Young women prisoners in New Zealand: Substance abuse and violent offending

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Young women offenders face a number of complex situations both inside prison and in the community when they are released. One that is of particular concern is the connection between substance dependence and violent offending and the wider contextual factors which make both more likely. Some studies suggest that the correlation between substance dependence and violence is more pronounced amongst female prisoners than male prisoners, a difference attributed to higher rates of substance dependence amongst women. This correlation is discussed in relation to young women in a mixed-age female prison environment.

In previous articles (Goldingay, 2007a), I explored the bullying evident within the group of 20 young New Zealand women prisoners (aged 17-19 years) who participated in my doctoral study. In this article, I discuss the strong link between drug use and violence for this group of young women and question why this might be, and how policy makers might respond. Consultation with representatives of Māori groups, including kaumatua, kaitiaki, and kia, and New Zealand research literature has indicated that substance abuse and violence are merely symptoms of deeper structural and contextual issues (Huriwai, Robertson, Armstrong, Kingi, & Huata, 2001; Kelsey as cited in Te Momo, 2004). The aim of my doctoral study was to investigate the discourses used by participants and what these say about the prevailing social norms and power relations. This form of investigation requires a smaller sample than would be used in a quantitative study. However, the sample of young women prisoners included eight who identified as Māori, three as from a Pacific nation as well as Māori, and two as part Māori, part Pakeha.

Data from the 13 personal files (available to me with the permission of the women) revealed that of the 12 women who were imprisoned for a violent offence, nine (75%) were under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of the crime or just before committing it (Kifer, 2005). In Aotearoa New Zealand, the current Department of Corrections’ response to violent offending committed by this group of young women has been to incarcerate them. Once in prison, some young women receive programmes designed to address criminogenic needs which have been defined as: “education/employment, finance, family/marital relationships, accommodation, physical and/or sexual abuse, use of leisure/recreation time, companions, alcohol/drug problems, emotional/personal issues, and attitudes/orientation” (Hollin & Palmer, 2006, p. 180).

In overseas jurisdictions, 81% of young women prisoners have been identified as being victims of physical and/or sexual abuse (Ambrose, Simkins, & Levis as cited in Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008, p. 168). Researchers have also noted the strong correlation between post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), resulting from victimisation, and the subsequent prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse (Dixon, Howe, & Stanfield, 2005; Johnson, 2006; White & Widom, 2008). Those who have suffered victimisation tend to be more likely to be substance dependent, which has been attributed to efforts to block out emotional pain and distress (Johnson, 2006; White & Widom, 2008).

Social and historical contextual factors

The number of young women in my study who committed a violent offence whilst under the influence of alcohol or drugs also suggests a correlation between historical and contextual factors, such as victimisation, and drug use and violence. That many within this group identified as Māori is also reflected in the findings of other researchers who note the cumulative risk of social exclusion as a result of poverty, victimisation, and drug use for indigenous peoples (for example, Hogg, 2001). Many Māori presenting for alcohol- and drug-user treatment have been described as “detribalised and deculturalised” (Tipene-Leach as cited in Huriwai et al., 2001, p. 1036). This may be because young Māori in towns and cities today are part of the third generation of Māori migrants from rural communities to urban life (T. Mataki, personal communication, November 5, 2008). For some Māori, such migrations have led to a loss of structure and meaning, replaced by emotional and other health problems, substance abuse, crime, and violence (King, 2003).

As a result of the loss of a collective structure, being in or joining a gang may be one way some Māori, as with other peoples in colonised societies, have created an environment that facilitates a sense of acceptance and belonging in the urban setting (Eggleston, 2000). This is in response to the dominant Pakeha world which is characterised by individualism and discrimination (Kelsey as cited in Te Momo, 2004, p. 5). For those that take this path, gang membership may then lead to anti-social sentiments, substance abuse, and crime, although crime may not be a gang’s only purpose for being (Eggleston, 2000; Roguski, 2008). Gangs are not the only setting where substance abuse is condoned, however.

The prevalence of excessive drinking and/or drug use amongst young women of all ethnicities has been noted worldwide (ALAC, 2008; Boden, Ferguson, & Horwood, 2006; Gilmore, 2008; Norton, 1998). It may be useful, therefore, to raise questions about how the use of alcohol and drugs may be condoned or even valued in some social contexts as a result of the meanings it is given in those settings.

Further questions could also be raised about how violent behaviour by females may make sense amongst various groups. Loyalty and the protection of loved ones, allegiance to particular social groups, or even strength of character may be demonstrated through violence towards others and hence be seen as valued feminine behaviour (see for example, Day, Cough, & McFadden, 2003; Goldingay, 2007a). Gang involvement may also justify the use of violence to obtain drugs (John Howard Society of Alberta, 2001).

It is also important, however, to focus on the strengths of these young women. For example, my research indicates that some young women prisoners have taken a stand against continued violence and alcohol abuse in their families, and have engaged in considerable personal growth despite the extreme and difficult circumstances in which they were raised. Many of the young women in my study (45.5%) grew up in gang environments where they were exposed to...
anti-social sentiments (towards those outside the gang and towards women), drugs, alcohol, violence, and abuse. They spoke of being unsupported by their families, of feeling lonely and alienated. A large percentage (62%) had been in youth justice facilities and/or in Child, Youth and Family (CYF) care. Despite this, they showed a capacity to care for and protect others, willingness to be challenged and to grow, respect for and eagerness for guidance from their elders (see Goldingay, 2007b).

Nevertheless, for these young women, substance dependence appears to be normal and expected: a shared way to demonstrate connectedness with others and block out pain and loneliness. As the international literature referred to earlier reveals. For some, violence is all they have ever known. The extent of violence and substance abuse over their lifetimes and the meanings they give it in their current talk, suggests there are powerful discourses at work in these contexts. It is to these contexts that they are likely to return, as maintaining close relationships with whanau is particularly important for Mäori (T. Mataki, personal communication, November 5, 2008). Such “normalising” ways of framing substance use and violence can be attributed to multiple social factors, including disadvantage and social exclusion brought about by colonisation and racism in Aotearoa New Zealand (Kelsey as cited in Te Momo, 2004).

**Intervention and innovation**

It is possible that greater reductions in re-offending may be achieved if policy makers were able to support interventions at the discursive level in the social contexts, both in prison and on release, as well as at the individual level to address individual behaviours.

An important finding in my doctoral study is the level of respect shown by a number of young women participants towards their elders in the prison context. Participants have spoken of their appreciation of the guidance, support, comfort, discipline, and wisdom provided by older prisoners (see Goldingay, 2007a, 2007b). Resourcing Mäori and Pacific elders to design and carry out interventions at this level, therefore, has the potential to change the way substance abuse and violence are justified on the discursive level in these groups.

Such an intervention may not be sufficient on its own, however. It would need to be matched by government efforts to reduce social exclusion, which is often justified in discourses by Pakeha on individual and institutional levels (see Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Public campaigns similar to the Family Violence—It’s not OK campaign (www.aryaouk.org.nz) may be effective in changing dominant discourses about those who offend, and prejudice towards Mäori and Pacific peoples. Resource distribution systems aimed at reducing material inequalities and enabling Mäori to control and run their own solutions to problems as they see fit are also essential.

While complex and challenging, more long-term and context-related ways of thinking about how, when, and where to intervene in order to prevent young women’s drug use and subsequent violence is important for many reasons, including issues of safety, quality of life, and human rights.

**References**


Every year in New Zealand there are many children born to people with inadequate parenting skills: dysfunctional families who face multiple problems such as drug addiction, poverty, a criminal record, a poor standard of housing, long-term unemployment, poor education, inability to find work and having been subject themselves to childhood maltreatment.

Dr Annabel Taylor, Chair, Family Help Trust, 19 November 2008

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Media release Victim Support

Victim Support hopes booze bans mean less victims

1 August 2008

The link between alcohol, serious assaults and violent crime is irrefutable. The national organisation whose volunteers have to pick up the pieces has spoken out in favour of booze bans.

Wellington’s CBD has a ban in place, and Lower Hutt is proposing extending its ban to 24 hours, seven days a week to combat increasing alcohol-related offences such as intimidation and violence.

“We can clearly see the connection between assaults and violent crime and alcohol,” Victim Support acting CEO Heather Verry said. “We are in favour of any strategy that helps address the problem.”

Mrs Verry said that Victim Support volunteers were concerned at what they see as an increase in alcohol-fuelled incidents occurring.

“Most people can drink sensibly. Alcohol-fuelled aggression doesn’t fit with this, and it is invariably an innocent passers-by and their families who become the victims,” Mrs Verry said.

Mrs Verry pointed to the figures in Lower Hutt. In this area alone, Victim Support assisted over 100 victims of serious assault in the year 1 July to 30 June 2008.