

# Women exiting prison in Victoria

Summary report of a  
post-release study by  
Monash University

Correction Victoria



### Introduction and Key Findings

This report provides a summary of research conducted for Corrections Victoria (CV) by Monash University, Victoria which looked at the post-release experiences of women exiting prison in Victoria between 2011 and 2012, and the association between participation in prison programs and prisoner outcomes post-release. This research indicated that female prisoners commonly struggle with housing, family connections, mental and physical health issues and generally rebuilding their lives following release. Interviews with women prisoners revealed that the women continued to face a number of issues in the community post-release, which had implications for their transition and reoffending outcomes. Unstable housing and substance misuse were key factors increasing the likelihood that women would return to prison.

Overall, women perceived prison programs as helpful. Importantly, participants perceived prison-based programs that established connections with women pre-release and continued to provide support post-release as the most helpful.

There were some challenges identified in the study, including the lack of integration between programs and services offered within prison and in the community. Some prisoners experienced barriers in accessing prison programs due to long wait lists or limited resources. This was a significant issue for those serving short sentences or remand. For others, the supports and services available to them in the community were reported as inadequate.

### Methodology

The methodology, findings, conclusions and recommendations are those of the original authors of the study report.

All sentenced female prisoners in Victoria who had a release date from either Tarrengower Prison or the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre from October 2011 to May 2012 were invited to participate in the study which then tracked their experiences for up to 12 months following release from prison. Around half (90 of 182) of the eligible women leaving prison during this period agreed to participate. These women participated in up to four interviews – one in prison and three in the community.

The interviews in the community were scheduled for three points in time following release from prison, namely three months, six months and twelve months post-release. Almost half (44) of the original 90 women completed at least one post-release interview at post-release. On average, participants completed two follow-up interviews.

Some limitations apply to the collected data:

- Much of the data was drawn from prisoner self-report information. Some information could be verified by secondary sources while other information, notably health and mental health information, could not be verified externally.
- The sample sizes post-release are quite small due to attrition.
- The 12 month follow-up period is shorter than is generally utilised in many recidivism studies.

### Characteristics of women in the study

- Prisoners were slightly older and more likely to have previously served prison sentences than the overall female prisoner population.
- There was a higher prevalence of pre-existing issues, such as drug use, mental health conditions and financial debt among participating prisoners.
- The cultural profile of study participants differed somewhat from that of the overall women prison population at the time of the study – Koori women comprised 13 per cent of study participants compared to eight per cent of the overall prison population, and Vietnamese-born women comprised seven per cent of study participants compared to 16 per cent of the overall prison population<sup>1</sup>.

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1 Corrections Victoria administrative data

### Pre-prison – Self-reported characteristics and issues

This section outlines the issues participants faced prior to entering prison, based on self-report data. Substance use was the most commonly cited contributing factor to offending. Many of the women reported multiple and complex issues. Mental health concerns, drug and alcohol, poverty, homelessness and victimisation were the most commonly mentioned issues experienced by participants prior to imprisonment. The two charts below present information on the characteristics of women prisoners and the key issues facing them prior to entering prison, based on self-report data.

Figure 1: Self-reported characteristics of women participants

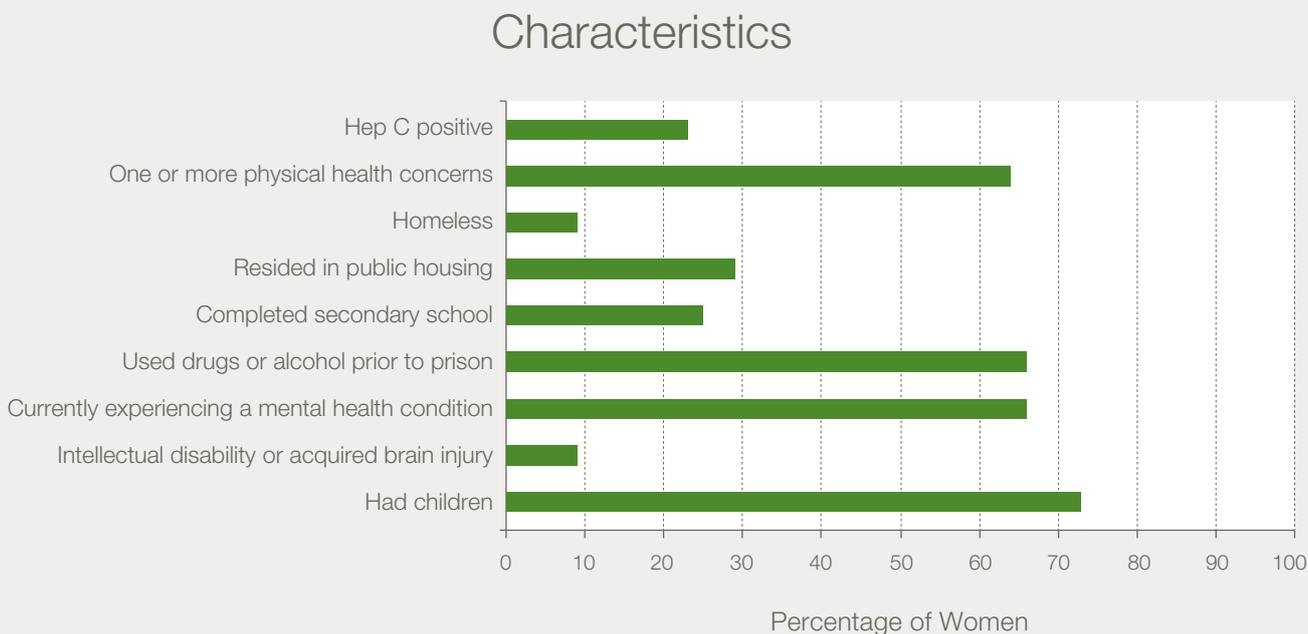
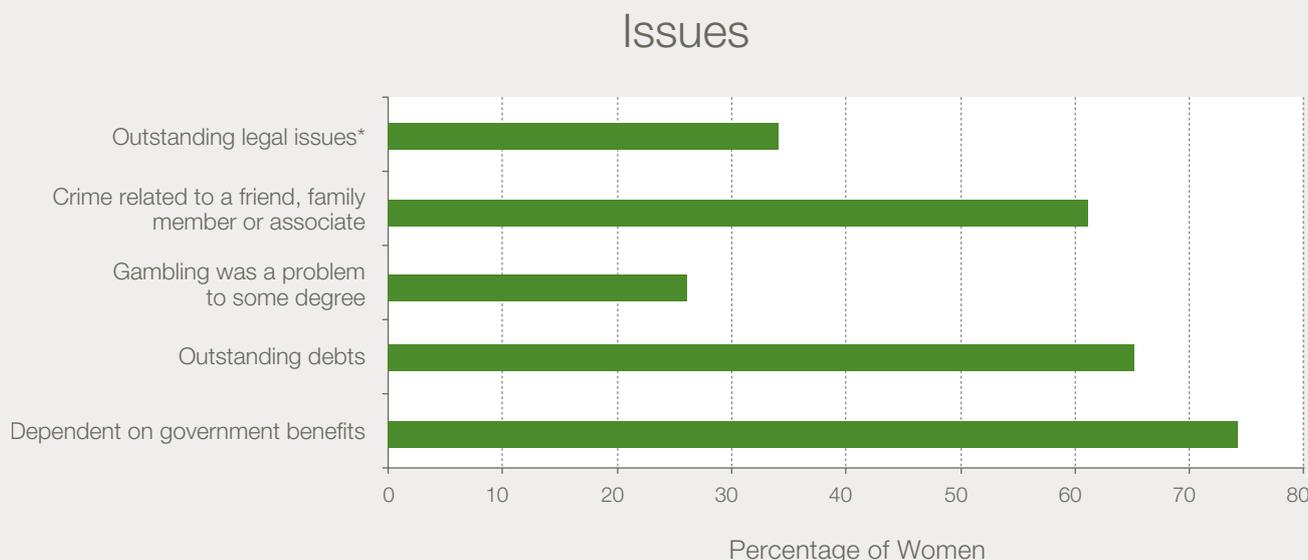


Figure 2: Self-reported issues experienced by women prior to imprisonment

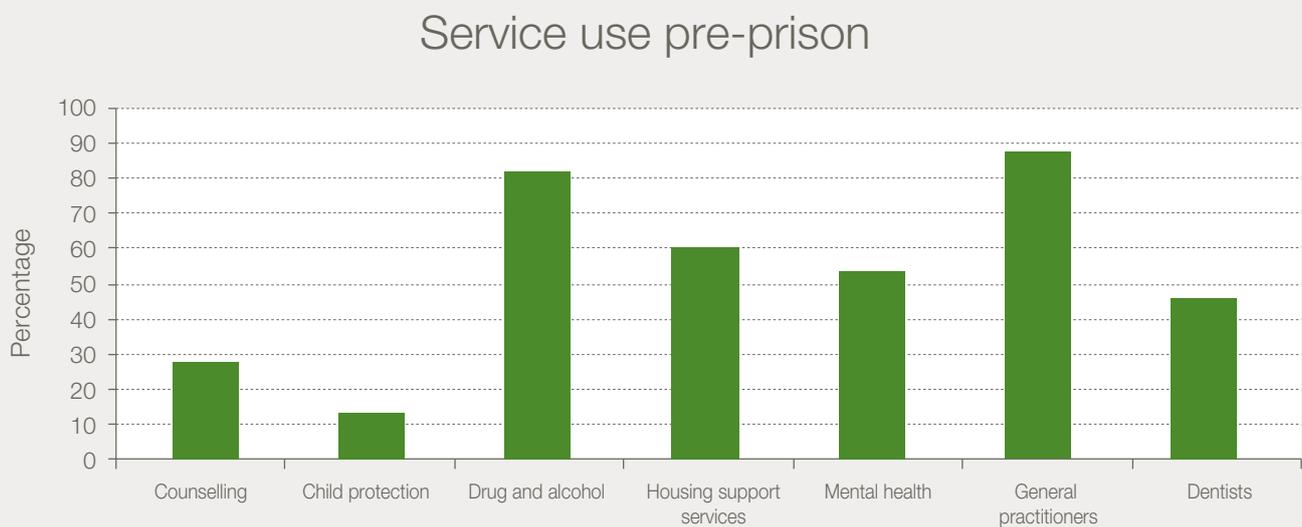


\*Outstanding legal issues included fines, warrants or upcoming court dates

### Service use pre-prison

Figure 3 displays the services that participants most commonly reported accessing prior to imprisonment. Over half of the participants (53 per cent) had accessed at least one welfare service in the 12 months preceding their current sentence, with counselling (28 per cent) and child protection (13 per cent) the most widely accessed. Women were also asked whether they had accessed health services in the community. On average the women had used approximately two health services in the 12 months preceding their current sentence, with general practitioners and dentists being the most common (88 per cent and 46 per cent, respectively). Other frequently accessed services were drug and alcohol services (82 per cent) and housing support services (61 per cent), with the majority of housing services accessed being public housing tenancies.

Figure 3: Service use pre-prison



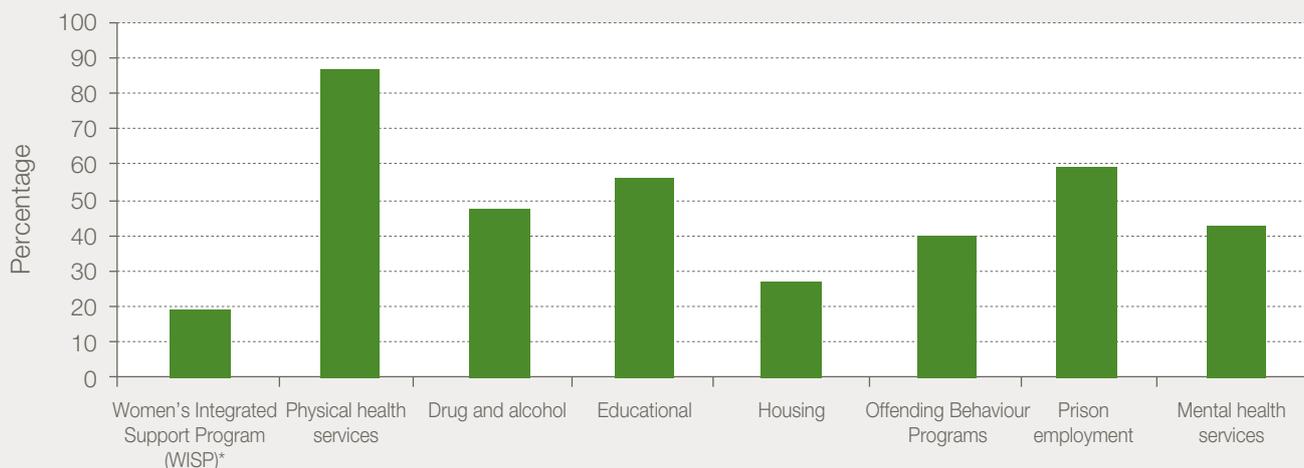
### Service use in prison

Women were also asked about welfare programs and services accessed during their current prison sentence. Most women (83 per cent) reported accessing at least one welfare program or service, with many women accessing multiple services during their sentence. The most commonly accessed welfare program or service in prison was drug and alcohol programs (49 per cent) and the least common was relationship programs (4 per cent). Other programs accessed by the women in the study included mentoring, sports and leisure services, faith-based services, arts programs and theatre groups.

Women were also asked whether they accessed any healthcare services in prison, with 89 per cent of the women reporting having accessed a physical health service (this response rate may include the medical screening that automatically occurs at prison reception), and 44 per cent reported having accessed a mental health service during their current sentence. Over half of the women (58 per cent) undertook education or training during their sentence, and 61 per cent of women participated in prison employment.

Figure 4: Service use in prison

### Service use in prison

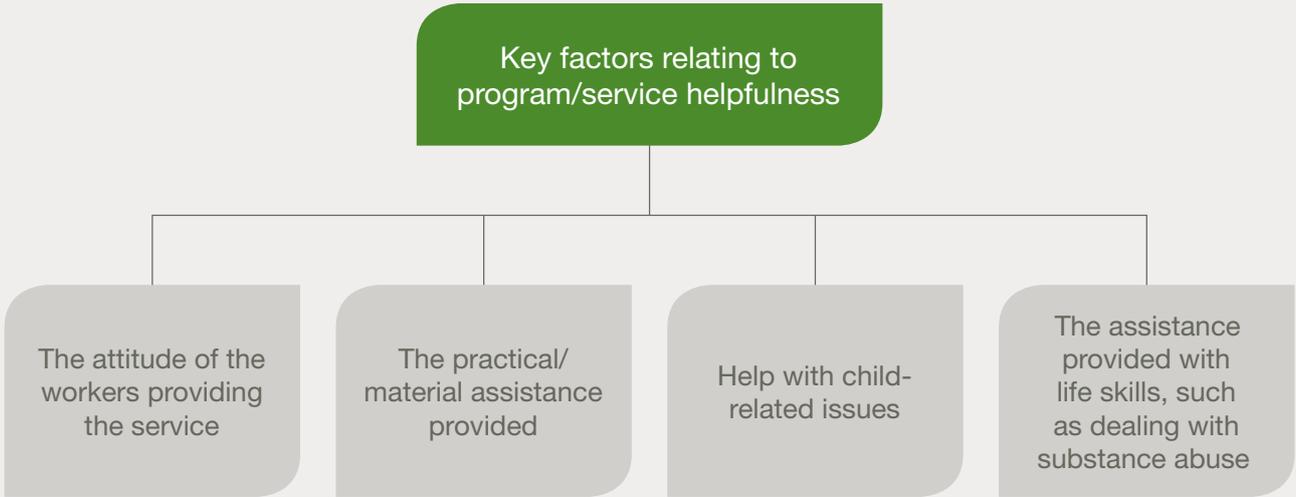


\* Women's Integrated Support Program (WISP) provided pre and post-release transitional support for women prisoners with issues such as alcohol and other drugs, physical health, housing, material aid, parenting, financial assistance, advocacy and advice.

### Overall helpfulness of programs and services during prison

Overall, prison programs were perceived to be helpful in reducing offending. Four key factors relating to perceived program/service helpfulness were identified.

Figure 5: Key factors relating to perceived program/service helpfulness

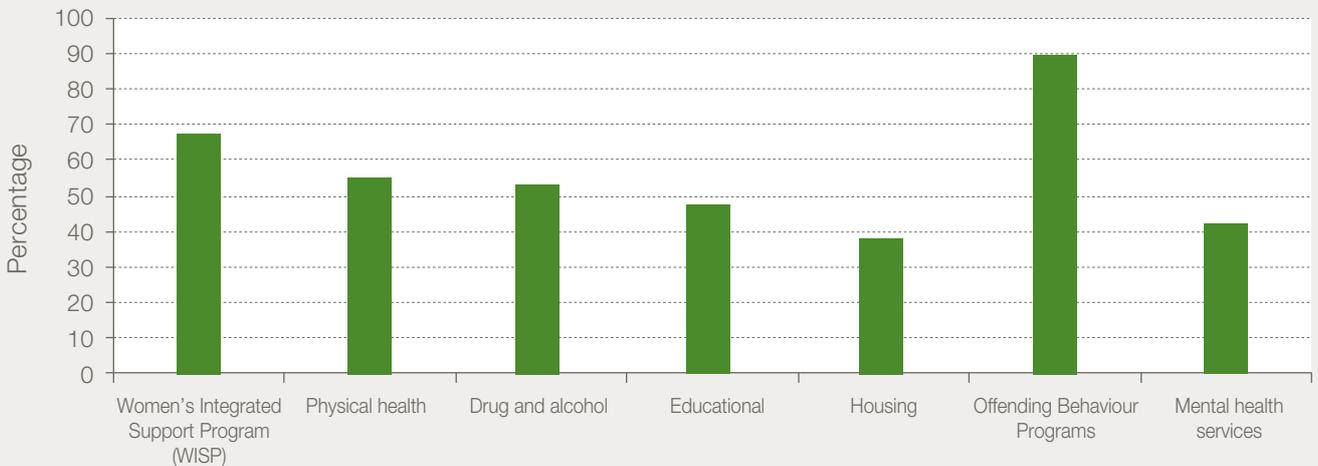


The most commonly cited barrier for program participation was the lack of access to services due to long waiting lists and limited resources. This was a consistent issue for those serving short sentences or on remand.

Group-based programs where highly personal issues were discussed were seen as unhelpful aspects of the programs. The participants were asked to nominate the prison-based services they had participated in and found to be helpful. Figure 6 represents the perceived helpfulness of some of the most commonly accessed prison-based programs and services.

Figure 6: Perceived helpfulness of program/service

### Perceived helpfulness of program/service



### Anticipated challenges upon release

During the pre-release interview, the women were asked to report the main challenges they anticipated experiencing after leaving prison and how they might deal with these challenges. A total of 161 challenges were anticipated by the 82 women. The most frequently mentioned challenges related to family reunification, housing and avoiding drugs and alcohol post-release.

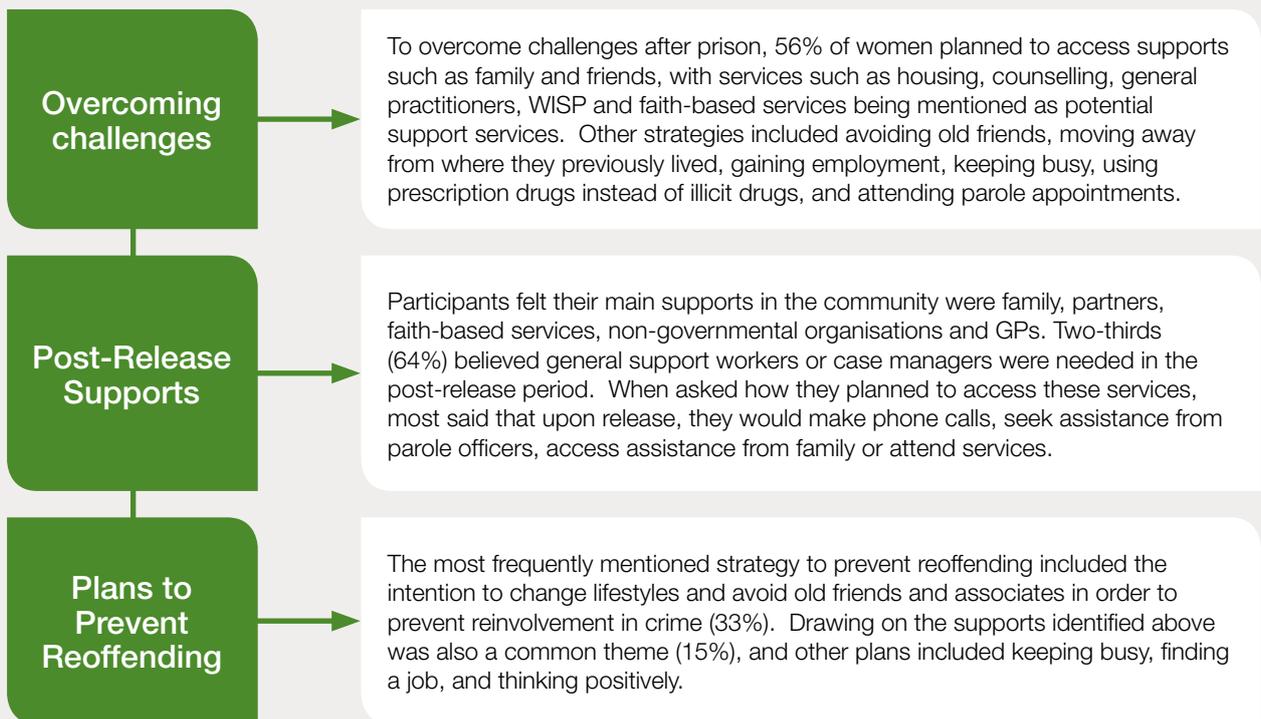
Figure 7: Anticipated challenges upon release from prison



### Overcoming challenges and plans to prevent reoffending

Women were asked how they planned to deal with the issues they faced prior to imprisonment and the anticipated challenges they expected to face once back in the community. Post-release supports (both formal and informal) and plans to prevent reoffending were seen as critical in overcoming challenges post-release. Over one-third of the women (36 per cent) had a range of strategies for coping with post-release challenges.

Figure 8: Self-reported strategies to overcome challenges and prevent reoffending post-release



## Post-release interviews - Key findings

The women were asked to describe the experiences and challenges they faced at various points during the 12 months following their release. The objective of the post-release interviews was to understand the women's perceptions about which services were assisting them in reintegrating into the community. Around half of the women described themselves as coping well post-release. However, the other half referred to ongoing challenges post-release. The interviews also provided insight into how women prisoners in Victoria manage the challenges they face upon leaving prison. Many women reported facing similar challenges to those experienced before entering prison, such as unstable housing, substance use, unemployment, and financial difficulties.

Figure 9: Identified challenges experienced by women in the 12 month period following release from prison

Identified Challenges	
<b>Children and their care</b>	Over the 12 month study period, an average of 38% of mothers with dependent children reported resuming their full-time care duties. For the remainder, their childcare arrangements remained complex, with children residing mostly with extended family or in shared care that involved family, foster carers or child protection arrangements.
<b>Physical health</b>	Most women rated their physical health as 'good' or 'very good'. However, two-thirds indicated health concerns, including conditions such as Hepatitis C, heart conditions and diabetes. Over 70% were on regular medications for physical health problems.
<b>Mental health</b>	Although a majority of women rated their mental health as 'good' or 'very good', 52% described mental health problems at three months post-release, with depression and anxiety the most predominant.
<b>Drugs and alcohol</b>	50% of the women reported no alcohol or illicit drug use at three months post-release. Others cited alcohol and cannabis as the main substances used, followed by heroin and drugs such as benzodiazepines and amphetamines.
<b>Housing</b>	The most common housing arrangement at each post-release interview was public housing (average of 39% over the 12 month follow-up). Unstable housing, including residing in crisis accommodation, transitional housing or having 'no fixed address', affected up to 20% of participants. Those experiencing unstable housing identified factors such as having to escape from an ex-partner or abuser, to move for work, or moving due to drug addiction/methadone needs. Women who reported unstable housing at any point post-release were more likely to return to prison than those who never reported unstable housing (80% vs 18%). Women who felt they had stable housing mentioned that they lived with family, had a rental agreement or lived in accommodation provided by services, including the Office of Housing.
<b>Finances and outstanding debts</b>	Over 85% relied on government benefits for income post-release, with only one woman undertaking paid work at three months post-release, two participants working at six months, and four at 12 months. Debt remained a major issue for 60% of participants, and 43% of women said they were not managing financially.
<b>Victimisation</b>	The most frequent types of victimisation experienced by women after leaving prison were assault and domestic violence. Victimisation rates increased over time, from 21% to 32% over the 12-month follow-up period.
<b>Community supervision</b>	Almost 53% of the women were released on parole. Most felt they would be able to meet their parole conditions. Women on straight release were one and a half times more likely to return to prison than those on parole (29% vs 19%).
<b>Legal issues and police involvement</b>	80% of respondents described involvement with police post-release. Three quarters of these mentioned reasons relating to their own behaviour, such as eviction for squatting, a mental health episode or drink driving, while a quarter of respondents reported having ongoing legal issues typically related to fines and pending court appearances for a range of matters*.

\*Data on offending outcomes should be treated with caution, as women were asked not to disclose any criminal matters that had not yet been adjudicated.

### Post-release - Programs, services and supports

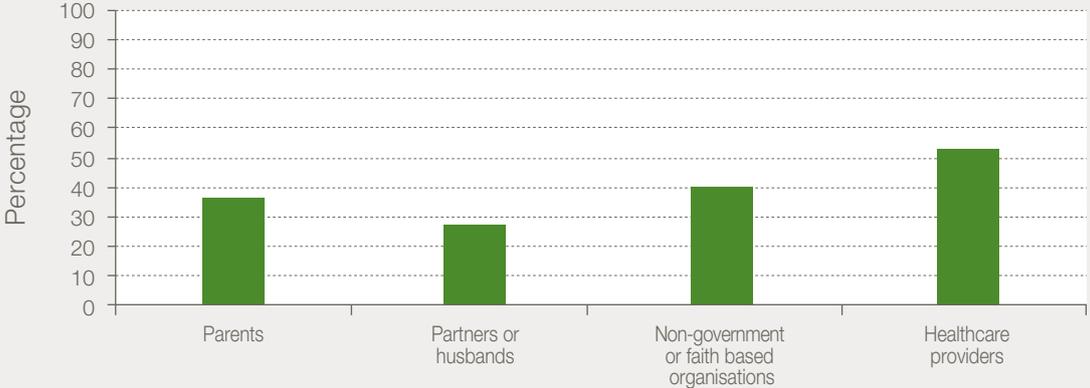
The participants were asked to describe their experiences and needs for support services after prison. Participants reported facing multiple challenges post-release and required a range of services and supports, many of which were unavailable to them in the community.

### Sources of support

For more than one third of the women (37 per cent) parents were a key source of ongoing support over the 12 month period post-release. Healthcare providers, such as general practitioners, nurses, midwives and psychologists were also an important source of support identified by participants, and most women identified accessing at least one service provider during the first 12 months post-release. WISP, counselling and parole-related services were the most frequently accessed services in the initial period after release. After six months, the number of women accessing WISP reduced, while counselling and family support services remained critical.

Figure 10: Key sources of support accessed by women in the 12 month study period post-release

Sources of support over 12 month study period post-release



## Post-release - Perceived helpfulness of support services

The participants were asked a series of questions about the helpfulness of support services post-release. The perceived helpfulness of the health, mental health, behavioural and welfare interventions received in prison declined as time passed following release from prison. Participants were more likely to perceive programs as helpful to their transition where services were holistic, understanding, available, and where non-judgemental relationships were formed. WISP, Prison Network Ministry, Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA), Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO), physical and mental healthcare services, alcohol and other drugs (AOD), and community supervision services were considered helpful post-release. Importantly, these services had established connections with women pre-release and continued to provide direct support post-release. Housing services were identified as unhelpful, which was largely attributed to the fact that these services were unable to provide timely access to secure housing post-release.

Figure 11: Characteristics of 'helpful' and 'unhelpful' programs accessed by women

Characteristics of 'helpful' programs	Characteristics of 'unhelpful' programs
Non-judgemental relationship	Accessibility difficulties
Practical assistance	High turnover of staff
Trusting	Limitations of services on offer
Active listening	Costs associated with attending appointments
Accessibility of service	Impractical strategies
Reliability of service	Lack of adequate time
	Poor treatment

## Return to prison

According to the Victorian Intervention Screen and Assessment Tool<sup>2</sup> (VISAT) scores of study participants, 28 per cent of participants had a low risk, 31 per cent had a moderate risk and 41 per cent had a high risk of reoffending post-release. Over the 12 month follow-up period, just over one-quarter (26 per cent) of the women returned to prison, most of whom had been assessed as having a moderate or high risk of reoffending (95 per cent). Property offences (43 per cent) were the most common most serious offence among those who reoffended, followed by good order (26 per cent), breach of parole (17 per cent) and traffic offences (13 per cent). The average number of days to reoffend was 218 days (approximately seven months) while the median was 184 days (approximately six months) post-release. Factors significantly associated with return to prison were unstable housing post-release, multiple terms of prior imprisonment, a sentence length of less than 12 months and self-reported substance misuse both pre and post-release. Post-release program participation was associated with reduced reoffending post-release, although this did not reach statistical significance.

2 A clinical risk assessment tool, which measures risk of offending

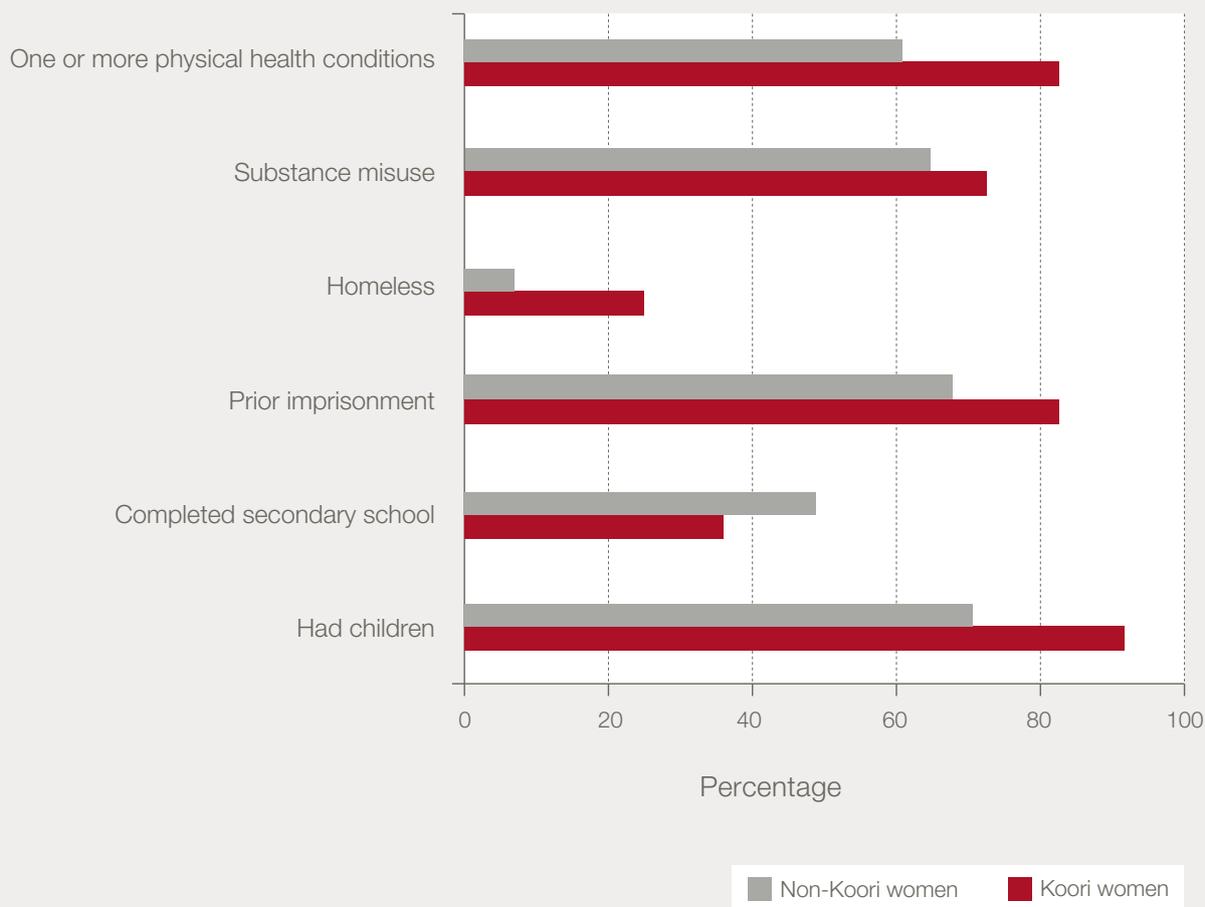
### Perspectives of Koori women

Twelve of the 90 women in the study identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Three of these women participated in the post-release interviews. Overall, the Koori participants, compared to non-Koori participants, were younger (35 vs. 38 years) and more likely to be serving shorter average sentences (four vs. seven months). The following chart compares the self-reported responses of Koori and non-Koori participants.

The chart shows that Koori women reported higher levels of social disadvantage than non-Koori women in the study. For both groups, drug and alcohol use was reported to be a major contributing factor to their offending. Other issues cited included difficulties dealing with emotions and mental health, housing and financial problems, as well as relationship difficulties. Koori women also had a higher risk of reoffending, with 58 per cent of Koori women receiving a VISAT 'high risk' rating compared to 38 per cent for non-Koori participants.

Figure 12: Characteristics of Koori and non-Koori participants

### Characteristics of Koori and non-Koori participants



### Pre-release – Programs, services and supports for Koori participants

Over 56 per cent of Koori women identified at least one service as a source of support pre-release. Koori women were more reliant on services and programs than family and social connections for support, with 10 women (83 per cent) accessing one or more prison-based programs. Only 17 per cent of Koori women received drug and alcohol interventions, compared to 49 per cent of non-Koori women. This is of concern, given that approximately 70 per cent of Koori women linked drug and alcohol use to their offending. Few Koori women participated in Offending Behaviour Programs (OBP), possibly because of their shorter sentences.

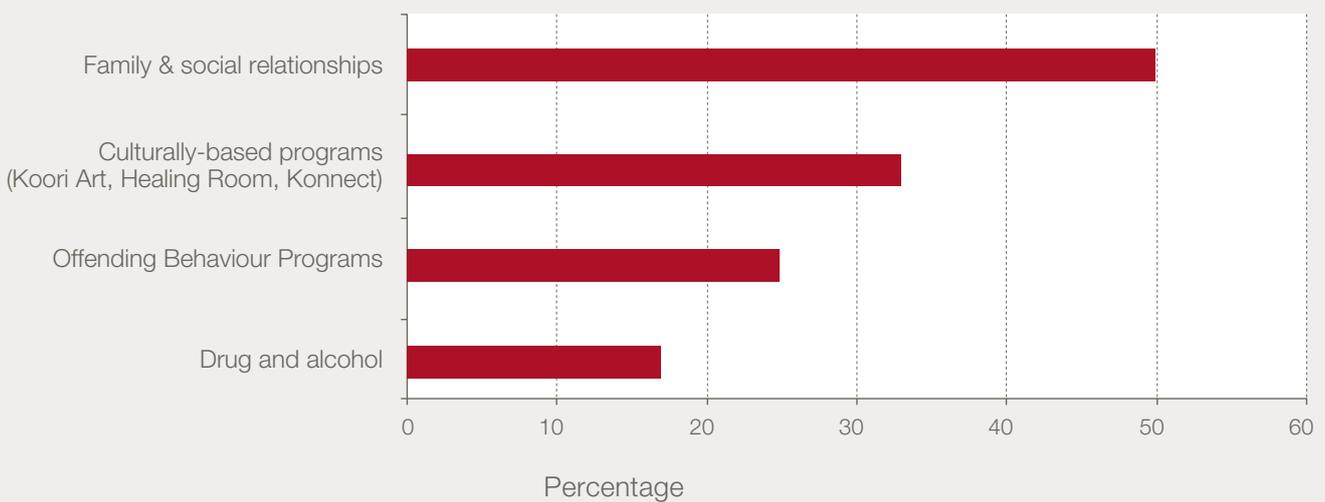
### Pre-release - Perceived helpfulness of support services for Koori participants

Consistent with the broader findings, Koori women spoke positively about the majority of programs they accessed. Most were perceived as helpful where they were accessible and the information provided was perceived as practical. Konnect<sup>3</sup>, family support worker, WISP, peer mentoring, educational services and housing services were identified as most helpful among Koori participants. A third of the women accessed culturally-based programs such as Koori art, the Healing Room and Konnect, and found these programs helpful.

Koori women were more likely (70 per cent) to indicate that prison health services were unhelpful than non-Koori women (42 per cent). Although this is of concern, the main issues identified with health services were related to waiting times and access to treatment such as specific medications. The major barriers to program participation for Koori women were inaccessibility because of their short sentences and waiting lists for programs.

Figure 13: Service use during prison for Koori participants

### Service use during prison



3 Konnect was a voluntary transition support program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people exiting prison

### **Post-release - Supports and program use for Koori participants**

Post-release information is limited to interviews with three women at six months post-release – two of which were conducted in prison due to re-imprisonment. These women indicated that service providers were their main supports at six months and the third woman stated that she had been unable to access programs due to her short sentence length and had no other supports.

### **Post-release - Perceived helpfulness of programs/services**

For the three Koori women interviewed post-release, the support available was perceived as inadequate to meet their needs and unhelpful during their transition (from prison to the community).

### **Return to prison**

Similar to non-Koori participants, 25 per cent of the twelve Koori women had returned to prison within 12 months (compared to 26 per cent of all women in the sample). Koori participants who returned to prison were younger than other Koori women, had a greater number of previous imprisonments, served shorter sentences, and had completed fewer programs than Koori women who did not return to prison. An analysis of CV administrative data indicates that the overall return to prison rate for Koori women during the study period was higher (41 per cent) than for non-Koori women (32 per cent). However, these rates are based on return to prison outcomes two years from the date of release. In comparison, the return to prison rates cited earlier in this report are based on return to prison after only one year following release, and are therefore lower.

### Conclusion

This study explored the post-release experiences and outcomes of women exiting prison in Victoria. Consistent with broader research, the findings highlight that women exiting prison frequently struggle with housing, family connections, mental and physical health, and generally rebuilding their lives. As other research has shown, women exiting prison require significant practical support to manage their correctional obligations and successfully transition into the community.

At post-release many of the risk factors that women had reported in prison remained concerns for participants, and this continued to be the case at 12 months follow-up. This demonstrates the need for ongoing, long-term access to services and support for women exiting prison if they are to successfully reintegrate into the community.

The relatively high uptake of prison-based programs indicates a willingness on behalf by the women to address issues that impact on offending and reintegration into the community. While the majority of the women participated in at least one welfare program or service, health services and education and/or training in prison, access was a major factor influencing program participation within prison. Wait lists and limited resourcing affected program participation. Women serving short sentences or on remand were particularly disadvantaged in terms of access to programs, and were ultimately more likely to return to prison following release.

Prison-based programs that continued to provide direct support to prisoners post-release were considered to be the most helpful, highlighting the need for ongoing access to appropriate services and support to continue to be available in the community post-release.

### Acknowledgements

This summary presents the key findings from the Monash University Criminal Justice Research Consortium's final report to CV in 2013. The report authors are Associate Professor Rosemary Sheehan, Dr Catherine Flynn, Professor Chris Trotter and Associate Professor Brownyn Naylor. The project team comprised Ruth Klein (project manager), Alannah Burgess, Ella Crotty, Tess Bartlett and Susan Baidawi.



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