



MONASH University

Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences

# Imprisoned mothers with a mental illness and their children

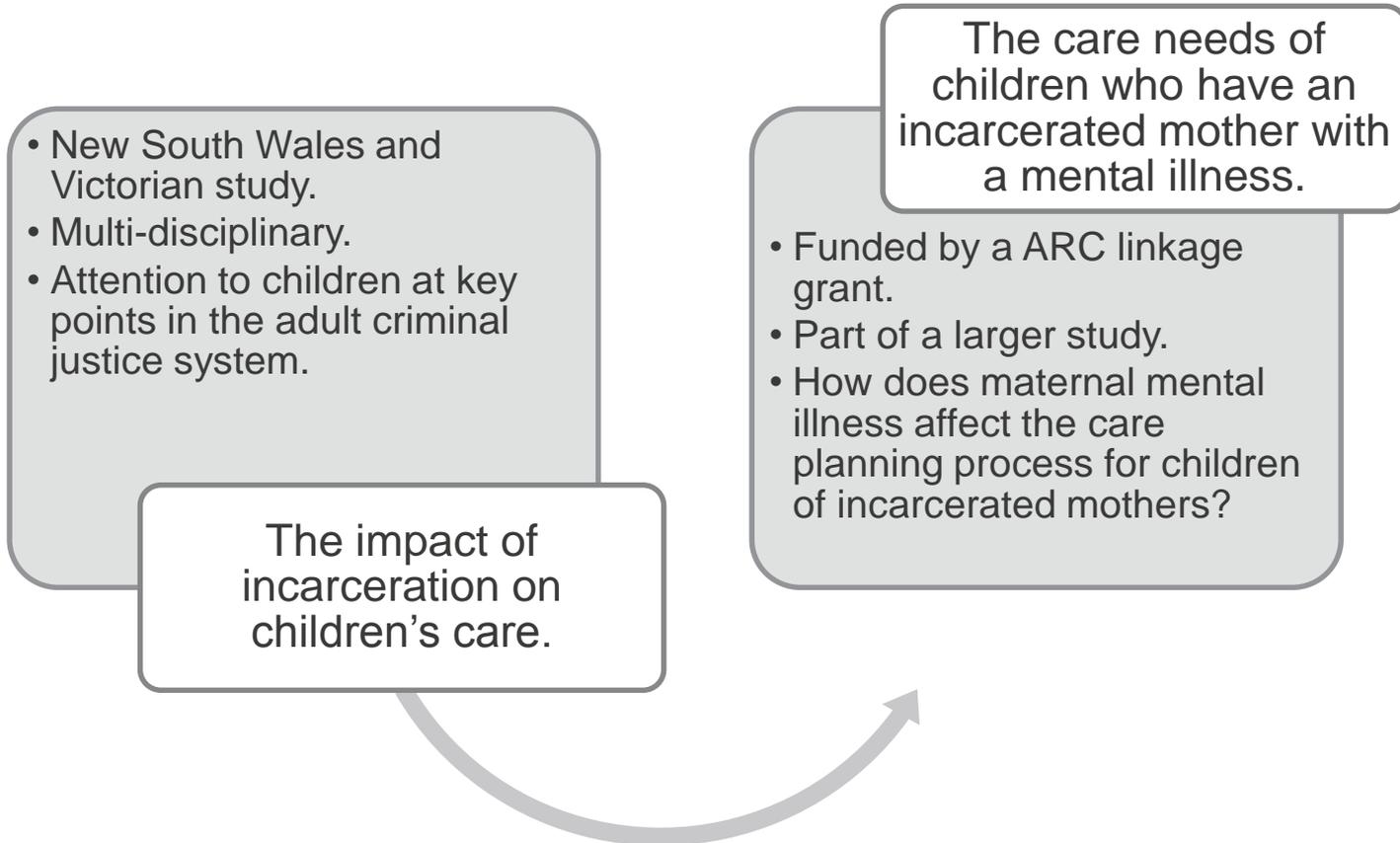
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# Background and linkages:



# What do we know about imprisoned mothers:

Homelessness/Unstable Housing

History of abuse including emotional, physical and sexual in childhood and adulthood

Poverty

Substance use

Poor school achievement

Unemployment

Poor physical health

Mental health issues

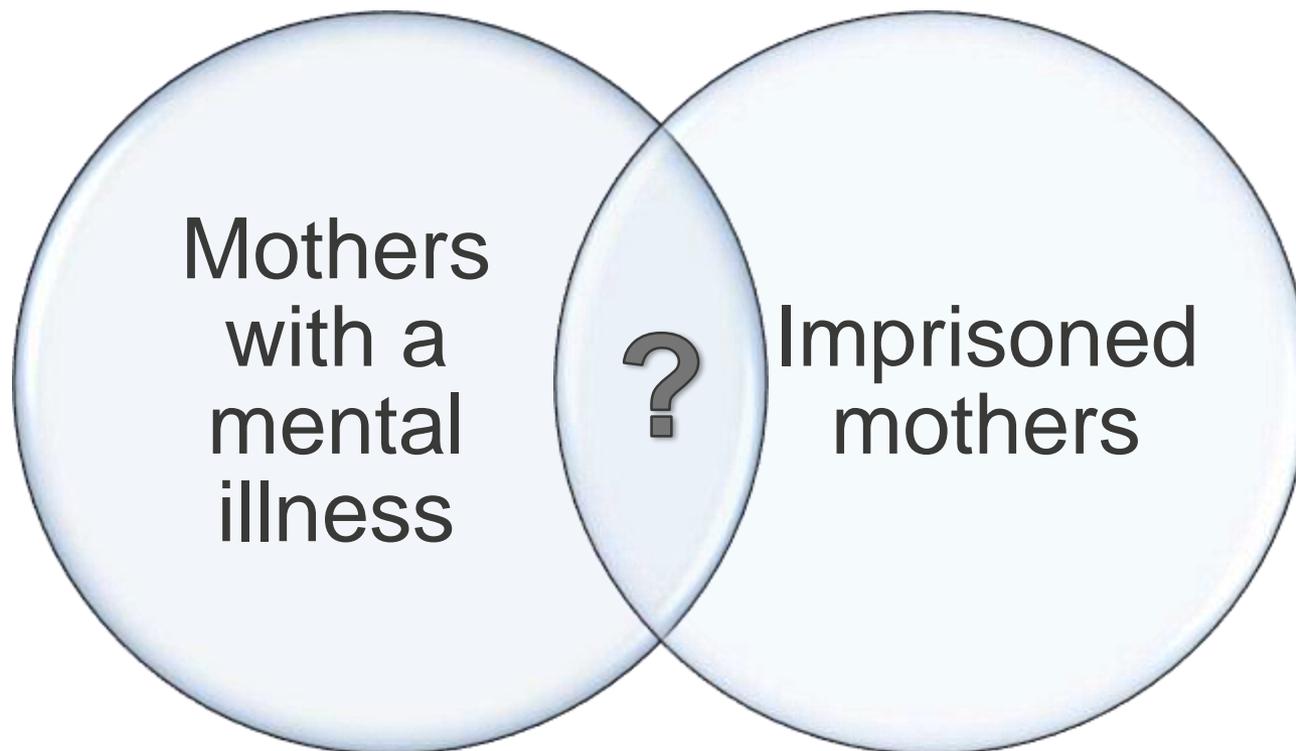


Involvement with child protection

# What do we know about mental illness in Australia's prisons:

Disorder:	Prevalence Rates for the Australian Population (ABS 2008):	Prevalence Rates for the Australian Prisoner Population (Butler et al, 2006):	Prevalence Rates for the Victorian Female Prisoners (Tye & Mullan 2006):
<b>Any Mental Illness:</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>85%</b>
Anxiety Disorders:	14.4%	37.9%	52%
Affective Disorders:	6.2%	23.2%	45%
Substance Use Disorders:	5.1%	65.7%	63%
Psychotic Disorders:	Approx 1%	7%	N/A

# What do we know about the imprisoned mothers with a mental illness?



# Impact on children:

***“You don’t know what it feels like to come up in the world with parents that can’t stay out of jail. You don’t know what it’s like to have your sisters and brothers took from you and placed in a group home. You don’t know what it’s like to have no family to be by your side when you need them in a time of hurt. You don’t know what it feels like to be me and never will, so I’ll tell you... It feels like forever going rollercoaster ride though fire and water that ends when you fall”***

Written by a Juvenile Detainee in San Francisco  
(Bernstein 2005, pp. 147-148)



# Research methodology and methods:

- Exploratory mixed methods study.
- Structured interviews with mothers and focus groups with key stakeholders.



**The Dame Phyllis Frost Centre:**  
Maximum Security, located approx.  
26kms from Melbourne CBD, 344  
Beds.



**Tarrengower Prison:**  
Minimum Security, located approx.  
146kms from Melbourne CBD, 72  
Beds.

# Victoria's forensic psychiatric hospital:



**Thomas Embling Hospital:** Secure forensic mental health hospital, located approx. 7kms from Melbourne CBD, 10/116 beds for women .

# Recruitment:

- Completed.
- **In prison:** Information sessions, use of flyers/fortnightly bulletins, assistance from staff at the programs building and unit walk around.
- **At Thomas Embling:** Staff identification.
- **Community:** Recruited through partner organisations, flyers, letters, staff identification and \$30 Coles-Myer gift card.
- **Challenges:** Difficulty engaging women, prison staff difficulty identifying women who fit the selection criteria, practical challenges of recruiting during winter.



# Participants:

Participant Group:	Number of Participants:
Imprisoned mothers with a mental illness	21
Imprisoned mothers	20
Mothers at Thomas Embling Hospital	0
<b>Total:</b>	<b>41</b>

# Pre-prison life experiences:

- **Mental Illness:** 21 mothers self-report a mental illness, of these 9 reported a multiple mental health issues.
- **Motherhood:** Mothers with mental illness have 58 children between them.
- **Substance Use:** 15 mothers with a mental illness self-reported illicit drug and/or alcohol use.
- **Victimization:** 20 mothers with mental illness reported childhood and/or adulthood victimization.
- **Previous Imprisonments:** 12 mothers with a mental illness had been previously imprisoned.



# Prior to arrest:

## Mental illness:

- The mothers with a mental illness reported on average that their mental health was poor prior to imprisonment ( $M=2.10$ ,  $SD=1.38$ ).

*“Started because I got molested by uncle, and sometimes it was harder than others... and blocking it out with drugs”*

*“Normally, I’m a person who always swallows, pretending to be happy.”*

- Mental health prior to prison was related to medication, parenting stress or losing children, death and grief, symptoms, drug use, victimization, financial concerns.

## Children:

- May be ‘seen’ by mental health services but not responded to.

# Arrest:

## Mental illness:

- The mothers with a mental illness reported on average that their mental health was very poor at arrest ( $M=1.53$ ,  $SD=.87$ ).

*“Same as before arrest, I’d given up on life, so it didn’t change.”*

*“Yes, I don’t think I was in the right frame of mind to make an decisions.”*

- A larger percentage of the women ( $n=13$ ) believe their mental health affected their participation in the police interview.
- This was related to their drug use, symptoms, unsure of police procedures, and poor comprehension.

## Children:

- Six mothers reported that their children witnessed their arrests.

# Sentencing:

## Mental Illness:

- The mothers with a mental illness reported on average that their mental health was poor at sentencing ( $M=2.15$ ,  $SD=1.1$ )

*'Grief, anxiety about going back and having to put son through it again.'*

*"The whole unknown..."*

*"Up and down, got depressed a lot, since then dealt with it, accepted it."*

- A larger number of mothers reported that their mental health history was reported at the court case ( $n=13$ ).

## Children:

- Acknowledgement of hardship to children.



# Imprisonment:

## Mental Illness:

- The imprisoned mothers with a mental illness reported that on average their mental health was good ( $M=3.81$ ,  $SD=.87$ ).

*“I’ve had it for a long time and it depends on what happens in my life depends on how well I cope with it - biggest stress factor coming in was the children”*

*“...people are quite shocked about what I have through [participant was molested and raped], if I let myself dawdle in the past, it’s hard not to, to make an impact, rather than be shaped by what I can’t control”*

## Children:

- Range of care arrangements, changes to schools, and separated from siblings.

# Implications for children:

- Imprisoned mothers reported that their children:
  - (1) Displayed problematic behaviours – including, substance use, acting out, offending.
  - (2) Experienced victimization.
  - (3) Experienced multiple care arrangements.
  - (4) Academic issues – including, school dropout, bullying.
  - (5) Teenage pregnancy.



# Things to think about:

- Emerging picture of families with complex and compounding issues – with mental illness and correctional service involvement.
- Impact of chaotic lifestyles on parenting and decision making capacity for children prior to and during imprisonment.
- Children may experience a double vulnerability due to maternal mental illness and imprisonment.
- Children must interact with multiple systems that often do not ‘respond’ to them.



**Mental illness + Imprisonment = ? For children**



# Thank you

Any questions or comments?

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- **Images from Google Images.**