

# Prisons: a Cruel and Costly Response to Homelessness

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PARITY  
VOL 26  
ISSUE 7  
AUGUST 2013

Founded in 1988 Flat Out is a Victorian state-wide support and advocacy service for women who have had contact with the criminal justice system. Flat Out's vision is that women are not imprisoned; women's rights are understood and upheld; and there is a compassionate response to personal and social trauma.

Flat Out works toward making this vision a reality by providing individualised support, systemic advocacy and social change work. Support involves co-advocating with women to access affordable housing, drug and alcohol treatment services and other necessary supports that reduce the likelihood they will be re-criminalised and re-incarcerated. Flat Out's systemic advocacy work involves taking a lead role in agitating for change by informing the community and other service providers about the issues that occur for women who are criminalised, when they are incarcerated and after they are released. Flat Out is a strong voice in the prison abolition movement in Australia; believing that one day prisons will be fully exposed as antiquated, cruel and ultimately ineffective institutions.

CHRIP is a project of Flat Out focusing on education, community capacity building and systemic advocacy. The work of Flat Out and CHRIP builds on the intrinsic connections between service delivery and social change work. This model ensures that the individual needs of women who are criminalised, imprisoned or recently released from prison are met alongside work to address broader structural issues such as poverty,

institutional racism and violence against women.

## 'An End to Prisons' Poster

One of CHRIP's projects is the production of the poster 'An End to Prisons', which provides information and analysis about who is imprisoned in Victoria, the harms of imprisonment and its social and economic costs to the community along with decarceration strategies for community organisations. Decarceration is a cornerstone of Flat Out's ethos and it refers to people and organisations committing to policies and practices that reduce the number of people in prison and finding alternative responses to pressing social issues.

We include the 2013 edition of the poster as an insert in the *Preventing Homelessness* edition of *Parity* as the issue of homelessness is inextricably bound with the issues of criminalisation and imprisonment. As a community resource we hope that the poster continues the conversation about the long-term goal of abolishing imprisonment and encourages community organisations to use their voice, knowledge and resources to educate and advocate for decarceration. Along with the poster, the brief article below considers key aspects of the relationship between homelessness, criminalisation and the imprisonment of women and provides decarceration strategies to prevent homelessness.

## Prisons, a Default Response to Homelessness

Prisons are Australia's current 'default response' to homelessness, mental health issues and poverty.<sup>1</sup> Victoria directed \$131.5 million in the 2013/14 budget in addition to

the \$819 million in the previous year for the expansion of prisons.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, \$950.5 million has been diverted away from education, housing, health care including supports for drug and alcohol misuse, compromised or poor mental health and other services that would address the growing levels of economic and social disadvantage in Victoria. An example of this re-direction is the TAFE funding cut of \$750 million in last year's budget. TAFE has traditionally provided educational opportunities for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and thus provided pathways away from prisons.

The distribution of funds to prisons over social services demonstrates a lack of political will to address the root causes of poverty, homelessness and compromised or poor mental health. The road to prison is paved by these issues and other complex factors, such as substance misuse, low educational attainment and lack of employment opportunities. Rather than deal with inequality and injustice through community driven programs and policy and institutional change, the government chooses to focus on prison expansion. Criminalising drug and alcohol misuse does little to address the health and therapeutic concerns of individuals and the community and instead diverts funds into police and prisons.<sup>3</sup>

In June 2012 there were on average 4,884 people in prison in Victoria on any given day, of which approximately 340 were women.<sup>4</sup> Disturbingly, rates of imprisonment of Australian women have risen by 48 per cent since 2002.<sup>5</sup> Many of the women we incarcerate have

histories of victimisation, sexual violence, family violence and socio-economic disadvantage.<sup>6,7</sup> Rather than the common misconception of prisons as places for rehabilitation, prisons, like homelessness, further traumatise women, often worsening their mental and physical health. It also increases a woman's likelihood of experiencing violence, and entrenched poverty.<sup>8</sup> The issue of homelessness and its links to criminalising women is clear as we know that women are more likely than men to be homeless prior to imprisonment.<sup>9</sup> The cycle of homelessness continues when women exit prison as they are more likely than men to have unstable housing when leaving prison.<sup>10</sup>

Along with factors previously discussed, incarcerated women's histories continue to be influenced by inequalities related to their gender, race and class.<sup>11</sup> Discrimination and racism is a compounding factor which adds to the risk of a person being homeless and incarcerated. Homelessness and imprisonment disproportionately affect communities that experience racism. Aboriginal women constitute the fastest growing group of incarcerated people in Australia.<sup>12</sup>

### Homelessness Leads to Imprisonment, and Imprisonment Leads to Homelessness

Between 2010–2011, of the women incarcerated in Victoria:<sup>13</sup>

- 21.6 per cent were on remand
- 46.8 per cent received sentences of less than six months
- 64.1 per cent were sentenced for a period of less than 12 months
- 32.3 per cent were serving a sentence of six to less than 12 months.

These statistics show an alarming number of women are being remanded and receiving short prison sentences. Short sentences are a major contributing factor to homelessness because they disrupt existing housing, employment and other protective factors that mitigate risk of future incarceration. These short sentences are often the result of women being criminalised

for circumstances related to poverty and drug use. Short sentences fail to support a sustained recovery from addiction in the same way that homelessness often prevents people from addressing their addictions.<sup>14</sup>

### Decarceration Strategies can Prevent Homelessness

Ending homelessness and imprisonment will require the judiciary and broader criminal justice system to fully recognise the impact of its decisions. This includes being fully cognisant of regimes including remand and prison sentences which directly impede the ability of criminalised women to maintain housing. The judicial process needs to work with criminalised people to address their social disadvantage, including homelessness — rather than incarcerate them for it, or to generate homelessness through extended periods of remand and imprisonment.

Enabling women to maintain their existing housing is a primary way to prevent homelessness and further incarceration. This can be achieved by increasing the capacity of the broader community and agencies to support women to advocate for housing and support services to be maintained when a woman is imprisoned. Women could then be supported to take advantage of legislative provisions that allow the maintenance of public housing for up to six months and transitional housing for up to three months.

At the organisational level agencies can prioritise their energy towards women at risk of imprisonment. One way they can achieve this is through the delivery of services that meet the needs of women such as assertive outreach support. This will enable community workers to provide court support, including bail applications, and link women with other necessary services as an alternative to imprisonment. They can also provide intensive support to women being released from prison to facilitate a successful re-entry into the community and reduce the risk of future incarceration.

Flat Out believes strongly that economic and social justice is the short and long term goal for resolving high rates of homelessness, criminalisation and imprisonment. We call on governments and communities to be pro-active in addressing social and economic disadvantage. We likewise call on government and the community for funds and support to be redirected away from punitive regimes and responses towards community programs and therapeutic services and supports that enhance women's autonomy and safety.

#### Endnotes

1. Kilroy D 2005, *Prisons: Australia's Default Response to Poverty, Homelessness and Mental Illness — Especially for Women*.
2. Smart Justice 2013, *Growing imprisonment rates an expensive non-solution to community safety*.
3. VAADA 2013, *News March–April*.
4. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012, *Prisoners in Australia*, p.32.
5. *Ibid*, p. 32.
6. Women in Prison Advocacy Network 2011, *No exit into homelessness, still a dream? The housing needs of women leaving prison discussion paper*.
7. Strahopoulos M 2012, *Addressing women's victimisation histories in custodial setting*, p.3.
8. Smart Justice 2011, *More prisons are not the answer to reducing crime*.
9. Women in Prison Advocacy Network (2011) *No exit into homelessness, still a dream? The housing needs of women leaving prison discussion paper*.
10. *Ibid*.
11. *Ibid*.
12. Australian Institute of Criminology 2010, *Indigenous women's offending patterns: a literature review*.
13. Corrections Victoria, 2012, *Statistical Profile of Victorian Prisoners 2006–07 to 2010–11*, p. 76.
14. Wright S 2013 'Being set up to fail?' *The role of CJS in perpetuating cycles of repeat criminalisation for substance addicted women*, ECAN Bulletin.