

Broken Families: The Children of Women Accessing Melbourne Citymission's Prisons Programs

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Background

The Melbourne Citymission Support for Women Exiting Prison Program (SWEP) provides pre and post release support for women exiting the Women's Correctional Centres at Deer Park and Tarrengower, through ongoing case-management to assist women to stabilise their accommodation, reunite with their children and families and resettle back into the community. The Bridging the Gap Program (BtG) provides intensive support for women who are in transition between prison and the community, in the areas of housing, drug and alcohol treatment, employment and education programs, health services and issues relating to family reconciliation.

The aim of this project was to gather information relevant to the situation of the children of these women, as there is currently no data collected to record this upon entry or exit from the prison system. This 'audit' of client information was also intended to provide 'raw' data to the Department of Justice for use in policy formation and as the basis for further research in this area.

The project's objectives were to answer the following questions:

- How many children do the women have?
- Whose care are they in while the woman is in prison?
- Did the women re-gain the care of the child/re post-release?
- How many of the children had involvement with the Department of Human Services?

Findings

How many children do the women have?

The files of 103 supported clients of both programs were audited. The number of children tabled here does not take into account the possibility that women may not have listed children that were non-dependent (e.g. adult) at the time of the woman's imprisonment, or that had been adopted or had been in foster care or whereabouts were unknown. Approximately 71% of the women had children. On average each woman had 2.2 children. However it is important to note that 24 of the women had three or more children, which accounts for 90 of the total number of children.

No's of women & children

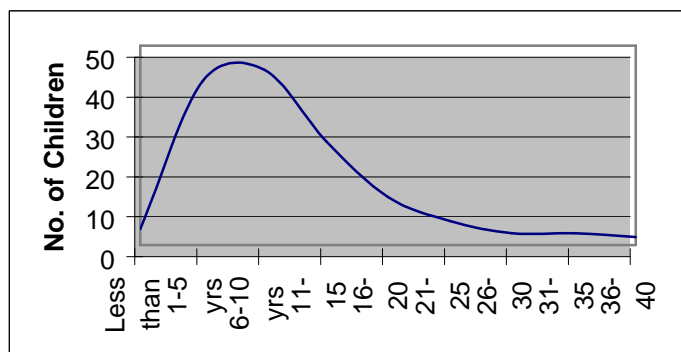
Program Area	No of Women	No of Children
SWEP	39	94
BtG	30	59
Total	69	153

No of:	2 x children	3 x children	4 x children	5 x children
Women	18	11	8	5

Ages of women	Number of women with children
20-25	15
26-30	23
31-35	15
36-40	7
41-45	7
46+	2

21.7% of the women who had children were between the ages of 20-25 at the time of accessing Melbourne Citymission services, and around a third of the women were aged between 26-30. The ages of the women's children ranged from 5 weeks old to 40 years of age. Over half of the children were under the age of ten, and a quarter was aged between 10-21. Twelve of the children's ages were not listed. Five of the women were pregnant at the time of program assessment.

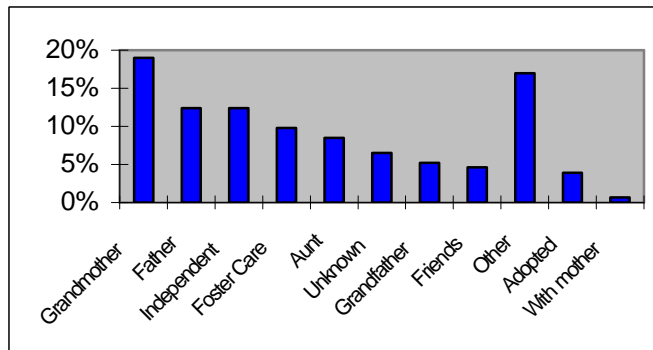
Ages of Children



Whose care are the children in while the women are in prison?

For the 153 children, many of which who had at least one or two siblings, there were a total of 159 *separate* listings of locations for their whereabouts at the time of their mother's imprisonment. Around 19% of children had stayed with their grandmother. 12.4% of children lived with their fathers or stepfathers, and the same percentage were aged over 18 and lived independently. 9.8% of children had been placed into foster care and 8.5% stayed with an aunt. 5.2% of children lived with their grandfathers and 4.6% with friends. 17% of children had also spent time with the women's parents, parents-in-law, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, great-aunt, brother, cousin, nephew or an older sibling. 6.5% of children's whereabouts were listed as unknown, and one young child had been in prison with his mother. 3.9% of children had been listed as being given for adoption at birth or while quite young.

Location of Children



Tracing the living arrangements of many of the children during the period of their mother's imprisonment is quite complicated, due to the transient nature of their lifestyles before, during and after this time. Some women had listed up to twenty places that they had stayed prior to their imprisonment when they had been homeless, and many of these women had children. For women who had more than two children, arrangements that had resulted in splitting up the family were often in place before imprisonment. For example, one woman's oldest daughter had already been placed into foster-care and the middle child with her ex-partner; at the time of her imprisonment she was only caring for her baby, who was placed with her mother. Another woman had five children who were at various stages of care; the oldest two had been taken into permanent care and three were on custody orders.

The difficulty of tracking the movements of the children is also due to the official status of some children being quite different to their actual situation. Some children who did not have a formal custody arrangement moved around depending on changes with the circumstances of their carers or how well the arrangements were working. There were situations where prior custody arrangements had been challenged in court between conflicting family members, which may have occurred while the woman was in prison. One woman who had been homeless with her two children prior to being imprisoned, was fearful of them going into separate foster-care placements because they had already moved several times between her sister to her brother and sister-in-law and their father who was violent towards them. Other examples include:

- Children from the same family who were separated because they had different fathers and therefore had different extended family members involved, which also served to complicate access arrangements for the women who were estranged from ex-spouses and their families.
- Several women who were unable to maintain contact with their children while they were in prison and or/post release due to their poor relationships with carers. A few were denied even telephone contact with their children because carers did not think it would be a good idea. One woman had two children staying with their respective fathers and one with her mother, yet was only able to gain access to the child who lived with the father who she was still on speaking terms with.
- 12 of the children had been re-located in regional Victoria or interstate with family members, which meant that the mothers often could not see them for the duration of their sentence, and were more likely to have difficulties re-uniting with them post-release.

Did the women re-gain access to their children post-release and were there any issues around this?

11 of the women were listed as having re-gained care of their child/ren and 10 are listed as having re-gained access. 10 were listed as having lost permanent custody either due to their having a court or DHS order to that effect. Children under the age of two were most likely to be returned to their mothers, who often received more intensive support in this area post-release. Some women did not re-gain custody because they had returned to prison, but mostly custody was not possible because of housing issues. Many women were involved in a repetitive cycle of requiring appropriate housing to regain access to or custody of their children, yet simultaneously requiring to have part access/custody of their children before qualifying for appropriate housing.

Many of the women did not regain custody or access because they were required to also stop their drug-usage, and found this virtually impossible to do when faced with the pressures of finding housing, or returning to the same social circle or relationships. One woman who had been homeless prior to her imprisonment had on the one hand feared ending up 'on the run' with her children in an effort to keep them from foster-care, yet also worried that, while they were with her, they were 'at risk of using (drugs) themselves'. She was also aware that her drug-usage would most likely result in her having to return to prison in the longer term.

Some women had health issues that prevented them from regaining care of their children. Many found it difficult to re-establish daily routines and activities in their lives, and felt particularly unequipped to re-build relationships with family or children. Women who had supervised access had to rely on the carer being supportive regarding this arrangement for it to be successful. Some women moved in with their families to be close to their children, and were faced with the challenge of re-gaining their trust. Women who did regain care of their child/ren were often left to rebuild these relationships with little support. One woman, who was re-united with her three children on the day of her release after 18 months of imprisonment, stated that it took at least a year of re-adjustment for both her and her family to learn to live with each other again.

How many of the children had involvement with the Department of Human Services (DHS) (pre-prison/duration of sentence/post-release)?

31 of the children were listed as having current DHS involvement, and 11 were listed as having had involvement in the past. Of these, the majority had been subject to custody orders, followed by supervision orders and interim protection orders, and lastly, guardianship orders. Once again it is very difficult to assess how accurately this reflects the actual situations of the children due both to the inconsistency of information provided by the women and changes in program record-keeping systems. The updated data collection process may still be unable to provide a clear picture because of information gaps from the past, or the frequent and complex movements of some children.

The information available from the client files does not specifically identify at what stages pre/during/post-sentence that the Department became involved with the children. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most involvement was pre and during sentence, with involvement reducing as the children were placed into appropriate or permanent care. There was post-release involvement with the Department for women wishing to re-gain custody of their children through having to satisfy

conditions such as obtaining adequate accommodation and/or drug and alcohol counselling and regular clean urine tests. The following are further examples of DHS involvement:

- A 23-year old woman's DHS reunification plan with the youngest of her three children involved anger-management counselling, drug-treatment and the attainment of appropriate housing. The woman ended up back in prison, her youngest children remained in the care of her mother, and the oldest went into foster care.
- One woman could not find a Ministry of Housing property close to the school that her children attended, so was unable to challenge the custody order that had placed them with their grandparents who lived near the school.
- Another woman was planning to leave her two oldest children in care to focus on regaining care of her 8 month -old baby.

Summary

The majority of women accessing Melbourne Citymission's Women's Prison's Programs are mothers, generally with more than one child under the age of ten. These findings have illustrated that the movements of the children are difficult to follow, however as mentioned earlier, this is not only due their their mother's imprisonment, but is often a reflection of their dislocated families and fragmented lifestyles prior to this.

For many children, DHS involvement was necessitated by protective issues that were linked to the transient or inappropriate lifestyles of the family or to extended or sporadic separation from their primary caregiver, resulting living situations that also did not provide them with adequate care or support.

The development and implementation of adequate and effective support for the children and their families is necessary to attempt to break the cycles of disadvantage that lead to intergenerational involvement with the criminal justice and prison systems. Until there is effective data collection and further investigation (in the form of longitudinal research) into the circumstances of these children they will remain largely invisible, particularly in Victoria where there has been no recognition of their needs at policy level.