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Exploring fathers' child and family support during Aboriginal mothers' incarceration

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Abstract

Aboriginal women are one of the fastest-growing subgroups among the Australian incarcerated population. Their incarceration affects increasing numbers of children, families, and communities. Few studies have examined the role of fathers when mothers are incarcerated. Using 49 in-depth interviews with Aboriginal mothers in Western Australian prisons, we explore the types of child and family support fathers provide based on the incarcerated mother's perspective. Four themes were identified: (1) diverse support and involvement by fathers; (2) absence of father's support due to death or incarceration; (3) parental cooperation and communication; and (4) supports and challenges to maintaining family networks. Overall, fathers can play important child and family support roles during a mother's incarceration and contribute to breaking intergenerational cycles of trauma which are exacerbated by incarceration. Measures to ensure Aboriginal traditional family networks are maintained in the face of mass incarceration and redressing the over-criminalisation of Aboriginal women are needed.

Keywords

Aboriginal, fathers, incarceration, Indigenous, mothers, prison

Introduction

Evidence of the intergenerational impacts of parental incarceration has seen scholars and advocates call for the consequences of imprisonment as well as social support and cultural resilience of incarcerated parents to be examined in greater depth (Dennison et al., 2014; Kendall et al., 2019). Although several studies have investigated the needs and experiences of mothers in Australian prisons (Breuer et al., 2021), little attention has been given to the support role of fathers when mothers are in prison, many of whom are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, hereon respectfully Indigenous.

Indigenous Australians are believed to be the most imprisoned group in the world at a rate of 2253 per 100,000 Indigenous adults in 2015, compared to 1745 per 100,000 African American adults, and 1063 per 100,000 Māori adults (Anthony, 2017). Indigenous women are grossly overrepresented in Australian prisons, representing 34% of all women in Australian prisons (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023), but only 3.8% of the Australian community female population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023a). In the state of Western Australia, Indigenous women represent 47.3$ of the incarcerated female population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

About 80% of Indigenous women in prison are *birth mothers*, and at least one-in-three normally take care of more than one person (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2018; Laurie, 2003). In Indigenous communities, mothering is not defined by giving birth. Children can be cared for by different women interchangeably and often will be brought up by women who are not their birth mothers (Atkinson & Swain, 1999; Jones et al., 2018; Ralph, 1998). Within urban Indigenous communities, traditional approaches have survived and adapted to contemporary life. As such, 30% of Indigenous women in New South Wales prisons report caring for children who are not their biological children (Jones et al., 2018; Lawrie, 2003). The increasing imprisonment of Indigenous mothers gives rise to short- and long-term health, well-being, and social consequences for mothers, their children, and the communities in which they live (Sullivan et al., 2019).

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Parental imprisonment compounds children's disadvantages and impacts the intergenerational transmission of parenting knowledge, skills and culture (Dennison et al., 2014). It is important to understand the processes by which these outcomes may or may not occur, including the experiences of child support that families provide when mothers are incarcerated. In a review of 22 articles on the needs and experiences of mothers while in prison in Australia, Breuer et al. (2021) cite 13 studies which reported on family and social supports. Collectively, these studies highlighted that many women in Australian prisons lacked family support and for those who reported having a supportive family, many were required to avoid what authorities regard as negative relations, leading to isolation and loneliness. In addition, several studies reported that mothers in prison identify the maintenance of the mother–child relationship as extremely important, often worried about their children, and were frequently unable to contribute to planning care arrangements once incarcerated (Breuer et al., 2021). While these studies have provided important insights into family support of mothers in prison, few studies to date have explored child and family support undertaken by the father when the mother is incarcerated. Such exploration is important to inform policies and programmes directed at supporting parenting and other needs of Indigenous women and men during their time in prison and return to the community.

The term *father* has multiple definitions in the literature (Canuto et al., 2019; Dowd, 2000; Marsiglio, Amato, et al., 2000; Marsiglio, Day, & Lamb, 2000). For this study it refers to any person that participants identified as a father, which varied between one or a combination of birth father, stepfather, or the mother's male companion. International research suggests that relatively few children are cared for by their fathers when the mother is incarcerated, even if the father is not incarcerated (Dowd, 2000; Jones et al., 2018; Quaker Council for European Affairs, 2007). In an international narrative review of studies on caring for the children of incarcerated mothers from the early 1980s to 2011, Flynn (2012) states there has been a relatively consistent trend; when mothers are incarcerated, only about one-quarter of their children enter the care of a father. Generally, children of incarcerated mothers internationally seem more likely to live with another relative, often a grandparent (Hungerford, 1996; Kjellstrand et al., 2012).

The reasons why fathers do not become carers for children when a mother is incarcerated are unclear. One interpretation is that compared to mothers, fathers have different perceptions of responsibilities and styles of parenting, and are more likely to support children financially, but less likely to be involved in active care (Siennick, 2016). It has also been suggested that compared to mothers, fathers may have increased rates of violence and substance misuse decreasing their suitability as carers when mothers are imprisoned (Anaraki & Boostani, 2014). Earlier US research found that about 40% of incarcerated mothers whose children were cared for by their fathers were dissatisfied with the arrangement; reasons for this were not further explored (Koban, 1983; Zalba et al., 1964).

Children and mothers in a 2012 study in an Australian prison in Victoria reported low levels of satisfaction with the father's care when the mother was imprisoned, especially if the father was an ex-partner. They described children entering the father's care due to a lack of options, the mother's perceived incompetence of the father in meeting children's needs, as well as complaints of fathers actively curtailing the mother–child relationship, and interpersonal disagreements between mothers and the father's partners (Flynn, 2012). Similar findings from other Australian and international studies have been reported regarding fathers serving as a barrier to the mother–child relationship in prison and upon release (Arditti & Few, 2006; Mumola, 2000) and women often having limited time to organise care options, and children ending up in their fathers' care due to a lack of viable alternatives (Dallaire, 2007; Flynn, 2012; Kendall et al., 2019; Lawrie, 2003).

Understanding fathering under Australian settler colonialism

In Australia, approximately 60% of the male partners of Indigenous women are Indigenous, and in remote communities, this figure is 85% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Fatherhood in Indigenous cultures is underexplored when compared with men from White, upper-middle-class backgrounds (Astone & Peters, 2014). Pre-colonial Indigenous societies were complex and democratic, with diverse, clearly understood individual roles, and kinship systems which defined the relationships between every person in a group, including children (Dudgeon et al., 2010; Rowe & Tuck, 2017).

Colonialisation has drastically affected traditional kinship systems. Individual roles, including those of men, have been challenged by genocide, child removal, assimilation policy, and the associated trauma, eroding paternal relationships in Indigenous families (Adams, 2006). Furthermore, Indigenous people who were, and continue to be, removed from their culture as children and raised without Indigenous role models, by non-Indigenous people, will raise their children without the benefit of cultural continuity. This colonised experience has been described as a gradual breaking of the spirit of Indigenous people (Lowe & Spry, 2002). The contemporary impacts of colonisation, which we contend includes the erosion of cultural roles and responsibilities experienced by Indigenous men, have also been linked to the overlapping social determinants of poor health (Markwick et al., 2014) and incarceration (McCausland & Baldry, 2023). The cyclical nature of this issue has been documented, in which colonisation's impacts can lead to compromised health directly and indirectly, through substance misuse and violence, which further undermines men's roles in Indigenous societies (Adams & Danks, 2007). Others have noted the presence of an understanding of the traditional

lore of *men's business* and *women's business* among Indigenous people today. As such, it has been suggested that some Indigenous men may feel the need to uphold the role of parenting as *women's business* for cultural reasons (Reilly & Rees, 2018). Indigenous men may also face external and internalised stigma about their capacity as fathers due to stereotypes of substance abuse and violence, rooted in colonialism. Arguably, these ongoing colonial impacts have prevented recognition and actualisation of the important role fathers can play in reducing children's exposure to child protection and out-of-home care systems. However, a *transgenerational shift* in culture post-colonisation is seeing Indigenous men increasingly engaging in parenting as an emotionally fulfilling and rewarding privilege (Canuto et al., 2019; Reilly & Rees, 2018).

In a meta-synthesis of nine qualitative studies on Indigenous men's experience of fatherhood, four themes were identified: (1) the complexity of roles and relationships; (2) poverty and exclusion; (3) sharing and receiving knowledge and (4) keeping strong. Each theme was discussed in terms of a barrier, facilitator or both to male parenting (Reilly, 2021). Prehn et al. (2021) state that a small number of studies have examined the significance of relationships Indigenous fathers have with their children through the lens of relationality. In articulating relationality, Prehn et al. (2021) draw on Ritchie's (2013) Aotearoa New Zealand study stating that for many Indigenous peoples, relationality refers to "our lived relation to other human beings, other living creatures, and to the non-living entities with whom we share our spaces and the planet" (Ritchie, 2013, p. 307). In an analysis of 112 responses to the question "What's the best thing about being your child's dad?" by Australian Indigenous fathers, Prehn et al. (2021) identified 13 themes which reflected the variety of ways Indigenous fathers are positively engaged in their child's life. Four key themes included: "doing things together", "nurturing growth", "sharing love", and "everything", were interpreted through the significance of relationality for Indigenous fathers and their children (Prehn et al., 2021).

Although limited studies have examined the experiences of father–child relationships and support among Indigenous men who are incarcerated (Dennison et al., 2014; Rossiter et al., 2017) no literature could be located examining father–child relationships and support by father's when the mother goes to prison. This study addresses this gap by examining the support fathers provide when Indigenous mothers are incarcerated, as reported by the incarcerated mother. Enablers and challenges of incarcerated Indigenous mothers receiving child and family support from fathers are also examined.

Methods

Data for this study come from the qualitative arm of a mixed-methods study called the *Social and Cultural Resilience and Emotional Well-being of Aboriginal Mothers in Prison* project, which aimed to better understand the health, treatment, and other needs of incarcerated Aboriginal mothers in Western Australia and New South Wales. The project utilises a decolonising methodological approach, which "considers that the experts are the women themselves" (Sherwood & Kendall, 2013, p. 86) and has been described in detail elsewhere (Sullivan et al., 2019).

This study focuses on interviews with Western Australian women only, which were conducted by three female interviewers, two of whom are Aboriginal. A total of 84 women participated, housed in two women-only prisons in Western Australia, and three regional prisons housing both men and women in separate parts of the same prison. All women spoke English, and 40% also spoke an Aboriginal language. Participants were recruited with the assistance of a nominated prison representative, who was a health services staff member, who assisted the researchers to identify and meet potential participants. Participants were invited to participate via plain language material disseminated in the prisons and provided with written and verbal information about the research and consent procedures. All participants provided written informed consent before being interviewed (Sullivan et al., 2019).

Interviews were conducted in private rooms at the prison or in the prison grounds without custodial staff present and were audio-recorded. Audio files were transcribed, and de-identified. Interviews took between 40 minutes and 2.5 hours and were held from February to September 2013. Women who were monitored under the prisons' at-risk management system due to current mental health distress were excluded from participation, as were those who did not identify as mothers. The working definition used to define a mother as eligible to participate in the study was: a woman who has given birth, adopted or fostered a child; or identifies as a mother or significant carer of a child.

Interview transcripts were managed in NVivo12 and analysed using a six-phase thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A random selection of 49 of 84 interviews were coded and saturation was reached. Pseudonyms are used when presenting the data. Four key themes were identified: (1) diverse support and involvement by fathers; (2) absence of father's support due to death or incarceration; (3) parental co-operation and communication; and (4) supports and challenges to maintaining family networks. These are presented following a description of the care arrangement of children during participant's current incarceration period.

Results

Care arrangements during mother's current incarceration period

The 49 women participants collectively reported 78 fathers of 176 children. During the current episode of the participants' incarceration, 70 children were living with a member of their mother's family, 27 children were living either with their birth father (16), non-birth/second father (6), or with their birth father and the father's family (5), 21 were living with a member of their father's family, 16 were living independently, 12 were with foster parents, 5 were

with their mother in prison, 4 children were incarcerated, 4 were deceased, 4 were living with a sibling, and 3 were living with a female friend of their mothers at the house the mother lived in before entering prison. It was unclear where the 10 remaining children were living.

Diverse support and involvement by fathers

Participants revealed a diverse range of child supports and levels of involvement provided by fathers while they were incarcerated. This included: full-time, stay-at home fathers who cooked and cleaned for their children, often supported by their own families; fathers in paid employment that provided financial support; incarcerated fathers that provided emotional support, and when not incarcerated, were also supportive in other ways; and fathers that were not involved with their children.

Many participants' accounts included evaluative or normative claims about the father(s) of their child(ren), which broadly divided fathers into six groups: men whose fathering was described as (1) good (n = 13; 20.3%); (2) alright or OK (n = 13; 20.3%); or (3) bad or not good (n = 3; 4.7%). Fathers described by participants as good were generally involved and active parents that were seen to put the time in to care for their child or children, while some of those viewed as OK would visit and then leave for periods of time, or as one participant described it *on and off* fathers. There were also men who were (4) incarcerated (n = 14; 21.9%); (5) deceased (n = 9; 14.1%); and (6) not involved (n = 12; 18.8%). Berry, a single mother, described group (7) simply "sperm donors." These groups were not mutually exclusive, and men were described as shifting between groups at different times—such as the father of Harmony's first child, who had "Only recently come back into her life. I [previously] didn't allow him to have nothing to do with her because . . . he was into drugs, stealing cars and he was in and out of prison" (Harmony).

When fathers were not incarcerated, they were most often described as good by mothers. A similar spectrum of father types was reported among the incarcerated fathers; however, a slightly greater proportion of these fathers were described as "not good". Nonetheless, most fathers were described as good, yet only a minority of fathers were primary carers for participants' children. Most fathers were no longer in a romantic relationship with participants. About half of the fathers described as good were ex-partners: "He's the best dad in the world, I can't fault him for that, but he was a lousy partner" (Grace).

Absence of fathers' support due to death and incarceration

About one-third of participants' children experienced the absence of the father's support due to either death (n = 4) or incarceration (n = 11). Fathers in prison were generally unable to provide much child and family support, despite most described as being involved in their children's lives to various degrees and several being described as "good" by participants. Reasons for fathers' incarceration were not probed by the interviewers; however, accounts of some participants' own experiences with aggravated burglary potentially indicate broader, interlinked issues of drug dependence, violence, poverty, and unemployment: "We [the participant and the child's father] were out stealing and then he had a really big shot and so that evening he were bashing people" (Delia). Similarly, few reasons for death were explored in detail, but the most common cause reported was suicide.

Parental cooperation and communication

Several participants spoke of fathers playing a significant role when communication was open and effective both before and during the mother's incarceration. The most optimistic stories frequently shared a theme of two parents cooperating and communicating, often inspired by their own children: "we're communicating for our kids" (Harmony).

Several stories revealed the role of children in parents' transformative journeys towards mutually ending violence.

> We dealt with [the violence] because [we were] just sick of it . . . the kids are
>
> shouting—No. . . . You've got to learn to communicate, that's the biggest
>
> key. . . . looking back to where we are now, we have grown a lot . . . The most
>
> blessing thing, . . . is that our children have still got their parents where you see
>
> others don't. (Aloe)

However, more often among participants, disagreements and violence limited parental communication, sometimes resulting in fathers actively curtailing the mother–child relationship, or vice-versa.

> So [the father] wouldn't meet me half-way and then things got a little bit too rough, so I started going down the wrong path again . . .. I've had them from day one and I've never kept my kids away from him and he's making things hard for me to see them. . . .. There was nothing I can do, yeah, and when I was in jail he kept on and put a restraining order on me. . . .. I haven't seen them for three years. (Chloe)

Some participants reported that effective communication between parents was only reached after an argument or a tumultuous relationship history:

> I said, "you're going to die a lonely old man, you know, no one's ever going to want you, you're too cruel" . . . Now he says . . . "you jinxed me" . . . he comes in and goes, "I just want you to be my best friend" (Grace).

Other participants reported cooperating to mutually kick substance misuse:

> He's not violent. A long time ago he used to [be], when he was a drinker and that but since I got off the drink, and he got off it . . . we're both off the drink and he's just been good. (Vera)

Supports and challenges to maintaining family networks

Several participants spoke of familial networks as a source of support for their children, fathers, and for themselves, particularly when faced with the challenge presented by Correctives Services' arrangements where participant ends up incarcerated far from home. Some fathers were described as instrumental in maintaining these networks. Several fathers who were or became primary carers upon a mother's incarceration were supported in child-rearing by other family members, often Elders, from maternal or paternal sides. In most families where the father was not involved in the support of the child at all, strong support networks from participants' families were often present, assisting in fulfilling the needs of mothers and their children:

> I missed out on being a mother to my kids. I didn't give them that—they didn't have their own rooms. I wasn't there making breakfast for them or even making their school lunch. My cousin did all that for me. (Edna)

Several fathers contributed to the maintenance of family networks by facilitating prison visits with children. According to Grace, her partner "brings [the kids] in three days a week." However, some participants did not want visits from their children, noting that the nature of visits, which varied between prisons, was intimidating or unpleasant for themselves or for their children: "I'll talk to them on the phone, but I don't want them to come in, as much as it hurts me not seeing them, I don't want them to remember their mum in jail" (Harmony).

Physical distance often presented a crucial barrier preventing participants' families from visiting. A GPS-Navigation tool was used to determine travel times by motor vehicle between the prison that participants were housed in, and their place of last residence. From this, approximately three-fifths of participants were over 180 km driving distance away from their last place of residence, and as such, many participants were prevented from receiving visitors, for a lack of a car, driver's licence, money for fuel or public transport, or simply, time to make a commute. In some cases when a father had no driver's licence or car, they were still able to visit with their children via support from other family members; for example, according to Carmen, her "partner's mum brings him out with [Carmen's] daughter." Video link visits were an option for some participants to maintain contact with their families; however, several participants, like Milan earlier, reported difficulties in accessing this service. Problems with verifying the relationship between parents presented one such difficulty:

> I said, "you can ring up my mum to verify our relationship and how long we've been together." They didn't want to do it . . . but they do it for everybody else. I just don't want to bother with these officers, you know. (Sam)

The Western Australia Department for Child Protection was also an avenue, and in some cases the sole avenue by which visits with children were facilitated. However, many participants reported that they did not feel supported by the Department for Child Protection or the prison to maintain relationships with their children. Some children were placed with their fathers via the Department for Child Protection, which, while generally not considered by participants as being as satisfactory as placement with the mothers' own parents or siblings, was relatively preferable to placement in nonfamilial care, as Gloria noted: "I know that they're safe and they are secure where they are. . . They are not just with anyone. They are with their fathers."

Discussion

This paper has explored incarcerated mothers' experiences of child and family support provided by the fathers of their children while they were in prison, and the barriers and enablers to this support. The findings indicated a diverse range of support provided, including a minority of fathers being the primary carers. Death and incarceration were identified as barriers to fathers' involvement with children, while parental cooperation and maintenance of family networks were identified as enablers.

Consistent with the international literature (Anaraki & Boostani, 2014; Dallaire, 2007; Kjellstrand et al., 2012; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2011; Quaker Council for European Affairs, 2007; Shamai & Kochal, 2008; Sharp & Marcus-Mendoza, 2001) our findings showed that when mothers were imprisoned, a minority of fathers take on the role, or continue, as the primary carers. Children whose own mothers were incarcerated tended to enter the care of their grandparents, and other relatives who are also mothers. Most fathers who were caring for these children were already doing so before the mother's incarceration. Thus, rather than children being forced into a new environment with their father, most may have already established a home with their fathers.

International literature also posits that increased rates of violence and substance abuse decrease fathers' suitability as carers (Anaraki & Boostani, 2014) or, that children of imprisoned mothers have less available adults to care for them as their families report high rates of other familial incarceration, hence increasing the rate of nonfamilial care (Dallaire, 2007). Both these ideas may in part, explain our results, but the drivers of the overincarceration of Indigenous Australians suggests there are probably also unique influences.

While fathers were relatively scarce as carers, participants usually reported being comfortable when fathers were primary carers for their children, contrasting with previous Australian (Flynn, 2012) and earlier US literature (Koban, 1983; Zalba et al., 1964) which describe low rates of incarcerated mothers' satisfaction with fathers' care. Contributing factors for this difference may include methodological, temporal, geographical and cultural factors. Nonetheless, the wide spectrum of fathers in our study may suggest that transgenerational formations of

parenting is an ongoing and complex process, with previous research indicating that the transmission of Indigenous culture to children is likely to be an important component of this process (Prehn et al., 2021; 2022). The emergence of Aboriginal-specific fathering programmes and resources (Hammond et al., 2019) can be viewed as a response to support the transmission of culture to children, and a resource to ameliorate the barriers of performing the role of father particularly those who have experienced adversities including incarceration. For example, the KARI Fathers and Sons Camp programme in New South Wales aims to "highlight cultural practices, as it understands the importance of connecting Aboriginal fathers and sons back to their culture and creates those bonding experiences between a father and his son, which may be missed during everyday life" (Hammond et al., 2019, p. 10)

About one-third of fathers were either dead or incarcerated. The high proportion of deceased or incarcerated fathers starkly illustrates reduced opportunities for children and fathers to develop relationships. The most common cause of death reported by participants was suicide. Indigenous Australian suicide rates are more than double the non-Indigenous Australian rate, with Indigenous men's suicide rates triple than of Indigenous women (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023b). This suggests a need for increased access to mental health and other supports. In addition, the proportion of incarcerated fathers who remained variously involved in their children's lives and whose involvement was described as good by participants, suggests community reintegration programmes that involve family and communities are warranted. Such programmes were recommended in a systematic review of the evidence about programmes which aid transition from prison to the community for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Abbott et al., 2018).

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) are likely to be well positioned to provide suicide prevention and community re-integration programmes. ACCHOs are reported to increase Aboriginal people's access to primary health care—including mental health care, even where alternative services exist; due to holistic, flexible, culturally appropriate, continuous, and empowering approaches (Dimer et al., 2012). ACCHOs provide multidisciplinary care to address multiple facets of health, including family violence, family reunion, child protection and child care programmes, anger management courses, counselling, and bereavement services (Campbell et al., 2017). Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service (Winnunga) was the first ACCHO to provide comprehensive, community-controlled health care in an Australian prison. The service is designed as "a direct extension of the Winnunga community service and aims to provide holistic and culturally safe medical and nursing care, as well as social and emotional wellbeing support" (Arumugam et al., 2024, p. 2). Recognising the need for reintegration programmes that involve families, Winnunga has commenced a Justice Reinvestment programme that aims to provide intensive whole-of-family case management and support for clients who have been involved, or are at risk of involvement, in the criminal justice system (Arumugam et al., 2024). However, in general ACCHOs are underfunded for such programmes, and that providing sustainable funding can increase ACCHO accessibility to those in prison and continuity of care when returning to the community (Pettit et al., 2019). Investing in reintegration and preventive approaches that create alternative pathways away from incarceration are urgently needed to break the cycle of family disruption.

Findings indicate that parents communicating effectively was an enabler of fathers' care. Participants revealed that such communication were typically consequent to a significant incident or event such as children's response to witnessing family violence or stopping alcohol use to effective health initiatives which specifically address violence and substance misuse. Several participants spoke of being able to transform their relationships from a cycle of violence to a mutually beneficial open dialogue, regardless of separation status. Most of these participants described that a shared priority for their children's needs was a key driver behind this transformation. Many participants spoke of supportive ex-partners, who comprised about half of all "fathers described as good." Previous literature describes male ex-partners as generally having *punishing attitudes* towards and acrimonious relationships with incarcerated mothers (Arditti & Few, 2006; Martin, 1997) which was partially reflected in our results, with several fathers actively limiting the mother–child relationship. However, while a proportion of fathers of incarcerated mothers' children were ex-partners, they were reportedly actively providing care.

Maintenance of family networks was found to be both an enabler of father's care, and a task that some fathers facilitated with the support of family members, to the benefit of children. Traditional Indigenous Australian kinship systems which involve child rearing via multiple adults through multiple generations are well-documented (Adams & Danks, 2007; Muir & Bohr, 2019) and some have described the valuing of fathers within Indigenous families to be increasing over time (Reilly & Rees, 2018). However, our participants revealed that family connections were threatened upon incarceration and resulting physical separation, either by distance between communities and prisons or enforced by child protection authorities. Participants emphasised the shortcomings of the Western Australia Department of Child Protection, when they are involved, to address the needs of children and families. Most participants, when involved with the Department of Child Protection, reported that they did not feel supported in maintaining a relationship with their children, despite that maintaining this relationship is generally in the child's best interests if the pre-incarceration mother–child relationship was positive (Poehlmann et al., 2010). Increasing bureaucratisation and invisibilisation of children within the Department of Child Protection has been reported to prevent the translation of child protection values into practice (Bastian, 2020). Unfortunately, our findings show that the task of maintaining these connections appears to be placed on the families, due to systemic issues with prisoner case management (Dennison et al., 2014).

Geographical distance between home communities and prisons was a striking yet common barrier physically preventing families from maintaining connections. Such separation was exacerbated by some fathers not having access to transport or a driver's licence. This finding contravenes Recommendation 168 of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991), which stated that "an Aboriginal prisoner should be placed in an institution as close as possible to the place of residence of [their] family" (Recommendation 168). Despite Western Australian standards on housing stating that people in prison should be housed as close as possible to their family and community (Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services, 2021), our findings indicate that approximately three-fifths of participants were over 180 km driving distance away from their last place of residence, and as such, many could not receive visits, from fathers, family, or friends. This is reflected internationally with one US study noting over 60% of parents in prisons were held over 100 miles or 161 km from their last place of residence (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000) and locally in a 2010 Report of An Announced Inspection of Casuarina Prison in Perth which quantified the proportion of Aboriginal prisoners who were out-of-country at 60% (Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services, 2014). The carceral solution of simply building more prisons, closer to remote Aboriginal communities is problematic; this probably would encourage further increased funding to Corrections, the filling of these prisons, and incarceration (Schwartz, 2010). More elegant solutions directed at decarceration are required in which implementing all recommendations made within the Australian Law Reform Commission's Pathways to Justice report—Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2018) could assist with.

Limitations

A limitation of the study was that it included a self-selected convenience sample of Aboriginal mothers in prisons Western Australia; thus, findings may not be generalisable. A strength of this study was the extensive community consultation and community control of the design and conduct of the study and the engagement of a large sample of Aboriginal women to share their stories and knowledge.

Conclusion

This study explored the underexamined area of child and family support provided by the fathers of the children of Aboriginal mothers in prison, according to incarcerated mothers themselves. We found a diverse range of perspectives on the fathers, providing support in a variety of ways, with one-third prevented from providing support due to death or incarceration. Parents' cooperation, with each other and their children, as well as the maintenance of wider family networks, were shown to facilitate fathers' support; however, these enabling factors were themselves limited by several factors. These included issues stemming from intergenerational trauma, such as family violence, and substance abuse, as well as complex systemic issues within the carceral system. These barriers likely in part reflect the systemic racism emanating from Australia's history of colonisation, and lie at the crux between perpetuating, and breaking, intergenerational cycles of trauma.

Authors' note

Bon Miu (BMed, MD) practises medicine on the lands of the Eora Nation, where they live and work.

Paul Leslie Simpson (PhD) was born in Sydney on Gamaragal land (Eora Nation) and currently lives on Darkinjung land. Of Scottish (McGregor Clan) and English descent, he is Senior Research Fellow at UNSW Sydney's Justice Health Research Programme, School of Population Health, and an Associate of the Australian Human Rights Institute. Paul's research focuses on the health and well-being of, and social determinants behind, over-represented populations in criminal legal systems, including sexuality and gender diverse groups, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. He has almost a decade of experience as member and chair of human research ethics committees and has conducted research on prison research ethics to promote ethical and equitable research participation of those incarcerated.

Tony Butler (PhD) has conducted numerous projects in the justice health area over the past 25 years. He currently heads the Justice Health Research Programme, School of Population Health, UNSW Sydney. Tony's work has involved developing two national offender health data collections: the National Prison Entrants Bloodborne Virus Survey, and the Prisoner Health Information Collection. Current research includes examining the link psychosis and offending, the role of traumatic brain injury in offending, a pharmacotherapy-based RCT (ReINVEST) for impulsive-violent offenders, evaluating an intervention (Beyond Violence) for women who use violence, and text mining police domestic violence event narratives. He leads the National Health and Medical Research Council funded Centre of Research Excellence in Violence Perpetration and convenes two teaching electives at UNSW, "Public Health and Corrections" and "Inside the Criminal Mind".

Mandy Wilson (PhD) is an anthropologist with a long history of working with at-risk and marginalised populations. She worked at Curtin University in justice and Aboriginal health research for many years. Now an independent consultant, Mandy is involved in programme evaluation in the justice and social services sectors and works as a heritage anthropologist in the Goldfields region of Western Australia. She holds a number of volunteer positions which aim to promote the human rights of incarcerated and detained peoples.

Destiny Kynuna (BMed, MD) is a proud Wunumara and Kokobera woman. She is a dedicated medical doctor, who grew up on Gunggandji and Yidinji country, in the Aboriginal community of Yarrabah. Destiny's primary goal is to specialise in psychiatry and work closely with First Nations communities, helping to address the mental health challenges they face and advocating for better health care outcomes. She is a descendant of the Traditional Owners of the Malgana, Yamatji Nation; NDRI PhD scholar; and Centre for Aboriginal Studies Senior Lecturer.

Robert Shaw is a descendant of the Traditional Owners of Gutharraguda ('two bays' or 'two waters') Peoples of the Malgana Yamaji Nation, Western Australia. With a background in Education, Cultural Studies, Commerce and Languages, including

Australian First Nations Languages, he has been engaged in Aboriginal Education and Aboriginal Studies since 2000, taught across universities, TAFEs, schools and within the prison system. Robert teaches within the Curtin University Prison Outreach Programme, has mentored incarcerated Indigenous students in universities, TAFEs and Certificate courses and provides academic support to Indigenous students at the Geraldton Universities Centre. He is multilingual and is a member of the Bundiyarra Aboriginal Community Aboriginal Corporation. Robert is undertaking research into First Nations incarceration inlcuding pathways that prevent the reincarceration of First Nations men who use illicit drugs. He aims to improve policy and practice for incarcerated First Nation Peoples through his research and professional experience.

Jocelyn Jones (PhD) is a Nyoongar woman with Wadjuk, Ballardong and Palyku connections to the land in Western Australia (WA). She has over 30 years of experience working in Aboriginal community-controlled health services and senior positions in health. Joceylyn's areas of expertise include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, prisoner health, child protection, juvenile justice, mental health and well-being, and alcohol and other drugs. Joceylyn has recently led research into the experiences of family and domestic violence (FDV) of women and children with disability, and an evaluation of WA's therapeutic pilot court *Dandjoo Bidi Ak*. She is a Vice-Chancellor's Associate Professorial Research Fellow at Kurongkurl Katitjin's Maladjiny Research Centre and leads a research programme currently encompassing projects focused on understanding and addressing the behaviours of those who perpetrate FDV, the preferences of women for reporting experiences of FDV, and on reducing alcohol and other drug harms in Aboriginal primary care.

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Ethical considerations

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