living with them, and who was not living with them. Parental status was defined by an affirmative response to either of these questions, while care status was defined by whether women reported having any children living with them at the time of entry into custody¹.

A series of frequency tables were created to compare women in custody with and without children on key variables at the descriptive level. Results for the cohort of women with children were further divided by those with children living at home and those with children not living at home.

¹ We note that this definition only accounts for children in cases where the woman identified being their parent or guardian. It does not account for cases where the woman has children living with them who they do not identify being the parent or guardian of.

FINDINGS

Parental and care status among women in prison

Among the total sample of custodial episodes involving women over the study timeframe, almost two thirds involved women who had children, with the remainder involving women who did not have children (64% vs 36%). In the most recent calendar year included in this study (2019), 1,696 custodial receptions involved women with children and 1,001 receptions involved women without children.

Within the total sample cohort of women with children, 73% reported that none of their children lived with them up to the time of their imprisonment, and 27% reported that one or more of their children lived with them at the time of their imprisonment. Custodial intakes over 2019 included 1,253 women with children not living at home and 443 women with children living at home.

Trends in custodial receptions

The overall number of custodial episodes involving women increased from 2,128 in 2015 to 2,697 in 2019, at an average rate of 6% growth per year. This overall trend has been primarily driven by increases in women on remand. Female remand receptions increased by 14% per year on average, from 957 in 2015 to 1,572 in 2019. In comparison, the overall number of women sentenced to a custodial episode declined at an average yearly rate of 1%, from 1,171 in 2015 to 1,125 in 2019.

The number of custodial receptions increased for both women with and without children over this period, though more significantly for women without children. Between 2015 and 2019 the number of women without children receiving a custodial episode increased at an average rate of 10% per year from 683 to 1,001. In comparison, the number of custodial episodes involving women with children increased by 5% each year on average, between 2015 and 2019 (1,445 to 1,696).

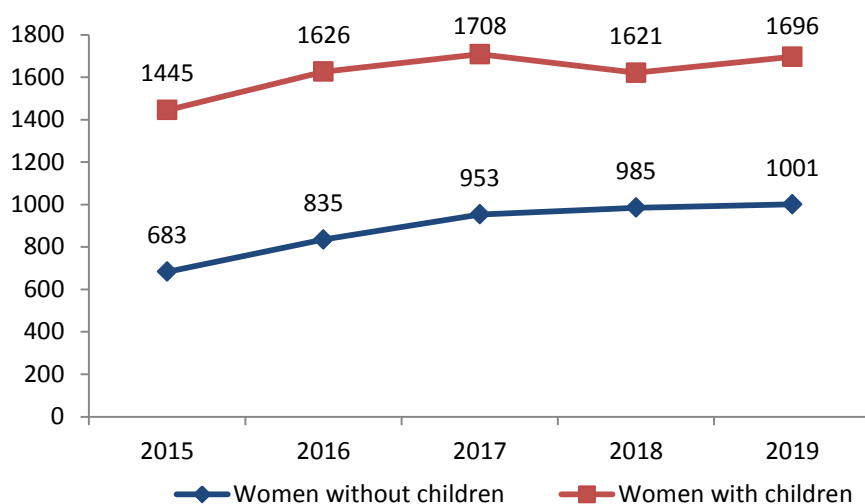


Figure 1. Number of custodial episodes involving women with (n=8,310) and without (n=4,590) children each year between 2015 and 2019.

As with the results for the overall population of women in prison, the increase in custodial receptions of women with and without children was primarily driven by remand receptions. For women with children, remand episodes increased by an average of 17% per year over the study timeframe, whereas sentencing episodes declined by an annual average of 4%. For women without children, remand episodes increased by an average of 12% while sentenced receptions increased by an average of 4% per year.

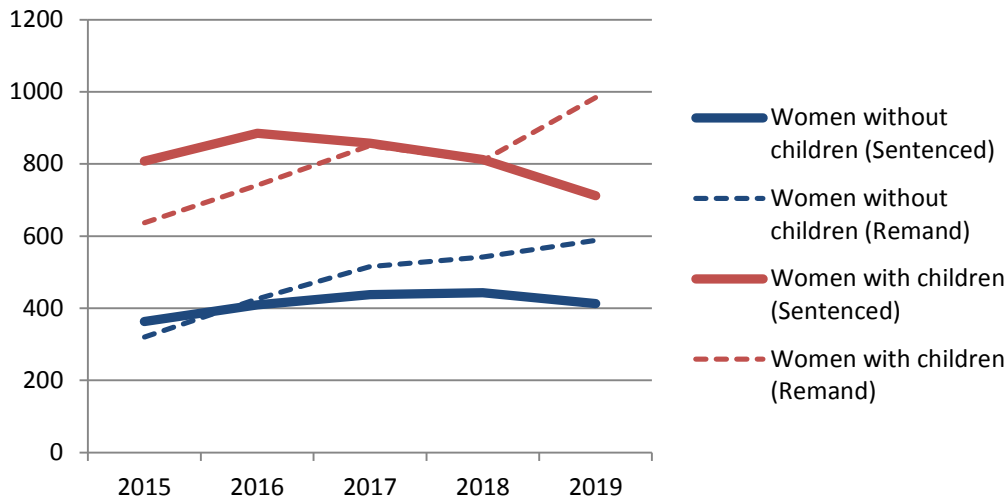


Figure 2. Trends in remand and sentenced receptions for women with children and women without children between 2015 and 2019.

Custodial receptions increased by a similar yearly rate for women with children who were living at home (4%) and those with children who were not living at home (3%) between 2015 and 2019. Growth in rates of remand for women with children were more pronounced for those with children not living at home (14%) compared to those with children living at home (10%) over the study timeframe.

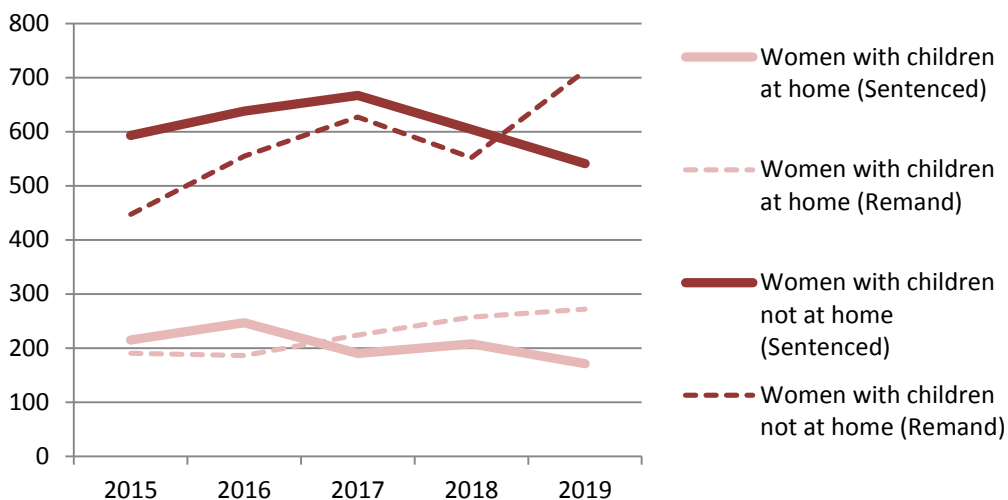


Figure 3. Trends in remand and sentenced receptions for women with children living at home and not living at home between 2015 and 2019.

Demographic and sentencing characteristics

The average (mean) age of women both with and without children was 36 years. Women with children were more likely to be Indigenous compared to those without children (44% vs 35%). Conversely, women with children were less likely to be of other culturally and linguistically diverse (other than Indigenous) backgrounds compared to women without children (12% vs 20%).

Table 1 indicates that cultural background also had a relationship with the living status of women's children. Indigenous mothers were more likely to have their children not living at home with them than living with them at the time of imprisonment. Other CALD mothers and non-Indigenous / non-CALD mothers were more slightly likely to have one or more of their children living with them at the time of imprisonment.

Table 1. CALD and Indigenous status of women with and without children

	Women without children	Women with children		Overall
		At home	Not at home	
CALD	20%	17%	10%	12%
Indigenous	35%	38%	47%	44%
Other	44%	45%	43%	44%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

As shown in Table 2, the most prevalent index offences were the same for women with and without children, as well as for women with children who were or were not living at home. These included acts intended to cause injury, offences against justice procedures, and theft and related offences.

Table 2. Top 3 index offences among women with and without children

	Women without children	Women with children		Overall
		At home	Not at home	
Acts intended to cause injury	25%	22%	26%	25%
Offences against justice procedures	18%	17%	23%	21%
Theft and related offences	15%	13%	18%	16%

The median length of custodial episode was similar for women in custody with and without children (60 days vs 60 days). As expected, length of stay varied substantially depending on whether the woman was remanded or serving a custodial sentence. As shown in Table 3, women imprisoned under sentence stayed in custody for around five times longer than those on remand. This disparity was consistent for women with children (119 vs 21 days) and those without children (121 vs 22 days).

Table 3. Median length of stay (days) in custody for women with and without children

	Women without children	Women with children		Overall
		At home	Not at home	
Sentenced	121	121	119	119
Remand	22	21	22	21

Over half of women with children (56%) had a history of multiple prior custodial episodes, which compared to 44% of women without children. On average, women with children spent more time out of prison prior to their most recent custodial episode compared to women without children (308 days vs. 257 days). Among the cohort of women with children, those with children not living at home spent less time out of custody prior to their most recent episode on average, compared to women with children living at home (272 days vs. 344 days).

Parent specific characteristics

This section examines familial characteristics and other dynamics relating to the children of women in our sample. As such, results are drawn from custodial episode data for women in the sample who were identified as having children only (n=8,310).

Primary comparisons in this section are made between mothers with children who were living with them at home and those with children who were not living with them at home at the time of imprisonment. As previously mentioned, the majority of women in our sample had children who were not living at home (n = 6,101; 73%) compared to those who had one or more children who were living at home (n = 2,209; 27%).

All women with children in the sample had between one and four children. The majority of women with children living and not living at home had one or two children (88% vs. 85%). Table 4 illustrates that children were most likely to be between the ages of 6–10 years or between the ages of 0–5 years, and distributions of age were similar for children who were or were not living at home.

Table 4. Ages of children of women in custody

	Women with children		
	At home	Not at home	Overall
0–5 years	31%	30%	30%
6–10 years	28%	32%	31%
11–15 years	27%	26%	26%
16–18 years	14%	11%	12%

At the time of intake into custody, women were asked about current care arrangements for their children. Responses from women with children are given in Table 5². Care for children was provided by a relative for almost three quarters of women with children. In 15% of these instances the relative providing care lived with the mother prior to their intake into custody.

Responsibility for current care of children varied depending on whether the children had been living at home with the mother. Children who had been living with their mother were more likely to receive care from a relative compared to children who had not been living with their mother (82% vs 67%), and this was understandably more likely to involve a relative who had been living in the same accommodation as the mother (33% vs 6%).

² In many cases women reported that there were ‘multiple’ carers for their children, which could include combinations of each of the other categories. As a result the figures in Table 5 are likely to be a conservative estimate of how often various carer groups are providing care to children.

Table 5. Care provider for children of women in custody

	Women with children		
	At home	Not at home	Overall
Mother	1%	1%	1%
Father	26%	20%	22%
Grandparent	41%	33%	36%
Sibling	6%	4%	5%
DOCS / FACS	3%	19%	13%
Multiple	7%	12%	10%
Other relative	9%	10%	10%
Other non-relative	4%	1%	2%
Other	3%	1%	2%

Conversely, thirteen per cent of women reported that their children were under the care of Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ: formally DOCS / FACS) community services at the time of their imprisonment. As expected, care of children by DCJ was higher for women with children not living at home than for women with children living at home (19% vs 3%). Overall, a third of women (34%) reported that there were care orders in place for one or more of their children at the time of their imprisonment; this was substantially higher for women with children not living at home compared to women with children living at home (48% vs 9%). In this case, ‘care’ is taken to imply any form of out-of-home care organised or in the process of being organised by DCJ³ and any children on a care order issued by the NSW Children’s Court⁴.

Situational factors

The following section explores factors associated with women’s psychosocial functioning in the community at the time of their involvement in the criminal justice system and resulting imprisonment. In particular we focus on situational factors that may be relevant to their care of children, including relationship dynamics and accommodation.

Table 6 shows the most common living arrangements for women up to the time of their imprisonment. Over half of women with and without children lived with family or in shared accommodation prior to their intake into custody (57% vs 54%). Among women with children, those with children not living at home were more likely to be in shared accommodation (37% vs. 22%), while women with children living at home were more likely to be living with family prior to custody (27% vs. 19%).

Critically, 6% of women with children and 4% of women without children identified being homeless at the time of their imprisonment. Women with children not living at home were more likely to identify being homeless (7%) than women with children living at home (2%).

³ This includes emergency care, short to medium term care, long term or permanent care and relative or kinship care.

⁴ The term care order includes emergency care and protection orders, assessment orders, removal of child orders or any other care order issued by the Children’s Court in NSW. The ISQ does not make a distinction between these types of orders or who these orders were taken out by.

Table 6. Most common accommodation arrangements of women with and without children prior to custody episode

	Women without children	Women with children		Overall
		At home	Not at home	
Renting	13%	25%	10%	14%
Living with family	22%	27%	19%	21%
Shared accommodation	35%	22%	37%	34%

Around a third of women with and without children lived at three or more addresses over the last 12 months prior to their imprisonment (31% vs 35%). The result for women with children was largely driven by women with children not living at home, who were twice as likely to have lived at three or more addresses over the last 12 months compared to women with children living at home (40% vs. 21%).

Women with children were more likely to have lived in a high crime area than women without children (52% vs. 45%). Women with children not living at home were more likely to be living in a high crime area (56% vs. 41%) than women with children living at home.

Table 7. Women with and without children living at 3 or more addresses, and living in a high crime area, prior to their imprisonment

	Women without children	Women with children		Overall
		At home	Not at home	
3 or more addresses in last 12 months	31%	21%	40%	35%
Living in high crime area	45%	41%	56%	52%

There was limited detailed information available about women's relationships with partners and family for the purposes of this study. Available data indicated that more than two thirds of women with children had a current or former spouse who had a criminal record (69%), which compares to around half of women without children (56%). Having a spouse with a criminal record was more common for women with children not living at home than among women with children living at home (71% vs 63%).

Women with children were almost twice as likely to have convictions for partner or family violence attached to their index custodial episode than women without children (63% vs. 37%). This trend was driven by women with children not living at home, who were more than twice as likely to have related convictions than women with children living at home (44% vs 19%).

Notwithstanding the above findings, similar proportions of women in custody with and without children had a current Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) or Apprehended Domestic Violence Order (ADVO) against them at the time of intake (25% vs 25%). Women with children were slightly more likely to have a current AVO or ADVO in place against other parties compared to women without children (10% vs 8%).

Women with children were more likely than women without children to be employed (65% vs 57%) and to have held employment for a continuous 12 months at the time of their intake into custody (49% vs. 42%). Women with children not living at home were more likely than women with children living at home to be currently employed (70% vs 53%) or to be in employment for a continuous 12 month period prior to their intake into custody (54% vs. 37%).

Table 8. Women with and without children currently employed at the time of entry into custody, and employed for a continuous 12 months prior to custody

	Women without children	Women with children		Overall
		At home	Not at home	
Employed at time of custody	57%	53%	70%	65%
Employed for continuous 12 months	42%	37%	54%	49%

Just over half of women without children received Centrelink benefits, compared to almost three quarters of women with children (56% vs. 73%). Women with children living at home were slightly more likely to receive Centrelink benefits than women with children not living at home (79% vs 71%).

Criminogenic needs

The average assessed risk of recidivism was in the medium category for both women with ($M = 32.4$; $SD = 8.5$) and without children ($M = 31.0$; $SD = 7.3$) who received an LSI-R assessment. There was substantial variation in risk among women with children, so that those with children living at home tended to have LSI-R scores that were lower than the population average ($M = 28.4$; $SD = 8.1$), whereas those with children not living at home had LSI-R scores that were higher than the population average ($M = 33.7$; $SD = 6.5$).

Corrective Services NSW applies scoring thresholds to each of the domains of dynamic risk in the LSI-R to categorise the severity of offenders' needs. Scores at the highest end of the severity of needs scale denote 'considerable need for improvement'. These needs have a greater risk of influencing criminal behaviour and are therefore considered a priority for intervention and support.

Application of the severity of needs scale to the risk rating scores of women in prison with and without children (see Table 9) showed that the same three domains were most commonly identified as having considerable need for improvement. These domains related to leisure and recreation, alcohol and drug use, and financial needs. These three domains were also consistently identified as most prevalent among women with children who were or were not living at home.

Table 9. Women with and without children with considerable needs in each of the dynamic risk domains of the LSI-R

	Women without children	Women with children		Overall
		At home	Not at home	
Education/Employment	35%	27%	44%	39%
Financial	68%	68%	80%	77%
Family/Marital	41%	36%	50%	47%
Accommodation	19%	9%	24%	20%
Leisure/Recreation	79%	69%	85%	80%
Companions	14%	10%	17%	15%
Alcohol/Drug problems	73%	59%	77%	72%
Emotional/Personal	43%	36%	41%	40%
Attitude/Orientation	42%	34%	46%	43%

Considering the patterns of need as a whole, it can be seen that women with children and women without children tended to have similar prevalence of needs across each of the domains. Women with children were slightly more likely to have needs in the education and employment, financial, and family and marital domains than women without children. Within the cohort of women with children, those who had children living at home showed a lower prevalence of need on all domains compared to those who had children not living at home.

Other support and reintegration factors

Similar proportions of women with and without children had a history of treatment for mental health difficulties (74% vs. 75%). However, among the women with children cohort, a greater proportion of women with children not living at home had been treated for mental health difficulties than women with children living at home (77% vs. 69%).

One in five women without children reported having a disability compared to one in six women with children (22% vs. 15%). Women with children not living at home were twice as likely to have a disability as women with children living at home (17% vs. 8%). Among women with a disability, a mental health disability was most commonly reported by both women with and without children (58% vs 43%: see Table 10). Women without children who reported a disability identified having physical disabilities more often than women with children (22% vs 14%).

Table 10. Prevalence of different categories of disability among women with and without children who reported having a disability

	Women without children	Women with children		Overall
		At home	Not at home	
Intellectual	12%	4%	4%	4%
Physical	22%	15%	14%	14%
Mental Health	43%	50%	59%	58%
Multiple	23%	30%	24%	25%

At the time of intake into custody women are asked to indicate known exit planning needs for when they are released into the community, including arrangements with their children. Among women with children, one in six (16%) reported that they expected to have custody of their children after release. This included only around half of women with children who were living at home at the time of their imprisonment (46%) and fewer women with children who had not been living with them (6%). Notwithstanding custody arrangements, very few women with children living (1%) and not living at home (2%) anticipated needing assistance with relationships with their children after release.

Women also reported on their anticipated access to prosocial supports when next in the community. Table 11 shows similar patterns whereby the vast majority of women with and without children anticipated the support of prosocial family members. Women with children living at home were almost universally reliant on the anticipated support of family members, and identified these supports more often than those with children not living at home (90% vs 81%).

Expectations of support from other community organisations were low among all women in the sample. It was noted that a non-marginal proportion of women were unable to identify any prosocial supports in the community who could provide support upon their release, although this was less common for women with

children living at home (5%) compared to women with children not living at home (12%) and women without children (13%).

Table 11. Anticipated access to prosocial supports at the time of release among women with and without children

	Women without children	Women with children		Overall
		At home	Not at home	
Family	83%	90%	81%	83%
Friends	20%	17%	21%	20%
Community	3%	2%	3%	3%
Sports	1%	1%	0%	0%
Religious	1%	1%	1%	1%
Other	9%	7%	10%	9%
None	13%	5%	12%	10%

Relatively small numbers of women with and without children anticipated needing formal assistance with accommodation (14% vs 14%) or with employment (4% vs 3%) after their release. There was little difference between women with children living and not living at home in the need for employment assistance following release from custody. However, women with children not living at home were almost twice as likely to require assistance with accommodation following their release (16% vs. 9%).

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we aimed to identify the support needs of women in prison who have children and how these needs differ depending on whether these women have children living or not living at home. We did this by comparing the custodial experiences of women with and without children in terms of demographic, sentencing, situational factors, criminogenic needs, and other reintegration and support issues. We also examined these characteristics and specific parental factors to identify similarities and differences in the support needs of women with children living and not living at home.

Across the selected sample of custodial episodes involving women, we found that around 2 in 3 involved women who had children. Typically women in prison had 1–2 children who tended to be aged between infancy and 10 years. Significantly, 73% of women with children were not living with any of their children prior to their imprisonment. In addition, relatively few women expected to have custody of their children after release.

While it has previously been identified that women in prison are at particular risk of losing custody of their children (Dowell et al., 2018), these findings highlight the prevalence of the issue and suggest that women’s child-related support needs commonly involve factors other than the immediate care of their children. These could include ensuring the suitability of alternative care arrangements; maintaining contact; complying with community care arrangements; and working towards reunification. In this regard it is likely that many women would benefit from continued access to community services that support ongoing contact or reunification with their children throughout their time in prison and following release.

We found an increasing trend in the number of custodial episodes involving women with and without children between 2015 and 2019. Consistent with other research (e.g. Strathopoulos & Quadara, 2014), this trend was primarily driven by increases in remand receptions. Custodial sentences were relatively

steady, and decreased slightly for women with children, over the study timeframe. Women with and without children were also frequently sentenced for offences against justice proceedings, which suggests that return to custody for breach of parole orders was common. As a result the average custodial episode was short at less than two months.

Even brief periods of imprisonment could have substantial impacts on women's functioning in the community, including on the continuity of their accommodation, employment, and childcare arrangements (Flynn, 2008; Stone, 2013; Stone et al., 2015; Walker, 2018). A complicating factor is that many existing custody-based interventions and case management processes may not be feasibly delivered to people who serve very short periods in prison. These issues may be addressed by services that support women in maintaining community-based protective factors while they are in the community, and adhere to intervention principles such as commencing as soon as possible after imprisonment; using throughcare models so that support can continue after release; and being available to prisoners on remand as well as those who have been sentenced.

In line with other studies (e.g. Baldry et al., 2008; Flynn, 2008; Dowell et al., 2018; Stone, 2013; Stone et al., 2015; Walker, 2018; Walker et al., 2019) we found that women in prison, both with and without children, tended to be a vulnerable and marginalised group. Difficulties with mental health and other disabilities, underemployment, unstable accommodation, and prior imprisonment were common. The most commonly identified domains of criminogenic need involved alcohol and other drug use, finance, and leisure / recreation activities, which was relatively constant for women with and without children. In addition to the high prevalence of women with children who were not living at home there were other signs of family disruption, such as a high proportion of spouses with a criminal record. Women with and without children also commonly had index convictions for family or partner violence, which in many cases is likely to reflect their own experiences of domestic abuse (Wilson et al., 2017).

Conversely, our results also highlight the importance of family as a protective factor for women in prison. Most women identified family as their primary prosocial support upon release, and this was pronounced among women with children living at home. Similarly, women with children reported that they were often dependent on relatives – most commonly grandparents – for the care of their children while they were in prison. It appears that a key challenge for many women's case management is to leverage existing family supports, while also navigating children's custody-related or other restrictions on associations and the risk of potentially harmful exposure to more antisocial members of their family network. Other prosocial community supports were rarely identified, and we note that a particularly vulnerable group may involve the small but significant proportion of women who were unable to identify any prosocial supports upon release.

Considering the pattern of findings, this study indicates that some support needs may be greater priorities for women with children compared to those without children. Consistent with the above discussion about family supports, women with children appeared to have more complex familial dynamics such as having spouses with a criminal history and index convictions for family or partner violence. While women with children were more likely to have recent employment, they were also more likely to require financial support in the form of Centrelink benefits. Consequently, women with children showed elevations on LSI-R need domains of education and employment, finance, and family and marital issues compared to women without children. It appears that these needs reflect some of the situational and relational strains associated with having and raising children. Women with children were also more likely to be Indigenous and to live in high crime areas, although were less likely to identify having a disability, compared to women without children.

However, our results showed that underlying the distinction between women with and without children, there were consistent differences in needs according to whether women were living with and immediately involved in the routine care of their children prior to their imprisonment. Overall, women with children living at home had a less severe profile of need, marked by lower assessed risk of reoffending and prevalence of various domains of need on the LSI-R; more stable accommodation; greater access to family-based supports and care or living arrangements; and less reported mental health and other disability. The relationship between severity of needs and custody of children is likely to be cyclical, whereby more disadvantaged women may be at greater risk of losing custody of their children, which in turn could aggravate factors such as mental health and substance use difficulties (Rossiter et al., 2015; 2016; Stone, 2013; Walker, 2018). These results suggest that a large proportion of women in prison who tend to be targeted for criminogenic and non-criminogenic interventions have needs relating to custody or separation from their children. On the other hand, the lower risk / needs profile of women with children living at home indicates that many may not traditionally be considered priorities for intervention. In this case it may be important to revise the role of the risk principle (e.g. Andrews & Bonta, 2010) when developing interventions to support the needs of women with children.

While this study largely focuses on situational factors and support needs that pertain to women's functioning in the community, it is important to emphasise that a large proportion of women in prison are parents and experience immediate and significant needs relating to separation from, and the continued safety and care of, their children while they are in custody. Regardless of women's recent custody or living arrangements with their children, there is a common need for services that support continuing contact while they are in prison, pursue aims of reunification, and increase capacity and social capital to care for their children. There are indications that programs delivered to mothers by CSNSW, such as Mothering at a Distance (MAAD), can help to reduce some of the adverse impacts of separation on women (Perry et al., 2009; Rossiter et al., 2015); the results of our study highlight the extent of need for such support at the system level. Such support is critical to help meet the needs of both women and their children, with implications for cycles of intergenerational trauma and offending as well as prospects for desistance among women in prison.

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