



Telling life stories:

Exploring the connection between trauma and incarceration
for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

Key findings and future directions

ANROWS

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ANROWS Research to policy and practice papers are concise papers that summarise key findings of research on violence against women and their children, including research produced under ANROWS's research program, and provide advice on the implications for policy and practice.

This is an edited summary of key findings from ANROWS research *Kungas' trauma experiences and effects on behaviour in Central Australia*. Please consult the ANROWS website for more information on this project and the full project report: Bevis, M., Atkinson, J., McCarthy, L., & Sweet, M. (2020). *Kungas' trauma experiences and effects on behaviour in Central Australia* (Research report, 03/2020). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS

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ANROWS research contributes to the six National Outcomes of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*. This research addresses National Plan Outcome 3 - Indigenous communities are strengthened.

Acknowledgement of Country

ANROWS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present, and future, and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledge. We are committed to standing and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, honouring the truths set out in the Warawarni-gu Guma Statement.

Acknowledgement of lived experiences of violence

ANROWS acknowledges the lives and experiences of the women and children affected by domestic, family and sexual violence who are represented in this report. We recognise the individual stories of courage, hope and resilience that form the basis of ANROWS research.

Caution: Some people may find parts of this content confronting or distressing. Recommended support services include: 1800 RESPECT - 1800 737 732 and Lifeline - 13 11 14.

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Telling life stories: Exploring the connection between trauma and incarceration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are incarcerated at extremely high rates in Australia
- While existing evidence can tell us how many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are incarcerated, the life stories of those women remain under-explored and unheard
- An ANROWS research project sought to address this. It engaged Aboriginal women in Alice Springs who had allegedly committed violent offences, and were or had been in prison (either on remand or serving sentences) to tell their stories, and explored the ways experiences of trauma contributed to offending and incarceration

KEY FINDINGS

- The research reveals a cohort of women who are financially stressed, lacking stable and safe accommodation, dealing with addictions to alcohol or using other drugs, frequently negotiating family violence; and have high physical and mental health needs
- The women had shared common experiences in particular, they experienced “trauma enablers”: events, processes and systems that support self-destructive beliefs and behaviours
- Factors identified as trauma enablers included:
 - Barriers to addressing wellbeing and accessing housing and services
 - Communication disconnects, such as language barriers
 - Discrimination and structural issues within the law enforcement system
 - Fractured mother-child, family and community relationships
- These factors not only contributed to offending, but also to the likelihood of incarceration
- Almost all of the women had endured violence by an intimate partner prior to entering prison. Further, post-release, the women face extra barriers and risks in abusive relationships due to a reluctance to seek help from authorities

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Initiate early intervention for teenagers with culturally specific support to help young people through loss and grief, exposure to traumatic incidents, intimate partner violence, and use of social media and bullying
- Urgently increase the supply of public housing in Central Australian communities and develop alternative women’s crisis accommodation models
- Develop and fund culturally safe and relevant, trauma-informed family violence programs and services that work in coordination with other services in the social, health and legal service sectors
- Increase police and judges’ understanding of the impact of trauma, allocate more time to communicating with and listening to Aboriginal women in the legal system, and develop trauma-specific alternatives to sentencing for Aboriginal women

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's imprisonment in Australia

In Australia, the last 30 years have seen the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison more than double (Human Rights Law Centre and Change the Record Coalition, 2017). In the Northern Territory, the number of women imprisoned increased at a rate of over 440 percent between 2004 and 2014 (ABS, 2014) and the overwhelming majority of these women were Aboriginal. Indeed, although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women make up only 2 percent of the Australian adult population, they comprise 34 percent of the women in prison nationally (Human Rights Law Centre and Change the Record Coalition, 2017).

There is currently a lack of research and understanding on the dynamics contributing to these numbers. However, there is growing evidence suggesting links between experiences of trauma and imprisonment. This is particularly significant in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, whose experiences of trauma are compounded by historic and current forms of colonialism (including overt and covert racism), interruption of cultural practices, and disadvantage. The compounding of trauma, or “complex” trauma, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is communal, prolonged, cumulative and intergenerational, with its origins stemming from colonisation.

Despite the links between trauma and imprisonment—and the high rates and complexity of trauma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities—there are limited examples of trauma-informed programs in prisons that are specifically designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Recognising trauma for imprisoned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

One example of a trauma-informed program for imprisoned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is the Kunga Stopping Violence Program (KSVP).¹ The KSVP is a voluntary throughcare program for Aboriginal women² in the Alice Springs Correctional Centre. The program has been running since 2014 and works specifically with women who have an alleged history of violent offending.

The KSVP provides pre-release support to Aboriginal women in the prison, including a four-week violence-reduction, trauma-specific course. When the women are released from prison, the KSVP continues to provide them with support for at least 12 months. The KSVP has successfully assisted the women in areas such as safety planning, medical treatment, employment and training, housing, mentoring, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, family reunification, legal assistance and court support.

The KSVP's "educaring" approach is a "trauma-specific blend of Aboriginal traditional healing activities and Western therapeutic processes. It uses experiential learning to enable participants to explore their individual and community transgenerational trauma" (Atkinson, Nelson, Brooks, Atkinson & Ryan, 2014, pp. 298–299). Part of this approach includes developing "Loss History Maps": tools which help a person tell a life story by identifying significant experiences from birth to the present, allowing them to reflect on how those experiences may be contributing to their present life circumstances. The Loss History Maps are an important tool in the KSVP for understanding behaviours as trauma responses, and facilitate the use of trauma-specific recovery tools to support the women to focus on their resilience and to build on their strengths.

¹ In the Anangu languages of the Central Desert, "kungka" means "young woman".

² To date all KSVP participants have been Aboriginal and not Torres Strait Islander.

Kungas' trauma experiences and effects on behaviour in Central Australia by Miriam Bevis, Emeritus Professor Judy Atkinson, Dr Leisa McCarthy and Dr Michelle Sweet

Through the delivery of eight iterations of the KSVP, it became apparent that there was a need for further research to understand the events that led to the women's incarceration. It was clear in the stories coming through the KSVP that trauma was a major contributing factor to the women's incarceration. The KSVP designed a pilot study that aimed to provide an opportunity for clients of the KSVP to tell their stories, and to contribute to a deeper understanding of the life events that led to their incarceration.

The secondary aims were:

- to apply a trauma lens to the life stories of Aboriginal women in Central Australia who have been incarcerated
- to identify the interventions, services and supports that can divert women into programs to prevent incarceration
- to highlight the need for a coordinated service response
- to identify service reforms to meet the needs of Aboriginal women experiencing complex trauma.

The research project used a mixed methods approach, including:

- interviews with 12 KSVP clients
- qualitative analysis of the 12 KSVP clients' Loss History Maps
- quantitative and qualitative analysis of KSVP client data including 53 client files
- stakeholder workshop discussions and individual interviews (29 participants representing 20 different organisations).

Dadirri—described as a deep listening process, of being fully present and aware (Ungunmerr Bauman, 1993)—was used by the researchers with all research participants in order to give participants greater control over what and how much detail they presented.

The full report is available at anrows.org.au/publication/kungas-trauma-experiences-and-effects-on-behaviour-in-central-australia

Key findings

All of the women in the study showed signs of complex trauma

The emerging theory from this study is that a high percentage of Aboriginal women incarcerated for violent crime would have a possible diagnosis of complex trauma. The women had experienced multiple life stressors, many of which involved a trajectory starting with a lack of safety in childhood that continues into adulthood; lives of uncertainty; a sense of abandonment by caregivers who were busy dealing with their own distressed life circumstances; and an inability to know, name and manage difficult emotions. These life stressors were found to contribute to the women's continuing victimisation and offending, but also to the incredible resilience the women displayed.

The study identified a set of common complex trauma enablers that the women had experienced and were experiencing; these are discussed below. "Trauma enablers" are experiences, processes and systems that support, on the one hand, self-destructive beliefs and behaviours and, on the other hand, strength in survival.

All of the women in the study demonstrated high levels of resilience

Despite their histories, the women showed remarkable resiliency. They operated with family values of support and caring: providing food for the family, attempting to be the best mothers they could be, and trying to establish order in the chaos around them.

While all the women in the study showed high levels of resilience under extreme circumstances, it would appear from their stories that resilience can also become an enabler of further trauma. Resilience may be, for example, the very thing that enables a woman to return to and stay in abusive relationships without the possibility of, or support for, the abusive partner changing.

There was a difference in resilience levels for those whose childhoods involved being in country, being taught traditions, and feeling safe in the loving care of grandparents and others who did not drink, and those who grew up in town camps in Alice Springs or Tennant Creek and experienced a lot of family or community fighting fuelled by alcohol. In the first group, women had levels of resilience that allowed them to bounce back in adversity, had a higher capacity to adapt to distressing circumstances, and were more able to remain hopeful for the future.

Barriers to housing, services and addressing wellbeing act as complex trauma enablers

A lack of safe housing was a constant frustration for the women and stakeholders. The client file audit revealed high levels of homelessness prior to incarceration—none of the 53 women were living in private housing. The majority of the women and their children were living in overcrowded homes of extended family, and over 60 percent of the women were not officially listed on a lease.³ Lack of housing is a problem that continues post release due to a lack of public housing stock, supported accommodation and transitional housing. Shortages mean women can wait up to 10 years for housing allocation. Lack of housing post incarceration places women at risk of breaching their parole conditions.



Without access to secure housing, women and their children are vulnerable to violence. One KSVP worker explained:

Some women don't have housing when they get out, so they have to face overcrowding. There's a five- to seven-year waitlist for housing; hostels are expensive, or are booked out. Their only options are to go out bush or live off family, going from house to house. There, people may be drinking. The risk factors are high. They are more likely to reoffend and many won't get bail because they don't have an appropriate house to go to. ... Women who want to make a go and if they can be set up with housing straight away, they go okay. If they can't get housing, it becomes a problem. Often, they will have to stay with people who may be drinking, or the house might already be overcrowded and that becomes a struggle to stay focused on recovery.

A further key issue is that the women struggled to access a range of services due to the combination of poverty, coping with symptoms of complex trauma, and being in dangerous relationships. Specific service issues that were identified included:

- The women face extreme difficulty in meeting court-mandated reporting requirements: they have no transport, are moving from one crisis to the next, and are often homeless.
- Despite alcohol and drug use being a contributing factor to women's incarceration, alcohol and other drug rehabilitation services are generally not trauma-informed. Stakeholders also reported that treatment programs have an over-focus on alcohol and lack awareness of new drugs being used in the community.
- There is a lack of support services available once the women have been labelled as "perpetrators". They become marginalised in the service system as most perpetrator supports or alternatives to sentencing are for men.

Barriers to addressing wellbeing were also a concern. Many of the women had complex health issues as well as histories of mental health distress for which they generally had not received a diagnosis. Even when a diagnosis exists, there is no guarantee that the women will receive mental health services; they are more likely to be given medication. Many of the women expressed that at times they had thought about suicide, and being left alone to think through issues without help added to feelings of powerlessness and distress.

³ Not being listed on the lease is significant: if a woman is at risk of family violence and is included on a Territory Housing lease, then she has the ability to be transferred to safe housing. If a woman is not on the lease, then this is not an option for her. Additionally, women under the age of 18 cannot access a women's shelter without a support person. Given that most of the women interviewed in the study endured intimate partner violence from their mid-teenage years onward, this is an important gap.

Communication disconnects act as complex trauma enablers

Communication problems were identified at multiple levels in the women's stories. Language was named as a fundamental communication disconnect between the women and service agencies. The majority of the women speak a local Aboriginal language as their first language, however, communication with police, legal services, service providers and corrective services is dominated by the use of English. The women shared stories of the way shame contributed to communication disconnect, in that it prevented them from seeking assistance or providing full stories to law enforcement officers. Further, even when trying to communicate their experiences and distress, the women were often dismissed or disbelieved.



“Most women we work with, English is not their first language. They have to have a command of English when they go to organisations whose services they need to access. It's not like they can't communicate in English, but when they are in crisis, when they are having intrusive thoughts—memories and they dealing with things like counselling, deep things, trauma, this also impacts. Again, women giving statements, it is in English. Do they really get a chance to fully explain the complexities of their story! This also affects their relationship with police, and lawyers as they think police don't listen. Misunderstandings also happen with service providers which creates a distrust. For example, one woman said service providers was getting housing for her, while in fact what they were doing was putting in an application for her.” [KSVP worker]

Discrimination and structural issues within the law enforcement system act as complex trauma enablers

The women spoke of multiple layers of discrimination and judgement across all sectors of law enforcement systems: police, courts and prisons. The women felt judged for defending themselves, and keenly felt that they were not heard or believed by police, lawyers or the court.

A key issue is mandatory sentencing legislation in the Northern Territory. Lawyers described how communication problems between them, the women, and services prevented them from accessing enough evidence to take to court, frequently resulting in incomplete defence evidence. The research interviews and the Loss History Maps documented stories from the women that never made it to courts or into police statements. This lack of background can result in long mandatory sentences or unhelpful and unsafe orders placed on women. The women, as a result, can feel confused about the sentence or order, or believe that prison sentences are unjust. One woman said:

The male judge who sentenced me spoke wrong way about me. He said I was really dangerous, not a responsible person, and not a responsible person for my children. He did not listen to my history and why I did things, I wouldn't just be violent for nothing. That judge should have listened to my story and given me help in prison—given me rehab and counselling. *I am a young woman, and not a violent person until violence is done to me.* [Emphasis added]

A significant issue for this cohort is that women who leave prison and are in abusive relationships face extra risks and barriers. Women leave prison with conditions placed upon them as part of parole, conditional release or as a suspended sentence. As a result, the women become legally compromised; that is, women spoke of their reluctance to access service providers, hospitals and police when in need of help in case this results in a breach of their conditions. Abusive partners are aware of the dilemma the women face and can use it against them.

Fractured mother-child, family and community relationships act as complex trauma enablers

Fractured relationships surrounded the women as a result of intergenerational, collective and cumulative trauma, grief and despair. The women commonly experienced a lack of feeling safe when growing up. Common themes that contributed to a lack of a sense of safety were premature deaths across their family systems and/or caregivers; dislocation from moving to town camps; the influence of alcohol and other drug use by those around them (particularly for those who grew up in town camps); and fear passed down through generations. The women in the study felt abandoned and unsupported within their communities. Their lives were layered with loss and accompanying unresolved grief.



“My mum and dad drank. There was violence. Us children had one room together ... [names seven siblings] we stayed in that room when the fighting was happening, we were frightened. Big sisters would look after me. My sister left and I went bush, west of [place name] with my mother and father. They didn’t drink out bush. Parents started drinking and fighting again when they went back to [place name]. There was no food when they were drinking.” [KSVP participant]

The life stories revealed that many of the women had difficulty maintaining strong, healthy relationships. The majority of the women entered intimate relationships as teenagers and told stories of violence endured in these relationships, in particular of the way they were isolated from their immediate family by the abusive partner. Of the 53 women engaged in the KSVP, almost all (n = 51, 96%) had endured violence by an intimate partner prior to entering prison. In most instances, this was their husband/boyfriend and/or father of their children. Often, the reason for the women’s incarceration was because they had been trying to get away from violence (driving without a licence) or fighting back (to protect themselves).



One woman described childhood memories of her parents fighting, her mother bleeding from wounds. She moved around a lot, but for most of her childhood she lived in a town camp in Alice Springs. At 16, she met the man who would become her first child’s father. When her son was born, she was happy, but the father threw the baby into a garbage bin in a fit of rage and burnt all his clothes and baby toys. She says: “He was a violent man.” At 19, her first daughter was born. At 22, her second daughter was born. She finally left the man after she was hospitalised with head, arm and leg wounds. He was jailed for this assault. Two years later, her mother was stabbed, and her partner was released from jail. Her daughters were removed by the Northern Territory Department of Children and Families and put in the care of an extended family member. At 24, she met her fourth child’s father. Her new partner was violent and controlling and he kicked her in the stomach while pregnant. She was hospitalised for an emergency caesarean, giving birth to a son.

Stories such as these were common among the women and represent the recurring themes of fractured family relationships and multiple abusive partners.

Systemic failures act as enablers of complex trauma, and contribute to cycles of retraumatisation

Systemic failures contribute to the women's retraumatisation and increase their risk of revictimisation and reincarceration. For many of the women, time away in prison and residential rehabilitation has not changed the difficult circumstances they faced prior to incarceration and will continue to navigate after their release. Lack of ongoing stability in their life results in the women constantly dealing with immediate crisis needs. This leaves them with very little time and energy to devote to longer-term strategies to heal and to move out of cycles of abuse and poverty.

The hyperincarceration of Aboriginal women points to systemic failure on multiple levels. Systemic failure is the combination of all the above factors—compromised health; inadequate housing, social support and, legal services; families and communities in crisis—that continue to compound the complex trauma experienced by the women. The lack of systemic coordination between sectors of the service system (such as health, legal or support) exacerbates systemic failure. Further, a lack of understanding of trauma also leads to unsafe or unhelpful decisions around sentencing, bail, or parole. As described above, from interviews and workshops with stakeholders and KSVP staff, it was clear that systems are not tailored to respond to the reality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's lives.

The KSVP program is an avenue to addressing complex trauma enablers



“Kungas helped me dream again. I completed Year 12, did a part of a Bachelor of Arts at Deakin University, and Community Management at Curtin University. I have aspirations. I want to finish them. The world is a big place and I can dream again that I can be part of it.” [KSVP participant]

“My story never changed. What did change is I had someone to listen to me. That in itself was a little bit of justice. I know that it's not the justice system, but in my consciousness it was that little bit of justice.” [KSVP participant]

In response to the above trauma enablers, the KSVP program works with the women to help address otherwise unmet needs, to help the women understand and heal from their traumatic experiences, and to empower the women after a lifetime of being disempowered by society. In the KSVP, the researchers noted that the deeper teaching/learning began when the women felt safe enough to share their own stories. The women's stories were told with such simplicity; however, in discussion, the women began to unpack the complexity of their lived experiences. Their individual stories interlinked with their collective narratives. Working with stories is meaning making—transformative, political, healing action.

The KSVP is an example of the kind of program the courts could use as a diversionary option while the women are on remand and after sentencing. The educational package delivered through the KSVP could also be delivered outside of prison. Some of the women could be skilled up to run such a program in their communities, in partnership with the

KSVP, after they have undertaken a residential program. Indeed, a number of the women expressed interest in running the program in their community. Aboriginal women can be skilled up to do this work, while skills and healing—educaring—can happen at the same time. One stakeholder commented:

If I had a magic wand, I would have less non-Aboriginal people running around trying to be the saviours and invest in more Aboriginal people who were skilled up to work with the women—to hold the stories, in the training workshops and do what I call ... story mapping for whole of community, becoming Communities of Care.

Implications for policy-makers and practitioners

The KSVP is a uniquely culturally safe program. It is recommended that the KSVP be funded to expand to deliver the educational package into community settings, to address the needs of women and their children in order to prevent their incarceration or reincarceration.

This study, and the stories within it, provide a building block for further research and practice reform.

The life histories of the women in this pilot study show the many ways in which complex trauma has contributed to their incarceration. The findings of this research demonstrate the need for substantial investments in healing for Aboriginal women, their children and communities. There is a strong case for system-level improvements so that future work with women is complex trauma-informed, holistic, and tailored specifically for the needs of Aboriginal women, not just in justice agencies and diversionary programs, but in health, disability, education, and housing.

Recommendations for policy-makers

- Continue the support for and funding of the Kunga Stopping Violence Program as a wrap-around service.
- Develop and fund the delivery of trauma-specific and culturally safe approaches to alcohol and drug rehabilitation in Central Australia.
- Develop and fund family residential alcohol rehabilitation, including women and children's residential rehabilitation in Alice Springs.
- Increase the screening of and treatment for women entering the legal system with mental health, complex trauma, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) and brain injuries, with flow-through therapeutic care from prison to services on the outside.
- Increase the number of female Aboriginal police officers and equip them with trauma-specific intervention skills.
- Develop trauma-specific alternatives to sentencing for Aboriginal women in collaboration with local Aboriginal women.
- Increase the supply of public housing in Alice Springs and remote Central Australian communities.
- Provide transitional accommodation for women leaving prison in Central Australia.
- Develop alternative women's crisis accommodation funding models in Central Australia in collaboration with local Aboriginal women.
- In recognition of the effects of intergenerational trauma, place more emphasis on whole-of-family and whole-of-community approaches to family violence interventions.

Recommendations for practitioners

- Initiate early intervention for teenagers, with culturally specific support to help young people through loss and grief, exposure to traumatic incidents, intimate partner violence and assault, and intimate use of social media and bullying.
- Increase the training and employment of local Aboriginal staff who can speak Central Australian languages within the social, health and legal service sectors.
- Coordinate and hold regular cross-sectional communities of practice meetings to facilitate support for women who are, or have been, in prison, and to facilitate peer support for the workers who work with them.
- Implement better screening and health coordination within the prison context, including screening for complex trauma, other mental health conditions, FASD and brain injuries.
- Allocate more time to communicating with and listening to Aboriginal women in the legal system.
- Hold educational sessions for lawyers, judges and community corrections staff about the safety implications of release conditions.
- Increase police and judges' understanding of the impact of trauma and how this affects a woman's ability to provide evidence.

Further reading

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