The Victorian female prison population has risen by 138% in the ten years to 2018, outpacing growth rates for men.\textsuperscript{1} Recent sentencing and bail condition changes (including abolition of suspended sentences and increased sentence lengths) have had a disproportionate effect on women, including a rapid rise in those held on remand in the past 4 years.\textsuperscript{1} Growth in the prison population affects the availability of rehabilitation programs and support services, with limited or no access for women on remand.\textsuperscript{2}

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are overrepresented in the prison population, reflecting the compounding effects of racial and cultural discrimination and disadvantage. Compared to non-Aboriginal women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are more likely to be on remand, be jailed for minor offences such as unpaid fines, and serve shorter sentences.\textsuperscript{3}

Incarcerated women experience high levels of mental ill-health, victimisation, substance abuse and social disadvantage.\textsuperscript{4} Compared to male offenders, female offenders are 1.7 times more likely to have a mental illness,\textsuperscript{2} more likely to have an acquired brain injury,\textsuperscript{5} and more likely to have minimal employment histories, unstable housing and be the primary carer for children.\textsuperscript{4} Prior to incarceration, these women have often experienced sexual assault, intimate partner violence,\textsuperscript{6} and revictimisation at a considerably higher rate than the general community.\textsuperscript{4} In recognition of the high proportion of female offenders with histories of abuse, the Victorian Ombudsman recommended stopping the practice of routine strip searches.\textsuperscript{2} However this recommendation has not been accepted by the Victorian Government.

Over 80% of women in prison have dependent children and a majority are the sole or primary carer.\textsuperscript{7} This means that even short sentences can have an acute impact on the mother-child relationship, can lead to loss of custody or children entering state care.\textsuperscript{4} A criminal record impacts women’s ability to find employment or housing post release, making it very difficult to regain custody of children.

Access to Medicare is revoked while in prison, which deepens health inequities already experienced by the prison population and has ongoing implications post-release.\textsuperscript{9} The time between release from custody and access to the National Disability Insurance Scheme is also an emerging area of concern.\textsuperscript{10} Hepatitis C prevalence is also high among prison entrants at 28% in women (compared to 24% in men) in 2016.\textsuperscript{11}

The majority of incarcerated women experience repeat imprisonment, and each period of imprisonment has a cumulative effect.\textsuperscript{12} Financial and housing instability are contributing factors to recidivism that often go unaddressed.

Much can be done to reduce and prevent women’s offending, imprisonment and recidivism. Primary prevention measures include adequate access to stable housing, employment, and gender-sensitive mental health and drug and alcohol services for women in all regions of Victoria. Reversing changes to bail and sentencing laws which have led to higher numbers of women in prison, together with an increased focus on justice reinvestment and community-based rehabilitation programs, can reduce the risk of offending and re-offending.

Programs for women in prison should be gender-sensitive and address underlying issues including lack of employment, education and stable housing, trauma, as well as supporting relationships with children and family.\textsuperscript{8} Ensuring access to appropriate and culturally safe services both inside and outside prison, including transition and pre and post release support, is also of critical importance. This includes specialist services, case management and supported accommodation post release.
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