



# Executive Summr Profile of Women in Priso

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A report by the Western Aust  
Department of Justice  
Community and Juvenile Justice Division  
Planning, Policy and Review

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June 200

**SUMMARY OF**  
**'PROFILE OF WOMEN IN PRISON'**

***MAIN FINDINGS OF THE PRISONER  
CHARACTERISTICS AND NEEDS SURVEY OF  
ADULT FEMALE PRISONERS IN WESTERN  
AUSTRALIA***

Conducted by the  
**PERFORMANCE REVIEW AND EVALUATION UNIT**  
**PLANNING AND POLICY DIRECTORATE**  
**COMMUNITY AND JUVENILE JUSTICE DIVISION**  
**DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE**

**JUNE 2002**

**The Department of Justice would like to thank those women who took the time to share their lives with us, and the band of dedicated interviewers who travelled all over the state to share in those lives.**

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Female prisoners have historically made up a very small proportion of the Western Australian prison population. Between 1991 and 1996, the female prisoner population in Western Australia remained relatively constant at approximately 5% of the total prisoner population. The proportion of women in the prison population rose to 7.6% in 1999/2000 with women now, in 2002, representing approximately 7% of the total prison population.

This rise in the number of female prisoners in Western Australia, recognition of their unique needs and the commencement of the planning for a new metropolitan women's prison, provided impetus for the Department of Justice to develop a profile of women in prison.

This report summarises the profile of female prisoners. The primary source of information used to develop the profile is the *Prisoner Characteristics and Needs Survey*. This survey was conducted in all Western Australian prisons that accommodated female prisoners between 22 October and 30 November 2001. The participating prisons were Bandyup and Nyandi Women's prisons in the metropolitan area and Greenough, Roebourne, Broome and Eastern Goldfields prisons in the regional areas of Western Australia. A total of 199 women were approached and asked to participate in the survey. One hundred and forty (140) women consented (a response rate of 70%).

Interviews lasted approximately 45 – 50 minutes and were conducted on a one-to-one basis with each participant. These interviews were guided by a questionnaire consisting of 119 open-ended and closed questions. Aboriginal interviewers were used where possible to interview Aboriginal women.

## **2.0 Limits of the survey and data**

The survey collected self-reported information voluntarily provided by the women. There may be cases where the self-reported data does not accord with the official data eg. time in prison is the female prisoner's expectation of time in prison.

Whilst this profile represents the experiences of a specific group of women at a particular time, the survey findings may be generalised to the Western Australian female prisoner population due to the high response rate and respondents' general representativeness of the total female prisoner population.

## **3.0 Women in contact with the criminal justice system**

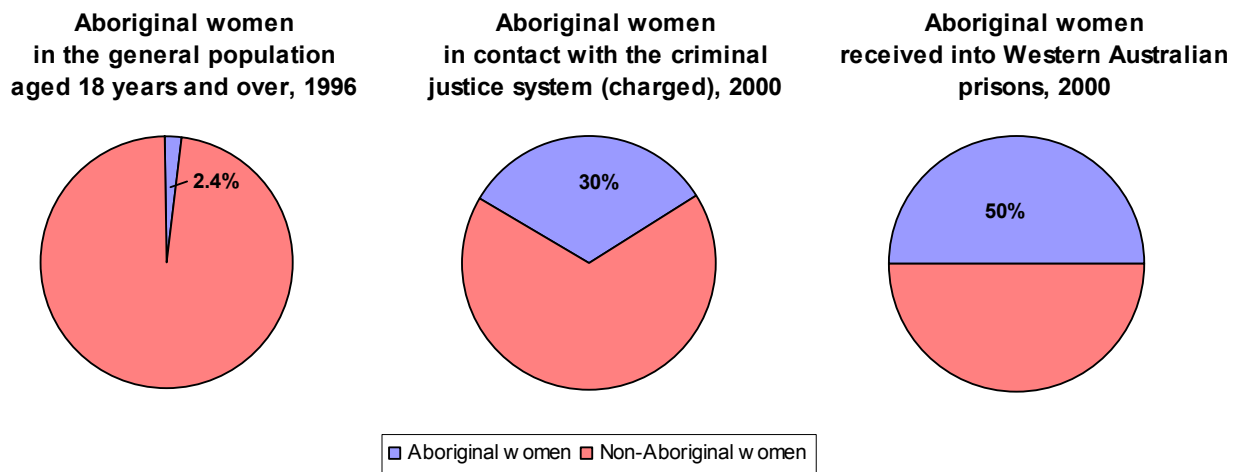
The total number of people charged for an offence remained relatively stable between the years 1992 to 2000, however there was an overall increase of 12.8% of females charged with an offence. The most significant change in any group was in the number of Aboriginal females apprehended by the police and charged (53.3% increase). The increased number of arrests mainly relates to good order and driving offences.

Analysis of sentencing data for 2000, shows that males were more commonly imprisoned (9.8% of those convicted) than females at 5.9%. Women were more likely to receive non-custodial sentences than males (25% compared with 15.3%). A total of 68.6% of male defendants received fines, compared to 62.7% of female defendants.<sup>1</sup> This may be due to the differences in the types of crimes committed by men as opposed to women, (women's offending is generally less serious than men's) and/or it could reflect differences in sentencing patterns based on gender.

Aboriginal women are significantly over-represented at all stages of the criminal justice system. Aboriginal women represent 2.4% of the female population aged over 18 years in Western Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996 Census of Population and Housing), however in 2000 they made up 30% of all women charged for an offence and 50% of all women received into a prison in Western Australia.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the percentage of Aboriginal women in the general population, those in contact with the criminal justice system and those Aboriginal women received into prison.

**Figure 3.1 Over-representation of Aboriginal women**



#### 4.0 Personal Characteristics

##### 4.1 Age

The majority of the women surveyed (72%) were under 36 years of age. The Aboriginal women were on average, younger than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (29 years and 33 years respectively). Table 4.1 presents the age groupings of the women surveyed.

<sup>1</sup> 6.1% of female defendants had their convictions dismissed, as did 6.2% of male defendants.

**Table 4.1 Female prisoner respondents: age groupings; October/November, 2001.**

Age groupings	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
18 to 25 years	24	29%	18	33%	42	30%
26 to 35 years	33	40%	25	45%	58	42%
36 to 45 years	13	16%	11	20%	24	17%
46 to 55 years	12	14%	0	0%	12	9%
56 years and over	1	1%	1	2%	2	1%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>55<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>138<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>2</sup></b>

1 Two women did not respond

2 Rounding error

## 4.2 Nationality and culture

The majority of the survey participants (88%) identified their cultural background as Australian. Of these, 48% were non-Aboriginal and 40% Aboriginal. The other 12% identified with other cultures including English, French, German, South East Asian, Pacific Islander, New Zealand and South African.

Western Australia was identified as home by 91% of the survey participants and 4% were from other Australian states including New South Wales, Victoria, Northern Territory and Queensland. The other 5% of participants identified their home as being overseas.

## 4.3 Language

Of the non-Aboriginal participants, 90% of respondents spoke English as their main language at home, while 10% spoke a language other than English at home. As one prisoner put her experience when she arrived in prison: *'Can't (couldn't) speak English - didn't know what jail was.'*

Of the Aboriginal participants, 14% spoke an Aboriginal dialect as their main language in the home. The women who spoke an Aboriginal dialect were concentrated in the regional areas of Roebourne, Broome and Eastern Goldfields.

## 5.0 Imprisonment and offending histories

The data in the following section is reported by Aboriginality because of the significant differences that exist between the histories of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal survey respondents that point to the systemic issues facing Aboriginal women in Western Australia.

## 5.1 Number of convictions

A conviction is generally recorded when a person is found guilty of an offence. Table 5.1 presents information provided by the women interviewed about the number of times they have been convicted of an offence.

**Table 5.1 Female prisoner respondents: number of convictions; October/November, 2001.**

Number of convictions	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
No convictions	3	4%	4	7%	7	5%
Convicted once	23	28%	7	13%	30	22%
Convicted twice	8	10%	11	20%	19	14%
Convicted 3 to 5 times	23	28%	10	18%	33	24%
Convicted 5 to 9 times	5	6%	6	11%	11	8%
Convicted 10 to 20 times	12	15%	6	11%	18	13%
Convicted 21 to 50 times	4	5%	7	13%	11	8%
Convicted 51 to 100 times	1	1%	3	5%	4	3%
In excess of one hundred convictions	3	4%	2	4%	5	4%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>82<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>56<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>138<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>2</sup></b>

1 One woman did not respond

2 Rounding error

3 Two women did not respond

There were no previous convictions reported by 5% of the women – all were on remand. Of the women, 22% reported that they had one conviction and 74% had been convicted more than once. Over a quarter of women surveyed (28%) had been convicted ten times or more. Generally, the Aboriginal women reported more previous convictions than the non-Aboriginal women.

Whilst the number of convictions can indicate the frequency of contact with police, it is not necessarily an indicator of the seriousness of offending behaviour.

## 5.2 Most serious charge or offence currently imprisoned for

There is a noticeable difference between the offending patterns of the responding Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women. Aboriginal respondents most common serious charge or offence group for which they were most recently imprisoned related to ‘assault’ and ‘other property offences’. For the non-Aboriginal women it was ‘drug offences’.

Table 5.2 presents the responses provided by the women when asked to name the most serious charge or offence they were most recently imprisoned for. It is important to note that this table includes charges where they may have been imprisoned, but not yet found guilty (i.e. on remand).

**Table 5.2 Female prisoner respondents: most serious charge or offence currently imprisoned for; October/November, 2001.**

Most serious charge / offence	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Drug offences	19	23%	2	4%	21	15%
Assault (excluding sexual assault)	3	4%	15	26%	18	13%
Breaking and entering	10	12%	7	12%	17	12%
Other property offences <sup>1</sup>	5	6%	12	21%	17	12%
Armed robbery	11	13%	1	2%	12	9%
Fraud/ misappropriation	10	12%	2	4%	12	9%
Homicide <sup>2</sup>	10	12%	1	2%	11	8%
Driving offences	1	1%	6	11%	7	5%
Other robbery	2	2%	2	4%	4	3%
Sexual assault	1	1%	3	5%	4	3%
Other offences against the person <sup>3</sup>	2	2%	1	2%	3	2%
Receiving stolen goods/ unlawful possession	1	1%	1	2%	2	1%
Extortion	1	1%	0	0%	1	1%
Offences against justice procedures <sup>5</sup>	1	1%	0	0%	1	1%
Other offences against good order <sup>4</sup>	0	0%	2	4%	2	1%
Unlawful possession of weapons	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Other offence	5	6%	2	4%	7	5%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>82<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>139<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>

1 Other property offences eg. motor vehicle theft

2 Homicide includes manslaughter, wilful murder, attempted murder

3 Other offences against the person eg. deprivation of liberty, abduction, hijacking, libel

4 Other offences against good order eg. liquor licensing offence

5 Offences against justice procedures eg. pervert justice, breach community based order

6 One woman did not respond

The respondents reported similar patterns for the most serious offence for which they had ever been convicted, with assault the most common offence for the Aboriginal women and drug offences for the non-Aboriginal women.

### 5.3 Sentence status

Of the interviewees, 76% were sentenced prisoners, 22% were on remand and 2% were under appeal or other.

### 5.4 Imprisonment history

For 40% of the women surveyed, the current period of imprisonment was their first experience in prison. There was a marked difference, however, between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women. Approximately half of the non-Aboriginal

women (52%) surveyed were in prison for the first time, whilst only 21% of the Aboriginal women were experiencing their first period of imprisonment.

**Table 5.3 Female prisoner respondents: previous imprisonments; October/November, 2001**

Imprisonment	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
First imprisonment	43	52%	12	21%	55	40%
Previous imprisonments	39	48%	45	79%	84	60%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>82<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>139<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>

1 One woman did not respond

Figure 5.1 illustrates the difference shown in the above table.

**Figure 5.1**

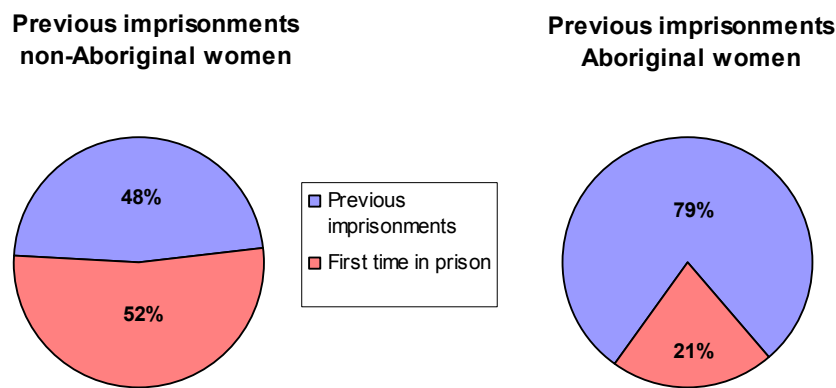


Table 5.4 below shows the number of times the women who had previous imprisonments had been imprisoned.

**Table 5.4 Previously imprisoned female prisoner respondents: previous imprisonments; October/November, 2001.**

Previous imprisonments	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Once	6	16%	3	7%	9	11%
Twice	8	22%	15	35%	23	29%
3 to 5 times	14	38%	12	28%	26	33%
6 to 9 times	5	14%	8	19%	13	16%
10 to 20 times	3	8%	2	5%	5	6%
21 to 100 times	1	3%	3	7%	4	5%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>37<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>43<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>80<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>

1 Two women did not respond

2 Rounding error.

3 Four women did not respond

Of the women whose current period of imprisonment was not their first, 72% reported up to five previous imprisonments and 28% reported more than five previous imprisonments.

### 5.5 Sentenced prisoners breaching release orders

Sentenced prisoners may be released from prison earlier than their earliest eligibility date at the discretion of the prison by way of a community-based work release, home detention or by release on parole by the Parole Board. These orders are supervised in the community by community corrections officers and the offender can be returned to prison during the life of the order for any breach of the conditions of the order.

Release orders can be breached by the offender either by re-offending or by not complying with the terms of the release order. Examples of non-compliance include failure to report to the community corrections officer, change of address without notification, failure to follow lawful directions, failure to appear at programs or not completing the required program hours.

Aboriginal women reported much higher rates of imprisonment for breaches of release orders than non-Aboriginal women at 50% and 30% respectively.

### 5.6 Time in prison

More than half the sentenced women surveyed (59%) reported an expected time in prison of less than one year. Further analysis shows that women expecting a prison duration of less than one year were sentenced for crimes related to assault, other robbery, breaking and entering, fraud and misappropriation, other property offences and other offences against good order. Table 5.5 below summarises the expected time in prison as reported by sentenced women.

**Table 5.5 Sentenced female prisoner respondents: expected time in prison; October/November, 2001.**

Expected time in prison	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
1 month or less <sup>1</sup>	0	0%	3	8%	3	3%
> 1 month to 3 months <sup>1</sup>	3	5%	7	18%	10	10%
> 3 months to 6 months	10	16%	8	21%	18	18%
> 6 months to 1 year	13	21%	15	39%	28	28%
> 1 year to 2 years	10	16%	3	8%	13	13%
> 2 years to 5 years	14	23%	1	3%	15	15%
> 5 years to 10 years	4	6%	0	0%	4	4%
Greater than 10 years	8	13%	1	3%	9	9%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>62<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>38<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>

1 Some women expecting less than 3 months in prison were anticipating an early release while others were serving time in prison in lieu of fines

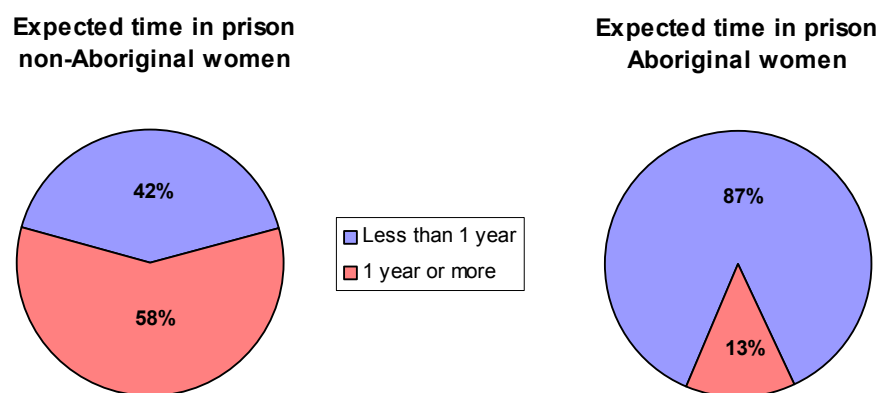
2 Three women did not respond

3 Five women did not respond

4 Eight women did not respond

Figure 5.2 illustrates the difference in expected time in prison between the Aboriginal women and the non-Aboriginal women who responded to these questions. Eighty seven percent (87%) of Aboriginal women expected less than one year in prison, compared to only 42% of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Conversely, only 13% of Aboriginal women were expecting greater than one year, compared to 58% of non-Aboriginal women.

**Figure 5.2 Expected time in prison**



## 6.0 Family and relationship issues

The survey participants were asked a number of questions about their family lives and experiences. Key findings are summarised below.

### 6.1 Main carers in childhood

Women were asked to identify the person/s who provided their primary care during childhood. The proportion of women raised by family members, including parents or other family members, was high for both the Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal women surveyed, at 86% and 95% respectively. Women raised in foster care or by persons other than family members was higher for Aboriginal women at 14%, compared to 5% of the non-Aboriginal women surveyed.

The interviewees were also asked about their legal status in childhood. In total, 19% indicated that they were wards of the State at some stage during their childhood. However, of the Aboriginal respondents 26% reported that they were wards, whereas for non-Aboriginal women the figure was much lower at 13%. This suggests an over-representation within the prison system of women who were state wards, particularly Aboriginal women.

### 6.2 Relationship status

Following imprisonment, 26% of all women reported a change in their relationship status. Overall, the most noticeable change in relationship status resulted from women who were in a defacto relationship prior to imprisonment, who became single.

Approximately half of all women (52%) reported being single or divorced before imprisonment. This changed to 63% at the time the survey was conducted.

### 6.3 Carer status

One of the main findings of research into the issues concerning female prisoners is the difficulties they face as a consequence of their role as parents or carers.<sup>2</sup>

At the time of their imprisonment, 43% of the women surveyed reported that they were the carer of dependents. Dependents cared for included the women's own children, other family member's children and non-family member's children, as well as dependent adult family members and other dependent non-family adults.

**Table 6.1 Female prisoner respondents: carer status prior to imprisonment; October/November, 2001.**

Carer status	TOTAL	
	Count	%
Women who did <b>not</b> care for a dependent/s	80	57%
Women who cared for a dependent/s	60	43%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>100%</b>

The table below shows the dependents cared for by the women before they were imprisoned. It is important to note that some women were carers for more than one category of dependent.

**Table 6.2 Female prisoner respondents with dependents prior to imprisonment: people cared for prior to imprisonment; October/November, 2001.**

People cared for	TOTAL	
	Count	%
Own children	53	88%
Other family members' children	2	3%
Other children – not family members	1	2%
Dependent adult/s - family members	6	10%
Dependent adult/s – not family members	2	3%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>

<sup>1</sup> Will not add to totals as women reported caring for more than one category of dependent.

### 6.4 Children of women in prison

Previous research (Kupper and Jans cited in Kauffman, 2001) shows that children of women in prison are usually vulnerable and a high percentage will also end up in prison themselves.

<sup>2</sup> Parents / carers may be responsible for their own and/or other people's children, as well as adults who may or may not be family members.

## 6.5 Ages of children

The 88 women surveyed (63%) had 221 children. Of these, 55 women (39%) cared for 138 children immediately prior to their current period of imprisonment and 43 women (31%) had 83 children who were not in their care immediately before their current period of imprisonment. Ten women cared for some of their children, while other children were not in their care. Table 6.3 provides a breakdown of the ages of these children.

**Table 6.3 Children of female prisoner respondents: ages of children by carer status of women prior to imprisonment; October/November, 2001.**

Age groupings of children	Children cared for by the women prior to imprisonment		Children <u>not</u> cared for by the women prior to imprisonment		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
0 to 2 years	19	16%	9	11%	26	13%
3 to 5 years	29	24%	19	23%	48	23%
6 to 12 years	50	41%	49	59%	99	48%
13 to 17 years	24	20%	6	7%	30	15%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>122<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>83</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>205<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>2</sup></b>

1 Ages for 16 children were not provided

2 Rounding error

Overall, 36% of children were preschool age (less than six years of age), with 64% school aged (aged from 6 to 17 years). Slightly more of the children cared for by the women prior to imprisonment (39%) were of preschool age, compared to 34% of preschool aged children who were not cared for by the women prior to imprisonment.

## 6.6 Current carers of children

Of the women who were carers of dependent children at the time of their arrest, 72% reported that family members were caring for their children and 16% reported that the children were being cared for by the father of the child.

Seventeen percent (17%) of the women who did not care for children at the time of their imprisonment reported that the father of the child was caring for the children. Sixty three percent (63%) reported that family members had care of the children. Noticeably, more children of this group of mothers (15%) were in foster care, as compared to 4% who had been in the care of their mothers prior to the time of arrest.

## 6.7 Visitation by family

The importance to female prisoners of receiving visits, particularly from their children, cannot be under-estimated. One prisoner stated that: *'When my family don't come to visit I feel nobody cares for me.'* Of the women who were main carers prior to their imprisonment (138 children and 18 adults were cared for), 44% indicated that they received no visits from persons previously cared for.

**Table 6.4 Female prisoner respondents: current visits by persons previously cared for; October/November 2001.**

Frequency of visits	TOTAL <sup>1</sup>	
	Count	%
Daily	1	2%
1 to 3 times per week	14	26%
2 to 3 times a month (once a fortnight)	3	6%
Once a month	3	6%
Less than monthly	9	17%
No contact	24	44%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>54<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>3</sup></b>

1 Total includes women who receive visits from dependent children and adults

2 Four women did not respond

3 Rounding error

Only 8% of the group who received no visits from persons previously in their care indicated that this was their preferred situation. Thirty seven percent (37%) of these women wished to have daily visits and 38% wished to receive 1-3 visits per week.

Prisoners indicated that transport difficulties and the distances that visitors need to travel are factors curtailing the number of children/dependents who are able to make visits. They also indicated that the prospect of being strip-searched also deters their visitors, with some stating that they have asked their families not to visit because they do not want to expose their children to the possibility of strip searches. *'I've told my mother if they want to strip my kids to turn around and go back.'*<sup>3</sup>

## **7.0 Social disadvantage**

A level of access to education, employment and income, which is lower than that experienced by the majority of the community, indicates social disadvantage.

### **7.1 Education and employment**

In Western Australia, completion to Year 10 is the minimum level of compulsory education. Of the women surveyed, 60% had completed Year 10, however 40% had not received this basic level of compulsory education. Fourteen percent (14%) of the women surveyed stated that their education level was primary school or less. Aboriginal women were proportionately more represented in this group.

<sup>3</sup> It may be the case that the perception of the likelihood of such searches of children is far greater than the actual number of such searches conducted.

**Table 7.1 Female prisoner respondents: highest level of schooling completed; October/November, 2001.**

Level of schooling completed	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Primary school or less	6	7%	13	23%	19	14%
Year 9 or less	17	20%	20	35%	37	26%
Year 10	36	43%	15	26%	51	36%
Year 11 or 12	24	29%	9	16%	33	24%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>100%<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>100%</b>

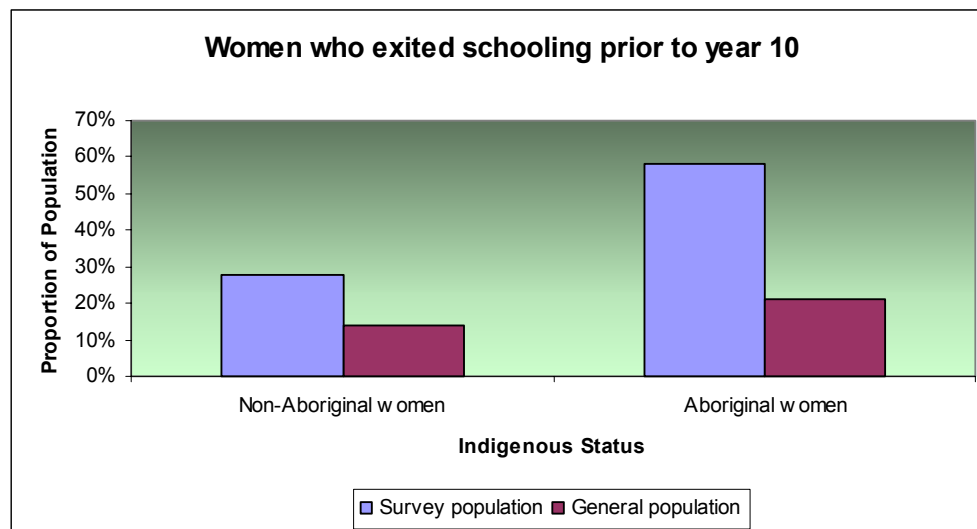
<sup>1</sup> Rounding error

Comparison to the general female population demonstrates the educational disadvantage of the women surveyed. Twenty one percent (21%) of Aboriginal women aged 15 years and over in Western Australia had either never attended school or had left school by the age of 14 years or younger (ABS, 1996 Census of Population and Housing). This compares with 58% for the Aboriginal women in prison that participated in the survey.

For non-Aboriginal women, 14% of women aged 15 years and over in Western Australia had either never attended school or left school by the age of 14 years or younger. This compares with 28% of the non-Aboriginal women surveyed.

Figure 7.1 illustrates the school attrition rates of the women surveyed compared to the general population.

**Figure 7.1 Women who exited schooling prior to year 10**



When compared to the general female population in Western Australia, the majority of women surveyed have received a lower level of basic schooling than women in the general population.

**Table 7.2 Female prisoner respondents: employment status six months prior to arrest; October/November, 2001.**

Employment status – 6 months prior to arrest	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Unemployed	50	60%	50	88%	100	71%
Employed:	33	40%	7 <sup>1</sup>	12%	40	29%
- Full-time	16	19%	4	7%	20	14%
- Part-time	9	11%	1	2%	10	7%
- Casual	8	10%	0	0%	8	6%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>100%</b>

1 Two women interviewed reported that they had employment in the 6 months prior to arrest, however data regarding their employment status (full / part time etc) was not provided.

Although the majority of respondents (75%) have had some form of work prior to imprisonment, in the six-month period prior to their arrest less than one third of the women (29%) were participating in the workforce.

**Table 7.3 Female prisoner respondents: nature of work the women were involved in prior to imprisonment; October/November, 2001.**

Type of work	TOTAL	
	Count	%
Clerical/administration <sup>1</sup>	27	19%
Hospitality industry <sup>2</sup>	26	19%
Sales industry <sup>3</sup>	19	14%
Government program <sup>4</sup>	12	9%
Manual labour <sup>5</sup>	12	9%
Rural/farming/working with animals	9	6%
Care industry <sup>6</sup>	8	6%
Health industry <sup>7</sup>	7	5%
Prostitution	6	4%
Personal services <sup>8</sup>	6	4%
Teaching/instructor <sup>9</sup>	6	4%
Self-employed/own business	5	4%
Manager/supervisor	5	4%
Other <sup>10</sup>	9	6%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>140<sup>11</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>11</sup></b>

1 Clerical/administration includes receptionist, office worker, secretary

2 Hospitality industry includes waitressing, cook, kitchen hand and bar work

3 Sales industry includes cashier operator, sales person, shop assistant

4 Government program includes the Community Development Employment Program

5 Manual labour includes gardening, labouring, cleaning and factory work

6 Care industry includes child care and working with people with disabilities

7 Health industry includes nursing or dental nursing

8 Personal services includes hairdressing, beautician, dressmaking and clothes designer

- 9 Teaching/instructor includes teachers assistant, teacher, swimming instructor and driving instructor
- 10 Other includes modelling, computer programming, mineral analysis, painting and decorating, exotic dancing, wrecking business and radio work
- 11 Will not add to totals as some women had been involved in more than one type of employment prior to imprisonment

The women had worked in a variety of roles and industry types during their previous employment. Most of the women who had been employed at some time prior to imprisonment worked in the areas of clerical/administration, hospitality and sales. A small proportion of women (4%) had their own business or were self employed. Similarly, a small number of the women (4%) were employed in a supervisory capacity.

Nine percent (9%) of all women reported that the nature of their work was with the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP). CDEP is a Commonwealth government program that assists the Aboriginal communities through the provision of funds for employment of community members.

The results of this survey suggest that Aboriginal women who become prisoners, as a whole, are socially disadvantaged. They have completed lower levels of education than non-Aboriginal women, with 58% not completing completed Year 10 and 23% receiving an education of primary school level or less.<sup>4</sup> They are less likely than non-Aboriginal women to have worked: 51% of the Aboriginal respondents had never held a paid job, whilst this figure was only 7% for the non-Aboriginal women.<sup>5</sup>

## 7.2 Income

The economic position of the respondents is highlighted by two thirds of the women receiving some form of government benefit at the time of their imprisonment<sup>6</sup> (67%). The most common benefit received by the women prior to imprisonment was the unemployment benefit at 34% followed by the sole parent payment (16%).

Table 7.4 presents the sources of income prior to imprisonment as reported by the women surveyed.

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<sup>4</sup> This notes only formal education status and does not account for other types of learning. As well, some respondents may not have completed year 10 but have undertaken TAFE study or other education programs.

<sup>5</sup> Again it should be noted that not being in paid work may be a choice made by an individual.

<sup>6</sup> Prisoners do not receive government benefits whilst imprisoned, except for those women raising a child full time in prison.

**Table 7.4 Female prisoner respondents: source of income; October/November, 2001.**

Source of income	Non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Unemployment benefit	22	27%	25	44%	47	34%
Sole parent payment	14	17%	8	14%	22	16%
Parenting payment	2	2%	5	9%	7	5%
Student payments	1	1%	1	2%	2	1%
Other government benefit	8	10%	8	14%	16	11%
Total government benefits	47	57%	47	82%	94	67%
Wages/salary	31	37%	11	19%	42	30%
Crime (excl. drug dealing)	8	10%	4	7%	12	9%
Drug dealing	10	12%	0	0%	10	7%
Somebody else supported	5	6%	0	0%	5	4%
Other	4	5%	1	2%	5	4%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>83<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>57<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>140<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>1</sup></b>

<sup>1</sup> Will not add to totals as some women had multiple sources of income

The Aboriginal respondents more commonly received a government benefit than the non-Aboriginal respondents, at 82% and 57% respectively. Non-Aboriginal respondents more often received income from wages or salary, drug dealing and from somebody else supporting them than the Aboriginal respondents.

### 7.3 Accommodation

The women reported that they had been living in a variety of accommodation types. Appropriate accommodation is a major factor in determining the custody of children and a number of the respondents were concerned about the accommodation they could access upon release to facilitate custody.

Table 7.5 presents the types of accommodation used by the women at the time of their arrest.

**Table 7.5 Female prisoner respondents: type of accommodation at time of arrest; October/November, 2001.**

Accommodation at time of arrest	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Rented house/flat with own money – private rental	37	45%	1	2%	38	27%
Boarded in someone’s house	10	12%	23	40%	33	24%
Homeswest flat/house	7	8%	13	23%	20	14%
Owned/paying off own house	16	19%	2	4%	18	13%
Lived in someone’s house rent free	7	8%	10	18%	17	12%
Homeless	3	4%	4	7%	7	5%
Lived at motel/hotel	3	4%	0	0%	3	2%
Women’s refuge/supported accommodation	0	0%	1	2%	1	1%
Other	0	0%	3	5%	3	2%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100%<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>140</b>	<b>100%</b>

<sup>1</sup> Rounding error

## 8.0 Health and wellbeing

### 8.1 Health

The health of a prisoner presents important resource and management implications for custodial services. Research indicates that female prisoners frequently present with significant and complex health problems. This is particularly evident when the relatively young age of the female prison population, with a majority being under 36 years of age, is considered alongside the prisoners’ health problems.

Sixty one percent (61%) of the women surveyed reported that they had physical health issues prior to their imprisonment – the most frequently reported health issues being back problems and asthma. Of the Aboriginal respondents, 11% also reported that they had been previously diagnosed with diabetes – no non-Aboriginal women had been diagnosed with this condition.

### 8.2 Mental health

The women were asked whether they had a previous diagnosis of a mental health issue prior to imprisonment, 51% reported a previous mental health diagnosis. The most common mental health issues reported were unipolar depression (36%) and anxiety (21%). Fifteen percent (15%) of the women reported that they had been previously admitted to a mental health unit/institution. The non-Aboriginal women surveyed reported a higher incidence (57%) of diagnosed mental health issues than the Aboriginal women (41%).

### 8.3 Suicide

The following two tables compare the suicidal behaviour of the women prior to imprisonment and since imprisonment.

**Table 8.1 Female prisoner respondents: suicidal behaviour prior to imprisonment; October/November 2001.**

Suicidal behaviour prior to imprisonment	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Never attempted or seriously thought about it	32	41%	31	62%	<b>63</b>	<b>49%</b>
Seriously thought about it	11	14%	4	8%	<b>15</b>	<b>12%</b>
Yes, attempted it	36	46%	15	30%	<b>51</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>79<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>50<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>129<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>2</sup></b>

1 Four women did not respond

2 Rounding error

3 Seven women did not respond

4 Eleven women did not respond

Of the women interviewed, 52% reported that they had seriously thought about and/or attempted suicide prior to imprisonment. In contrast to this, when asked about their suicidal behaviour since imprisonment, 74% of the total group responded that they had never attempted or seriously thought about suicide since imprisonment.

**Table 8.2 Female prisoner respondents: suicidal behaviour since imprisonment; October/November 2001.**

Suicidal behaviour since imprisonment	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Never attempted or seriously thought about it	60	76%	35	70%	<b>95</b>	<b>74%</b>
Seriously thought about it	14	18%	5	10%	<b>19</b>	<b>15%</b>
Yes, attempted it	5	6%	10	20%	<b>15</b>	<b>12%</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>79<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>50<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>129<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>4</sup></b>

1 Four women did not respond

2 Seven women did not respond

3 Eleven women did not respond

4 Rounding error

Of those women who reported attempting suicide since imprisonment, all of the non-Aboriginal women had also attempted suicide prior to imprisonment, whilst half of the Aboriginal women who had attempted or seriously contemplated suicide since imprisonment had never previously thought about or attempted suicide.

### 8.4 Self - harm

Self-harming behaviour (such as cutting oneself) is more prevalent amongst female prisoners, as compared to their male counterparts. The majority of women (84%) have not self-harmed since their imprisonment. A higher proportion of Aboriginal

women (22%) than non-Aboriginal women (13%) had self-harmed since entering prison.

Table 8.3 below shows the number and proportion of women who self-harmed since imprisonment.

**Table 8.3 Female prisoner respondents: women who have self-harmed since imprisonment; October/November 2001.**

Self-harm since imprisonment	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Had self-harmed	10	13%	11	22%	21	16%
Had not self-harmed	68	87%	40	78%	108	84%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>78<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>51<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>129<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>100%</b>

1 Five women did not respond

2 Six women did not respond

3 Eleven women did not respond

When asked what led the women to self-harm or attempt suicide the respondents indicated that previous abuse, grief and loss, imprisonment and sentencing, family/relationship problems, isolation (particularly from family), depression, stress and a sense of hopelessness were the most common factors.

### 8.5 Experiences of abuse

The interviewees were asked about abuse they may have suffered in their lives. Previous research has shown that experience of abuse may impact on ways in which people relate to power structures such as those found in prisons, and is also important in determining a prisoners' needs.

Of the women who responded to the survey, 77% reported a history of past abuse;<sup>7</sup> 74% experienced abuse as an adult and 57% reported a history of child abuse. A high proportion (54%) of the women reported having experienced abuse both as a child and as an adult. Abuse was most commonly experienced at the hands of a person they were in an intimate relationship with as an adult, or caregiver as a child.

Less than a quarter of respondents (23%) reported that they were not abused as a child or an adult. Non-Aboriginal women reported higher rates of abuse than Aboriginal women.

<sup>7</sup> The survey used the widest possible definition of abuse, including physical, sexual, social, financial and emotional abuse. Previous research into abuse also indicates that some victims do not define their circumstances as abusive.

**Table 8.4 Female prisoner respondents: women with a history of abuse; October/November 2001.**

History of abuse	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL <sup>1</sup>	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Women who did not report experiencing abuse	13	16%	16	33%	29	23%
Women who reported experiencing abuse:	66	84%	33	67%	99	77%
- as a adult	63	81%	32	65%	95	74%
- as a child	50	63%	23	47%	73	57%
- both as an adult and child	47	60%	22	45%	69	54%
<b>TOTAL<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>79<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>49<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>128<sup>2,3,4</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>1</sup></b>

1 Eleven women did not complete this section of the survey

2 Will not add to totals as categories overlap

3 One woman did not respond to the child abuse question

4 Two women did not respond to the adult abuse question

Physical abuse was reported as the most prevalent type of abuse experienced as an adult at 67% of the women, followed by emotional abuse at 62%. Sexual abuse was reported by 39% of respondents.

Emotional abuse was the most prevalent type of abuse experienced as a child at 40%, followed by physical abuse at 38%. Sexual abuse was reported by 37% of respondents to this question.

Of the women who experienced abuse as an adult or in their childhood, more than half (58%) reported that no assistance had been received to resolve any issues related to their abuse.

## 8.6 Drug and alcohol use

Drug and alcohol use was also a common feature among the women interviewed. Of the women interviewed, 80% reported that they had frequently used drugs and alcohol in the six months prior to their arrest.

**Table 8.5 Female prisoner respondents: use of alcohol or drugs; October/November 2001.**

Alcohol or drug use	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Used alcohol or drugs	65	78%	47	82%	112	80%
Did not use alcohol or drugs	18	22%	10	18%	28	20%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>100%</b>

There were differences in regard to histories of drug and alcohol use, with 70% of the Aboriginal women and 58% of non-Aboriginal women reporting frequent use of

alcohol. Non-Aboriginal women reported use of the widest range of drugs including amphetamines, cannabis and heroin.

Two thirds of the women interviewed (67%) reported a connection between their drug and alcohol use and offending behaviour. Forty one percent (41%) of these women reported that they were under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol at the time of the offence, 21% of the women stated that they committed the offence to get money to buy drugs and 16% were selling or trafficking drugs<sup>8</sup>.

Table 8.6 examines the alcohol or drug use and its relationship reported by the women to criminal offences. A number of the women indicated more than one connection between offending and their alcohol or drug use.

**Table 8.6 Female prisoner respondents: relationship between substance use and offending; October/November 2001.**

Offending related to drug use	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Offending not related to drug use	27	33%	19	33%	46	33%
Offence related to drug use:	56	67%	38	67%	94	67%
- Offence committed to get money to buy drugs	20	24%	10	18%	30	21%
- Under the influence at the time of the offence	28	34%	29	51%	57	41%
- Selling drugs	21	25%	1	2%	22	16%
- Other	5	6%	2	4%	7	5%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>83<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>57<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>140<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>1</sup></b>

<sup>1</sup> Will not add to totals as some women's offending was related to drug use in more than one way

## 9.0 High need

A large proportion of the women who participated in the Prisoner Characteristics and Needs Survey had:

- been diagnosed with a mental health issue;
- experienced abuse as an adult or in their childhood; or
- used alcohol or drugs at least four times a month in the six month period prior to their arrest.

Table 9.1 shows the number and proportion of women who experienced some or all of these issues, as well as those women who did not experience any of these issues.

<sup>8</sup> These figures add to more than 67% as participants were able to select more than one option.

**Table 9.1 Female prisoner respondents: women who experienced multiple issues; October/November, 2001.**

Multiple issues	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Women who experienced none of these issues	4	5%	1	2%	5	4%
Women who experienced at least one of these issues	75	95%	48	98%	123	96%
Women who experienced at least two of these issues	62	78%	33	67%	95	74%
Women who experienced all three issues	34	43%	13	27%	47	37%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>79<sup>1 2</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>49<sup>1 3</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>128<sup>1 4</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>1</sup></b>

1 Will not add to totals as categories overlap

2 Four women did not respond

3 Eight women did not respond

4 Twelve women did not respond

Thirty seven percent (37%) of the women had been diagnosed with a mental health issue, had experienced abuse as an adult or in their childhood, and had used alcohol or drugs at least four times a month in the six month period prior to their arrest.

Almost half of the non-Aboriginal women (43%) had experienced these three issues, compared to just over a quarter of the Aboriginal women (27%).

Five women (4%) had not been diagnosed with a mental health issue, not experienced abuse as an adult or in their childhood, and not used alcohol or drugs at least four times a month in the six month period prior to their arrest.

## 10.0 Returning to the community

An important issue for women in prison and members of the community is the prisoners' release from prison and return to the community. Of the women surveyed, 63% were expecting to be released from prison and returned to the community within six months of the time they were interviewed. The majority of the women had some idea about where they would be living and with whom, however 26% did not know what money they could access. Forty nine percent (49%) of the women indicated that they thought they would get a job when they returned to the community.

The women were also asked about whether they thought they would re-offend. Table 10.1 presents the responses given by the women.

**Table 10.1 Female prisoner respondents: likelihood of re-offending after release from prison; October/November 2001.**

Likelihood of re-offending	non-Aboriginal		Aboriginal		TOTAL	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
No, not likely to re-offend	61	75%	29	53%	<b>90</b>	<b>66%</b>
Hope I wont	11	14%	10	18%	<b>21</b>	<b>15%</b>
Don't know	2	2%	12	22%	<b>14</b>	<b>10%</b>
Yes, likely to re-offend	7	9%	4	7%	<b>11</b>	<b>8%</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>100%<sup>1</sup></b>

1 Rounding error

The Aboriginal women (53%) were less confident than the non-Aboriginal women (75%) that they were not likely to re-offend. Twenty two percent (22%) of the Aboriginal women reported that they 'didn't know' if they were likely to re-offend compared with 2% of the non-Aboriginal women.

The majority of the women surveyed (58%) expressed concerns about their impending release and return to the community.

**Table 10.2 Female prisoner respondents: concerns about release from prison; October/November 2001.**

Concerns about release	TOTAL	
	Count	%
No concerns about release	58	42%
Concerns about release:	79	58%
- Rebuilding family unit / friendships	28	20%
- Unconfident about coping skills for re-entry	24	18%
- Drugs	18	13%
- Accommodation	14	10%
- Finances and employment	11	8%
- Attitude of community	7	5%
- Returning to offending	5	4%
- Being on / completing parole	5	4%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>137<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>100%<sup>1</sup></b>

1 Three women did not respond

2 Will not add to totals as some women may have expressed multiple concerns about release

The most frequently cited concern, expressed by 20% of the women, related to issues surrounding re-building their family and friends. Other common concerns included: confidence about their coping skills, returning to their old habits of addiction and offending behaviour, dealing with judgmental attitudes within the community toward ex-prisoners, finding appropriate accommodation to enable them to resume caring for their children and ability to obtain employment.

## **11.0 Conclusion**

This summary report covers many of the issues that are expanded on in the full Profile of Women in Prison report. Issues and information presented are those of the women that participated in the survey population. Information from this report is generally transferable to the Western Australian female prisoner given the high response rate and the close demographic parallels to the complete female prison population of the time.

The Profile shows that women who are imprisoned have often experienced significant social and economic disadvantage when compared to the female Western Australian population as a whole. This is particularly so in the areas of education and employment. The survey respondents also experienced high levels of abuse, both as children and adults. The experiences of Aboriginal women who participated in the survey demonstrate even greater levels of disadvantage, suggesting systemic disadvantage suffered by many Aboriginal people in Western Australia.

The responses to the survey highlight the disruption experienced by the families of female prisoners and the difficulties faced in maintaining family relationships during a period of imprisonment. Further research is needed into the consequences of this experience for Western Australian families.