



Improving Family Violence Support for Women in Victoria's Criminal Justice System

Knowledge Translation and Exchange

The Bouverie Centre, La Trobe University

May 2024



Suggested citation:

Booth, A., Cloud, Z.C.G., Kuntsche, S., Bailey, A., McIntosh, J. (2024). *Improving Family Violence Support for Women in Victoria's Criminal Justice System: Knowledge Translation and Exchange*. The Bouverie Centre, La Trobe University.



Overview of the Research

A range of programs and services are currently in place in Victoria's women's prisons at various points of the prisoner journey to identify and support both victim-survivors of family violence (FV) and women who use violence. However, there is significant variability in access and uptake of these services. Given that most women involved with the criminal justice system have experienced FV^{1,2,3} and are also at an increased risk of re-experiencing FV upon exit³, there remains an imperative to improve FV service engagement through **understanding the barriers to and enablers of service access and uptake**.

Project Aims and Research Questions

Through three complementary enquiries, we aimed to understand the:

1. Current thinking in best practice in FV programs and services for women in the criminal justice system, via a rapid review of the existing published literature.
2. FV support needs identified by women with lived experiences of both FV and Victoria's prison system, via a series of interviews with lived experience advocates.
3. FV service needs identified by staff who are supporting the FV needs of women in Victoria's prison system, via a series of focus groups with workers.

Underpinning these project aims, our research team aimed to identify:

- Gaps in FV support for women in prison
- Best practice principles for FV support services in prison
- Protective factors that help women stay safe from FV when exiting prison, and
- Support needs of staff delivering FV support for women in prison.

¹ Lynch, S. M., Fritch, A., & Heath, N. M. (2012). Looking beneath the surface: The nature of incarcerated women's experiences of interpersonal violence, treatment needs, and mental health. *Feminist Criminology*, 7(4), 381-400.

² St. Cyr, S., Jaramillo, E. T., Garrison, L., Malcoe, L. H., Shamblen, S. R., & Willging, C. E. (2021). Intimate partner violence and structural violence in the lives of incarcerated women: a mixed-method study in rural New Mexico. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(12), 6185.

³ Cyrus, E., Sanchez, J., Madhivanan, P., Lama, J. R., Bazo, A. C., Valencia, J., Leon, S. R., Villaran, M., Vagenas, P., Sciaudone, M. & Atice, F. L. (2021). Prevalence of intimate partner violence, substance use disorders and depression among incarcerated Women in Lima, Perú. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(21), 11134.



What did we do?



Rapid Literature Review

- **A review of the literature on family violence (FV) programs for women in prison, to articulate current best practices and their evidence base**
- **Part a:** Review of the replicated evidence (systematic reviews and meta-analyses) on FV programs and services available to women in custodial systems, globally
- **Part b:** Review of the grey literature (non-peer reviewed articles, e.g., policy documents and reports) on FV programs and services available to women in custodial systems in Australia



Lived Experience Advisor Interviews

- **Interviews with women who have lived experiences of incarceration and of family violence, to understand needs for FV support in prison**
- **Part a:** Individual interviews with 6 lived experience advisors
- **Part b:** Small group workshop with 3 lived experience advisors from **Part a** participating together, to provide feedback and further input based on the findings from **Part a**



Focus Groups with Sector Workers

- **Focus groups with Victorian women's prisons staff working directly with women, to understand barriers to and enablers of FV service engagement in light of the diversity of women needing support**
- **Two online focus group session times offered to workers at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre and Tarrengower Prison**
- **Overall attendance by 12 individuals from 8 different services or organisations**

June 2022 – June 2023

Key Findings and Implications

A review of the key themes arising from the three enquiries revealed significant overlap of evidence. This replication of findings across the existing literature and the lived experience of women and workers confirms and validates the conclusions of each individual enquiry, and strengthens the evidence base overall.

Aggregated key findings and implications drawn from all three enquiries are summarised below:

Identified Gaps in FV Support

Key Findings:	Implications:
1 Gaps in the identification of FV support needs for women in prison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routine provision of universal screening for FV is indicated, performed by trusted services and placed at an appropriate time point at or after prison entry. Positive screening results would optimally be followed up by the same service, to shape an effective response. This would reduce the onus on women to seek support themselves.
2 Within prison coordination barriers to engagement in FV support services. These included communication gaps and coordination between prison officers, programs and services within the prison, and external/community service providers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved communication between FV programs and services involved in the assessment and response to women's multiple needs (e.g., FV and housing) could reduce the likelihood that women need to retell their stories, thus reducing the risk of re-traumatisation. This includes communication between services provided in-prison, pre-release planning and throughcare support.
3 Systemic barriers to engagement with FV services in prison. Women and prison workers identified these as including short sentences/remand; infrequent or poorly timed service delivery; poor past experiences and distrust in services; high staff turnover; and insecure and short-term program funding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring some level of FV support is available across the spectrum of prisoner experience is a key implication. To increase access, uptake, and facilitation of FV supports offered, and their effectiveness, the context of each woman's time in the prison systems needs to be considered in service provision.
4 Prison replicating power cycles and lack of autonomy experienced in their in violent relationships. Lived experience advisers reported that upon community reintegration, criminalisation stigmatises them through bias, discrimination, and community distrust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prison programs designed to empower women in while in prison are needed. Upon release, community programs designed to address the primary factors contributing to involvement in the criminal justice system or recidivism may prevent adverse and enduring consequences associated with criminalisation, including but not limited to bias, discrimination, and re-traumatisation.



Best Practice Principles to Facilitate Engagement in FV Support

Key Findings:		Implications:
1	Multiple factors facilitate engagement in FV support while in prison. Women and workers highlighted programs that offer personalised and tailored outcomes, programs that are gender-responsive and trauma-informed, and programs that are developed with, delivered by, and specific to women from the same cultural group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Personalised programs that incorporate and target these factors and are gender-responsive and trauma-informed will facilitate engagement, and are in turn likely to provide more effective support to women in need, thus improving program outcomes (e.g., safety from FV).Existing programs and newly developed services need to incorporate lived and living experience in revision and development of content, as well as engagement and retention strategies.
	Meaningful involvement of lived experience advisors is needed at all levels of program governance, design, and delivery.	

Protective Factors Upon Release

Key Findings:		Implications:
1	Safe and accessible housing is critical for post-release safety from FV. Women experienced a shortage of suitable, medium- to long-term housing options available to them post-release, and reported that this increased their likelihood of returning to an unsafe relationship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Universally assessing women's need for housing pre-release could help increase safety from FV after exit from prison. Investments in short to medium term safe housing within contexts of post-release support are likely to yield significant benefit via prevention of trauma and recidivism.Beyond an individually focused lens on in-prison and post release support, the replicated evidence for family inclusive support is well established. Investment in programs grounded in systemic perspectives are needed to build healthy relationships for women. Strong family connection and safe relationships with support people are significant protective factors for both FV and recidivism for women upon release.
	Systemic perspectives and a family-inclusive approach are essential to promoting safety and preventing FV.	



Staff Support Needs

Key Findings:		Implications:
1	Workers experience significant job insecurity due to short-term funding contracts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Strategic funding opportunities could be explored to promote job security for workers and longevity in the development and delivery of FV support programs for women in prison.
2	Short-term funding contracts also impact program continuity and development.	
3	Role demands and workplace isolation negatively impact the wellbeing of workers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Encouraging and resourcing reflective practice sessions within and across teams could promote learning, debriefing, connection, and mutual support among staff and reduce isolation.
4	There is a shortage of workers with expertise and specialised qualifications in providing FV services to incarcerated women. Most prison staffers lack the necessary qualifications and experience to work directly with traumatised women in this context.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Greater training for prison officers could improve the ability for workers in the prison to consistently and safely respond to disclosures and provide referrals for FV support.Delivery of programs by appropriately trained FV experts is essential, highlighting the importance of the MARAM (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management) framework reflecting this expertise requirement.
5	Better opportunities are needed for collaboration among staff working to address FV in prison settings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Establishing and maintaining a community of practice could support workers and encourage collaboration opportunities across programs. For example, case consultations and peer supervision could enable workers to discuss emerging trends and share their experiences.

Conclusion

The findings of this three-part study provide key evidence to inform future policies and service development that aims to strengthen the identification, engagement, and access to FV support needs of women who have experienced incarceration. We refer the reader to the detailed study findings contained in the Final Report.