

*‘[T]hey Say “You’re Going Home, You’re Going Home” ... But I
Don’t Have A Home... I’m Getting Out, But I’m Not Going Home,
There’s No Home...’*

***The Experiences of People Leaving Prison in the Australian
Capital Territory***

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Executive Summary

Recidivism and reincarceration are a significant national issue. In 2020, the Australian Productivity Commission reported that almost 55 percent of people released from prison returned to prison, or received a community corrections order, within two years of their release. The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) has the highest rate of return to corrections, at 71 percent. Whilst reincarceration rates can offer policymakers a reasonable measure of determining whether prison works, re-offending is a complex issue involving a range of variables, such as unemployment, drug use, mental health issues, homelessness, and an absence of social supports. There is little recent qualitative Australian research on the experiences of people once they leave prison and the challenges they face re-entering and (re)integrating into the community.

Adopting a qualitative research design, this pilot project investigated the experiences of people following their release from the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC), the ACT's only adult correctional facility. The project aimed to further understand what service providers they engaged with post-release and how they felt this engagement assisted them to re-enter society and take steps towards leading a crime-free life. The findings are based on face-to-face interviews conducted in 2019 with 11 people who had spent at least one month in the AMC and were interviewed within six months of their release.

Findings

1. The majority of participants spoke about challenges they experienced obtaining suitable housing upon release. Specifically, they noted the lack of availability, wait-times, condition of housing and difficulty of obtaining private rental in the absence of government housing.

This finding is consistent with the 2017 *Evaluation of ACT Extended Throughcare Pilot Program* (Throughcare Evaluation) (Griffiths et al 2017), which highlighted that suitable housing is a key factor for an individual to succeed post-release. It is also consistent with the objectives of the current ACT Justice and Community Safety (JACS) Justice Housing Project, which seeks to address issues with the availability of housing and suitable housing for people involved with the criminal justice system (ACT JACS 2020a).

2. The majority of participants spoke about how, following a period of incarceration in the AMC, they did not feel adequately prepared for the post-release experience. Specifically, participants commented on challenges relating to accessing case managers, program availability and suitability, a lack of preparedness for obtaining employment post-release and an inadequate understanding of the support services available to them post-release.

The findings are well positioned to contribute to two pillars of JACS' 'Building Communities Not Prisons' initiative. The first pillar is the Justice Housing Program, which seeks to generate a 'multi-component response to meet diverse needs of people involved in or at risk of being involved in the criminal justice system' (ACT JACS 2020a). The second pillar is the Community Building Capabilities, which aims to develop functional and appropriate capabilities to drive the multi-component nature of the BCNP initiative (ACT JACS 2020b).

We note that this study was a pilot project. The focus on one Australian jurisdiction and small sample size limit the generalisability of the findings, as with any qualitative research, although they provide depth of understanding and analysis to some of the challenges people face upon release from prison. Taking into account the challenges of doing this type of research, further studies could target a larger sample size. They should also focus on examining the specific challenges people who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander face.

Recommendations

We recommend that the ACT Government:

1. recognise the importance, and urgency, of implementing the Justice Housing Program to address the availability of suitable housing for people upon release from the AMC;
2. improve its communication about the availability of current programs at the AMC and how they can assist people with the challenges they may face upon release. Improvements to current programs should include a further focus on living, employability and confidence-building skills;

3. provide more detailed information about the specific support service providers can offer to people upon release. This information could be provided in a ‘release pack’ given to detainees by their case manager with clear verbal communication on repeated occasions to ensure awareness of the range and availability of support services. Service providers could also provide this detailed information to current detainees;

4. re-evaluate the current number of sentencing managers available at the AMC. This may involve lowering the number of clients allocated to each sentencing manager to ensure they can adequately manage the needs of their clients during incarceration and ensure they have suitable post-release plans and support;

5. adopt a co-design approach to its Justice Reinvestment Strategy. Participants provided important insights into what supports could have assisted them post-release. Previous research has found that the participation of former detainees in prison (re)integration programs offers a range of benefits, including improved community integration and reduced reoffending rates (Le Bel et al 2015; Weaver and McCulloch 2012). It is therefore appropriate to develop options for incorporating the lived experiences of former detainees into current and future JACS policies and practices;

6. establish a ‘Peer Mentor Program.’ Some participants noted that, given their personal experience with the criminal justice system, they are motivated to mentor others exiting the system. Research has shown that peer mentor programs can improve the post-release experience by providing empathy and practical advice (Kenemore and In 2020; Seppings 2015). The ACT Government should examine the feasibility of establishing a peer mentorship program, run by former detainees, to assist others with the complexity of re-entry. In designing a peer mentorship program, it would be important to take into account the small(er) population of the AMC, in comparison to correctional facilities in other Australian jurisdictions, and the challenges this might pose in identifying suitable peer mentors and;

7. establish an annual ACT (Re)integration Symposium. This research has provided insights into the importance of consistent collaboration between former detainees, policymakers, service providers and researchers to understand the challenges of the post-release experience. The ACT Government should host a multi-disciplinary symposium, bringing together these

stakeholders to gain further understanding of the post-release experience and establish locally-relevant 'best practice' for re-entry.

Introduction

In March 2019, the Australian prison population was at its highest-ever recorded level. Over the past decade, the number and rate of people imprisoned across all Australian states and territories has risen rapidly. In March 2020, the national imprisonment rate was almost 223 per 100,000 adult population, an increase of almost 30 percent in ten years (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2020; Australian Productivity Commission 2020). In 2018-19, expenditure on corrective services was almost \$5 billion for prisons and community corrections (Australian Productivity Commission 2020).

Reincarceration is a significant national issue. In 2020, the Australian Productivity Commission reported that 46 percent of people released from prison returned to prison within two years;¹ the figure for the Australian Capital Territory (the ACT) was 42 percent. The numbers are even more concerning when looking at those who returned to prison or received a community corrections order within two years;² nationally, almost 55 percent were re-engaged with corrections within two years. The ACT had the highest rate of return, at 71 percent of people returning to corrections within two years.³

While reincarceration rates can offer policymakers a reasonable measure as to whether prison ‘works’, that is, has the effect of reducing crime, care should be taken with interpreting re-imprisonment data as a performance indicator for corrective services agencies (Johns 2018). Reincarceration is a complex social issue involving an unknown number of variables, such as unemployment, drug use, laws, policing, homelessness, mental health issues, and the absence of social supports, with the net result reflected in the prison population (ACT Inspector of Correctional Services (ACT ICS) 2019; Harper and Chitty 2005; Maguire and Raynor 2017; Petersilia 2003; Taxman 2004). Reincarceration is also not necessarily the same as ‘recidivism’, as recidivist offenders are not always imprisoned (ACT ICS 2019).

¹ The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2020) adopts slightly different measurements, reporting that 58 percent of individuals in prison have been imprisoned previously, compared with 77 percent in the ACT.

² This can include a community service order, drug/alcohol treatment, supervision by corrections, or return to court date (Australian Productivity Commission 2020).

³ Prior imprisonment was not necessarily in the ACT. Prior imprisonment for the ACT includes both episodes of imprisonment under sentence and on remand (ABS 2019 Explanatory Notes).

For the purposes of this study, the term (re)integration is used to highlight the problem with the term reintegration. The latter term assumes a degree of integration to be resumed or rekindled, when, for many prisoners, the experience of ever having been integrated into a ‘law-abiding community is alien’ (Johns 2017, 20). Furthermore, Johns (2018) argued that rehabilitation requires a pre-existing level of health to be restored, which can be problematic for the prison population, due to their higher rates of mental health and general issues, compared to the general population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2019).

The Post-Release Experience

There is little recent Australian qualitative research on the experiences of people once they leave prison. The most influential study was conducted by Baldry et al in 2003. This longitudinal study interviewed prisoners pre- and post-release to investigate housing and integration post-release. The findings emphasised the importance of having secure housing, employment or study opportunities, and contact with and support from agencies post-release in reducing recidivism. In the last ten years, a small number of Australian research projects that followed a qualitative research design have investigated the experiences of people following their release from prison (Baldry et al 2018; Carlton and Segrave 2016; Cherney and Fitzgerald 2014; Griffiths et al 2017; Johns 2017; Schetzer and Streetcare 2013).

These studies ranged from interviewing 12 former prisoners in Victoria to understand the general post-release experience (Johns 2017) to interviewing 50 former prisoners nationally to understand the challenges they face with finding and keeping employment (Baldry et al 2018). These recent studies found that former prisoners face a range of challenges post-release. These can include a lack of education, limited employment skills and difficulties in transferring skills gained in prison after release, which can affect the likelihood of finding and keeping employment (Baldry et al 2018); the challenges of housing and the need for stability, security and belonging (Johns 2017; Schetzer and Streetcare 2013); the importance of post-release support and the need for a continuum of care to extend beyond the prison and in the community (Cherney and Fitzgerald 2014; Baldry et al. 2018; Johns 2017; Schetzer and Streetcare 2013); and the importance of former prisoners addressing underlying self-identity and confidence issues in their efforts to obtain and maintain employment (Cherney and Fitzgerald 2014; Johns 2017).

The current research provides key information in areas of significance for facilitating successful re-entry into the community, including, but not limited to, obtaining and maintaining employment (Baldry et al 2018; Borzycki 2005); addressing substance use issues (Borzycki 2005; Melbourne Criminology Research and Evaluation Unit 2003); having access to supportive relationships (Baldry et al 2003); and securing safe, stable accommodation (Baldry et al 2006; Borzycki 2005; Hinton 2004).

Aims of this Research Project

The aims of this project were to:

1. explore the lived experiences of detainees following their release from the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC) and their subsequent re-entry into society;
2. understand what service providers former detainees engage with, following their release and how this engagement has assisted them; and
3. further understand what works well and what can be improved, from a service provision perspective, to assist former detainees in their successful (re)integration into the community and ultimately to reduce levels of recidivism.

It is intended that the findings will provide insights not only to ACT policymakers and service providers, but also other Australian jurisdictions in the design and delivery of programs which seek to assist former prisoners in their (re)integration into the community.

Population of the AMC

The AMC houses male and female detainees at all classification levels (minimum, medium, maximum), sentenced and unsentenced (remand). As at 30 March 2020, according to the ABS (2020) the number of detainees at the AMC was 442. Men comprised the majority (409 detainees; 93 percent) of the prison population and unsentenced detainees comprised 40 percent (178 detainees) of the population. In 2019, the AMC had the highest proportion of unsentenced detainees across all Australian states and territories (ABS 2019). In 2019, the AMC population had a median age of 33. The median time spent on remand was 2.6 months and the median aggregate sentence length for sentenced detainees was 3.1 years (ABS 2019). Similar to other

Australian jurisdictions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over-represented, comprising 26 percent (114 detainees) of the total prison population in 2020 (ABS 2020).

Post-Release Experiences in the ACT

There has been limited qualitative research investigating the experiences of former prisoners (known as detainees in the ACT) of the AMC. The most recent study, the *2017 Evaluation of the Extended Throughcare Pilot Program* (the Throughcare Program) employed qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate clients' experiences with the Throughcare Program, the impact of the Throughcare Program in key areas, the strengths of the Throughcare Program, and areas of improvement (Griffiths et al 2017). The overall findings were positive. Participants highlighted a number of reasons why the Throughcare Program helped them on release, such as the personal characteristics of ACT Corrective Services (ACTCS) and service provider staff, and the impact on their self-esteem and confidence. However, the evaluation found three challenges. Firstly, there was some confusion by clients about the Throughcare Program, which could be overcome by providing more detailed information about the program or providing it again if needed. Secondly, there was insufficient stable and suitable housing, despite this being a key factor for a client to succeed post-release. Thirdly, the evaluation highlighted insufficient engagement with employment services, especially with those that had experience working with former detainees. The evaluation recommended that this engagement could be improved to assist clients to develop job-ready skills.

ACT Justice Reinvestment Strategy

JACS is currently implementing a Justice Reinvestment Strategy, with the goal of 'reducing recidivism by 25 percent by 2025' (ACT JACS 2020b). This strategy seeks to 'develop a smarter, more cost-effective approach to improving the criminal justice outcomes by reducing crime and diverting offenders, and those at risk of becoming offenders, from the criminal justice system' and is being implemented through the initiative, 'Building Communities Not Prisons' (the BCNP) (ACT JACS 2020b; see also Bartels 2019). BCNP is founded on the principles of restorative justice and human rights. It is also trauma-, gender- and evidence-informed in its approach to contextualising, mapping and tailoring policy solutions to offenders and their particular histories with the criminal justice system (ACT JACS 2020b). Contained

within the BCNP are six pillars of the justice reinvestment program, focusing on core issues which appear to be driving recidivism in the ACT (ACT JACS 2020c):

1. *The Justice Housing Program*: This is a core pillar of the BCNP initiative and is closely related to the ACT Government's aim to reduce recidivism by 25 percent by 2025. This program seeks to deliver solutions, via a multi-agency response, to the acknowledged lack of adequate, available and affordable housing for people released from custody (ACT JACS 2020a).
2. *The Strong Connected Neighbourhoods Program*: This pillar is a place-based justice reinvestment program, first operationalised in 2008, under the high-density housing program. The program aims to work with complex and high-needs residents who are at risk of or have come into contact with the criminal justice system (ACT JACS, 2020d).
3. *The Women Offenders Framework*: Not yet operationalised, this pillar is a statement of intent by the ACT Government to better 'strengthen correctional interventions, services and activities for female offenders, as well as enhancing opportunities for integration'. The framework is currently being developed, in partnership with key stakeholders in the ACT (ACT JACS, 2020e).
4. *Yarrabi Bamirr*: In Ngunnawal language,⁴ this translates to 'Walk Tall' and is the first ACT Justice Reinvestment trial project. It adopts a family-centric model and is delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations which enables a more culturally sensitive and evidence-based delivery of targeted interventions. The core aims are to 'improve life outcomes and reduce or prevent contact with justice system, particularly trans-generational offending' (ACT JACS, 2020f).
5. *Ngurrambai*: In Ngunnawal language, this translates to 'perceive' and is the second ACT Justice Reinvestment trial project. Ngurrambai is implemented within a culturally sensitive framework and calibrated to the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The objective of this trial is to reduce the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on remand and their time spent on remand (ACT JACS, 2020g).
6. *The Drug and Alcohol Sentencing List (DASL)*: In operation since December 2019, the DASL was developed to offer an alternative approach to rehabilitating offenders whose

⁴ The Ngunnawal people are traditional custodians of Canberra.

crime is related to drug or alcohol dependency. The objective is to provide ‘targeted and structured health and justice interventions while holding people to account for their behaviour’ (ACT Supreme Court 2020).

Methodology

This pilot project followed a qualitative research design. Qualitative research involves collecting in-depth information from a relatively small number of cases to draw inferences about a particular phenomenon. A significant element of qualitative research is ensuring the accuracy of the account in representing the participants’ realities of the studied social phenomena and ensuring the account is credible to them (Schwandt 1997).

A qualitative narrative research design was used for this study. Narrative is a way of both making sense of one’s lived experience and a way of sharing that understanding with others (Gergen 1999). Gubrium and Holstein (1997) described narrative practice as the ordering of a story that makes an otherwise chaotic narrative meaningful and reportable. Presser (2008) argued that narratives not only concern the past and the present, but also a desired future of which the narrative needs to make sense. Gergen and Gergen (1997) have noted that progressive narratives, in which things get better, allow individuals to believe in positive change, and argued that a progressive narrative can be self-reinforcing, because the hope generated in telling this type of story provides individuals with motivation to make the projected positive future a reality (see also Maruna 2001).

Adopting this research design allowed people exiting prison to tell the story of their experiences post-release. It also provided an opportunity to investigate how they position their post-release experiences in their lives, rather than treating their post-release experiences as an isolated occurrence (Riessman 2002). Visher and Travis (2003) argued that this approach is crucial for former prisoners (re)integrating into the community, as it recognises that re-entry into the community is not a ‘static’ event, but rather is fundamentally a social process that incorporates life prior to prison, life in prison, immediate release from prison and the years that follow.

Inclusion Criteria

There were two conditions that participants needed to fulfil to qualify for this study. The first was that they needed to have spent at least one month in the AMC. The second was that they had been released in the last six months. Previous studies have shown even a short period of incarceration can have an adverse effect on (re)integration into the community. For example, the Australian Law Reform Commission *Pathways to Justice Report* acknowledged that any period of incarceration can have a ‘compounding effect’ (2017, 81) on the life of an individual and their families. Especially for women, even short periods of incarceration can result in the removal of their children. Furthermore, previous research has shown that people serving shorter sentences are more often those who have committed multiple less serious offences and tend to cycle in and out of the justice system (Borzycki 2005; Baldry et al 2006; Dowse et al 2009).

Data Collection

Ethics approval was granted by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee in mid-2019. Permission was given by ACTCS in 2019, on condition that interviews were not conducted in the AMC. Support for this research was also given by a range of ACT service providers that support former prisoners upon release from the AMC. Around the time of the interviews, Doyle was the President of Prisoners Aid (ACT) and Bartels was Secretary of Prisoners Aid (ACT).

In March 2019, phone contact was made with service providers. If the service provider agreed to advertise the research, they were sent a flyer with information about the research project. This flyer contained the contact information (email and phone number) of the researchers, the inclusion criteria for the study (described above), payment information and stated that any information provided would not be shared with ACTCS or other agencies. Following permission from the service providers, some visits were made to further explain the research objectives to the front-line staff. Former detainees who agreed to participate in an interview (see Appendix for interview questions) were paid in \$20 Essentials Cards. It was initially planned that follow-up interviews would be conducted with participants; however, due to the challenges of recruiting participants (discussed below), only one interview was conducted with each participant.

Pseudonyms have been given to protect the participants' identity.

Interviews

After telephone contact with the researchers, an agreed time was arranged to meet at the Prisoners Aid (ACT) office at the ACT Magistrates' Court. This was a central location and the office had a private meeting room. All interviews were conducted by the first-named author. Before the interview, the researcher re-explained the research objectives and asked participants again if they met the inclusion criteria. The participants were provided with a consent form and accompanying participant information sheet and the details contained in these documents were explained. It was reinforced to participants, in plain language, that their participation was voluntary, they could leave at any time and that their participation would not affect any services they received from Prisoners Aid (ACT) or any other service providers. The interview commenced after participants provided written agreement. The interviews ran for 30-90 minutes and proceeded roughly according to the questions set out in the Appendix, with some exchanges more structured than others.

Coding Themes

Following the transcription of the interviews, the following codes were used to analyse the interview data:

- effective release preparation;
- housing;
- finding employment;
- utilisation/efficacy of services post-release;
- transportation;
- mental health post-release;
- substance-abuse post-release;
- confidence to reintegrate; and
- non-criminal familial bonds.

The purpose of identifying broad themes for coding in this project was to guide any future research into the experiences of people released from the AMC. Themes against which data were recoded and subsequently coded reflected an amalgamation of key meta-themes in the relevant literature which examines lived post-release experiences. As this is a pilot project and there is limited research available on the post-release experiences of detainees from the AMC, the selection of themes for data collection and subsequent coding was not intended to be hypothesis-testing (Leon et al 2010).

The codes are mainly drawn from Maruna's (2001) study *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. In this research, Maruna identified two broad themes or variables, termed 'hooks for change' (see also Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002). The first theme identified by Maruna (2001) is that the ability to lead a crime-free life is closely aligned with the availability of social and economic resources and prospects on release from incarceration. The second theme is that 'structural variables', such as housing, employment or the reasonable prospect of employment, independent transport (e.g. a car), and non-criminal familial bonds, are fundamental in sustaining a crime-free life.

This pilot project was therefore guided by Maruna's (2001) study by selecting the codes of effective release preparation, housing, employment prospects and transportation challenges. The value of these codes lies in their structural nature, their permanent and replicable importance in most modern societies, and their 'extrapolative' power in encouraging crime-free lifestyles post-release (Maruna 2001). The pilot project was also guided by the findings of the *Evaluation of the Extended Throughcare Pilot Program*, which found that stable and suitable housing is a key factor in people's ability to lead a crime-free lifestyle (Griffiths et al 2017).

This pilot project sought to investigate how well-equipped the participants were, from their own perspective, to not return to prison. A first- and second-level coding process used the theme of 'confidence to reintegrate' and 'effective release preparation'. These themes drew upon previous literature examining the powerful narratives of redemption and transformation in people's ability to lead a crime-free life (Herrschaft et al 2009; Jones et al 2000; Maruna 2001; O'Brien 2001; Richie 2001; Schinkel 2015). The interviews attempted to draw out from the participants how they viewed their experience in prison in preparing them for a return to the community. Implicit in these experiences of incarceration was whether the AMC provides

a space in which people could question past choices which led them to imprisonment and how best they may be able to avoid criminal behaviour once released. Flowing from this theme was the ‘utilisation/efficacy’ of services post-release. This theme is in keeping with the general consensus in the literature, that is, an individual’s ability to lead a crime-free lifestyle, no matter the type of redemptive mindset cultivated while incarcerated, hinges on the availability of social and economic structural variables and prospects post-release (Johns 2017; Maruna 2001; Schinkel 2015). The theme of ‘non-criminal familial bonds’ was another data point which flowed from the themes of ‘confidence to reintegrate’ and ‘utilisation/efficacy’ of services post-release. Lackner (2012) found that, for women in particular, whose lifestyles were characterised by crime, substance use, and abusive, controlling, or dysfunctional relationships, imprisonment acted as a form of intervention. The final themes of mental health post-release and substance abuse post-release stem from recent ACT studies, specifically, the *Healthy Prison Review* (ACT ICS 2019), the *ACT Detainee Health and Wellbeing Survey* (ACT Health 2017) and *The Stories of ACT Women in Prison* (Women’s Centre for Health Matters (WCHM) 2019).

Challenges of Doing Research with Former Detainees

While all qualitative research is predicated on establishing rapport and trust, this was particularly important for this research. There are specific logistical challenges that researchers can encounter with capturing the experiences and insights of former prisoners (Baldry et al 2018; Baldry et al 2003; Johns 2017). Johns (2017, 111) emphasised that ‘flexibility, tenacity and respect... were required to locate, make contact and meet with participants’. Baldry et al (2003) acknowledged the difficulties in recruitment, as former prisoners may have no formal reporting requirements and usually want to avoid bureaucratic control.

One particular challenge in recruiting and interviewing participants relates to the ethical issues that researchers need to consider, given the institutional and disadvantaged characteristic of this group (Willis 2005). For example, Johns (2017) conducted face-to-face interviews with 12 former prisoners in Victoria and acknowledged that assuring the confidentiality of participants’ responses was critical in establishing trust, as was a guarantee of anonymity. Early on, for this research project, we received feedback from service providers, potential participants and

participants about the research flyer. For example, some noted the importance of highlighting that any information provided would not be shared with ACTCS.

Previous studies have highlighted that researchers should acknowledge why a participant might want to take part in research, including an expectation of economic gain (Fry et al 2006), rewards for others (Harrison 1991) or therapeutic benefit (Latterman and Merz 2001). In Australia and other developed countries, it has become common practice to pay participants. The ethical issues related to research payments have been explored in the literature (Mercer et al 2015; Permuth-Wy and Borenstien 2009). Previous research has shown that monetary payments are effective at increasing the recruitment of adult participants (Bower and Gilson 2003; Jennings 2012).

For this research, the principal researcher explained to the participants her experience in the area and motivation for the research project. This appeared to be particularly important in developing rapport with participants. She explained to them her involvement with Prisoners Aid (ACT) and how anything they said during the interview would not affect any services they would receive from Prisoners Aid (ACT) or other service providers. She also repeated on various occasions that any identifying information provided would not be shared with ACTCS or other agencies. She used simple language when explaining the consent form and how their information would be stored. One challenge with completing the consent form was that some participants did not yet know their mobile phone number or email address, as they were recently released and had forgotten their email password. Many also did not know their address.

Whilst it was initially proposed that participants could tell other people, who fit the inclusion criteria, about the research project, this proved to be difficult for two reasons. First, some reported that they did not want to socialise with other former detainees and, secondly, because some participants said that their peer group was still inside the AMC. The second challenge related to the difficulty of arranging interviews with participants in 'the future'. Most participants requested to meet within the next 24 to 48 hours, as they were not sure of their future plans, such as a potential job interview, a court date and time or a housing inspection. Furthermore, on two occasions, arrangements were made to meet participants, but they did not turn up at the pre-arranged time and did not answer follow-up phone calls/messages.

Limitations

This study was a pilot project. The focus on one Australian jurisdiction and the sample size limit the generalisability of the findings, as with any qualitative research, but provide a depth of understanding and analysis to some of the challenges people face upon release from prison. Further research on this area, taking into account the challenges of doing this type of research, could target a larger sample size. They should also focus on examining the specific challenges that people who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander face, as only one person in this study identified as such. It should be noted that such research would preferably be conducted by an Indigenous researcher and we may have had a higher response rate from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders in such circumstances.

Findings

Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Age	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	Previous prison episode/s	Time spent in AMC	Remand or sentenced
Carl	Male	49	No	Yes	Four months	Remand
Brian	Male	25	No	Yes	Six months	Remand and sentenced
John-Andrews	Male	46	No	Yes	Six years	Sentenced
Ian	Male	55	No	Yes	Six months	Remand
Aaron	Male	50	Yes	Yes	Six months	Sentenced
James	Male	35	No	Yes	One month	Remand
Sean	Male	43	No	No	Five months	Sentenced
Renee	Woman	34	No	Yes	Eight months	Remand

Michael	Male	39	No	Yes	More than one month	Remand
Kevin	Male	36	No	Yes	One month	Remand
Vivian	Woman	46	No	Yes	12 months	Sentenced

The majority of participants were male. They ranged in age from 25 years old to 46 years old, with a median age of 43. Their prison sentences ranged from six years to a month with the median sentence being six months. Most participants had been on remand in the AMC and one participant had been both on remand and sentenced.

We found that participants appeared to be motivated to participate in the research by two factors. The first was the monetary payment, with some specifically referring to the fact that they were ‘really struggling at the moment’ and needed it to buy food or baby clothes. However, others mentioned that they were not interested in the monetary payment, but rather wanted to see changes for future people in the same position and that this was the first time someone had asked about their experiences. Whilst they were interested in seeing change, they were however sceptical about any change happening.

Previous Prison Episodes

The majority of participants had previously spent time in prison. These previous episodes ranged from one to six episodes. The time spent previously incarcerated ranged from one month to 16 years. For some, this may have been a recent episode, such as in the last six months; for others, their last prison episode was over 14 years ago. To protect the identity of participants, specific information on their number of previous prison episodes has not been provided.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

Only one participant identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Further research is needed to ensure the specific challenges that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people face upon release are identified.

Key Findings

The key findings spoke to the critical issues of housing and the provision of services during incarceration and post-release to assist former detainees with navigating the challenges of returning to the community. These findings drew upon the nine coded thematic issues set out above, either through direct reference, such as being prompted to address the theme in the form of the question/s posed, or indirectly, such as the participants' spontaneous reference to the theme. Accordingly, our findings are structured around the following themes:

- effective release preparation;
- housing;
- finding employment;
- utilisation/efficacy of services;
- transportation;
- mental health;
- substance-abuse;
- confidence to reintegrate; and
- non-criminal familial bonds.

Effective Release Preparation

A range of group programs are offered at the AMC, including offence-specific, offence-related and wellbeing programs, to provide detainees with opportunities to address their criminogenic needs and assist them in leading crime-free lives post-release (ACTCS 2019; ACT ICS 2019). In these programs, participant numbers range from four to eighteen, depending on resources and detainee numbers (ACTCS 2019). Some programs are offered with rolling entry and others are scheduled on a non-ongoing basis. As set out in the ACTCS (2019) *Compendium of Programs*, the programs available to detainees at the AMC include:

- **Offence-specific (Criminogenic) Programs:** these target the range of factors that influence an individual's criminal behaviour. They are available to sentenced detainees and participants are individually assessed for eligibility by ACTCS staff:

- the *Sex Offender Program Suite* are programs that focus specifically on sexual offenders and aim to help participants gain an understanding of their offending and required future behaviours;
 - *Sex Offenders with a Learning or Intellectual Disability (SOLID)*: this is a group-based therapeutic intervention for adult men convicted of sexual offences with learning or intellectual disabilities and people with mental health disorders who are not suitable for the Sex Offender Program Suite;
 - the *Domestic Abuse Program* draws on a gendered understanding of violence and abuse within relationships and addresses these issues from the perspective of power and control; and
 - the *Violence Intervention Program*, which aims to reduce the detainee's risk of repeat violence, 'by increasing their self-awareness, self-management, conflict resolution skills, and better regulate affective responses and behavioural outcomes' (2019: 16).
- **Offence-related Programs:** these offer support for remand and sentenced detainees who use alcohol and other drugs (AOD):
 - *Harm Minimisation*, which presents ways to minimise harms associated with AOD ;
 - *Alcohol and Drug Awareness and Harm Prevention Training (ADAPT)* involves psychoeducational group sessions that promote AOD awareness;
 - *First Steps Alcohol and Drug Program* is a drug educational program for detainees with offending behaviour relating to substance abuse;
 - the *Self-Management and Recovery Training (SMART) Program* is a psychoeducational program which assists detainees with problematic behaviours, such as drugs, gambling, alcohol;
 - the *Solaris Therapeutic Community (TC)* is a residential program for male detainees who have AOD dependency issues;
 - the *Anger Management Program* targets the emotional and physiological components of anger and conflict resolution skills; and
 - the *Stress Less Program* is a psychoeducational program focussed on, managing and reducing depression, anxiety and stress.
 - **Wellbeing Programs:** these offer remand and sentenced detainees opportunities to attend mental health and personal development programs:

- *Circles of Security*: this is designed for both males and females with active parenting roles and focuses on improving the developmental pathways of children and their parents;
- *Seasons for Growth*: is a psychoeducational program for people who have experienced significant change or loss. It examines the impact of these significant changes and explores how people can learn to live with and grow from these experiences;
- *Out of the Dark*: this is a program for women who have experienced domestic and family violence as victims. It assists participants to identify issues around domestic and family violence and identify options and support available;
- the *Real Understanding of Self-Help (RUSH) Program* assists detainees who are vulnerable to suicidal and self-harming behaviour; and
- the *Cognitive Self Change Program*, which utilises cognitive behaviour therapies to enable participants to become more self-aware of thoughts relating to risk-taking behaviour and encourages the cultivation of less harmful modes of thinking.

There are also a range of programs and services specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delivered on a weekly and monthly basis, such as the:

- *Elders Visitation Program*: Ngunnawal Elders and other respected local community leaders from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia make formal visits and provide cultural advice and support to detainees and staff;
- *Elders Healing Program*: Local Elders who have experience and qualifications in social work and/or psychology suggest strategies for detainees who have demonstrated social/emotional distress whilst incarcerated;
- *Elders Yarning Circle Program (Men)*: Selected Indigenous male community leaders lead a culturally safe group discussion on problems Indigenous men have inside and outside the AMC. Strategies are presented to deal with these problems;
- *Elders Yarning Circle Program (Women)*: Selected Indigenous female community leaders lead a culturally safe group discussion on problems Indigenous women have inside and outside the AMC. Strategies are presented to deal with these problems;

- *Elders Indigenous Art Program (Men)*: Delivered by the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) Yurauna Centre, this program teaches Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men about traditional and contemporary Aboriginal art. Participants can attain a Certificate II in Cultural Art and sell their artwork through the ACTCS Indigenous Detainee Art Catalogue or gift to family and friends;
- *Elders Indigenous Art Program (Women)*: Delivered by a local Aboriginal woman, this art program aims to support the healing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women through creative practice. Participants explore art and culture through facilitated activities;
- *Elders Music Expression Program (Men & Women)*: Delivered by a Community Elder, this program is aimed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women interested in learning about culture through traditional and contemporary Indigenous dance routines. Participants learn about the importance dance plays in ceremony. There is the possibility of performing dances at future events at the AMC;
- *Indigenous Women's Leadership & Wellbeing Program*: Facilitated by Clybucca Dreaming, this program provides leadership training to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and aims to empower them to take back control of their lives and take on a leadership role in the lives of their family and community. It covers pre-release planning, post-release support navigation and ongoing support from the Clybucca Dreaming.

Notwithstanding this broad range of programs, the *Healthy Prison Review* (ACT ICS 2019) found that there are challenges in regards to accessing programs, including that it can take up to five months for a program to 'roll around', programs are not consistently run and the lack of facilitators, as well as clashes between education, rehabilitation programs and work times. This review also found that:

- 57 percent of detainees were not aware of the range of programs available to them at the AMC;
- 76 percent believed that available programs did not meet their needs;
- 66 percent did not believe that programs helped them to address their offending behaviour;
- 71 percent did not believe programs helped them to prepare for release; and

- 58 percent did not feel a sense of achievement by participating in programs (ACT ICS 2019).

The *Stories of ACT Women in Prison* (WCHM 2019) found that some of the women in their qualitative project valued the opportunity to access programs whilst in the AMC, but others did not feel their needs were met. Other relevant reports, such as the ACT Auditor-General's (2015) *Report on the Rehabilitation of Male Detainees at the AMC*, discussed the services and programs available to detainees at the AMC. Similarly, the Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety found few performance measures or key indicators to suggest that the rehabilitative services offered at the AMC were 'efficient, effective and targeted' (2016, 6).

In addition to the programs detailed above, there are also a range of education and training courses available to detainees at the AMC. The delivery of these courses is outsourced under contract to Forsite Training Pty Ltd (ACT ICS 2019). The Certificate I and II courses take around 48-104 weeks to complete, if detainees are able to commit to the requirement of study one day a week. Detainees are also encouraged to undertake relevant courses as a requirement for being employed in a range of jobs at the AMC jobs, such as unit cleaners (ACT ICS 2019). As a specific example, the AMC bakery has been open since 2017 and provides employment for around 20 detainees and baked goods for the prison. Bakery workers are given the opportunity to pursue a Certificate II (Retail Bakery Assistance) qualification (ACT ICS 2019).

In 2019, the *Healthy Prison Review* (ACT ICS 2019) found that a significant proportion of detainees were concerned about training opportunities and, specifically, that the courses offered were not relevant to their employment needs post-release. For example, they do not provide recognised qualifications that could assist detainees in finding employment post-release (ACT ICS 2019).

As the below comments highlight, from the participants' perspective, the programs at the AMC appeared to be inadequate in terms of developing their capacity-building and skills development options in preparing them for re-entry into the community:

Well, in the AMC, there should be a program for people who are close to getting out, say three months before they get out. A living skills program, where they learn how to cook basic meals. Healthy meals. Budget, even go, righto, 'you get this much money,

your food comes [to] this... Your rent comes to this, your electricity, your gas comes to this. This is what you've got left. And if you've got a phone, you put so much on your phone. Now, what are you going to do with the rest of this?' Things like that...A course like that run in jail would be helpful to a lot of people. And once they make it out, having another course to go to outside. And then have one of the workers coming in, going into the house, having a yarn to them. 'What do you need, what do you want?' (Aaron).

I think they should run programs for helping people for goals, goal-setting. And helping people start from small, even doing stuff in the system where they can set goals in the system that are achievable and, you know, start making bigger goals and bigger goals until they've got enough confidence to then just... yeah, I can really do this, I can really do this on the outside, you know. (Carl).

Probably more programs. You know, therapeutical stuff. Maybe having some counsellors that help with building people's confidence and stuff like that and not thinking... they can't break that mould and they're destined to fail. (Ian).

So yeah, programs... like some of the stuff that I saw that was going on, there was a lack of, just everyone was bored...You know, to me, a lot of them don't have any ambition. So, I think the main thing is having programs there to help people realise that this is just a mug's game, you know, there's no future here, get them into a right frame of mind, where they're achieving small goals and getting bigger ones and showing them there's more to life than going back in and out of jail, you know. (James).

John-Andrews specifically made reference to the importance of a mentoring type of program being delivered by someone who has lived experience in the criminal justice system:

Programs some mentoring and guidance...guidance rather than guys get out... But yeah, a bit of mentoring and that. Like, walking through what they've [former detainees] done coming out of jail, how they got back on track and walk them through it.

A second issue that participants made reference to when discussing effective release preparation was the inadequacy of current programs in preparing them for employment opportunities post-release:

The skills that I learned in AMC definitely wouldn't help with the outside world. They feel quite schooled, I guess. It feels like I'm back in the first-grade school. It's quite basic. Definitely nothing to gain for it on the outside world. For some people, it's like your first semester at school, it's real basic stuff you get in there, and I find a lot of it in there would not help you out here at all. And if I was to turn around to an employer and present the things that they gave me to present, it just wouldn't look so good, I don't think. (Brian).

I found the jail, like, any jobs that they [other detainees] do have, they don't take really seriously anyway. It's not like they would do on the outside, you know what I mean? It's only just to get, you know, a bit of money from the job and that's all it is. They don't really, you know, take it seriously. (Kevin).

Yeah, like qualifications for the work they do out there and that. Like, if we're going to do a job out there, at least you're training them properly. If they're going to make training, you're training them, so that you can walk out into a... job out there. Or, if they're going to be in the kitchen, they're qualified for the time they're working. (John-Andrews).

I had a job in the AMC of cleaning windows. What's that going to give me? I'm not going to get my squeegee and bucket of water and go to... or what? ... I don't think it [job training at the AMC] meets the level of community that would be required in the community. It's quite rewardless in there. For jobs like that, you don't really gain. Then again, I can't speak for the bakery and all that. Because I was never presented the opportunity for any of that. Never heard anything about it. (Brian).

By contrast, Renee spoke about her positive experience of working in the bakery, commenting on the importance of training being provided by other detainees, rather than correctional officers:

But I guess they're [the programs] not really great. But yeah, I worked in the bakery, so that's sort of how I filled my days... it was pretty good. So, it wasn't corrective services that trained us. It was, like, the girls that had been working there for a long period of time.

When Kevin was asked if he would have been interested in doing education courses offered at the AMC, he said: 'I just thought, I don't know how well it would be recognised you did a course or went to uni in jail'.⁵

A third issue concerning effective release preparation and access to programs at the AMC related to a lack of knowledge of availability of programs, as highlighted by the following comments:

unless you engage, you really don't know about these programs, and I guess it's a bit of paper that goes around, like an officer says, 'do you want to do this program?' There's no insight into the program. So, maybe you shed a little bit more light. I was just lucky enough, my mate's doing it, I'll do it... I've heard about people doing it doing it before, 'oh, yeah, I'll do that, but how do I go about it?' I don't know. And just by chance, I happened to sign up into a program and it had this in it and that fell into that and everything just fell into place for me, quite luckily. But had I not had that one friend saying 'I'm doing that program, come and do it', then I would not have known and potentially could have wrecked the next four to five years of my life. (Brian).

The story is like, you know, like you don't always get to education. And if you can get [there], you might not go three times a week. But pretty much every week and you'll miss a day. (Michael).

There's always something happening there. Meaning like random lock-ins. So, nothing is ever sort of like... consistent. A certain guideline or anything, just random things always occur. (Kevin).

⁵ This concern is unfounded, given that any university courses completed by detainees at the AMC only refer to the university's name, with no reference to the course having been completed in prison.

Renee commented on the specific challenges women can encounter with accessing programs:

[M]y cellmate was actually quite badly raped and hurt by a particular male and she ended up in jail, her very first time in jail and she was 45, and the guy who'd done all this stuff to her, yeah. And she had to walk past him every day and it would, she would just break down, you know, because she'd have to see him standing at the gate... It was, traumatising, bringing back memories.

This observation of possible danger and harm was acknowledged by the ICS in its report on the *Care and Management of Remandees* (ACT ICS 2018) and the *Healthy Prison Review* (ACT ICS 2019). These reports reaffirmed that remandees and sentenced detainees are often not separated in the AMC. The separation of particular detainees in the AMC, such as for security and safety reasons, can also have an impact on freedom of movement and complicate visits and access to programs and activities (ACT ICS 2018; ACT ICS 2019).

Housing

Upon release from the AMC, former detainees may be eligible for social housing through Housing ACT.⁶ To apply for social housing applicants need to complete an online application which can be lodged via email or phone. Agencies, such as OneLink, may be able to assist detainees with this application while they are in the AMC. With the application, individuals need to include documentation such as proof of identify, proof of residency in the ACT, proof of income and assets and proof of legal custody of dependent children (Housing ACT 2020). As of June 2020, there were 2,478 people on the ACT housing register waiting list,⁷ with the average waiting time⁸ for priority housing at 197 days, high needs housing at 776 days and standard housing at 1,247 days (Housing ACT 2020). There are also 'Affordable Housing' options, such as Argyle House, which provides safe, secure and sustainable accommodation for employed individuals (Argyle Housing 2020). Other accommodation options can include

⁶ To be eligible, a person must be: 16 years or older, in Australia lawfully and not subject to a time limit imposed by law, and a resident in the ACT for a period of six months immediately before the assessment date. Income barriers for a single applicant are \$754 gross per week.

⁷ This refers to approved applications currently on the list.

⁸ This is calculated in relation to those approved applications still currently on the list from the date of initial registration or re-assessment for either Priority Housing/Transfer or High-needs Housing/Transfer.

private rental. However, Canberra is the most expensive city in Australia to rent, with houses a median price of \$580 per week and units a median price of \$480 a week (Domain 2019).

All participants spoke about the issue of housing upon release. When participants were asked about what they would like to achieve over the coming months, to ensure they did not return to prison, the majority noted the importance of housing:

[G]ood housing, that's like critical... it's so important where you live. (Brian).

I would like to have my own housing. So that's why I'm in the transitional house, waiting for [ACT] Housing to provide me with a house. (Renee).

Number one priority would be steady accommodation...The biggest thing for me is, because I've been there and I've always gone out and gone to, like, the derelict, run-down flats, and this time, I'm in a nice townhouse and it's just, like it's been the best thing in my life. (Michael).

For Carl, housing was the second most important goal after employment. As he noted: 'Yeah, get out of Ainslie Village, that's for sure'. For Aaron, housing was important to reconnect with family, as 'I wouldn't have been able to get my son back'.

Specifically, when discussing the challenges of housing, our participants spoke of the difficulties of organising accommodation in the lead-up to their release date:

I had great hassles getting the housing. I'm actually at the caravan park living in a motel room... But yeah, trouble getting somewhere for parole was an issue to start with. [ACT] Housing, they won't interact with you whilst you're in custody. They will not... They won't even put you on a wait list, won't even talk to you, unless it's about your bills or about your accounts... If you want to organise somewhere for when you get out, it's like 'you come and see us when you get out and we'll put you on the priority list'... It's like, 'yeah, well, I can't get out unless I got somewhere to live. I can't get somewhere to live until I'm out'. Yeah, so, Housing ACT was a real issue. I was just lucky the caravan park accepted me on parole. (John-Andrews).

When you go to the AMC, you're not really classified as homeless. So, you can put in a housing application, but it doesn't move anywhere, it stays on hold until you get out, until you get out, that's when it sort of makes progress... Because when you get out, you don't have a place, you can't set it up while you're in there. You've got to do it when you get out... Places like, there are like Ainslie Village and Samaritan House, but they're pretty much the only options. (Kevin).

When I got released, I didn't have a place to go to. So, if I had the option of having a place and no furniture, I'd take it. At least it's still somewhere I can go to, you know, rather than jail as the only option sort of thing... My main problem, I guess this was just for me, was accommodation and I couldn't get it. I stayed with my mum for a bit, that didn't turn out well. I struggled with that. But, luckily, I put in an application for housing when I first went in there [the AMC], so, I've already got a housing application in, I just sort of had to go into Housing and show them ID and tell them I'm out of jail and stuff to get my housing application going again and trying to get some support letters. (Kevin).

Participants also spoke to the long lists associated with accessing public housing:

I don't think I'll be out of there [current accommodation] for a while, because the list for public housing, there's a lot of people in front of me. I know that. ... it's going to be a long time. That's the biggest barrier. I could survive there, but I don't want to survive, I want to live. (Carl).

Housing, it's a struggle, because, again, we get out of jail and we go to housing and it's just such a long wait-list and we're put at the back of the line of that. And it just takes so long to get anything rolling. (Brian).

Michael described what suitable housing would look like to him:

A place where my mum wants to stay and have a cup of coffee with me... A place where I don't feel embarrassed... I actually go home and I'm like, wanting to clean up, because I have like a nice place. Like, it's a nice feeling and I haven't been able to do this for 15 years...

However, for Renee, suitable accommodation was more about living in a particular neighbourhood:

And I did actually go look at one [housing] probably about five weeks ago, but I had to decline it because it was right behind a drug dealer's house that I used to get off and that's a high-risk situation for me. So, yeah, it's just a waiting game now.

Brian recognised the challenges of being able to access suitable housing: 'If housing is out of reach through Housing Commission. I don't see how I would afford private rental. I don't see that. I wouldn't even think of it as an option'. When he was asked to explain what challenges he might encounter with obtaining a private rental, he said:

Some sort of history [rental history] and possibly not having the best one to go off, especially if you're just coming out of jail. It can be quite hard... Housing, I think there is a lot of unreliaibilities coming from jail, or a sense of unreliability from jail, especially from someone in my issues, been in and out of jail. So, if you were to go to a private rental, I really think you'd be knocked back straight away, just no, the whole judgemental side of things.

Finding Employment

Employment opportunities for low(er) skilled workers in the ACT are limited, compared to other Australian jurisdictions (Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business 2019). A large percentage of employment opportunities in the ACT are in the Federal and ACT public service, which often require a certain educational level, such as at a minimum completion of Year 10 schooling, and criminal background checks (Australian Public Service Commission 2020). According to the Australian Human Rights Commission (2020), there is no definition of what constitutes a 'criminal record' and it has been interpreted broadly to include not only what exists on a police record, but also the circumstances of the conviction. There is a general exception to discrimination in employment, known as the 'inherent requirements' exception, which allows some employers the right to legally screen potential employees for their criminal record, and to take that record into account in employment

decisions (Australian Human Rights Commission 2020). In the ACT, an ‘irrelevant criminal record’ is a protected attribute under the *Discrimination Act 1991* (ACT).

Spent conviction laws allow criminal records to be amended after a certain period of time, usually subject to no future convictions, and employees/job applicants are not required to disclose information about their spent convictions (Australian Human Rights Commission 2020; Victorian Inquiry into a Legislated Spent Convictions Scheme 2019). In the ACT, a conviction generally becomes ‘spent’ after ten years of being ‘crime-free’ (see *Spent Convictions Act 2000* ACT s 13(1)(b)), although this only applies to prison sentences of six months or less and sexual offences are not capable of becoming spent (s 11(2)).

Other challenges in terms of accessing particular employment opportunities can relate to ‘Working with Children’ or ‘Working with Vulnerable People’ background checks (Office of the Children’s Guardian NSW 2020). In the ACT, the *Working with Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Act 2011* (ACT) requires those who work with vulnerable people (WWVP) to have a background check, including a criminal history, and be registered.

Our participants spoke at large about the importance of obtaining employment post-release. For most, after housing, securing employment was seen as the most important step they wanted to achieve in the coming months, to ensure they did not return to prison. For example, Brian spoke of the importance of housing and ‘a job to facilitate that’. Carl and Renee also both said they wanted to be working and Michael said: ‘if [I] don’t get some sort of job in six months’ time, I can see myself being back in there [the AMC]’. When Aaron was asked what was an important factor for him not returning to prison again, he said: ‘the only thing that will change is whether I work or not’.

Other comments from participants indicated that employment would provide purpose to their day-to-day lives:

Maybe if I had, you know, work to go into, speaking just for me... If I had my old job to go back to and stuff, get out, go back to work, you know, sort of put everything behind you, I probably wouldn’t have struggled as hard... (Kevin).

Probably one of the biggest things coming out of jail would be employment. If guys got accommodation and job, where they're getting a decent wage... They've got no reason to go back to their old lifestyle... I think it'd just be so much better for guys if they got out, ... could walk into a job or even on-job train... having something to keep them where they're distracted and they're not sitting around on their butt all day smoking... bongs, using drugs. (John-Andrews).

Employment... like this Newstart, there's so many people just rely[ing] on the dole, it's not actually that much. You go walking down the street and there's no signs in the window, like jobs vacant. You know what I mean?... because you can only do this little routine for so long... like... I said to mum for the next 20 years, what am I meant to do? Like, catch a bus, get my methadone, have a coffee. It's ridiculous... (Michael).

You're relying on yourself, you're not having to rely on a Centrelink benefit. It's quite, for some, disheartening. I hate it, I really do. To be self-reliant is something to be proud of and can be quite motivating. (Brian).

Participants also acknowledged the real and perceived challenges to gaining employment. Some saw their criminal record as being an impediment to securing a job:

But they [employers] want to know about your criminal records and things like that, a police check. I don't even know if I'll get one [WWVP card] now. (Ian).

I've got to get a better resumé. But, coming out of jail, it's not easy to get a job either... Most jobs, you've got to have your licence and your criminal check or something. (Kevin).

However, John-Andrews had some 'faith' that he might be able to find any employer who would take him on, despite his criminal record:

When I was in Queensland, I was on release to work, so I had to tell them, 'look, I'm from a jail and they let me out, go find a job'... Most of them [employers] were quite willing to give you a shot if they feel that you were able to be released back into the community... You just got to talk your way into it, more or less.

For some, it was important to be honest about revealing their criminal record to potential employers:

Like, a lot of them [employers] do police checks, and honesty is the best policy. So, you've got to be honest and say, 'yes, I do have criminal history', which you get knocked back a lot for. (Renee).

People ask me, bosses ask me when I went to the interviews. 'Do you have a criminal record' Aaron?' 'Yes I do'... I was taught, never lie to your employer. Because he'll find out and you mightn't have a job. If you tell him straight up front, he might go, 'yeah, well, you told me upfront, you'll be honest with me, so I'll give you a start'. But for some reason, Max Employment [an employment service provider] doesn't like people to tell them. I told them, I said, 'what happens if they ask me if I've got a criminal record?' But you don't have to say. You can say, been in a bit of trouble... Every time I go to a job interview, if they ask if I've got a criminal record, 'yeah, here you go'... I'll say what I've been in trouble for. (Aaron).

By contrast, others saw revealing their criminal record as having the potential to limit their employment prospects:

Yeah, there's no way you want to disclose it to them. Why would you want anyone to know that? (Carl).

Having that reference to go off is not going to be so great. I see a potential (sic) quite a struggle there for any employer to take me on ... And then also the look of someone being in jail, is not very... An employer turns around and says to me, 'so what have you been doing with your life over the last 12 months?' And you say 'jail'. Again, there's your anxiety flaring up. It's not a good outlook, you don't have much to fall back on and say 'I've done this, I've done that.' (Brian).

Vivian explained her anxiety with completing an online job application form, which asked about her criminal record:

When I was confronted with those questions [about her criminal record], I was like, I wish I could lie, because it was changeable.... Because it's personally challenging. What am I going to reveal? What are your rights in that? ... I think if it came up in an interview, I wouldn't hide it, I would just say, 'this is very personal'... I would hope that what I revealed was seen. This is how it is, take it or leave it, whatever you want to make from it.

Other challenges mentioned by participants in terms of gaining employment related to their need to address their own mental health before committing to an employer:

I really do want to go back to work, but I've got other things as well that I've got to sort of try and manage. (Kevin).

Right now, I'm not really concerned with Centrelink or jobs or anything like that. Right now, I'm just focused on my recovery... I can go out there right now and find a job straight away, but then, once I get my first pay check, I might find myself down the pub or down a dealer's place getting on and getting back down the same path that led me to the first debt and landed me in jail. (Brian).

For Aaron, the challenge was about completing further education to improve his employment opportunities. However, he was anxious about returning to school 'and doing my HSC [Higher School Certificate]. I don't want to walk into a classroom full of young fellas... I know I've got to go back to school to get my HSC, but that scares me'.

Some acknowledged that they did have certain strengths, which would be useful for gaining employment:

I've got some strengths and bit of knowledge. I know how to go about organising those kind of things and putting them in place, just getting off my butt and doing them. So, the motivation, is the hard part (John-Andrews).

I worked in the public service for six years. So, you know, like a busy environment, problem solving skills, you know, good customer service. Yeah, so I do have a lot of

that. And prior to the public service it was always sort of similar roles. So, help desk, you know, for a long time. (Renee).

Carl saw his strengths as related to his own personal experiences in the criminal justice system and how these personal experiences would put him in a good position for helping others navigate the system:

I'm good at helping people, and I'm a pretty good communicator, but I'm not qualified at anything. The only thing I'm qualified at is in building, a truck licence. Not anymore, it's suspended, but got all these tickets, asbestos tickets and all that. It's nothing I really want to do. ... I can't see being, my life being defined by I'll go and dig a hole. So, you probably get it all the time, but I'd rather be somewhere like here [Prisoners Aid office], where I know the system. If I know the people, they know me, they know I'm not going to judge them. I'm not qualified for anything and I'm not much of a studier either (Carl).

Utilisation/Efficacy of Services

This section examines participants' utilisation and the efficacy of services post-release. The analysis is grouped into three broad themes: case management, Throughcare and service providers.

Case Management

In July 2019, ACTCS moved to a new staffing framework for case management at the AMC. This involved the recruitment and training of new staff to fill permanent roles of Sentence Management Officers, previously known as Case Managers (ACT ICS 2019). Each detainee should be allocated a Sentence Manager within their first week of induction to discuss their sentence management plan. All remandees should also have access to a Sentence Manager. Each Sentence Manager manages a case load of around 50 detainees (ACT ICS 2019). In 2019, the ACT ICS found that around two-thirds of sentenced detainees reported that they had a case manager, they knew the name of their case manager and could access their case manager when they needed (ACT ICS 2019).

A majority of our participants felt there was inadequate information provided to them by their case manager:

Even the case managers that came to the AMC, they'd come and introduce themselves to you. Maybe they'd ring your real estate agent, but that would be the last you'd hear of them. It was the same from everybody... Nothing can change. You email, you don't even get an email back. Might be getting released, and they never show up (Ian).

If you want to see one, you can't see one, because you haven't been sentenced. You get what I'm saying? So, I was in there for five months. You know how many case managers I seen? I've seen one, within five days, because that's part of their obligation... You can start filling in forms and shit like that, you know what I mean? Why the fricken hell should you have to? (Sean).

Three of the times I got out and had no support, nothing at all... (Michael).

So, the first time I was released, there was a bit of support. Not ongoing, just like, 'do you need a taxi home? Do you have shoes to go?' That sort of support. This time, I was just released, no questions, no case manager to come down and see me. Nothing. So, it was quite nerve-wracking. I was questioning myself, 'am I even getting out?' (Brian).

Brian then went onto say how this left him feeling like there was not much support post-release: 'Then again, anxiety triggers, just leaves you feeling a bit distant I guess, don't know how to cope. So, I don't feel there's much support at all'.

Sean reflected on another former detainee he knew and the struggles he was facing with (re)integrating into the community because of the lack of support he had from his case manager leading up to his release:

There was a guy there, he'd been locked up for five years. Bang, came and got him, you've been released. After five-and-a-half years. And that's it, open a door, 'see you later'. I've seen him out, I've seen him once. And he's struggled, he was struggling, and I'm pretty sure he might be back there now. I know he was going back in court. How does that, how can you just release someone after five-and-a-half years of being

incarcerated and then 'see you later'? He's just going to go back in. He didn't want to come out in the first place really. He said 'no, I'd rather just stay here.'

Renee commented on her partner's experience with his case manager and how, from her perspective, further communication was needed:

My partner was going for parole. His case manager, I think she was away for six weeks straight. And all the information on the outside was getting passed onto her to be passed onto my partner, but because she wasn't there, she wasn't able to do anything. So, he pretty much had to do his whole, parole hearing and everything on his own, sort it out himself, which was a big stress for him.

However, according to Renee, the women appear to have good access to case managers, in comparison to men:

Yeah, I think with the females it's a bit different. Like they [case managers] just come into the yard, you know, and everyone sort of pounces on them... But for the males I've heard it's very hard for them.

Some participants made reference to the custodial staff at the AMC and the need to rely on them for not only accessing case managers, but also their day-to-day needs:

But they're [custodial staff] not going to talk to you because we're just inmates to them. You know, depends what kinds of correctional officers are there. A lot of them will have different opinions on how they view the inmates in prison. Some of the officers have been the worst people in the world and make us jump through hoops, and fucking... rub the salt and all that sort of thing. And just get off on it (James).

For Kevin, the hardest part of prison was that everything was out of his control, including access to his case manager:

You're in jail and it's run the way it is, so you can't do much about it. It's out of your control... it's just how it is when you go to jail and that's the hard part of jail. Nothing is in your control, whether it's waiting for medications or whether it's to go and get

your haircut or whatever. It's not in your control, it's in their control and the way they run it. And if you don't turn up on the day or time you're meant to, you miss out until the next time.

This lack of control therefore meant Kevin needed to be self-reliant:

Yeah, just, do what you need to do in there and if you need something from the screws, you do it yourself. Don't sit down waiting and rely on their word that it will happen at a certain time or whatever or they'll do it for you of whatever. You've got to get it done yourself.

Throughcare

The Throughcare program commenced in the ACT in 2013. It is tailored to each individual, commences pre-release and continues for 12 months post-release, with the support of local service providers. It is similar to other programs in Australia, in that it provides person-centred case management and support across accommodation, health, basic needs, income and community corrections (Griffiths et al 2017). As of April 2018, the eligibility criteria to access Throughcare assistance are: more than one month's imprisonment for women, more than three months for men who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and more than six months for men who do not identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (ACTCS 2018).

Several participants spoke positively about the support Throughcare provided them post-release:

Throughcare have been great. They helped me out yesterday, gave me a couple of food wraps and some bus passes and things like that. (John-Andrews).

There was options, but I wasn't really informed on what they were. And when I went to Corrections last time, there was a team that came and saw me and said we've got a pack for you... They said you're eligible because you were in there for six months. I've been out for four months, a few months... But I got a voucher from Woolies and a towel and this and that. That's fine. (Ian).

And an organisation and they're called Throughcare, and they sort of help you with things like that. Give you a bit of, you know, something you can walk out of jail with some clothes. (Kevin).

By contrast, Renee spoke of the lack of understanding of how Throughcare could support her:

Yeah. But when I was released, like I was supposed to be under Throughcare and they were going to pay, I think, for two weeks of my rent in rehab. And it ended up taking five/six weeks to get them do it, which was annoying... I was constantly calling and asking to speak to the team leader and stuff and she was always conveniently not there and not returning my calls... Because they didn't even buy me clothes or anything either. So, I literally had to get my dad to buy me stuff and drop off into my property. So, yeah, because I went into jail, I went in a blue see-through jumpsuit, so, I had no clothes anyways. And Throughcare knew that I was getting released and they just sort of didn't even bother to come and see me and see if there was any support that I needed... (Renee).

Service Providers

There are a range of service providers that assist detainees during incarceration and post-release in the ACT, including: Argyle House, Catholic Care, Care Financial Counselling, Canberra Harm Minimisation Alliance (CAHMA), Directions Pathways to Recovery, Everyman Australia, Karralika, Toora, OneLink, Prisoners Aid, Salvation Army, Shine for Kids, Street Law, Toora, Wellways and Winnunga Niummityjah Aboriginal Health Services (see Bartels and Doyle 2018). The *Healthy Prison Review* reported that service providers were experiencing difficulty connecting with clients, following the introduction of the new sentence management system, whereas previously they had no difficulty with case managers facilitating this contact (ACT ICS 2019). ACT ICS (2019) also acknowledged that the 'human' link provided by a case manager can be crucial for detainees to have access to service providers, if they don't have direct access to the service provider.

Some participants noted the value of specific service providers and how this engagement assisted them post-release. They spoke of, or made passing reference to, their positive engagements with Catholic Care, Canberra Street Law, Winnunga, Uniting Church and

Belconnen Family Child Centre. Some of the positive comments about these service providers included the following:

Engaging New Directions, absolutely, that was a big one for me. I think Smart Recovery or something in jail, something like that, [in] which I first engaged with Directions and I was able to speak to them, get a referral off them to speak to Directions about getting into a rehab and then first they told me about the rehabilitation program... and the dentist program, the dental and the doctors. And then they talked about the rehabilitation programs they have and the day programs they have. And that's where it kind of got me. So, if it weren't for that, I'd be doing a four-year stint in jail. Going down a path of recovery through Directions, really saved me... (Brian).

I would say Catholic Care, they got me some clothes and that, and I had nothing, which was great. (John Andrews).

Directions has really helped... It was a few different organisations. It was, of course CAHMA and the connections [at CAHMA], Directions, Gungahlin Child and Family Services... And doing parenting course and all this sort of stuff. I've done the circle of security and all that sort of shit. (James).

Winnunga, Belconnen Family Centre, Kippax United Church, Foodcare...Just the men's group. When I'm at the men's group, we can basically say what we want to say and know it doesn't leave the room...There's no judgement, there's no one looking at us, 'why did you do that?' (Aaron).

Michael and Carl found specific service providers useful, as they felt respected:

Because I've been there [Street Law] a few times, I've just sort of learnt these times, like which ones to contact and that. Like Street Law, like they're the most helpful people. Some organisations are very helpful and some aren't... They just made me feel, they just, like I felt I was respected and listened to. (Michael).

Good environment [CAHMA]. Very open minded. I can talk to them about things I can't talk to a normal person, so-called normal person, about. (Carl).

Some participants noted the challenges of knowing what services are available to detainees post-release, including accessing service providers and lack of knowledge about how they can assist them:

Like, knowing a lot of the services. Knowing where they are and how to access different services. A lot of guys just don't know that you can ring... or that there are other agencies around, it's not just St. Vinnies and Salvos and Throughcare, there's other agencies around that can help you and there's different agencies for different things. (John-Andrews).

There's some providers, there's some health services, whatever else, just something, to say you 'do have these supports? You can go to these people'. Because a lot of people don't know. I don't know what's out there really. The first time I ever heard of Directions was six months ago. So, just something with a bit of insight to the facilities that are in the community and organisations that we can turn to. (Brian).

Prisoners Aid, that's another thing. The first time I was released out of jail, I was told about Prisoners Aid, but I didn't know what they had to offer, so I didn't contact them, because I didn't know anything about them. Just a bunch of what ifs and unknowns, so it's just easier to close that door and forget about it. Had I had a bit more insight, someone to tell me this is what Prisoners Aid is, that is what they can assist you with, yada yada ya, because, still to this day, I don't know what Prisoners Aid is. I've heard about it, but it's just a door I've closed. Forget about it. (Brian).

Because when they do ring [the service provider] for help, the need that they want help with can't be fulfilled. (Vivian).

In addressing these challenges, some participants offered suggestions. For Vivian, it was about providing the 'human' link before someone is released:

At the time I was in there [the AMC], there was a specific lift in the support that was given to the women. There was a team worker coming from an organisation [WCHM] where they had bonded all of the networking and housing and all of these other

organisations that women needed to know about for when they were released. So, they networked all of the women into all these organisations. So, at that time I think it had been going in for the six months previous, where it was fairly intensive work uniting all of the services, and educating them hands-on about what the women need, what the women go through, where the women are at while they're incarcerated, before they're incarcerated, and then when they come out. (Vivian).

For Carl, it was important that staff at service providers had an understanding of what it was like to 'walk in his shoes':

As far as I'm concerned there's a lot of people walking around with their eyes closed. All these people in the university, and that, no idea. Fair enough, you've got all these qualifications to deal with these people. Take a step back and have a look. (Carl).

Brian's suggestion related more to clearly outlining the type of support that was available:

Setting up a bit of ongoing support, perhaps laying down a few suggestions and ideas about where I can get support in the community, where I might be able to get help if I do need it. Just something to outline and to know where there is support out in the community, that we can go and get. (Brian).

Transportation

Canberra is commonly known as a 'car city', with more than half of all households having two or more registered cars to their address (Lowrey 2019). In recent years, there have been reports of the challenges of public transport in Canberra, such as long waiting and commuting times (Nowroozi 2020). There is a shuttle bus to the AMC, which operates Wednesday to Sunday and generally aligns to AMC visiting times (Transport ACT 2019).

Some participants commented on the need for independent transportation following their release and the challenges of relying on public transport. For example, one of Vivian's challenges post-release was 'finding mobility with transport. Like, learning the public transport system was quite challenging', while Michael felt that transportation would have been

important to assist him in receiving his methadone treatment: 'Maybe the first month, like, someone picking me up early and taking me to get my methadone'.

When a potential employer asked Carl about his current transport arrangements, he responded:

Yeah, I'll travel. I rode to Karabar for an induction for that job I was doing. That was 22kms. I rode a bike there... Five o'clock in the morning to get there at 7 o'clock for induction. So, I knew I could do it. They said 'have you got your own transport?' 'Yeah, I've got my own transport'. They didn't know it was a push bike. That's my transport isn't it?

Renee referenced the challenges of relying on public transport for extended periods of time, due to her licence being suspended:

I've got my license cancelled for two years now because I was driving while suspended and then driving while disqualified... Two years of public transport's going to be a challenge... my only transport's a bus. And they're not very good.

John-Andrews' experience was similar:

I've just got done DUI... Had my licence for six months and you know, doesn't help that I'm on a non-drinking parole... Not having a car cuts your social circle... buses [in the ACT] are nightmare.

Some participants spoke about the importance of having transport organised immediately after being released from the AMC. As the following comments highlight, this can be a significant issue:

I was lucky that I had a friend come and pick me up and took me back to the AMC to get my stuff. And got me a little temporary phone. Otherwise I would have been walking, jogging along the road. Even if nobody was there to pick me up, I would have had to hitchhike home or walk home or get a bus or something. I couldn't get a bus, I didn't have any money. Walk to Queanbeyan. Get inside and go from there. (Ian).

There was a time when... my mum was going to pick me up but her car broke down and I took my money from Centrelink. I actually had to walk up the Hume Highway until I could get a bus. Like, that's not a good start from being released. Like it's pretty sad. (Michael).

But when I got out on bail I had like my dad pick up, so that wasn't a struggle with public transport at that particular time. (Renee).

Mental Health

On a national level, people in prison show much higher rates of mental illness, chronic and communicable disease, acquired brain injury, high-risk alcohol consumption and problematic drug use, compared with the general population (AIHW 2019). The *ACT Detainee Health and Wellbeing Survey* (ACT Health 2017) found that over half of the detainees surveyed had received one or more mental health diagnoses in their lifetime. Some of the most prevalent disorders experienced by detainees were depression and anxiety disorder. From an analysis of the *ACT Detainee Health and Wellbeing Survey*, Butler et al (2018) found that nearly half of the survey participants reported contemplating suicide at some point in their lives, 31 percent had attempted suicide and 18 percent had a lifetime history of engaging in self-harm. The *Stories of ACT Women in Prison* (WCHM 2019) found that there was a high prevalence of mental illness and poor mental health among women in the AMC. For some women, the experience of being in prison impacted adversely on their mental health and some viewed their return to the community as a time of anxiety. The theme of mental health is closely related to the theme of confidence to reintegrate (discussed below), as many participants spoke of their anxiety leading up to their release date and, for them, prison was a place where they felt comfortable and perhaps even happier than they did on the outside.

Our participants struggled with mental illness post-release. For Brian, exiting prison brought high levels of anxiety:

Coming from jail back into the community, there can be a lot of unknowns, I guess, or what ifs, they can trigger a lot of anxiety for us. Especially not having the crowd of people you're surrounded with in jail, to the crowd of people in the community, it's

quite different. So, having to approach someone and apply for a job, there's a big anxiety factor there for a lot of us, for me especially.

Michael had been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and was looking for a way to manage this:

Because I've got a nice lady, she said she could get me a dog because I've got PTSD. And...I was excited and then I went back and the next interview and she said, 'oh sorry, it was the wrong information, that's only for ex-soldiers'. But I'm trying to get a dog because, I was with a girl for 10 years and I just can't be with her anymore, it's just too much.

For James, addressing his mental health was an important condition in terms of reconnecting with the mother of his children:

I've done anger management. I've done a few other things. I just need to do a few more things, show her [former partner] ... get a psychologist because I was on treatment. I was in all that sort of stuff in the past and they've signed me off now. I just get all my medications through my GP. I don't see psychologists or psychiatrist [sic] anymore. So, she wants me to start seeing a psychologist again and all that sort of stuff. I'm stabilised on my medications. She just needs to see a few more things and then maybe we can talk about that again... Well I'm on medications. I've got mental illness, so I'm on a lot of medications. I'm on Valium, I'm on Seroquel and a large dose of methadone.

For Vivian, it was about the challenge of being positive, despite the daily challenges she encountered:

It's not just about being in prison for me, it's all the other stuff. It's family relationships, and it's dealing with other government departments, and it's everything. It's not just prison. It affects our whole lives. So, rebuilding everything. I guess a lot of pressure from self to be OK. And not OK. But having to hold it together, be OK, to make it OK. Not continually breaking down. Having to find that strength of mind to just get through a day. If I can get through this day, it will be OK... I get a lot of anxiety because circumstances around my kids and stuff that aren't good... And it's really hard work to

know that there's stuff going on that you can't do anything about. So, I wake up and I'm sick before I wake up. Struggle to take the first breath.

Substance Abuse

According to the AIHW (2019), almost 65 percent of prison entrants had used illicit drugs in the previous year and 75 percent were current tobacco smokers. Release from prison can cause trauma and emotional distress, which can increase the likelihood of harmful substance use post-release. The *ACT Detainee Health and Wellbeing Survey* found that over half of the detainees surveyed had received one more mental health diagnoses in their lifetime, with substance abuse one of the most prevalent disorders (ACT Health 2017). Similarly, recent research with women in the AMC found that most had histories of substance abuse, with some women resorting to this as a way of coping with life and its stresses (WCHM 2019).

Participants in this study did not refer to their current AOD use, although this may have been because they did not trust the researcher enough to reveal this information. However, they did speak about how, upon release prison, they felt tempted to return to AOD:

Because you know, when you get out, everyone's just like, first thing, I want to get a shot [of ice]. It's just not a good start. But if you got someone on your back a little bit and you develop like a friendship, [that] might help. (Michael).

Aaron also wanted to use drugs immediately after release, but made a different choice:

First thing people want to do, including me, first thing I wanted to do was having a shot when I got out... Ice... I just went, I've got a choice. Food, ice. And I went food... It's like walking into a pub and ordering one schooner. There's no way you're going to walk out just having one, you're going to sit there, maybe two won't hurt. Then three, then four... You've got a lot of blokes, I know for a fact, nine out of ten blokes come out, they're going to use a drug. Marijuana, ice, heroin. Anything. Just to take the edge off the feeling of why are these fellas looking at me all the time.

When Kevin was asked what would be most challenging in ensuring he did not return to prison, he spoke about drugs: 'any drugs. Like, narcotics...random drugs, you know, [dirty] urine...

And if I fail to do that I can pretty much go back to jail. That's probably the hardest thing [with being released]'. Some participants also discussed their previous episodes of AOD (ab)use and current rehabilitation programs to address this abuse, as the following comment from Michael highlights: 'I was just so bad on drugs. The way, I think now, like I just didn't even think, didn't even enter my mind, I just didn't care'.

Vivian spoke about her drug habit and the challenges she encountered:

No one else can do it for you. It's such a personal thing, and I think a lot of people, they see a relapse or they just see any stumble as a failure, and it's not like that... You fall into using when you're young, it's a bit of fun, you do it with your peer group. You move on. You develop a bit of reputation, you feed into that. You're kind of addicted and hooked with, you've got to have it before you know what's going on... And then you have the habits before you have the lifestyle and you're naïve, and it's not really choices that you're making consciously. Consciously, I'm going to become an addict. Consciously, I'm going to have a habit, woo hoo. That habit forms and then your lifestyle develops from that. And then that can get really dark. But underneath that, that person is going 'how did I fucken end up like that?' And then they go, 'how do I get out of it?' And then I think, years down the track, people aren't picking [drugs] because it's the cherry on the cake... Look, I got really badly affected by drugs.

For some participants, a typical day post-release was focused on addressing their AOD issues:

A typical day for me is just waking up, talking to my peers, possibly talking to a sponsor, reflecting on that, have a talk with the family, but then just participating in a day program somewhere to keep myself preoccupied and going down the same track of recovery. (Brian).

Michael's typical day was also focused on his rehabilitation: 'I get up, I just go and get my methadone at O'Connor'. Renee was likewise attending rehabilitation to address her addiction issues, but there was a financial cost with doing so: 'Newstart's not great and we pay a big portion of that to like the rehab. Yeah... Rehab's bloody expensive. Yeah, because it's probably more than a housing rent'.

While Aaron was not taking drugs, he was afraid of being forced to do a urine test and possibly returning to prison, which could see his son being taken away from him:

I'm dreading the day where my parole is going to say, we want a urine... I know it won't be dirty, but just the thought, you know. Being forced to do it. Because in jail, no, I'm not doing a urine, you'll get lock up for two weeks. Yeah, lock me up. But out here, you can't. You can't do that, you've got to do it. I can't worry about myself, I've got my son to worry about. If I go to jail next time, I might not get him back. Whilst the DOCS [Department of Community Services] might set in, don't ask for your son back.

When asked about people who may still use drugs, Vivian suggested that it might be a way to take off some of the pressure of the challenges of day-to-day life:

I look at people and I'm like, underneath that hard exterior or underneath that desperate desire to use, is somebody who's so hurt, oblivion seems better than reality. And they knew it's not going to take the pain away. They knew that even while they're off their face, they're still going to feel that pain. They've just got a different focus for a little while... It's not that it seems better even. It doesn't even seem better.... You're just affected by a substance and your brain works different. It's not even that you're going to crash back into reality or anything like that. It just takes the pressure off. But reality is still there. It doesn't take the pain away. It doesn't change anything. ...People know that big time. You just want to be gone.

Given Renee's own journey addressing her drug addiction, she would now like to train as a case manager to help others address their addiction issues:

Toora run a, I think it's a Diploma in Community Service. Because I wouldn't mind being a case manager, so that I can help people that have been in my position with addiction. Yeah, because I think that's something that I'm passionate about. I've been one of the lucky ones, that was able to turn my life around. A lot of people in addiction aren't able to do that... Not someone that's just, read textbooks.

Confidence to Reintegrate

The theme of confidence to (re)integrate is closely related to the theme of mental health. As acknowledged by the AIHW (2019), the higher rates of mental illness experienced among detainees can have an effect on their confidence to reintegrate into the community. The most recent *ACT Detainee Health and Wellbeing Survey* (ACT Health 2017) found that some of the most prevalent mental health disorders for detainees were depression and anxiety disorder. This was echoed in the *Stories of ACT Women in Prison* report (WCHM 2019) and some women viewed their transition from prison into the community as a time of anxiety.

For some participants, life in prison was seen as ‘better’ than life on the outside:

I just can’t see things getting better, to be honest. Like, I think society as a whole is just falling through the gaps. ... some of the best times I’ve had were in jail, ... I was happier in jail. I could play footy, I could do things and out here I can’t. (Michael).

I think that’s why a lot of people do go back in, because jail is a breeze, to be honest. I’ve got to say, it’s a lot easier in there... You’ve got routine, structure, you don’t have to decide what you’re wearing every day, you don’t have to organise travel. You know, your only money you’re spending really is on smokes or your buy-up. (Renee).

Well, it’s like home away from home. A lot of guys have actually got it better there than they do out here. If they’re out here, they’re couch surfing, they’re using drugs, or they’re drinking ... In there, everything’s there right within reach... you get your bed, you get your three meals... then you’ve got a gym, you can get out and play some footie or some soccer or cricket or whatever. And there’s always something to do. Table tennis, do laps. Yeah, they whinge about it while they’re in there... they can’t wait to get back there... All my mates are there. (John-Andrews).

Aaron commented that some individuals may feel ‘safer’ in prison, because they are viewed as ‘somebody’:

All of those blokes that's been in for a few years, ten years, they walk out. I can guarantee that most of the blokes that's been in there a long time will get out, some of them will feel institutionalised... They don't feel safe outside because... Out here, they're a nobody. Inside, they're somebody... Their friends, their mates [inside]. And they're the sort of people that I actually feel really sorry for. Because no human being should be feeling like that.

According to Sean, the 'guys in there that have got a better life in there than what they would out, [it's] because they're hopeless'.

When making reference to her fellow detainees at the AMC, Vivian spoke about how they often viewed their 'one mistake' as being destined to failure at life and it was challenging to change this belief:

They had lives, and something's gone wrong and they've lost all of that. And then that underlying grief needs to be addressed. And the strength given back to somebody to say 'you're not a complete failure in life'. Just because it's gone doesn't mean it can't come back. Just because you made this mistake, doesn't mean you have to keep going down that road. You don't have to develop the mentality that lasts a lifetime. You can change that and you don't have to become prison [sic]. You don't have to adapt that thinking to survive... There's a way out of it. There's a way to change it...

Kevin spoke about how, for some people, leaving prison was about returning home. However, he felt as if he did not have a place to call home or somewhere that belonged to him:

Because probably like with release, it's like they say, 'you're going home, you're going home'. And I remember being in there and ... I'm thinking, 'but I don't have a home. What do you mean I'm going home? I'm getting out but I'm not going home, there's no home'.

Some participants spoke about their high levels of anxiety leading up to and after release. They often had a negative self-image and struggled to find ambition, as noted by this comment from James:

A lot of us haven't done really well at school, didn't go very far at school, failed at a lot of things. So, there's that, there's no confidence there that they can achieve anything. And ... if I have set goals in the past, they've been ridiculous ones that aren't going to be achievable.

Michael spoke about how it was his own fault that he had gone to prison: 'you've got no one to blame but yourself really.' Carl said something similar: 'I'm here by my own choices, I can't blame anyone else, and I'm not blaming anyone else.' Sean considered himself 'pretty lucky, because I have my business and stuff like that', but he nevertheless found it 'tough', even though 'I'm pretty switched on, I'm not stupid, I'm not a bum'. Michael spoke about his negative self-image, given his physical appearance: 'a lot of the times when people are... if they're laughing, confident, and I just notice myself, I'm not like them. You know, I[m missing] teeth'.

For Vivian, returning to the community also brought feelings of stigma:

And I guess all of that stigma, that stigmatisation, that you wear on yourself. You kind of still want to be invisible. How do I say it? Become, integrating back into the community and feeling just a part of it. Like, you're not a stand out, like you don't have a sign on your forehead, that can take a little while... Going down to your local Woolies and they know you. They know who you are. Not necessarily in a bad way, but you haven't been there, and all of sudden you're back... You know that when you've been in prison, people at school know that something's different. And the kids go through it as well. So, the broader community where you live, if you're a resident, they know. They know little bits and pieces, and people do talk and there is community gossip.

John-Andrews spoke about how, upon release from prison, he lacked personal ambition: 'you don't have much direction or ...ambition at that stage. And yeah, I wasn't too worried about going back to jail. Thought I was tough'. By contrast, Kevin aimed not to return to prison: 'do my sentence and hopefully try not to come back.' However, when asked what he thought a typical day might be in the coming weeks, he did not express any ambition or aspiration: 'get up and do nothing', although he was clear that 'sometimes if you can't sort of stand on your own two feet you generally end up being a target. And that's the thing, you have to stand on your own feet because you can't rely on anyone else'.

James hinted at the importance of people who have spent time in prison meeting with detainees as this could provide some confidence to (re)integrate:

If I had this sort of mentality that I have now, that I have actually done, that that hasn't been because of the corrections or any affiliates of corrections, if they would have some sort of system like that in the prison, there would be a lot ... less people coming back. Because they'd be seeing that they're actually getting real results by achieving these goals. And you know, [a] confidence boost by talking to the people, because they're actually seeing results, they're actually getting a lot more pride and seeing that, you know, starting to, you know, even feel feelings and that they've never felt before, because they're achieving these things and because they've always had this fear of failure... all this sort of stuff. They start thinking, hang on ... I feel this way, I really like feeling this way, let's go down this road instead of going back down that road and continue, you know...

Non-criminal Familial Bonds

The *ACT Detainee Health and Wellbeing Survey* found that childhood removal from the family home and parental incarceration were indicative of disadvantage experienced across a lifetime (ACT Health 2017). To ensure that people have contact with family members post-release, it is important to maintain these relationships whilst incarcerated. The *Healthy Prison Review* (ACT ICS 2019) revealed that most detainees found telephone calls, emails, letters and visits very important to maintain relationships with family and friends. Some women have also spoken of the positive opportunity through prison to reconnect with their family (WCHM 2019).

Our participants spoke about the importance of being connected to family post-release to keep them motivated and ensure they did not return to prison:

Family and children. That's been really important to me. That's about it, really. Friends is kind of a no brainer for me, because they're just going to drag me back into the same lifestyle. But just friends and family. And you need support. So, there's very limited friends I can rely on, but my partner and my family and my children being my ultimate

motivation. Friends not so much, but family...It's the small things, that make the big things so big. Being there for them is important for them, but you too. (Brian).

My biggest problem is because like we lost our daughter and now I'm like lost because, you know, like that's what life's about really... You've got to have kids because it gives you a reason to get up to work. And yeah, I don't have that...' (Michael).

When James spoke about his typical day, he firstly spoke about the medications he was taking and then talked about how he was trying to have a better relationship with the mother of his children and that it was his 'fault' why they weren't together:

I'm just trying to do the dad thing, you know... Yeah, parenting. And like, we're not together [referring to mother of children], that's because of me, back in 2013, I was diagnosed with, well I was using a lot of ice at the time... and I was smoking a lot of pot. She was locked up at the time. So, when I did go to see my partner, when she had the baby... I was in psychosis then. So... and I think I told her at the day that I had that, that she had the baby, when I'm in the room, that I cheated on her while she was in jail and all this sort of shit. And it was ... wasn't very good. So, it sort of deteriorated since me being diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Our participants also mentioned how not being connected to family affected their mental health:

It's not the negativity that gets me, it's the actual physical grief that you have. From not having your kids with you. I think that is the biggest burden to any woman... You're just never not a mum... Sometimes there's no inner peace. It's all nice and you'd like to think it happens. You come to place where there's like acceptance and you work hard and you work for solutions, and you're proactive and you dig a hole in the ground to plant a tree in, and you water it, you fertilise it, you do everything right. And part of your heart is missing. And life just is not the same. So, there's moments where you're just broken. And there's nothing that fixes it, not even if they [her children] come home. You're broken, broken... Not a broken mess, broken. (Vivian).

Michael, who does not have access to his daughter, spoke about the loneliness post-release, and how having a pet could address this:

I think if they know that someone's getting out and they've got, they're by themselves, like 90 percent of the time they need, they should... like if they want to get them a dog, it's not that hard to get them a dog... It's something that I guess sounds silly, but not to me.

Aaron was trying to teach his son not to follow his 'past mistakes' of going to prison:

I'm trying to teach him [my son] not to follow my footsteps. I don't want him having a criminal record. Because basically it mucks you up. You can't leave Australia. You can't get a government job. I don't want him doing what I'm doing... I've been saying to him now, 'there are ways of getting things and there are other ways of getting things. But if you want something, don't go out there and just take it. Go out and work for it'... Like I said to him, 'police arrest you, you can ring me up, let me know where you are and that's it. I'm not bailing you out. You got yourself into that mess, you've got to... get yourself out of it. And if you can do the crime... You have to do the time'.

Participants also spoke about the need to rebuild friendship groups post-release:

They're [family] in different areas. And I don't have close-knit relationships. I do have close friends and stuff. You just don't go home and you have that welcome back party where there's like 25 of your nearest and dearest, or 40. So, that isolated feeling. You have to rebuild again. (Vivian).

I had some pretty good support, because I don't know many people in Canberra. I've lived here since 2015. The friends I did have I can't contact because they're mostly through the mother's club and she [former partner] was involved with. So, had some really amazing friends come in, supported me, helped me. (Ian).

Like of course it's the social circle and that, the people you grow up with and getting away from them, but that can be hard, and I guess it's just a decision you have to make or you're going to keep hanging out those people and still be able to do what you want

to do or you're just going to fall back into your old ways if you're hanging with the same people doing that same thing.... It's hard to break out of that cycle of, that social cycle and move either laterally or horizontally in the social circle. It's like making new friends, I mean cutting off the old ones takes a long time and a lot of effort. (John-Andrews).

Discussion and Conclusion

Recidivism and reincarceration are a significant national issue. According to the Australian Productivity Commission (2020), the ACT has the highest rate of return to corrections out of all Australian jurisdictions. The recent Australian qualitative research (Baldry et al 2018; Carlton and Segrave 2016; Cherney and Fitzgerald 2014; Griffiths et al 2017; Johns 2017; Schetzer and Streetcare 2013) on the experiences of people once they leave prison shows that they face a range of challenges post-release, including limited employment skills and opportunities, as well as difficulties obtaining housing. The research also highlights the importance of post-release support and addressing underlying self-identity and confidence issues.

This pilot project aimed to explore these issues in the context of the ACT. It also sought to examine what service providers former detainees engaged with post-release in the ACT and how they felt this engagement would assist them to ensure they did not return to prison. The findings of this study draw on 11 face-to-face interviews conducted in 2019 with people who had spent at least a month in the AMC and had been released in the last six months.

The majority of participants spoke about challenges they experienced obtaining suitable housing upon release. Specifically, they noted the lack of availability, wait-times, conditions of the available housing and difficulty in obtaining private rental, in the absence of government housing. Most participants also spoke about how, following incarceration in the AMC, they did not feel adequately prepared for the post-release experience. Specifically, participants spoke about challenges relating to accessing case managers, program availability and suitability, a lack of preparedness for obtaining employment post-release, and an inadequate understanding of the support service providers can provide post-release. Our findings contribute to two pillars of the JACS 'Building Communities Not Prisons' initiative, the Justice Housing Program and Community Building Capabilities.

In their evaluation of the Throughcare program, Griffiths et al (2017) highlighted that suitable housing is a key factor for post-release success in the ACT. Our findings reaffirm the importance of the objectives of the current ACT JACS Justice Housing Project, which seeks to address issues with the availability and suitability of housing for people involved with the criminal justice system (ACT JACS 2020a). We recommend that the ACT Government recognise the importance, and urgency, of implementing the Justice Housing Program to address availability of suitable housing for people upon release from the AMC.

On the basis of our findings, we also recommend improved communication about the availability of current vocational and educational programs at the AMC and how they can assist people with the challenges they may face upon release. Improvements to current programs could include a further focus on living, employability and confidence-building skills. More detailed information should also be provided about the specific support services providers can offer to people upon release. This information could be provided in a ‘release pack’ from a case manager and on multiple occasions, to ensure awareness of the range of support services available. Service providers could also provide this detailed information to current detainees. In addition, JACS should review the number of sentencing managers available at the AMC. This may involve allocating a lower number of clients to sentencing managers, to ensure they can adequately manage the needs of their clients during incarceration and that they have suitable post-release plans and support.

Participants in this study provided important insights into what support(s) could have assisted them in achieving their goal of not returning to prison. Research has found that the participation of former detainees and the opportunity to ‘give back’, such as in prison (re)integration programs, offers a range of benefits, including improved community integration and reduced reoffending rates (Le Bel et al 2015; Weaver and McCulloch 2012). Based on the findings of this project, we argue that it is appropriate to develop options for incorporating the lived experiences of former detainees into current and future corrections policies and practices.

Some participants noted how, given their personal experience with the criminal justice system, they feel motivated to mentor others exiting the system. Previous research has shown that peer mentor programs can be effective in reducing reoffending rates, as mentors can provide empathy and practical advice (Kenmore and In 2020; Seppings 2015). The ACT Government should examine the feasibility of establishing a peer mentorship program, run by former

detainees, to assist others with the complexity of re-entry. In designing such a program, it would be important to take into account the small(er) population of the AMC, in comparison to other Australian jurisdictions, and the challenges this might pose in identifying suitable peer mentors.

Finally, this pilot project has provided insights into the importance of consistent collaboration and engagement between former detainees, policymakers, service providers and researchers to understand the challenges of the post-release experience. We therefore recommend establishing an annual ACT (re)integration symposium, which brings together these stakeholders to gain further understanding of the challenges of the post-release experience and establish locally-relevant best practice for re-entry.

This study was a pilot project. The focus on one Australian jurisdiction and small sample size limit the generalisability of the findings, as with any qualitative research. However, the deep and rich insights provided by the participants show the importance of qualitative research to gain a better understanding of the range of challenges former prisoners can face in their efforts not to return to prison. Further research on this area, taking into account the challenges of doing this type of research, could target a larger sample size. Further studies could also focus on examining the specific challenges people who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander face. It is only through qualitative research, such as this pilot project, that policymakers and service providers can gain further understanding of the realities of the post-release experience and these insights will help to improve the effectiveness of the measures designed to reduce recidivism and reincarceration.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How long since you were released?
2. What is your age? Gender?
3. Are you of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background?
4. How long were you in the AMC for? Were you sentenced or on remand?
5. Was this your first time in the AMC or any other jail in Australia?
6. What would you like to achieve over the next couple of months?
7. What do you see as your key strengths in achieving these goals?
8. What issues do you think you might confront to achieve these goals (eg, access to housing, health, employment, meeting the conditions of parole)?
9. What supports were you provided with before being released to assist with your reintegration into the community?
10. What supports have you been provided with since your release to assist you with your reintegration into the community (eg, community organisations, friends, family)?
11. What has been helpful in supporting your return to the community? What has not been helpful?
12. What supports would be (or would have been) useful to help you reintegrate into the community and meet the challenges you have experienced?
13. What do you think will be a typical day for you over the next couple of months?
14. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience of being released from prison?