

Support for Children of Imprisoned Parents in New South Wales



To:	Committee on Children and Young People Parliament of New South Wales
Email:	childrenyoungpeople@parliament.nsw.gov.au
From:	Barnardos Australia
Contact:	Dr Robert Urquhart Head of Knowledge, Outcomes and Research rurquhart@barnardos.org.au
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Barnardos Australia (Barnardos) thanks the Parliament of New South Wales Committee on Children and Young People for the opportunity to provide a submission to its Inquiry into the support for the children of imprisoned parents in New South Wales.

Background: Barnardos knowledge of this area

Barnardos is a not for profit children's social care organisation, providing family support and out-of-home care (OOHC) to approximately 15,000 children and their families in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and New South Wales (NSW) each year. In our family support work we aim to reach vulnerable children at risk of separation from their families, and homelessness is a strong feature of this work. For close to 100 years, we have been working together with children, young people and families to break the cycle of disadvantage, creating safe, nurturing and stable homes, connected to family and community.

Barnardos' suite of Safety & Prevention programs includes tailored support for families with incarcerated parents, as outlined below.

Overview of Beyond Barbed Wire, Barnardos Western NSW

Based in Wellington NSW, Beyond Barbed Wire (BBW) is a program for women in prison, the majority of whom are Aboriginal mothers who are leaving a correctional facility to reside in Western NSW. Currently Barnardos supports 26 women (point in time) which translates to approximately 50 women (over a 12-month period) in the BBW program in Western NSW.

BBW participants are offered a range of services both during incarceration and post-release. A brief 13-minute documentary film summarising the key BBW program components can be found at URL: <https://spaces.hightail.com/space/p1rtyidMvx>

Support during incarceration

Barnardos ensures parents can maintain contact with their children during imprisonment, while developing skills and knowledge around positive parenting and building relationships.

Barnardos believes providing parents with opportunities to participate in parenting and other programs while incarcerated is critical, as they help parents assess their situation and take account of their responsibilities towards the child and family in a safe learning environment.

Parenting and other support programs benefit both mother and child. There is an emphasis on the importance of a parent staying in regular contact with their child(ren) via phone calls, letters, visits (especially child-centred visits) and the exchange of artworks. These various points of contact help the child by encouraging a positive and meaningful connection with their mother during the period of imprisonment.

In particular, parenting programs for mothers in custody assist them in:

- developing better relationships with their children when in prison and later when not in prison;
- increasing awareness of the impact of incarceration on their child/family;
- learning positive, practical parenting skills and an understanding of child development;

- developing listening and communication skills to improve relationships and parenting;
- sharing parenting experiences with others in a positive group learning environment;
- gaining practical life skills such as budgeting, cooking, job-seeking and problem-solving; and
- accessing support, ideas and knowledge to build and maintain meaningful relationships.

Post-release support

Barnardos continues to support mothers as they return to their families and communities for up to two years. The capacity of Barnardos to work with families both pre- and post-release has helped significantly reduce re-offending and recidivism rates.

When Program participants are released, BBW provides:

- transitional accommodation in short stay (3 month) housing and support to secure long-term housing;
- case management and/or advocacy and liaison with case management services;
- mentoring support from a trained mentor for 12 months post-release;
- information about and referrals to support services; and
- training and work experience opportunities in social enterprise coffee cart.

Demonstrated outcomes for children and families

For 12 years we have provided highly effective support through our BBW program for mothers in the Western region of NSW, achieving recidivism rates of **6-9%**, compared to a rate of **66%** cited in 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data.

This significant reduction was achieved by adopting a strengths-based approach and offering tailored and culturally-appropriate case management, housing, mentoring, parenting programs, goal-setting and flexible support practices for mothers.

Barnardos' views on the impact of parents' imprisonment on children and the adequacy of policies and services to assist these children (outlined below) draw on Barnardos' extensive involvement and experience in the area.

What policies exist and what services are available

The BBW program was developed in 2008 (not long after the opening of the Wellington Correctional Centre) in response to research that clearly indicated the existence of significant unmet needs and inadequate supports for incarcerated mothers and their children.

Barnardos currently has a comprehensive set of policies relating to all aspects of welfare service delivery and management of service contracts. The BBW program policies and tools, which have been specifically developed for this population (and with further investment could be translated into sector-wide resources) include:

- service manual for caseworkers;
- manual and short video for recruitment, assessment and training for volunteer mentors;

- resource manual and two three-hour training sessions for parents, carers and caseworkers in OOHC services designed to support and facilitate children's contact and family time with a parent who is incarcerated; and
- operational manuals for Three Wise Women Coffee Cart social enterprise that provides training and work experience opportunities.

The program makes use of the following evidence-based program components and tools:

- Parenting programs are all evidence-based, manualized and approved by Corrective Services NSW: Triple P, Out of the Dark, and Mothering at a Distance
- Evidence-based assessment and case management tools: Structured Decision Making (SDM) and E- SCARF
- Psychometrically validated outcomes measurement tools: Growth and Empowerment (GEM)
- Client data collection systems: Barnardos My Story and Data Exchange (DEX).

How effective these services are and areas for improvement

Barnardos strongly supports an outcomes-based approach to service delivery and has collected and analysed hard data to demonstrate outcomes relating to clients participating in the BBW program.

For the period September 2018 to September 2019 the BBW program accepted referrals for:

- 52 mothers, 62% of whom were Aboriginal;
- who were the parents of 146 children, 111 of whom were Aboriginal;
- **94%** of participating mothers did not re-offend and did not return to prison.

The attached Appendix provides two salient case studies demonstrating the effectiveness of culturally affirming "wrap around" family support services both pre- and post-release.

Based on the efficacy of the program, we note that areas for development and improvement include:

- funding to undertake a long-term evaluation study relating to key outcome domains for participants and their children including recidivism, long-term housing stability, education attainment, employment attainment, and health and wellbeing;
- investment to expand the BBW program in Western NSW; and
- investment to undertake program replication in other parts of New South Wales (see Recommendations for modelling).

Recommendations

The Western Research Institute (WRI) evaluated the outcomes of Barnardos' Beyond Barbed Wire (BBW) Program from 2013 to the present, to determine the contribution the program makes in economic and social terms (report available on request).

WRI estimated that expanding the BBW program would produce a strong incremental benefit-cost ratio (BCR) of 2.15, indicating that for every dollar spent on expanding the BBW program, just over \$2 would be returned to the communities in which the program operated through economic and social benefits.

Barnardos has undertaken further independent actuarial financial modelling to explore the funding required for BBW program expansion and replication (details available to the Committee on request).

We note that this independent modelling evidences that:

- By 2023, over the course of a year, an expanded Program has the potential to impact over 2,300 mothers and over 4,800 children, in NSW.
- The funding required would be \$28m over 4.5 years or \$6m per year.
- Each \$100,000 of funding would impact 20.6 mothers and 43.4 children each year.
- The proposed program expansion would cover NSW and ACT in the following 5 areas: Wellington (Western NSW), Emu Plains, Dillwynia (Penrith), Silverwater, and Berrima.

Barnardos therefore strongly recommends investment in:

1. Expanding the successful BBW model to other parts of New South Wales.
2. Developing sector-wide resources based on BBW tools for the recruitment, assessment and training of volunteer mentors to work with families with an incarcerated parent.
3. Developing sector-wide training for facilitating contact and family time for children with incarcerated parents for parents, carers and caseworkers in OOH services based on the BBW training package.
4. Undertaking a long-term evaluation study of the expansion of BBW relating to key outcome domains for participants and their children including recidivism, long-term housing stability, education attainment, employment attainment, and health and wellbeing.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any aspect of our submission. Please feel free to contact Dr Robert Urquhart, Head of Knowledge, Outcomes and Research on (02) 9218 2392 or rurquhart@barnardos.org.au.

Appendix - Case Studies

All names have been changed and pseudonyms used.

The impact of incarceration on children and need for culturally affirming “wrap around” family support services both pre- and post-release

Odin is a 6-year-old Aboriginal boy, in Grade 1 of Primary School in Western NSW who lives with his single mother and younger sister. The children often move back and forth, living between mother's and Nan's households. The children have a history of early trauma, including domestic and family violence, and having experienced the breakdown of their parent's marriage due to violence and substance use.

In early 2019 Odin's mother, Peta, and grandmother, Nan, were both incarcerated for different offences; Nan for a two-month period and Peta for a longer period.

Until Nan was released Odin and his sister lived with their father some distance away, which meant a change of school for Odin. During this period their father did not facilitate any contact with Peta or Nan as there were AVO's in place preventing contact between the mother and father and there were no other family members able to facilitate contact for the children. Once Nan was released, the children moved back with Nan until Peta was released.

Peta was referred to Beyond Barbed Wire when she breached an intensive corrections order.

Peta was assessed and matched with a Beyond Barbed Wire case worker and a mentor. With the support of Beyond Barbed Wire case workers, Peta was able to speak with her community corrections officer about the barriers, which had prevented her from attending appointments.

Peta says it has been difficult having the children back at home after being away from them for so long. *'It sometimes feels like the kids are punishing me for going away and leaving them. I'm finding it difficult to get them back into a routine, because everything is so different. I lost my job and my house when I went to gaol, so life has been very different for all of us.'*

Both Odin and his sister currently attend the Barnardos Breakfast Club every day and Odin attends the Barnardos Yalmambirra Learning Centre two afternoons per week. At Breakfast Club the children are picked up from home, taken into the office where they have a healthy breakfast and make their lunch for school. At the Learning Centre Odin is provided with a healthy and nutritious meal, one-on-one online tutoring, social and cultural craft, and support from the local workers.

Learning Centre workers liaise directly with the children's school teachers and can facilitate an understanding of their circumstances and advocate for the children at school. When Odin is dropped off at home the workers chat with Peta about his progress at school and encourage her to become involved in his school learning.

Peta has engaged well with the Barnardos Beyond Barbed Wire program and has undertaken barista and food handling training so that she can work in the Three Wise Women social enterprise coffee cart which is a part of the Beyond Barbed Wire program. BBW caseworkers supported Peta with referrals to drug and alcohol and counselling services and to Kids in Focus.

During school holidays Odin and his sister continued to stay with their father. Caseworkers have observed that when the children return home Odin's behaviour is quite chaotic and disruptive. Once Odin gets back into routine with bed time, meals, school and the learning centre his behaviour starts to settle, this usually takes 3 to 4 weeks and is sustained until the next period of school holidays.

More recently BBW caseworker was made aware of significant issues occurring in Odin's homelife—his father has now been incarcerated, there have been police raids at Peta's home for ongoing illicit drug use in the home, police welfare checks have been made on the children.

Peta was working as a casual nursing assistant in a local aged care facility. Recently her work hours have been reduced which has reduced household income.

Currently the BBW service is very concerned about Peta's wellbeing, her parenting capacity and the long-term prospects for these children.

Peta has not been readily available to engage with the Beyond Barbed Wire program and there are signs that her wellbeing is deteriorating, leaving her with a more limited capacity to care for her children and placing the children's wellbeing at further risk of harm. Accordingly, the family has once again escalated to a child protection response.

Despite all the chaos and disruption in Odin's home life, he is doing well at school—his reading level has increased dramatically since the start of the year. The teacher's aide from the school stated that Odin started the year on reading level 2 and has ended term 4 on level 12. His teacher reports that this is a very positive result: *'We have observed that Odin requires little to no help with his homework and can do single digit maths equations both plus and minus on his own'*. Feedback from his teacher also stated towards the end of the term Odin has been much more co-operative in class and has had fewer emotional outbursts. The routine of breakfast club and learning centre plus caring adults appears to have a positive impact when his homelife is more settled.

Mother with seven children, five of whom are in statutory care (Beyond Barbed Wire Program, Western NSW)

Stacey is an Aboriginal 31-year-old mother of seven children; Crystal (13), Taleah (12), Matty (9), Summa (8), Angel (2) and newborn twins; Tyrone and Jai.

The four eldest children have resided with Stacey's mother in Western NSW since 2012, under the jurisdiction of the Family Law Court due to concerns around Stacey's parenting capacity and substance use. Stacey is estranged from her mother and her stepfather and has no contact with her four eldest children. Stacey's youngest daughter Angel is in statutory care and has been placed with foster carers. Stacey has orders for monthly contact with Angel. However, attending regular contact visits has been hampered due to Stacey's homelessness, lack of transport and pregnancy. Stacey has no support from family or the fathers of her children.

Stacey has a personal history of early trauma, including family violence, sexual abuse, parental drug and alcohol use and neglect. Stacey has stated she uses 'ice' to help her to 'not feel' and to cope with the strong emotions surrounding the abuse. In 2018, Stacey fell pregnant with twins. Stacey was unsupported throughout her pregnancy, as the father of the twins was taken into custody. Due to Stacey's history of substance use and the care orders

for Stacey's other children, Family and Community Services became involved with the pregnancy.

Stacey was referred to Beyond Barbed Wire by Community Offender Services, when she was placed on an Intensive Correction Order (ICO) in late 2018 for an assault charge. Stacey had been involved in an altercation, in which another woman sustained injuries. Stacey has an extensive history of involvement with the criminal justice system and has served three prior custodial sentences for drug related driving offences, larceny and assaults.

Stacey was assessed and matched with a Beyond Barbed Wire case worker and a mentor. Not only did Stacey need a mentor to support her social wellbeing and connection to community, Stacey also needed the support of a case worker to ensure the family did not face further trauma which would inevitably result in the babies going into care. With assistance from Beyond Barbed Wire, suitable accommodation was secured in a Beyond Barbed Wire short stay property, and supported referrals were made to the Substance Use in Pregnancy Program and the Aboriginal Families Nurse Practitioner Program. Beyond Barbed Wire staff also provided advocacy around the family care plan; working closely with the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) and attending case conferencing to support Stacey in being able to safely bring her babies home.

In early 2019, Stacey's twins, Tyrone and Jai, weighed in at a healthy 2676 and 2314 gm respectively. A little later, following a safety assessment by FaCS, Beyond Barbed Wire case workers provided transport for Stacey to bring her babies to their new home in Western NSW. Further supported referrals were made to local community midwifery services, Brighter Futures and Safecare programs. Stacey told Beyond Barbed Wire case workers, *'I didn't have this kind of support when I had the other kids. Things could've been so different if I did. I can't thank Barnardos enough for making it possible for me to have my boys'*.