

by Lara Fergus

Women in prisons

Two major studies have been released recently on women in prisons, including new research on issues of sexual assault. In addition, Sisters Inside, an independent community organisation advocating for the human rights of women in the criminal justice system, is holding its third international conference in Melbourne in July 2005.

***Severed Connections: An Exploration of the Impact of Imprisonment on Women's Familial and Social Connectedness*, by Dr Dot Goulding and Trish Harris (2004), Murdoch University, Perth.**

Severed Connections is a two-year study that identifies six main socio-economic and cultural groups of women in prison in Western Australia and aims to challenge the "one size fits all" approach to program and service delivery. The report is a largely ethnographic account of the experiences of women in prison, newly released women and their families, using the women's own voices and acknowledging them as experts of the prison experience. The authors note that the study "has its ethos firmly grounded within the framework of prison reform" (Goulding and Harris 2004: 7).

Despite the vastly different backgrounds of the women, the research showed they shared certain common experience: "With only a handful of exceptions, each of the women in this study had endured histories of emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse" (Goulding and Harris 2004: 54).

High numbers of women recount their experiences of sexual and family violence, particularly by intimate partners, during the interviews. The problem of returning to abusive relationships, and of women being revictimised upon release from prison, is also examined. Mental illness was another major common experience. Other factors making reconnection difficult included homelessness, social isolation, addictions, the threat (for some) of deportation, self-harm and suicide.

One of the major recommendations of the report is the establishment of secure halfway houses in both metropolitan and rural areas "where women nearing release and those serving short prison terms can serve out their sentences in an environment more aligned with community standards", and that "information regarding domestic violence, relationship violence and sexual abuse be made readily available in all prisons holding women" (Goulding and Harris 2004: 54)

The full report *Severed Connections* is available online at:
<http://www.scase.murdoch.edu.au/projects-prison.html>, and
<http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/research/vicservice.html>

***Drugs and Crime: A Study of Incarcerated Female Offenders*, by Holly Johnson (2004), Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.**

Drugs and Crime is a study that is national in scope, covering six jurisdictions throughout Australia, and looks at the drug and alcohol use, and "criminal careers" of 470 incarcerated women. As suggested by the language choices in the title, the research takes a very different approach from that of the *Severed Connections* study. Rather than prison reform, it aims at "a better understanding of patterns in offending and drug use, and the connection between the two", to "assist in the development of crime prevention strategies for women" (Johnson 2004: xii). The women in the study tended to have extensive criminal histories and prior contacts with the criminal justice system, and the majority also reported chronic and persistent drug use.

Nevertheless, while the study's major focus is on pathways *between* drugs and crime, it also looks at the pathways *to* drugs and crime. Sections detailing "risk factors" of drug abuse in the various chapters consistently point to histories of sexual, physical and/or emotional abuse.

The research showed that: "Eighty-seven per cent of incarcerated women were victims of sexual, physical or emotional abuse in either childhood (63 per cent) or adulthood (78 per cent). The majority were victims of multiple forms of abuse; childhood and adult abuse were correlated with drug dependency and involvement in the sex trade . . ." (Johnson 2004: xiv)

The majority of incarcerated women were victims of multiple forms of abuse, and physical abuse in childhood was a predictor of violent offending. Mental health problems were correlated with drug dependency, violent offending and involvement in the sex trade. Furthermore, women with alcohol and drug dependencies, and those who were violent offenders, were also more likely to have grown up in families with alcohol dependence as an issue. The "Conclusions and Policy Implications" chapter reflects these results, albeit somewhat conservatively, calling for interagency commitment to addressing "the common factors in both drug use and crime – sexual and physical abuse, mental health problems and other negative family experiences – at an early stage" (Johnson 2004: 107).

The full report *Drugs and Crime* is available online at:
<http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/63/index.html>
with the key findings outlined at:
<http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/tandi2/tandi289.html>

***Is Prison Obsolete?* Sisters Inside 3rd International Conference, Melbourne, Hotel Y, 20-22 July 2005**

Sisters Inside Inc. are holding their third international conference, *Is Prison Obsolete?*, in Melbourne in July 2005. Sisters Inside is an independent community organisation, which exists to advocate for the human rights of women in the criminal justice system in Queensland, and to address gaps in the services available to them. The organisation works alongside women in prisons to determine how best to fulfil these roles.

The conference will address the crucial issues relating to the criminalisation of women, their experience of prison and post release. Speakers include Angela Davis, Debbie Killroy, Dot Goulding, Kim Pate, Jackie Huggins, Gina Dent, Lillian Holt, Terry Hannon, Debra Parkes and Julia Sudbury. The conference program will include more than 20 workshops and keynote presentations focusing on: Women in prison; Service provision; Advocacy; and Alternatives to prisons.

Sisters Inside also runs many programs for women in prisons, including a Sexual Assault Counselling Service. This service employs two counsellors, one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous, who work with the women in Southeast Queensland prisons. This program was established in 1994 due to the high percentage of women in prison who have been sexually abused at some time in their life and this abuse being one of the contributing factors to their offending.

The conference program, registration details and call for papers are available from the Sisters Inside website at:
<http://www.sistersinside.com.au/conference2005.htm>

ACSSA INVITES YOUR VIEWS

The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (ACSSA) invites readers to discuss the issues raised in this feature article through our email discussion list, *ACSSA-Discuss*. In particular, we invite workers and educators across the various sectors to talk online about schools-based education programs and prevention initiatives.

ACSSA-Discuss is a moderated email list for the discussion of topics of interest to people involved with the sexual assault field. To join *ACSSA-Discuss* send an email to "majordomo@aifs.gov.au" with the message "subscribe acssa-discuss", and leave the subject line blank.

For more information about the ACSSA email discussion group visit the mailing lists page on the ACSSA website at www.aifs.gov.au/acssa.