



Department of Corrective Services  
Government of Western Australia

## **Profile of Women in Prison 2005**

Main findings of the *Prisoner Characteristics and Needs Survey*  
of female prisoners in Western Australia 2005

Strategic and Executive Services  
Performance, Statistics and Evaluation

December 2006

**The Department of Corrective Services would like to thank the women who shared their lives with us, the dedicated interviewers who supported these women, and the staff who gave their commitment and time to the survey.**

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## **Introduction**

The rise in the number of female prisoners in Western Australia provided the initial impetus for the Department of Corrective Services<sup>1</sup> (the Department) to develop a profile of women in prison in 2001.

Between 1991 and 1996 the female prisoner population in Western Australia had remained relatively constant at approximately 5% of the total prisoner population. However in 1999/2000 the proportion of women in prison represented 7.6% and by 2004/2005 had increased to 8%.

Following the first survey in 2001 it was agreed to provide a bi-annual profile update to the Department in order to monitor the situation of women in prison in Western Australia.

It is intended that this profile will:

- increase community understanding of women in prison; their backgrounds, life experiences, reasons for imprisonment and challenges faced upon release; and
- assist Department employees to deliver services that best meet the needs of these women within the context of their families and communities;

The first profile report was completed in 2002, based on data collected in the *Prisoner Characteristics and Needs Survey* in late 2001. The second report was completed in 2005 reporting on data collected in 2003. This current report extends the information collected in the first two reports through a third survey conducted in November and December 2005. Taken together, these three surveys enable consideration of comparative changes in the profile of women in prison since 2001. The data presented are intended to be informative and no interpretation of the data tables or charts is presented.

This profile report outlines the research methodology used to gather information from female prisoners, including survey scope and design. This is followed by an overview of women's contact with the criminal justice system in Western Australia and the extent of use of imprisonment as an outcome of the court process.

The nature of female prisoners' offending behaviours and reasons for imprisonment are presented, with particular reference to different types of offending behaviour and imprisonment patterns for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women.

Information regarding the personal characteristics and family life of female prisoners is presented with a focus on women's role in the community as carers of others, particularly children.

The extent of social disadvantage among women in prison is explored by:

- comparing women in prison and women in the general community in the areas of access to education and employment, sources of income and type of accommodation; and
- an analysis of female prisoners' histories of physical and mental health issues, abuse and drug and substance use prior to imprisonment.

The women's experience of prison life is explored through an examination of activities undertaken and relationships with staff and other prisoners.

Finally, the female prisoners' intentions regarding life after imprisonment are presented, along with concerns they expressed about their release back into the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly Department/Ministry of Justice until the split of the Department in February 2006 into the Department of the Attorney General and the Department of Corrective Services.

## ***Executive Summary***

This report presents findings from the third survey in the *Profile of Women in Prison* series. It follows a similar, though not identical, format to the surveys undertaken in 2003 and 2001.

The information used to develop this profile of female prisoners is from the *Prisoner Characteristics and Needs Survey* conducted between 7 November 2005 and 6 December 2005 in all Western Australian prisons that accommodate female prisoners. The participating prisons were Bandyup and Boronia in the metropolitan area and Greenough, Broome, Roebourne and Eastern Goldfields in the regional areas of Western Australia<sup>2</sup>.

The findings of this third *Profile of Women in Prison* are largely consistent with data from other jurisdictions. Typically, it would appear that female prisoners in industrialised nations experience social disadvantage across such areas as education and employment; live with complex health issues; present with histories of drug and alcohol misuse and also histories of past abuse, both as adults and as children. The responses to the survey also tell of the disruption to the families of female prisoners and the difficulties faced in maintaining family relationships during a period of imprisonment.

A summary of the findings from the 2005 survey are presented below:

- Aboriginal women continue to be over-represented in the female prison population comprising almost 60% of all women received into prison in 2005. This represents a 20% increase from 2001 when Aboriginal women comprised 50% of receivals into prison;
- Over one-third of the sentenced women were in prison for breaching release orders, with Aboriginal women displaying higher rates of non-compliance than non-Aboriginal women;
- A significant decrease has been recorded in the percentage of women who expect to serve less than twelve months in prison;
- While back problems and asthma continue to be the most frequently reported physical health issues there has been a continuation of the almost exclusive reporting of diabetes and kidney problems by Aboriginal women;
- A high percentage of women reported a link between their offending behaviour and their use of alcohol or drugs. The use of amphetamines prior to imprisonment has shown an increase in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women;
- Suggestions have been made by the women surveyed on methods for improving the reception process including the provision of essential items at reception and the development of a separate process for women who are entering the prison for the first time;
- Participation in programs has increased since 2001. This has been accompanied by an overall increase in the levels of satisfaction with programs offered; and
- Non-Aboriginal women have expressed a greater perception of safety within the prison environment since the last survey. Aboriginal women continue to report feeling safe in prison.

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<sup>2</sup> The women usually held at Roebourne were transferred to Boronia and Greenough due to works being undertaken in the women section of Roebourne prison and were included as interviews at the respective locations.

This *Profile of Women in Prison* continues to provide valuable information for the ongoing monitoring of the attitudes and perceptions of the women who are resident in Western Australian prison facilities, and for future planning and service provision in the Department of Corrective Services and also more widely. In addition, this report has the capacity to increase community understanding of women in prison; their backgrounds, life experiences, reasons for imprisonment and challenges faced upon release.

## Key Findings

### Women in contact with the criminal justice system

- Contact with the Criminal Justice System can be measured at three distinct points: police apprehension, court appearance and imprisonment
- To fully understand trends in imprisonment it is necessary to provide an overview of contact with the criminal justice system at all three points. The following outlines data from each of these points of contact.

#### Police apprehension

- While the total number of people charged with an offence as a proportion of the total population has remained relatively stable between the years 1992 to 2004, the proportion of females charged has increased by 3.4%. More alarmingly the number of Aboriginal females charged as a percentage of all persons charged over the same period has more than doubled in 2004. This increase in arrests for Aboriginal females can largely be attributed to increases in justice and good order offences and driving-related offences. Data from 2004 indicates that the proportion of arrests for Aboriginal persons is higher for females than for males<sup>3</sup>.

#### Court appearance

- Between 1998 and 2004 the total number of offence counts dealt with by the adult lower courts have increased by 31% with an increase of 18.75% in the number of distinct persons appearing before the courts. Of the people appearing before the courts in 2004:
  - 24.1% were female;
  - Aboriginal persons are more commonly imprisoned than non-Aboriginal persons;
  - Females are more likely to receive non-custodial sentences than males.
- These differences in sentencing outcomes are likely to be due to the differences in the types of crimes committed by men as opposed to women<sup>4</sup>.

#### Imprisonment

- In 2004, there were 1002 female receivals into Western Australian prisons, as sentenced prisoners or on remand. Of these, 606 (60.4%) were Aboriginal women<sup>5</sup>. The most common offence for which women were imprisoned was for driving and traffic-related offences followed by offences against justice. Of the 432 sentenced female prisoners received in 2004 over three-quarters (77.5%)

Table	Page
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2.2	24
2.3	25
2.4	25

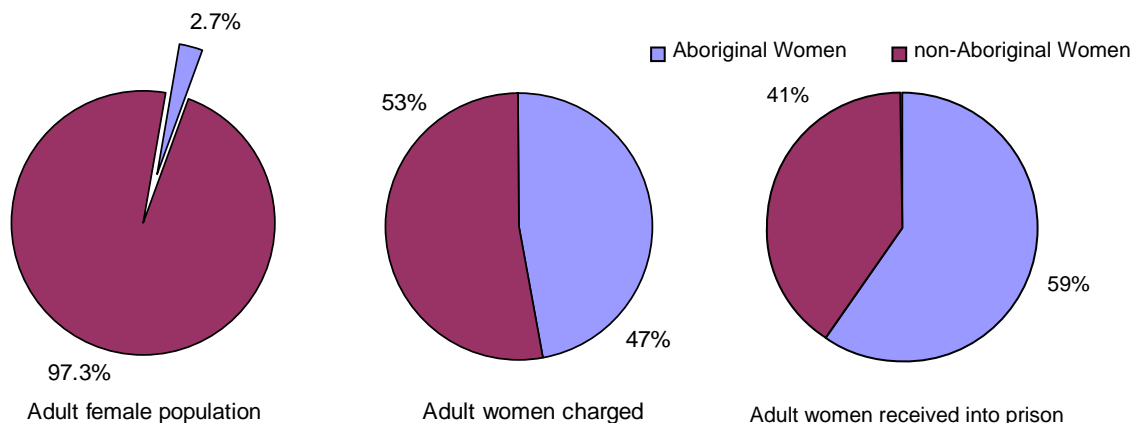
<sup>3</sup> Crime and Justice Statistics for Western Australia 1992 & 2004 Crime Research Centre

<sup>4</sup> Crime and Justice Statistics for Western Australia: 2004, p. 78

<sup>5</sup> Crime and Justice Statistics for Western Australia: 2004 Crime research Centre p. 136, Table 1

received sentences of less than 12 months with 16.7% of receivals sentenced for one year to less than two years.

Overall, Aboriginal women continue to be significantly over-represented at all stages of the criminal justice system. In 2004 Aboriginal women represented 2.7% (2001: 2.4%) of the female population aged over 18 years in Western Australia, however, they made up 47% (2003: 43.6%; 2001: 30.0%) of all women charged for an offence and 59.4% (2003: 56.0%; 2001: 50.0%) of all women received into prison<sup>6</sup>.



**Personal characteristics of the women surveyed**

- Almost two thirds (63%) of women surveyed were aged from 18 to 35 years of age with the median age of Aboriginal women in general being younger than non-Aboriginal women (31 years compared to 36 years). This is consistent with 2001 and 2003 survey findings.
- Seventy nine percent of women surveyed were Australian born and 93% identified English as the language they spoke at home. Eighteen Aboriginal women identified an Aboriginal language as their first language. A small proportion of the women were born overseas and identified with cultures other than Australian.

**Imprisonment and offending histories**

- In general, the findings from the 2005 survey were similar to the previous studies in regard to imprisonment and offending histories.

Table	Page
4.1	38
4.2	39
4.5	41
4.4	41

<sup>6</sup> Crime and Justice Statistics for Western Australia: 2004 Crime research Centre Table 2.4, Table 5.1

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The majority of non-Aboriginal women were in metropolitan prisons and the majority of Aboriginal women were in regional prisons. Just over two thirds of the participants were sentenced prisoners, and almost one fifth were on remand.</li> </ul>	4.3	40
	3.1	30
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Overall, the number of previous convictions each prisoner had in 2005 bore strong similarities to previous years, with a large majority of women having been convicted of more than one offence. As in previous surveys more Aboriginal women than non-Aboriginal women had two or more previous convictions.</li> </ul>	3.2	30
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In regard to multiple convictions, this survey has shown a small increase in the number of female prisoners reporting ten or more previous convictions.</li> </ul>	3.2	30
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In line with previous studies, there was a marked difference between non-Aboriginal women and Aboriginal women in terms of the types of offences they had committed. Drug offences and offences of fraud and misappropriation were the most frequently noted serious offences committed by non-Aboriginal women but only two Aboriginal women noted these offences. Assault (excluding sexual assault) and breaking and entering were the most frequently noted serious offences committed by Aboriginal women.</li> </ul>	3.3	31
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Over one third of the sentenced women were in prison for breaching release orders. Rates of non compliance and re-offending were over twenty percent higher for Aboriginal women, consistent with data from the 2001 survey.</li> </ul>	3.5	34
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The majority of women surveyed in 2005 had previously been imprisoned three to five times, mirroring the 2001 and 2003 survey.</li> </ul>	3.7	35
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There was a significant decrease from the previous survey in the percentage of women who had been sentenced and reported an expected time in prison of less than one year. Consistent with the 2003 survey more Aboriginal women had an expected time in prison of less than one year than non-Aboriginal.</li> </ul>	3.8	37
<b>Family life</b>		
<i>Main carers in childhood</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In line with the 2001 and 2003 surveys, the majority of women were raised by their parent/s or extended family members.</li> </ul>	5.1	44
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There was no change in the percentage of women who reported having been a ward of the state at some time during their childhood, although proportionally twice as many Aboriginal women reported having been a ward of the State.</li> </ul>	5.2	45
<i>Parental / carer status</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ At 47% the percentage of women in this survey who reported being carers of dependent children, other family members, or other non-family dependents fell</li> </ul>	5.4	46

in 2003 after a rise from 2001.

- More than half the women with children in this survey were aged from 26 to 35 years, an increase from 2003. Notably, for Aboriginal women the age group that had the highest number of children was 26 to 35 years as opposed to 18 to 25 years in the 2001 survey.
- Almost half of all women with children were single mothers, a small increase from 2003 but comparable to 2001 data. A similar percentage of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal women reported being single mothers.
- The majority of women who were caring for their children immediately prior to imprisonment intended to resume caring for their children upon their release. For those who anticipated difficulties in resuming care, the most reported reason indicated problems finding suitable accommodation.
- In almost half the cases, children who had been dependents of the women surveyed were currently being cared for by either their grandparents or by their fathers.

5.8	48
5.9	48
5.14	53
5.11	50

*Visitation by family*

- Thirty six percent of women who had cared for dependents immediately prior to imprisonment received visits from them at least once a fortnight. Over a third of women reported receiving no visits by former dependents. In line with the previous studies, almost half of the women would like daily visits from their former dependents, with three quarters desiring visits once a fortnight or more often.

5.12	51
5.13	52

**Social disadvantage**

*Education and employment*

- Thirty five percent of the women surveyed had not received a formal education to the completion of Year 10. The difference between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal women in the level of education and post-school study was consistent with the previous surveys.
- Sixty six percent of all women reported that they were not employed in the six months prior to their arrest. Consistent with both 2001 and 2003 data, more Aboriginal women were unemployed prior to imprisonment than non-Aboriginal. A similar percentage of all women across all studies reported as never being employed.
- In terms of those women who had previously been employed, there were some changes in the types of employment they had. In this survey, the top three areas in order of frequency were hospitality, sales and clerical/administration.
- In regard to sources of income, the women surveyed in 2005 were less dependent on government benefits for their income than those in the 2003

6.1	55
6.3	57
6.6	59
6.7	60

survey but more dependent than those in 2001. The percentage of women who reported crime related activities to be a source of income fell between 2001 and 2003 and has remained the same in 2005.

### Health

- Many women reported compromised physical health. There was, however, a decrease in the percentage of women in 2005 who reported a diagnosis of a physical health issue prior to imprisonment.

7.1

63
- Back problems and asthma continue to be the most commonly reported health issues reported by women prisoners. The most significant change in health issues in 2005 has been the increased reporting of arthritis which was not reported in 2001 and reported by only 8% of respondents in 2003. Diabetes and kidney/renal problems continue to be reported exclusively by Aboriginal women.

7.1

63
- Generally, health issues are similar between non-Aboriginal women and Aboriginal women with the exception of back problems where there is still a marked difference in the reported incidence with non-Aboriginal women reporting back problems more frequently.

7.1

63
- A slightly higher proportion of women had been tested for blood borne communicable diseases such as Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and HIV/AIDS in 2005. The number of positive results has decreased between 2001 and 2005. Hepatitis C continues to be the most commonly diagnosed blood borne communicable disease.

7.2

64
- More women reported a diagnosed mental health issue in this survey than in 2001 and 2003. The major change in terms of mental health has been an increase in the proportion of women who have received treatment for their condition.

7.4

66
- Unipolar depression remains the most frequently reported mental health issue although there has been a large decrease in the percentage of women who reported this condition. Anxiety was the second most frequently reported mental health issue in all studies.

7.5

67

### Suicide

- In 2005, a smaller percentage of women had seriously thought about or attempted suicide prior to imprisonment than in either 2003 or 2001. Encouragingly, far fewer women have seriously thought about or attempted suicide since their incarceration. A similar decrease has been seen in the number of women self-harming since imprisonment.

7.6

68
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7.7

68
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7.8

69

*Previous history of abuse<sup>7</sup>*

- In 2005, 88% of women reported having experienced some form of abuse as an adult or in their childhood. Half of the women surveyed had experienced abuse in both childhood and an as an adult. Consistent with the 2001 survey, the proportion of Aboriginal women who reported a history of abuse was lower than that reported by non-Aboriginal women.
- The most common types of abuse in adulthood reported by women were physical abuse followed by emotional abuse. Although not conclusive, comments made by several women during the course of the interview revealed this type of abuse was related to domestic violence.

8.1	71
8.2	72

*Drug and alcohol use*

- Similar proportions of women reported using alcohol and/or drugs in the six months prior to their imprisonment in 2005. The use of amphetamines/speed was considerably higher among non-Aboriginal women than Aboriginal women, as was the use of heroin. After alcohol the most common drug in use by both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal women prior to imprisonment is amphetamine/speed. This reflects a shift in drug use by non-Aboriginal women since 2001 where the most common drug used after alcohol was marijuana.
- Sixty nine percent of women reported a connection between their offending behaviour and their use of alcohol or drugs. A smaller percentage of non-Aboriginal women reported a connection than Aboriginal women. Thirty nine percent of non-Aboriginal women and 73% of Aboriginal women reported being under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time their offences were committed.

9.1	76
9.2	77
9.3	77
9.5	79

**Prison Life**

*Arrival into prison*

- A majority of the women surveyed in 2005 had concerns about imprisonment upon entry. This is consistent with data from 2001 and 2003<sup>8</sup>. Most women were concerned about the impact of their imprisonment upon their families.
- Most women reported that they were offered some form of support on arrival into prisons, an improvement on 2001 but marginally lower than 2003. Important to note with these findings is the high number of women reporting having received no support upon arrival.

10.1	82
10.2	83

<sup>7</sup> Previous history of abuse questions were not asked in the 2003 study.

<sup>8</sup> The 2001 *Profile of Women in Prison* did not report on 'arrival into prison'. Data is taken from the Department of Justice Report *Thematic Review of Women, Young Women and Girls in Detention* (2001)

*Reception process*

- |   |      |    |
|---|------|----|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In 2005, the number of women reporting being satisfied or very satisfied with the reception process has increased to 61% in comparison to 2003 and 2001.</li> </ul>  | 10.3 | 83 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Where 22% of women found staff to be supportive and helpful, 6% found the reverse to be true and listed this as the primary reason for their dissatisfaction with the reception process. Other reasons for dissatisfaction included an insufficient orientation process and strip searches.</li> </ul>   | 10.5 | 84 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Suggestions for changes to the reception process were noted by 55% of the women surveyed in 2005. Some of the suggestions referred to the process itself while others were directed towards staff attitudes and prisoner provisions. The most common suggestions included the provision of essential items, more understanding from staff and better explanations about rules. The women also suggested that a different process be in place for women facing their first time in prison, faster and more efficient processing, better peer support and cultural sensitivity.</li> </ul> | 10.6 | 85 |

*Visiting arrangements<sup>9</sup>*

- |  |       |    |
|--|-------|----|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The 2005 survey showed a majority of women receive visitors during their imprisonment although a smaller percentage of Aboriginal women have visitors compared to non-Aboriginal women.</li> </ul>  | 10.7  | 86 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Family members (not including partners and children) were the most often reported visitors. In this survey a smaller percentage of all women reported receiving visits from children and friends compared to 2003. Aboriginal women are less likely to receive visits from their children than non-Aboriginal women.</li> </ul> | 10.7  | 86 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Satisfaction with the visiting arrangements has shown a decrease from the 2003 survey. At the same time there was also a decrease in the percentage of women who reported dissatisfaction in 2005. Levels of satisfaction were highest for Aboriginal women.</li> </ul>   | 10.9  | 87 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In 2005, the most frequently expressed concerns about the visiting process were that it was uncomfortable for visitors, there were issues around the security process, the lack of flexible visiting hours, lack of privacy and the small size of the visiting area.</li> </ul>   | 10.10 | 88 |

*Recreational activities<sup>10</sup>*

- |   |       |    |
|---|-------|----|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Sixty two percent of the women surveyed in 2005 were involved in a range of recreational activities prior to their arrest compared to 70% in 2003. The main</li> </ul> | 10.11 | 89 |
|---|-------|----|

<sup>9</sup> No data for visiting arrangements available from 2001

<sup>10</sup> No data for recreational activities available from 2001

activity category reported was 'walking, running, bike riding, bush walking'. The 2005 results show that some women who were not engaged in recreational activities prior to imprisonment took up these activities while in prison.

10.12 90

- Satisfaction with recreational activities has increased in 2005 and sits at 54%. Among non-Aboriginal women satisfaction increased slightly but decreased slightly among Aboriginal women. Reasons for dissatisfaction were similar in both studies, with the limited range and opportunities for activities being noted by women in 2005 and 2003.

10.13 90

10.14 91

10.15 92

### *Religion*

- There has been some fluctuation in the percentage of women reporting that their spiritual, cultural and religious needs were being met. As with previous studies it is reported that the main reason for religious needs not being met is that the prison did not cater for the woman's religion and culture. It is evident that this is an issue for Aboriginal women more so than non-Aboriginal women.

10.17 93

### *Programs<sup>11</sup>*

- There was a small increase in the percentage of all women who were involved in, or had undertaken, programs whilst in prison at the time of the survey although the participation of Aboriginal women has decreased slightly. In 2005 more than half of the women surveyed were involved in a program.

10.18 94

- In 2005, the alcohol and substance misuse programs were the most frequently completed programs with a quarter of the women reporting participation. The second most frequently attended program in 2005 was cognitive skills program. This represents a significant change since 2003 when the most attended program was Occupational Health and Safety followed by Anger Management.

10.18 94

- Fifty eight percent of women reported that their program attendance was a requirement for parole in 2005 compared to 38% in 2003. More Aboriginal women were required to participate in programs as a condition of parole than non-Aboriginal women.

10.19 95

- Overall satisfaction with programs undertaken was higher in 2005 at 75% in comparison to 2001 where satisfaction was reported by 34% of respondents.

10.20 95

- The proportion of women who had not participated in any programs was similar across the 2003 and 2005 studies although the difference in participation rates between non-Aboriginal women and Aboriginal women has increased.

10.18 94

<sup>11</sup> No data for programs available from 2001

- Over two thirds of the women offered suggestions for the types of programs they felt were most needed by women in prison. The most often suggested were alcohol and substance misuse programs followed by personal development programs, life skills programs and parenting skills. In this most recent survey it is evident that alcohol and substance misuse has become the most sought after program by women in prison whereas in 2003 it rated as fourth most needed.

10.23 98

*Study*<sup>12</sup>

- A smaller percentage of women in the 2005 survey were participating in study or courses whilst in prison than in the 2003 survey. Overall, less non-Aboriginal women were participating in study than Aboriginal women. Aboriginal women are more likely to be studying in literacy and numeracy, computer or employment courses while non-Aboriginal women are more likely to be studying at TAFE or in employment courses.

10.24 99

- Satisfaction with study undertaken increased for both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal women. The main reason expressed by all women for satisfaction with undertaking study and/or courses was that they learnt new things and that it increased personal confidence.

10.25 100

10.26 100

*Work*<sup>13</sup>

- The most common prison work activity reported by women was cleaning, followed by kitchen, garments, gardens and laundry.

10.28 102

- In both studies, Aboriginal women were more involved in cleaning work and non-Aboriginal women were more involved in kitchen work.

10.28 102

- A large majority of the women were satisfied with the work activities, the most frequent reason being that it occupied time and they were able to use skills. Satisfaction with work activities has dropped among Aboriginal women but rose for non-Aboriginal women.

10.29 102

10.30 103

*Other activities*

- When asked to suggest activities that were currently not available in prison but that would be of benefit to them respondents suggested life skills, arts and crafts, structure and programs, and employment education. Aboriginal women would prefer arts and crafts and non-Aboriginal women are equally interested in life skills and employment/education.

10.32 104

*Relationships in prison*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> No data for study available from 2001

<sup>13</sup> No data for work available from 2001

<sup>14</sup> No data for relationships in prison available from 2001

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Almost 7 in 10 women described their relationship with prison staff as 'good' or 'okay', an increase from the 2003 survey. There was little difference in the positive responses of non-Aboriginal women and Aboriginal women. A slight increase was recorded for those who described their relationships with prison staff as 'not good', 'bad' or 'fearful'.</li> </ul>	10.33	105
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When asked to describe the prisoner-staff relationship for other prisoners more women saw these as 'good' or 'okay' in 2005 than they had in 2003. There was a greater reduction in the proportion who reported the relationships as 'not good' or "bad'.</li> </ul>	10.34	106
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The five attributes that prisoners felt make a good prison officer were very similar in each survey, although not in the same order. In 2005 these were: being able to listen, being respectful, showing understanding, acting with professionalism at work and being non-judgemental.</li> </ul>	10.35	107
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A major difference exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women when rating the most valued attributes of prison officers. For non-Aboriginal women a prison officer that is able to listen and shows understanding is valued more highly while for Aboriginal women it is a prison officer who has respect for the prisoners and is able to listen.</li> </ul>	10.35	107
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A majority of women said that the gender of the prison officer did not matter when it comes to their relationships.</li> </ul>	10.36	108
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fewer women considered their relationship with other prisoners to be good/great/fine in this survey than in the 2003 survey. Overall, however, the responses suggest that relationships between prisoners are generally positive.</li> </ul>	10.37	108
<i>Safety and bullying</i> <sup>15</sup>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eighty percent of all women reported that they felt safe or very safe in prison. The most significant change in perceived levels of safety has occurred for non-Aboriginal women with 20% more reporting this in 2005 than the previous survey. Aboriginal women's perception of safety decreased from 90% in 2003 to 83% in 2005.</li> </ul>	10.38	109
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The same low proportion of women (8%) reported feeling unsafe or very unsafe in 2005 and in 2003. In both studies the behaviour of other prisoners was the most frequently given reason for feeling unsafe.</li> </ul>	10.40	111
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thirty six percent of women reported that they had been victims of bullying in prison, a decrease of 9% from 2003. The identified source of the bullying in 2005 was spread across and staff and prisoners.</li> </ul>	10.41	112
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women were asked to offer suggestions for reducing bullying in prison and</li> </ul>	10.42	113

<sup>15</sup> Data for safety and bullying not available from 2001

70% provided responses. Of these 37% stated either that bullying cannot be reduced or that it that it doesn't exist or is under control. The remainder suggested that increased awareness by prison officers, punishing and/or educating the bully and separating prisoners would be the most effective strategies for reducing the bullying incidents.

***Returning to the community***

An important issue for women in prison and members of the wider community is the prisoners' release from prison and return to the community.

*Expected Time to Release*

- Fifty seven percent of the women surveyed expected to be released within six months, a decrease from both 2003 and 2001. Slightly more women expected to spend between one and five years in prison in this survey compared to previous studies.
- In 2005 the expected time until release was comparatively longer for non-Aboriginal women compared to the Aboriginal women. Almost half non-Aboriginal women expected to be released within six months compared to two-thirds of Aboriginal women. This is a considerable decrease from the 2001 survey for Aboriginal women where 85% expected to be released within six months. This change can be attributed in part to the legislative changes which abolished prison sentences of less than six months.<sup>16</sup> The legislative changes appear to have impacted Aboriginal women more so than non-Aboriginal women with the proportion of Aboriginal women reporting an expected release date of between 6 and 12 months increasing from 5% in 2001 to 20% in 2005.

11.1		115
11.1		115
11.2		115
11.3		116
11.4		116
11.5		117

*Release and Re Offending*

- In all three studies most women have reported knowing who they would live with and where they would live once they were released from prison.
- Fifty six percent of the women were confident or very confident that they would gain employment on their release.
- Forty six percent reported that they would be caring for others upon their release.
- At 90%, more women in 2005 were confident that they would not re-offend compared with 2003 and 2001. As with the previous studies, Aboriginal women were less confident than non-Aboriginal women in regard to re-offending.

*Concerns about Release*

<sup>16</sup> Part 5 of the Sentencing Legislation Amendment and Repeal Act 2003, which prohibits sentences of six months or less, was proclaimed in May 2004.

- Over the three surveys the level of concern that women prisoners express about their release has increased. In 2001, forty two percent of women had no concerns. This fell to 31% in 2003 and decreased further in 2005 to 21%.
- The most common concern in all three surveys was apprehension about rebuilding the family unit and re-establishing friendships. Other concerns rating highly included concerns regarding lack of accommodation, relapse into substance misuse, fear of prejudice and fitting back into the community, and concerns with being on parole.

11.6	118
11.6	118

## Conclusion

While there were some differences in responses to the same questions in the 2003 and 2001 survey, it is too early to draw conclusions about those differences, particularly as there were some changes in methodology and the number and location of the women who participated. In many areas the responses to the 2005 survey were consistent with those reported in 2001. In this respect, 2003 findings appear as somewhat anomalous but only further surveys will confirm this.

The findings of this third *Profile of Women in Prison* are largely consistent with data from other jurisdictions. Typically, it would appear that female prisoners in industrialised nations experience social disadvantage across such areas as education and employment; live with complex health issues; present with histories of drug and alcohol misuse and also histories of past abuse, both as adults and as children. The responses to the survey also tell of the disruption of the families of female prisoners and the difficulties faced in maintaining family relationships during a period of imprisonment.

There are a few areas where the results of the *Western Australian Prisoner Characteristics and Needs Survey* differ from those of other jurisdictions. For example, the population of women in prison in the United States of America and Canada were more likely to be employed at the time of their arrest than women in prison in Western Australia. Like Western Australia, however, women in prison in Britain are less likely to have been in employment prior to their imprisonment.

The reporting of health issues of the women surveyed in Western Australia was generally similar to those findings in other Australian states, although there were some differences. Rates of Hepatitis C infection reported by Western Australian prisoners were less those reported in New South Wales. As well, Western Australia female prisoners reported a higher rate of previous diagnosis of a mental health illness, at approximately twice the level of the survey population in New South Wales. Of note from this report, is the almost exclusive incidence of diabetes and kidney/renal problems within the Aboriginal female population. A Western Australian Department of Health Report<sup>17</sup> (2001) states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have one of the highest rates of diabetes in the world. The report adds that when compared to the non-Aboriginal population, the rate of death as a result of diabetes and renal disease was significantly higher for Aboriginal women at 14.2 times higher. It should be noted that diabetes often contributes to other chronic conditions such as renal disease.

Drug and alcohol use continues to have an adverse impact upon the everyday lives of women. Almost eight in ten women surveyed reported using alcohol or drugs in the four months prior to their imprisonment. Almost half of all women were under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of their offence and 13% were committing crimes to raise money to purchase drugs. While alcohol continues as the most used drug, this report has also highlighted the increasing use of amphetamines particularly amongst Aboriginal women. This reflects a worrying trend in drug use.

The extreme, systemic disadvantage experienced by the Aboriginal women who participated in this survey is illustrated throughout the report. The findings of the survey suggest that many of these women have lives of extreme hardship. Further research in this area is needed to better

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<sup>17</sup> Watson J, Ejueyitsi VB, Codde JP (2001). *A Comparative Overview of Aboriginal Health in Western Australia*. Epidemiology Occasional Paper 15. ISSN 1329-7252. Department of Health, Perth, Western Australia.

understand the extent of this disadvantage and the diversity of the experiences of Aboriginal women who are imprisoned.

This *Profile of Women in Prison* provides valuable information that has not previously been collected in one place. This information is useful for the ongoing monitoring of the attitudes and perceptions of the women who are resident in Western Australian prison facilities, and for future planning and service provision in the Department of Corrective Services and also more widely. Additionally, this report has the capacity to increase community understanding of women in prison; their backgrounds, life experiences, reasons for imprisonment and challenges faced upon release.