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women's centre for health matters

The stories of **ACT women in prison**

10 years after the opening of the AMC

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About Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc.

The Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc. (WCHM) is a not for profit incorporated association that works with women in the ACT and surrounding region, with a focus on women who are at risk of social isolation. WCHM uses health promotion, community development, and capacity building to provide information and skills that empower women to enhance their own health and wellbeing. WCHM undertakes research and advocacy to influence systems' change with the aim to improve women's health and wellbeing outcomes. WCHM is funded by ACT Health.

Acknowledgments

WCHM would especially like to thank each of the ACT women in the AMC who shared their personal stories with us. They have kindly agreed to WCHM sharing parts of their stories in this report to help create a better understanding locally about them (not just as prisoners but as women and in many cases as victims in their own right) and about the complex reasons that contribute to these local women in the ACT entering the criminal justice system.

We would also like to thank the artist – an ACT woman in prison in the AMC – for agreeing to the use of her artwork for the cover and within the book.

About the artist

Narrative by Angie about her art

My love of art and drawing has been a lifelong passion and an escape when things get tough for me. Being in custody at the AMC has bought back this love for me as a coping mechanism. My creativity has become more holistic with the inclusion of making items with minimal materials such as dream catchers, wind chimes, crochet, painting, sketching and detailed drawings.

With my art I have been able to motivate and show other detainees that you can get better and create a pleasant environment for yourself in dark times.

In creating the designs used in this book, I drew the Phoenix to represent Women in Custody as a symbol of the ability to rise from the ashes along with the Dream Catcher that is representative that no dream is impossible and that you can make your dreams happen with determination. If you can get through this, you can get through anything.

Capturing the beauty and good in everyday life is important no matter the struggles you have been through remembering the good is a strength to help get you through to better times.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have been part of the creation of this book.

Narrative about the artist and her art by another woman in prison

Angie is a talented, strong and beautiful lady. She is a mother of many children who are the centre of her world. I have known her since she came into custody, and it has been an honour to get to know her and be witness to her creativity blossom in the most dire of circumstances.

Her ability to create some of the most enlightening, peaceful and decorative art pieces whilst being in custody at the AMC is an incredible talent. Through her art and creations, she is not only an example of what women are capable of, but a bright light shining in a bleak environment that has brought love and appreciation to many.

Her artwork makes us smile, makes us cry, makes us amazed, and overall touches us with a depth of soul that's hard to describe. I am sure she is unaware of how her art affects us, but she needs to know how thankful we are for what she does. She has an incredible talent, but more importantly she is an incredible lady, who I will always call a friend.

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Background to this report

It has now been 10 years since the ACT's Alexander Maconachie Centre (AMC) was opened. The AMC began taking prisoners on 30th March 2009, with all ACT prisoners transferred from NSW facilities by 30 June 2009¹. Before that, ACT prisoners were sent to prisons operated by the New South Wales Department of Corrective Services, while people on remand and serving periodic detention were placed in ACT facilities.

The establishment of the AMC was intended to provide detention facilities locally for ACT prisoners who were held in NSW facilities. The decision to include women as well as men within the AMC was made to give women closer connections with family and community in the ACT.²

The Functional Brief for the design of the AMC³ identified the need for the AMC to include features which supported the social needs of women. As a result, women of all sentencing classifications were accommodated at the AMC in shared cottage-style accommodation, rather than in cell blocks. Women in the AMC were allocated 25 beds in these cottages when the prison was first built.

All female ACT prisoners were repatriated from NSW by the end of May 2009. According to the ABS, there were 7 ACT women in NSW prisons on 30 June 2008⁴, and 23 in ACT facilities by 30 June 2009⁵.

At that time the Women's Centre for Health Matters published *Invisible Bars: The Stories behind the Stats*⁶, which aimed to provide insights into the impact that imprisonment and institutionalisation has on women. The report presented excerpts from the stories of six ACT women about their experiences in prison and the impact that imprisonment had on their lives, and shared the experiences of twelve women from eight ACT women's services about supporting women with lived experience of prison and other institutions.

Since that time, there has been a growth in the numbers of women in prison, both in the ACT and nationally. In 2017, the number of women in prison at the AMC increased beyond the capacity of the Women's Cottages, and in October, their numbers had 'increased to as high

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018, *Prisoners in Australia, 2018*, cat. no. 4517.0, viewed 27 March 2019, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/exnote/4517.0>

² Australian Capital Territory, Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety, *The Proposed ACT Prison Facility: Philosophy and Principles* (Second Interim Report in the Prison Series, Report No 4, October 1999), 63 [3.166].

³ ACT Department of Justice & Community Safety, *Alexander Maconachie Centre Functional Brief*, 2005, Canberra, page 7.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008, *Prisoners in Australia, 2008*, 'Table 1: SELECTED PRISONER CHARACTERISTICS, states and territories—1998-2008', data cube: Excel spreadsheet, cat. no. 4517.0, viewed 27 March 2019, <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4517.02008?OpenDocument>

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009, *Prisoners in Australia, 2009*, 'Table 1: Prisoners, states and territories by selected characteristics', data cube: Excel spreadsheet, cat. no. 4517.0, viewed 27 March 2019, <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4517.02009?OpenDocument>

⁶ D Wybron & K Dicker, 2009, *Invisible Bars: The Stories behind the Stats*, Women's Centre for Health Matters, Canberra.

as 45 female prisoners'.⁷ As a result, the women were relocated to cell blocks in the Special Care Centre, a high security men's unit within the main prison.

As at 11 June 2018, there were 41 women in prison at the AMC of whom 17 were convicted, 24 were on remand, and 16 identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.⁸ More recently, the numbers rose to 51 women in prison. Based on national and international trends, the number of women in prison is likely to continue increasing.

As with women in the general population, women in prison have significant differences in their life experience and needs as a result of their gender.

This is not a report with recommendations for future work. Rather, in the tenth year of the AMC, Women's Centre for Health Matters (WCHM) wanted to share the experiences of women in the AMC to ensure a better understanding in the ACT of them as real women with families and complex backgrounds, not the stereotypes often portrayed in the media.

⁷ G Quinlan, *Canberra's skyrocketing prisoner numbers lead to new female unit and mooted expansion*, 23 October 2017, <https://the-riotact.com/canberras-skyrocketing-prisoner-numbers-lead-to-new-female-unit-and-mooted-expansion/220536>.

⁸ ACT Inspector of Correctional Services, 2019, *Report of a review of the care and management of remandees at the Alexander Maconochie Centre*, Canberra, pages 26 & 27.

Listening to the women's stories...

Women who are in prison, and who are released from prison, regularly have to tell their stories to others each time they appear before court or seek support to re-establish their lives. As identified in WCHM's 2009 report, 'rarely, though, are these women given the opportunity to tell their whole story, without judgement or fear of being denied services'⁹.

This is why WCHM has encouraged women in the AMC to share not only their history and the experiences that led to their imprisonment, but their hopes for the future.

Eleven women who were imprisoned in the AMC shared their stories with WCHM.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the collection of the women's stories and the development of this report. These included maintaining the anonymity of the women, protecting the confidentiality of their information at all times, ensuring they were fully informed about how their information would be used, obtaining their informed consent to participate, and allowing them to withdraw participation at any time.

Over the past nine months, we have spent considerable time with the women in the AMC, listening to them, working with them, and developing mutually respectful and trusting relationships with many of them. It is because of this that these women have felt comfortable and safe to share their stories with us, which are deeply personal and often difficult for them to tell.

The women have been open and honest about their lives, their struggles and their strengths and weaknesses, and this has resulted in a powerful report showing the realities and complexities in the lives of women in the AMC.

It is not without apprehension and vulnerability that these women have shared their stories. To preserve their privacy, we have chosen to use unaltered excerpts from each of their stories to highlight prevailing themes, rather than publishing the individual stories in their entirety. Publishing an individual story as a complete narrative may enable the context of key events in a woman's story to be identified, and therefore enable identification of an individual.

⁹ D Wybron & K Dicker, 2009, *Invisible Bars: The Stories behind the Stats*, Women's Centre for Health Matters, Canberra.

About women in prison

The number of women in prisons in Australia is growing at a faster rate than that of men.¹⁰

There has also been a dramatic rise in those held on remand (those who have been charged and not granted bail while awaiting trial or sentencing).¹¹ Compared to men, women are more likely to spend shorter periods of time in prison. However, women are more likely to experience repeat imprisonment. Each period of imprisonment has a cumulative effect on their personal circumstances, deepening their experience of disadvantage and increasing the risk of recidivism.¹²

Within the AMC, women are a small minority of all prisoners, but are a high needs group. The challenges that women face, and the issues with which they present, are quite different to those of men. Women's pathways to crime and incarceration are vastly different from that of men.¹³

In the literature relating to women in prisons (whether it be Canadian, Scottish, British, American, or Australian), there are common characteristics which have been identified as having a relationship to women's offending¹⁴:

- histories of childhood victimisation, particularly sexual abuse;
- re-victimisation as adolescents and adults, such as sexual assault and family and domestic violence;
- mental disorders such as borderline personality disorder (BPD), major depression, and PTSD;
- intellectual and cognitive impairments;
- substance abuse and dependency;
- housing instability;
- primary care for dependent children;
- low educational attainment; and
- minimal employment histories compared to men in prison.

¹⁰ Professor Eileen Baldry, 2017, *The Booming Industry continued: Australian Prisons*, School of Social Sciences University of New South Wales.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Australian Law Reform Commission, 2018, *Pathways to Justice—Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ALRC Report 133)*, viewed 27 March 2019, <https://www.alrc.gov.au/publications/disproportionate-incarceration-rate>

¹³ R Gobeil, K Blanchette & L Stewart, 2016, *A Meta-Analytic Review of Correctional Interventions for Women Offenders: Gender-Neutral Versus Gender-Informed Approaches*, *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, Volume: 43 issue: 3, pages 301-322

¹⁴ Stathopoulos, M., with Quadara, A., Fileborn, B., & Clark, H. (2012). *Addressing women's victimisation histories in custodial setting* (ACSSA Issues No. 13). Melbourne: Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

The vast majority of women in prison in Australia have a history of:

- abuse;
- unemployment;
- poor education;
- poverty;
- housing insecurity and homelessness; and
- institutional intervention.¹⁵

The New South Wales report, *Women as offenders, women as victims*, also contains a literature review which highlights that women enter the justice system with greater socio-economic disadvantage than men, with higher levels of psychological distress, and that drug abuse appears as a maladaptive coping mechanism.¹⁶

With many women having children, even short sentences and time spent on remand can have profound implications for the family and the mother-child relationship.¹⁷

In relation to their reasons for being in prison, women tend to be involved in crime such as theft, fraud and deception, public order offences and illicit drug-related crimes, rather than violent crime that is typically regarded as more serious.¹⁸ Women are also more likely to commit crimes while using drugs than while not using drugs.

¹⁵ Kilroy, D (2016) *Women in Prison in Australia* panel presentation to the National Judicial College of Australia and the ANU College of Law *Current Issues in Sentencing* Conference 6-7 February 2016.

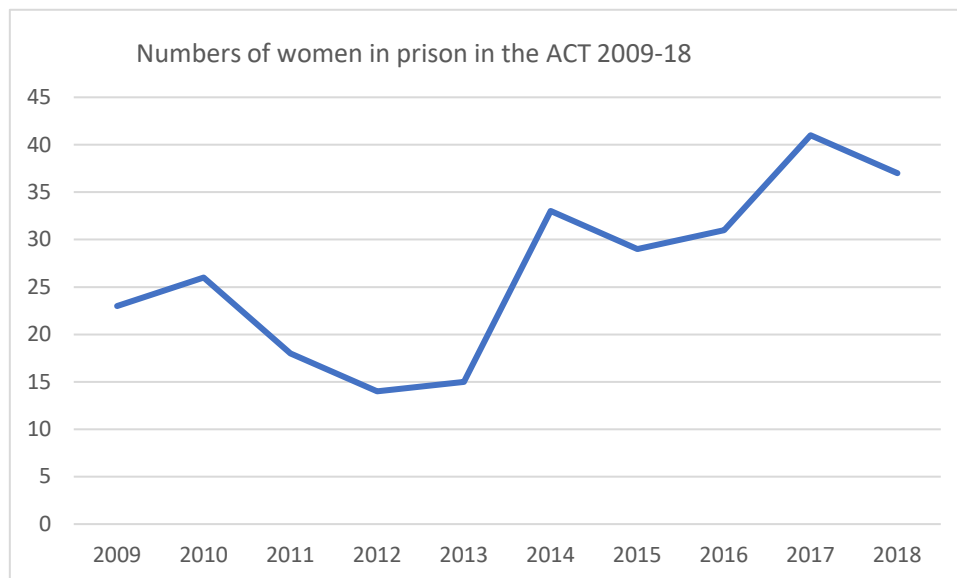
¹⁶ Stathopoulos, M and Quadara, A (2014). *Women as offenders, women as victims :The role of corrections in supporting women with histories of sexual abuse*. New South Wales Government, Sydney. Page 7.

¹⁷ Australian Law Reform Commission, 2018, *Pathways to Justice–Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (ALRC Report 133)*, viewed 27 March 2019, <https://www.alrc.gov.au/publications/disproportionate-incarceration-rate>

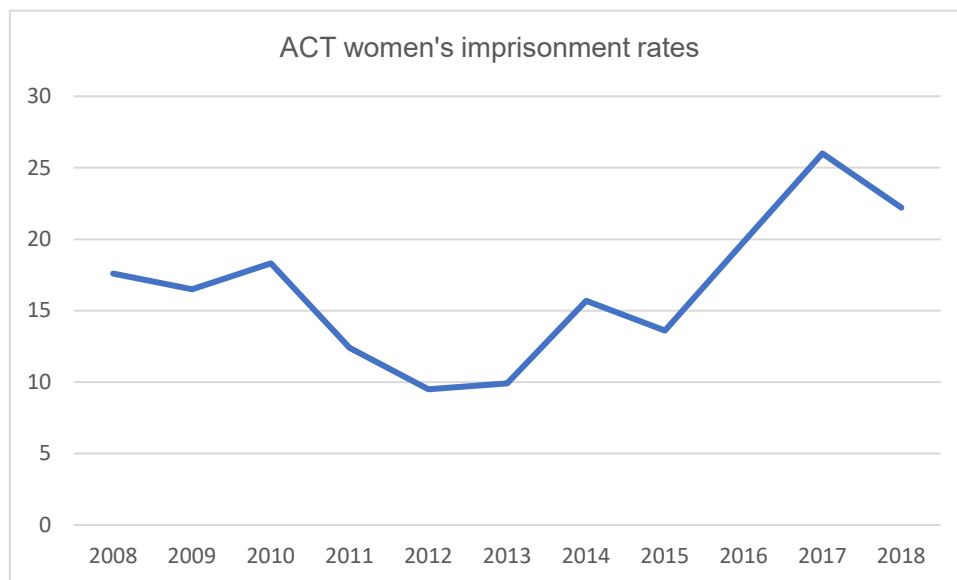
¹⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019, Recorded Crime – Offenders, 2017-18, 'Table 14: Principal offence by sex, Australian Capital Territory', data cube: Excel spreadsheet, cat no. 4519.0, viewed 27 March 2019, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4519.0>

A profile of women in the AMC

Men continue to make up the majority of the prison population in the ACT, with women representing 7.5 per cent of the AMC population¹⁹. However, since 2009 the total number of women in prison (on remand and sentenced) in the ACT has been rising.²⁰



The rates for sentenced women in prison have also been rising.²¹



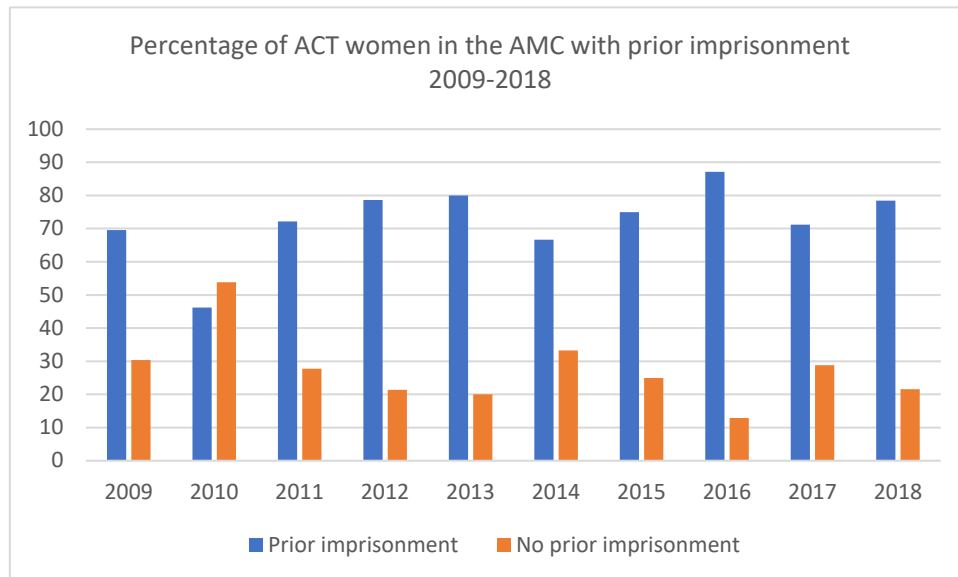
¹⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018, *Prisoners in Australia, 2018*, cat. no. 4517.0, viewed 27 March 2019, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/exnote/4517.0>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

On 11 June 2018, 39 per cent of the women in the AMC were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, despite Indigenous people comprising just 1.6 per cent of the broader ACT population.²²

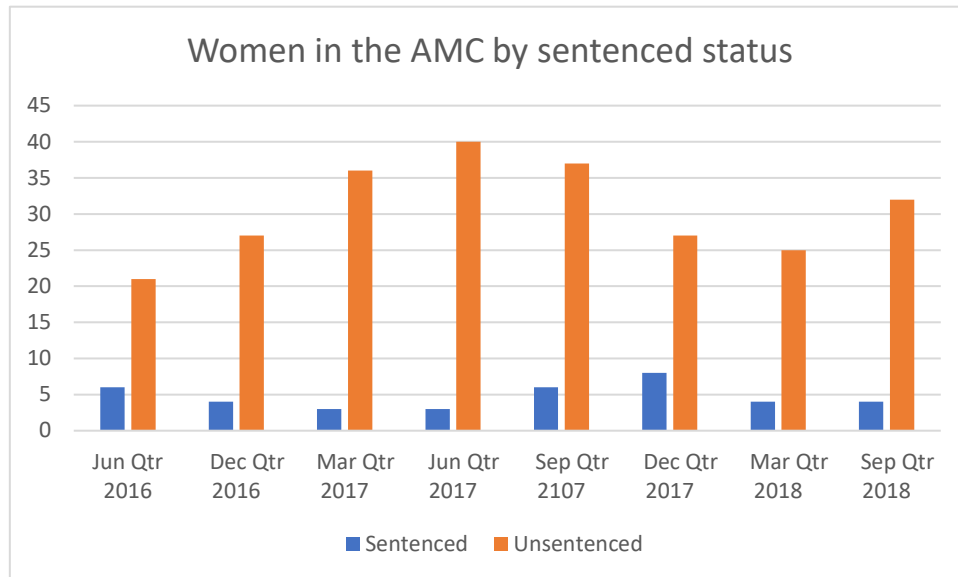
Over the period 2009 -18, a significant majority of women in the AMC have had a history of prior imprisonment.²³



²² ACT Inspector of Correctional Services (2019), *Report of a review of the care and management of remandees at the Alexander Maconochie Centre*, Canberra, page 27.

²³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018, *Prisoners in Australia, 2018*, cat. no. 4517.0, viewed 27 March 2019, <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/exnote/4517.0>

In recent years, the majority of women in prison in the ACT have been in the AMC on remand, or unsentenced. On 11 June 2018, 59% of the women in the AMC were unsentenced, compared to 36% of the unsentenced men at the AMC.²⁴ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women accounted for nearly half of all unsentenced women in prison.²⁵



²⁴ ACT Inspector of Correctional Services (2019), *Report of a review of the care and management of remandees at the Alexander Maconochie Centre*, Canberra, page 26.

²⁵ ACT Inspector of Correctional Services (2019), *Report of a review of the care and management of remandees at the Alexander Maconochie Centre*, Canberra, page 27.

Key themes from the women's stories

The women's lives before prison

For some women this was their first experience of prison.

'This is my first incarceration. I am in my mid 40's, am a single mother of a 20 year old son who is my world. I am relatively fit and healthy, I don't drink nor use any illegal drugs as throughout my career and my personal life I have seen the catastrophic devastation of both on lives and families more times than I care to recall. I have never been unemployed since the age of 13.'

'I am a 27-year-old female. Prior to coming into custody over 12 months ago, I have never been in trouble with the law. I was working full time as well as caring for several family members.'

'I've never been in jail before my recent incarceration. I spent 15 months in jail. No real family history of people being in jail. I was charged with obtaining property by deception which is basically a stealing charge.'

Women described their normal lives before they entered prison.

'I was 21 years old and a single mum to my 3-year-old boy when I met my ex-partner. I fell pregnant straight away with my second son. I was working as a full-time office manager at the time, I was playing sport and I was happy and healthy. During my pregnancy the violence started.'

'Until I started using ice and experiencing violence, I had an amazing and fulfilling life. I had a job I loved and lived as a healthy and respected member of my community. Before I had an addiction and ended up in an abusive relationship, I'd had no convictions, was a good mum and had positive influences in my life. Now, I have a drug addiction, a criminal record and a very long battle ahead of me to try and have my children restored into my care.'

'I had a good life as a child, teenager and most of my adult life. I have always worked and had been employed since I was 17 years old. My most recent job was in the public service, where I was for 7 years from 2005-2013 where I was earning a good salary and enjoying my life to its fullest. I got with my partner in April 2011 and fell pregnant by Christmas 2011. I had my beautiful baby boy in September 2012 after being told I would have trouble conceiving due to a long term illness. I could never have complained about my life in those days, I had a wonderful partner, a beautiful son and stepson, a job, a house, a car, great family and my freedom.'

'I never used to be like this, I used to be a normal kid having sleepovers, going to the mall with friends and going on dates to the movies. Now look where I am, sitting in jail, throwing my life away.'

Some of the women spoke about their focus on their relationships and providing for the needs of their children and others.

'While my children were little, my husband was working very hard as a concreter... 6 out of 7 days per week and also away a lot, for up to 8 weeks at a time. I was bringing up my children by myself. I was a very hands-on mum; cooking meals, and looking after my kids. I played a lot with them and gave them everything I felt I had missed out on as a child. Other kids felt safe at my place and I was very protective of them too.'

'I always tried to deal with everyone else's problems instead of my own, because my own problems were too hard to deal with, and helping other people gave me some sense of self-worth.'

Others spoke of hitting rock bottom in their lives.

'At age 33 my situation worsened and now I am in custody for the first time in my life. I have now been here for 14 months and am still waiting to be sentenced.'

'I never thought I would end up in and out of jail, yet somehow in a very short time, without even realising it, I have lost everything, my kids, family, friends and my freedom. Drugs took a hold of me and day by day, my life spiralled out of control before I realised what was happening.'

[After losing her children] 'I was devastated, I was doing drugs and started doing crime, I got into stealing.'

'My partner was involved in some criminal activity with his friends which always ended up back at our house as we were too kind to turn anyone away. My whole world came crashing down in April 2017 when our property was raided, and my partner was sent to prison and my son was taken by care and protection. I didn't think I would survive or make it through this traumatic situation which had taken my loves, my world away from me.'

'My sentencing was one of the hardest things I have had to do in my life, it took a real toll on my emotional wellbeing. I was forced to expose things that I have never spoken about before. I remember looking around the courtroom while the DPP was reading out the pre-sentencing report, in which complete strangers and media personnel were present, it came to the part of my life which my parents were not aware of the things that happened to me as a child.'

Some women had previously spent time in prison, and they spoke of the 'merry-go-round' in and out of prison.

'Spending the time I have in here has proven that over 95% of women I have met and lived with have returned more than once during my sentence. They don't change, some actually look forward to returning, which is heartbreaking in its own right.'

'I am 27 and this is my fifth time in prison. I first came to the AMC when I was 20 ... back then I still had custody of my kids and was a single mum. I never came back to jail until 5 months after I lost custody of my kids due to domestic violence and they went to live with their dad, 5 months after my battle with ice addiction began.'

'I've now been in and out of jail six times in 2 ½ years.'

'Two weeks after I was released, I breached my parole, I started using drugs again straight away. I not only didn't deal with my ice addiction whilst in custody, I became addicted to methadone and started using heroin.'

'I have been in custody three times ... Prior to coming to prison this time I was living in a refuge, as I was homeless when I got out in July 2018.'

'I have lived in a number of places before I came into custody but never anywhere stable enough to actually stay for a long period. I have been coming to prison since I was 18 years old and I've now been in custody five times.'

Different pathways to offending

Many of the women's pathways to committing offences were impacted upon by their family histories, violence and trauma.

'The loss of my baby daughter affected me and my other 4 children very badly. We started to blame each other, and I asked my second partner to leave as there was so much fighting going on. My first husband had been taking our two sons continually and then dropping them back to me when things got too hard for him. I felt very broken at this time in my life and things got worse.'

'I am Indigenous and from a big family of 12 children. My father was an alcoholic. I was the good one in my family. My first offence was for firearms, before that I used ice and smoked weed but I never committed any crimes.'

'Before coming into custody I lived with my mother, but I am otherwise homeless. I care for my mother when I am in the community as she has severe mental health issues and medical problems. I have always been the parent in my family.'

'I honestly don't even remember most of my crime, I've conditioned my body and my mind to dissociate from most of my life and I've been doing it since I was 9. When the police came to see me, I didn't have a clue what they were talking about. I remember bits and pieces, I don't remember why I did it and I don't remember all the gambling, I remember the feeling mainly, the gambling actually made me block everything out the way a drug or alcohol does.'

Many of the women spoke of committing crimes while using drugs.

'10 months ago was the first time I went to prison, I was in for three months. When I was released, I broke my good behaviour bond, I was hanging around with people stealing cars and using drugs and ice. Now I'm in here for charges relating to stolen vehicles.'

'I had started to use crack and the people I was associating with caused more trouble in my life. I was still drinking, and I bashed another person. I got community service, and a 9 month suspended sentence and good behaviour order.'

'In 2015, due to domestic violence, my sons were put into care. I was lonely without my kids and my ex-partner was in jail again. A friend introduced me to ice and before I knew it, I became an addict. I started hanging around other drug users and began participating in criminal activity, which resulted in me being sent to jail for the first time.'

'I was using drugs so heavy and it led me to doing crime stealing cars, driving around copping chases with the police because it was a good feeling. It wasn't to fit in though, it was for the excitement, and also the drugs gave me no cares in the world.'

Some women felt they did not have the capacity to create a different life and to remain resilient when confronted with emotional setbacks, especially when they had little outside support.

'I had no support to help me stay off the drugs and out of trouble and I was too embarrassed to ask for help.'

When faced with troubles, some women made decisions to go back to what they knew, while others felt they could not control their emotions or situations, and that committing a crime was the end result.

'Once he was locked up again, I resumed contact with the same people and doing the same crimes. Before long I was back in jail for the second time. After four months I was released on bail with the condition that I went into rehab immediately. I never showed up and once again I went back on to ice. After only four weeks of being out, I was sent back to jail.'

'Having my son with me is the reason for me to get out of here and stay out. I am fine to come off ice and other drugs, it's when I don't have my son and I am hurting and when I get bored that I get into trouble and use drugs. I want to be the mum that I was, I have missed out on nearly two years of my son's life. When I have him, I don't get the urge to use drugs and get into trouble. When I handed him over to my mum, that's when I lost it. It was only a matter of time before I did something and get into trouble.'

'One of my relationship breakdowns caused CYPs to become involved with all of my children. I lost custody of 5 of my children I lost hope after this and actually began using drugs and cut myself off from my supports.'

'After they were gone my whole life fell apart, I truly hated myself and lost all joy in life. I lost my willingness to try and be successful at anything.'

Histories of domestic and family violence, and sexual abuse

Women in prison have often been victims of crime themselves, particularly of physical and sexual abuse. A significant majority of the women who shared their stories spoke about their histories of experiencing family and domestic violence, or of sexual abuse as a child.

Some lived as children in families where they experienced violence and abuse.

'Mum and dad had myself and my older sister. Dad was an alcoholic and he was violent towards my mum and molested my older sister while mum was in hospital having me. I was also sexually abused as a child. So were my female and male cousins. It was all around us.'

'I am a 26 year old woman, born in Melbourne and raised in Sydney. I was raised by my mum In 2005 we moved to Canberra to make a new start and to get away from my mum's violent partner. My mum had been using drugs and alcohol and the domestic violence had been getting worse, so she just wanted to get away and start again.'

'By the age of seven, my mum had re-married and we moved into my step-father's house. They had two sets of twins together. My step-father was also a violent man. He belted me and was abusive to my mum. I can remember his heavy footsteps as he came up the hallway to bash my mum. A lot of bad things happened, and I didn't feel safe in my house. When I was 13 my stepfather knocked my mum out and then my sister. I rang my uncles and told them what he was doing. Then I ran away from home. At 13 years old I was living on the streets and developed an alcohol and speed addiction. I worked as a sex worker and always managed to support myself.'

'I have been in two relationships prior to the one I am currently in. Both relationships were volatile, and I was a victim of domestic violence. I grew up in a home where domestic violence was present. ... My mother, brother and I moved here to escape domestic violence.'

Others ended up living with partners who were violent towards them, and spoke of the impacts on them and their children.

'I stayed clean, but then my husband started to drink and he started to bash me. My kids were being exposed to domestic violence. I stayed with him for so many years because I didn't want my kids to grow up without a father who loved them; the way I had. I started drinking as well, which aggravated the situation. My kids kept me sane... they were my everything and they still are.'

'He has always been very controlling and I was so dependent on him for everything. During the last two years of our relationship, we were both using drugs and there was domestic violence. He was violent towards me during both my pregnancies.'

'All of my relationship breakdowns were due to domestic violence.'

'My relationship with my partner with drugs involved was absolutely toxic, we fought constantly and that eventually led to domestic violence.'

'I have a history of domestic violence, but I never reported it because I was young and I have had other previous partners who have been violent too. The trauma from the violence means I can't sleep at night.'

'After a year or so my ex-partner went to jail for domestic violence, but each time he got out of jail things got worse. I was depressed because I felt defenceless and confused, and I felt like I had let my kids down because they were witness to the violence.'

Some had managed to leave domestic violence, but spoke of the continued impact on them and their children.

'Then one day my husband bashed me for last time in front of our 4 children. My husband took the kids that day and I was sent to Doris Women's Refuge without my children. I was distraught. The police charged him and my children were handed back to me. We stayed in Doris for a while until I got a brand new Housing Commission home to live in with the kids. I was still drinking. By then I had divorced my husband, but we were still in continual contact and he tried every means to control me and used the kids to do it. This affected them very badly. My husband is still angry with me to this day because I left, and the disrespectful way he has treated me has reflected badly on my two sons'

Some experienced violence from their children.

'I was brought up to respect my elders but there was no respect at all being shown for me or anyone else in my house. The arguments were very physical. My family looked loving and supportive of each other to outsiders but behind closed doors the damage we inflicted on each other was unbelievable. I asked my two eldest boys to leave because of their violence. I felt terrible for them with all they'd been exposed to, but I felt I couldn't bring myself to charge them and I had to stop the situation so with a very, very heavy heart, I asked them to go.'

Others experienced sexual violence.

'I knew I needed to get off drugs and try and sort myself out, but I was being really stubborn and didn't want to ask anyone for help. I'd always relied on him for everything, I just wanted to be independent. In 2016-2017 I went to a rehab in NSW, I was sexually assaulted there by another resident. I left and attempted rehab at two other places but it was just not the right time for me.'

'Then I got raped and a lot of fear came back into my life. I thought I was going to die from strangulation. I was seeing counsellors and getting therapy, however the therapy was focusing on my use of alcohol and drugs, not on the ... abuse I had been through. I stopped talking after the rape and just drank and used drugs to cope.'

Several experienced abuse as children.

'My step father abused me and abused my daughter 20 years later, more than that. Yes, it's created problems, but I'm also a very strong person and I've come through it. Yes, I've been to jail now and that has opened my eyes so much, but I can't use it as an excuse.'

'When I was twelve, I told my father and grandfather what had happened and they went and confronted my mother's husband and he just said, "no I didn't do that" and picked up his bowling bag and went to play bowls. My father and my grandfather just left and from that moment, that's when I guess I started to dissociate.'

Poor mental health

The prevalence of mental illness and poor mental health among women in prison can be high. Many women in prison experience distress, and are depressed or anxious. Others have diagnosed mental health conditions.

'I see the doctor from Winnunga for anxiety and depression, and I have admitted myself to mental health several times. I've got a lot of friends in here which is good, but the lock-ins are bad for my mental health.'

'My family has a strong history of mental illness. My mother has schizophrenia and several other mental health issues. I have been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, bipolar, PTSD, depression and anxiety.'

For some women the experience of being in prison itself has impacted adversely on their mental health.

'While I have been in custody my mental health has diminished by being surrounded by triggers of my PTSD and not being provided with proper healthcare for a variety of different mental health issues.'

'My PTSD had become more and more severe, as unfortunately due to the lack of separation of female detainees based on our security classification, I live amongst women that bring back horrendous flashbacks and cause me anxiety like I have never before experienced. My medication has tripled since entering custody, I have lost over 20kgs in weight through stress and I have spent many, many hours on teaching myself how to cope, how to become stronger, how to channel my energy for good.'

Substance abuse and addictions

The majority of the women who told their stories had histories of substance abuse, and one spoke of gambling.

'I started to use drugs at a young age. I first started smoking pot, then it grew to a point where I was drinking all day every day. I started using ice around 17 years old, I was only smoking it at that point. Months went by, then I started to inject. Using ice turned me into a different person. Everyone kept telling me I had changed but not in a good way. I ended up pushing everyone away until I had no one. I never considered anyone to be my friend, just drug associates.'

'I am addicted to both ice and heroin. I am currently on the methadone program.'

'I left school when I was in year 8, I just thought there was no point me even returning as I was wagging every class and if I wasn't wagging, I was suspended. I loved primary school and I loved year 7, but as the year passed the generation changed and so did I. Once I changed, that was when I stopped caring, I would go to class drug affected and moody and that would lead to suspension. My parents never knew what I was getting up to, they always thought I was going to school, they never had any suspicion that I was using drugs or how bad I was getting. My father was a bit strict on me, but my mum was more easy going. I hid so much from them, not because I was worried about the consequences but more because I was scared to disappoint them.'

'Before that, I hadn't been gambling. I had done a bit when we were living in Victoria, when I first found out about my daughter. She was 4 when she told me. I did a little bit then, but not to the extent that I was stealing money or using up all our rent money or anything like that. It was just an occasional thing that took the edge off. My mother and her husband have always gambled, and I guess I have an addictive nature which I guess has saved me in some regards.'

Some women without a history of drugs or alcohol spoke of the impacts on them of the predominant focus in the prison on the numbers of women with substance abuse issues.

'I feel like I am judged by the fact that I haven't used drugs or alcohol to manage my past demons, and that my problems aren't as bad as someone else who uses drugs and alcohol.'

For some women their drug use was linked to their partner's or friends' drug use.

'It wasn't until one day I was introduced to ice by my partner and some friends in early 2013 that I realised my life was going to be different. I was using at least once a week, and while I was still being a good mum and partner, I had started to skip work due to being paranoid that I would be found out about my drug habit.'

'I started hanging around other drug users and began participating in criminal activity, which resulted in me being sent to jail for the first time. When I finally got out, my ex also got out just the day before me my ex and I returned home together. My intentions were to stay clean, however within a couple of weeks the violence started up again and we both got hooked back on ice again.'

'When I first started to use ice, I was with one of my exes, he was using it too. Then one day we had a fight. I was happy to leave the situation, but he chased after me and said, if I loved him, I would stay and do it with him. I stayed, because I was so young, I thought I genuinely loved him, I did everything just to make him happy. But it back-fired on me and we broke up.'

'The crowd I was hanging around never brought me any good, I was always the solid, loyal one to everyone, and in the end I was the one who got shat on and always got back stabbed. The only time people would need me was to buy drugs from me or for a lift or money.'

Some women spoke of resorting to substance abuse as a way of coping with life and its stresses, including the loss of the care of their children, abusive relationships, and feelings of guilt and shame.

'My biggest thing is guilt, and guilt has driven me to do a lot of stupid things.'

'I'd use drugs to numb any pain, drugs made me feel better for a while, but some days reality would kick in and I'd ask myself "what the hell am I doing?". But as I got to thinking, I just couldn't handle it, so I'd resort to drugs again.'

'I didn't think I would survive or make it through this traumatic situation which had taken my loves, my world away from me. I started using on a daily basis, and it wasn't because I liked to use ice, it was simply to numb the pain I was feeling, and hide my emotions and thoughts that I couldn't overcome what had happened in my life.'

'I waited and waited for them to come home but they never came. I couldn't stop crying and I just didn't know what to do. I was so depressed I started using drugs really heavily, I didn't know what else to do.'

'I was always trying to stop drinking but it never lasted for long. I had never smoked pot growing up, but I began to smoke and it helped me a lot because it was calming.'

Many women had tried to give up either through rehab or trying to go it alone.

'I knew I needed to get off drugs and try and sort myself out, but I was being really stubborn and didn't want to ask anyone for help. I'd always relied on him for everything, I just wanted to be independent.'

'I managed to stay clean from 2009-16. Coming down was worse than the high and it lasted longer. I had also lost a good friendship from it. So I stopped cold turkey – I had the willpower. When I think back to the good times when I was on drugs, there weren't many.'

'I put myself into a rehab ... when I was aged about 15 to try and get clean. ... A couple of years later the police raided (place) I lived in and I had to leave quickly. I contacted my mum for the first time since I'd left home and then admitted myself into the William Booth Rehab and did their 8 months program. For the next five years, I managed to stay clean from alcohol and drugs, and during this time I met my husband.'

The importance of children and family

Many women spoke of the positive opportunity through prison to reconnect with their family.

'After I had been here three and a half months, I spoke to my children. The separation and the break from drinking and using has had a positive effect on us. As bad as my life has been, I have found my strengths and I want a good relationship with my children.'

'I've always had a difficult relationship with my mum, I was scared to face her. We have started working on our relationship and she has said I can come home when I get out of here. She has strict conditions about me coming home, I have to stay off the drugs or she'll kick me out. She used to use drugs too, but she has turned her life around, she has two jobs and works as a support worker. I want to be like her.'

'My family is the only support I have in the community, and whilst I have been in prison, they are the only ones who have stood by me. I had a good childhood, I grew up with a big family, all loving and caring.'

Another woman did not want her children to see her in prison.

'I haven't seen my kids since I've been in here. I don't want them to see me in here, and I don't want to hurt them. Me not being there for them hurts all of us.'

Many of the women spoke of the adverse impacts on them of losing their children to Care and Protection or to other family members, and wanting to reconnect with them.

'One of my relationship breakdowns caused CYPs to become involved with all of my children. I lost custody of 5 of my children I lost hope after this and actually began using drugs and cut myself off from my supports.'

'After they were gone my whole life fell apart, I truly hated myself and lost all joy in life. I lost my willingness to try and be successful at anything.'

'One thing that is good is that I've been able to see my kids while I'm in here, but what happens when I get out? There's no obligation with the carers to keep up with visits once I get out. Lots of the women just give up because they don't see how they will ever be able to get their kids back once they get out. If there was a plan or a program to help us get our kids back, all the mothers would do it. I'm lucky, my kids are with family, but others don't even know who the people are who are looking after their kids. Most of them just give up because they don't know how they will ever get them back.'

'He's a good dad and the kids really love him, so I don't feel scared about their safety, it's just that I am missing out on so much of their lives.'

Some women lacked family support. Five out of the eleven women who shared their stories had partners or family members who were also in the AMC.

'My brother is like a dad to me, but he is also in the AMC. I don't really have any family support, and I am hurting so much when I don't have my son. And that's when things turn bad.'

Women's experiences of prison

For some women, prison has been a safe space for them to think and to prepare for release - and with support to consider changes they need to make in their lives.

'Prison to me now feels safe, I feel like I have structure and I feel like this is my home.'

'I have used this time to work hard on myself, taking every self-help course and any counselling that is available to me. I've also undergone educational training.'

'I'm hoping the work I have done in here will help me find employment when I'm released.'

'So now at 43 I am in jail for the first time. After the life I've led, I believe jail may have saved the rest of my life. I have accessed counselling in jail and have been diagnosed with complex trauma. I want to find out who I am. My kids want to know the real me. It feels like I have a chance to start my life again. I have three grandchildren now. I want them to feel loved and I want them to have a strong grandmother. I will continue to see the counsellor and work closely on my past trauma.'

'I have now started to build a strong relationship with my mother, who has also now been diagnosed with having had complex trauma too. We can be strong for each other.'

'Being in jail has positives as well as the obvious negatives. In custody, I have a huge range of supports that I would not have in the community, I am very fortunate to have people around me who are able to give me advice and support. In the community, my support network is minimal to say the least, but I am going to change that, continuing to engage with services that I am currently engaging with as well as reach out with other agencies, services and individuals.'

'Prison has had its ups and downs. However, it has certainly made me think long and hard about the life I want, and that's definitely not stuck in this cell or living the fast hard life.'

Some women valued the opportunity to access programs and services while in prison. Others participated but did not feel that their needs were met.

'I enjoy the fact that while I am in prison, I am clear minded and have the chance to prepare for my life when I am released. However, I am worried about what happens when I walk out of here, as after spending months in jail, myself and the other girls have not gained any experience of routine or structure. Most days, the majority of us have sat around doing nothing. The education we have is only one hour each week, and that's only if it happens at all.'

'Prison for me, was an opportunity to get my head straight and participate in all the programs. However, there are few to choose from. At the moment, our prison lacks many opportunities to help us change the path we have chosen. Because as it is now, after months and months of doing nothing, we get out and do the same thing which is not only unhealthy but exposes the risk of falling back into the same habits. In my case, I feel that if I had sought help for the domestic violence I was experiencing, I might have chosen a different path instead of relying on the company of the drug user crowd.'

'My experience in prison has done me no good. They provide no support for me or my mental health. If they had proper supports in here and provided help and support every time I have been released, then I may not have come back. Every time I am released, I've been left with nothing to look forward to or gained any skills or nothing to prepare me for being back in the community.'

But for some, being in prison was a negative and traumatic experience.

'I spent my first six months in jail in tears, I was hysterical, and I couldn't get any help. Even when I did see a psychologist, when I first got there. I saw the counsellor from Women's Health Service, she was good but again she wouldn't delve into the problems because you're in jail. I understand one side of that but you're not going to help people if you're not going to fix the problems while you're in there.'

'I have served my time to the best of my ability. I have tried my hardest to better myself and help others whilst in custody. I have suffered badly though. I have been assaulted, abused and bullied. I look forward to my lock-in periods in my room to be safe and secure and be away from the noise and constant feeling of edginess that has become a daily occurrence now.'

'Sadly, I will leave prison a different person, not a better one but a different one. I will be harder, colder and more withdrawn. I will avoid crowds and noise and yelling at all costs. I will always have to sit with my back to the wall and scan constantly what is happening around me, and sadly I will now avoid helping people, my trust is broken, my soul is broken, and I am now different thanks to a system that fails in every aspect.'

Looking to the future

Most of the women felt this might be a chance for them to change their lives, to live crime-free, and to reunite with family.

'I am determined to change my life so that I will never be in this situation again.'

'I want to get my kids back, and to get away and go back to my family. I know I can do it.'

'I am still very close to my children and they tell me everything (they always have). No more hurting each other. I do know that my kids and I are never going to be broken like that again. It's time for our strong family to shine.'

'I'm not sure what the future will hold for me, but my goals will be to stay drug and crime free so I can prove I'm the person my boys should be with I want to make my kids proud and show my mum that all her support and commitment to me was worth it in the end, as she has made many sacrifices to be there for me and I never want to do it to her again. It is important to me to stay out of jail, as every time I come back it decreases my chances of ever having my boys home. If I could go back in time, I would never have used drugs which led me to breaking the law and being sent to jail.'

'For my future, I want to have the old life that I once had with my partner and my son in my care and arms again, just like it used to be. My son motivates me to get out of jail and stay out of jail. It is important that I stay out of prison for me, my partner and my son. If I am in prison, I'm not going to be getting any closer to getting my son back, and he motivates me and has given me the determination that I have today to change my life around and get out of prison and stay out of prison.'

'I want my future to be drug free, to have a job, sometime down the track I want to have children and get married. So in saying all that, I just want to be normal and do normal things.'

'I sit here now wondering what my life would have been like if I had never used drugs or committed crimes. I have a brief idea in my head and thoughts that it would be so amazing and wonderful because I see myself doing so well, a job that I love, living somewhere I am most happy. But then I realise where I am, what I'm here for and how long I have to serve, it was all just in my imagination. If I can put all this behind me, do my time and try and gain some skills and have something in place for when I am released, then it won't have to be just in my imagination. I can make it all real.'

Others viewed the transition from prison back into the community as a time of anxiety.

'I am determined to change my life. But if you keep getting told you are no good long enough Even if I get out, I will still be in jail – people's perceptions of me are already out there.'

'As my release date approaches, I feel very nervous that I will fall back into my old habits. This is something I really do not want. I am now 33 years old, and I believe I would have a greater chance of staying clean and crime free if I could access a service that could support me in trying to achieve my goals of living a good, healthy lifestyle. On my own, it's hard dealing with my issues of drugs and domestic violence, which inevitably results in me coming back to jail again.'

For some there is a tension, as they know they need to change their current relationships, and their homes.

'For me to actually make a new start, I need to find myself again, I need to out with the bad and in with the new. I need to stay away from all my old contacts and get me head in the right place.'

'I want to get to feeling good. I have regular counselling so I don't have the need or want to go back to old friends. I feel like doing it on my own is the only way. When I am on my own, I am a different version of myself and feel better about myself.'

'When I get out, I need to find housing and to surround myself with people that are able to help support me and guide me in the direction that I want.'

'To make a fresh start, I will need stable accommodation, counselling and support to keep clean.'

Many of the women spoke of the importance of rebuilding positive relationships with their family and children.

'This time I have support from my mum. Having her support will have an enormous effect on me integrating back into the community and she will help me reconnect with my kids.'

'My ultimate aim is to regain custody of my children and be the mother I was meant to be.'

'After I get out I want to find stability and peace. I hope that I continue to maintain abstinence and am able to put my drug addiction behind me. I hope to be able to be the sole carer for my baby and to become a constant part of my other children's lives.'

'My family and my children are important to me and make me want the best in life for them and myself. it is important for me to stay out of prison because my family need me and deserve better.'

Conclusion

Despite having experienced trauma, violence, and chronic addiction throughout their lives, many of these women are resilient. They told us they can see a future where their lives have meaning, where they can make a contribution to their families and society. These are women who have been dealt challenging life experiences.

While there are many common themes that have led to their incarceration, it is important to recognise that these are individual women with unique stories to tell. They are real ACT women with complex and varied backgrounds, experiences and aspirations, who have different needs to the mainly male population of the AMC.

But their experiences are also common for many women in prison and reflect the common elements in the literature that is already out there about the nature of, and the contributors, to women's pathways into the prison system.

WCHM hopes that this report contributes to a better understanding of the backgrounds and circumstances of the women in our ACT prison, and of their needs as women.