

COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE  
AND THE  
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER  
ADVISORY BOARD

DISCUSSION PAPER

**Discussion paper on the impact on  
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander children  
when their fathers are incarcerated.**

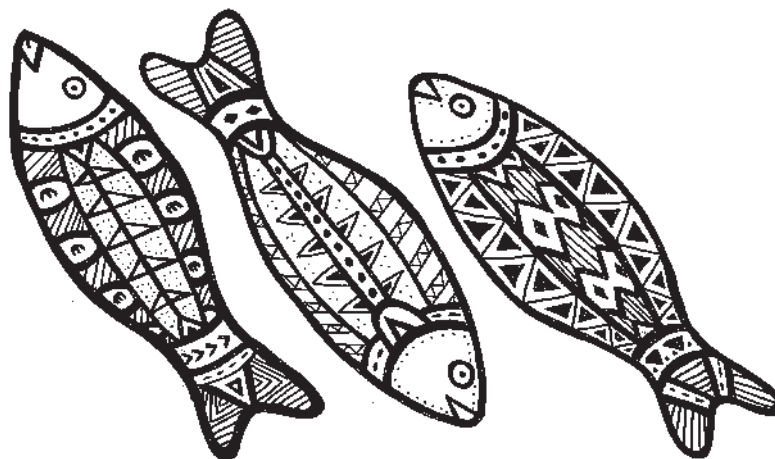
**June 2001**



*Illustrations courtesy of Aboriginal artist Bill Ivinson and  
Torres Strait Island artist Andrew Williams.*

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Thanks are also extended to the men with whom Barry Malezer consulted and to participants in the community meetings hosted by the Commission for Children and Young People and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board in Brisbane and Cairns in mid 2000 which significantly shaped this paper.



## Foreword

There is no doubt that the loss of a parent has an impact on a child. Often, in the media and in public policy, the negative effects of the death of a parent or of parental separation on the well being of children are highlighted. Yet it seems that when a parent is lost through incarceration, there is a silence about the effects on the children, who are often the “hidden victims of crime”. When this occurs in families that already suffer fragmentation and loss of cultural identity, the well being of the children is affected even more severely.

This paper has been developed by the Commission for Children and Young People and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board. It aims to provide a starting point for public discussion about the impact of the incarceration of fathers on Indigenous children, and issues to be considered when developing effective parenting programs for these men.

The Commission for Children and Young People is concerned with the well being of all children and young people in Queensland and, in particular, seeks to support those who are marginalised and vulnerable in our society. Parenting programs have been shown to be an effective preventative measure for supporting the well being of children. However, it is only very recently that it has been recognised that parenting programs are often actually about mothering and that there is a need for programs specifically targeted at supporting men to be more effective in their fathering role. As part of its Focus on Fathering Project, the Commission is interested in exploring and supporting programs that meet the needs of children whose fathers are in prison.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board (ATSIAB) is the Queensland government’s peak advisory body on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy issues. ATSIAB also monitors the implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) and maintains contact with Indigenous inmates through visits to Correctional Centres by members of the Board. During 1999 and 2000, visits were undertaken to several Correctional Centres in Queensland where forums with Indigenous inmates were held. Maintaining family relationships was a common concern for inmates. ATSIAB is interested in programs that support Indigenous inmates to maintain strong connections to their families, communities and country while they serve their time, thereby reducing the impact on young people when their parents are locked up.

Supporting incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males to build and maintain positive relationships with their children is not an easy task. For the sake of the children, however, it is crucial that we wait no longer to explore creative ways to do this.



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## Introduction

*Of all systems to have been affected by social influences and time, it is the family that has been most challenged. Whereas the family in “white” communities has been subjected to evolutionary challenge and change, the influences on Indigenous families and their way of life has been by far the most substantial and complex. The traditional ways are no longer with us, the way we used to know, and yet we cling to those values that made the family an integral part of who we are as cultural people. We have all been affected by history and the processes that damaged our families and our children continue to suffer the consequence. We need to resurrect the family the way it used to be and then we will have a better chance of mastering our survival and cultural existence (Personal communication with Barry Malezer:- Male Elder Brisbane Community Meeting, 1999).*

The family unit in industrial and post-industrial society has been the subject of many studies by sociologists, anthropologists and social scientists who recognise it as the primary socialising agent. Social changes have had a dramatic impact on the family, not only altering the structural foundations of the family unit, but also impacting on the role that it plays.

In recent times, consideration has been given to the family unit in the Indigenous Australian context, including the impact of changes on the development of the younger generation. Following on from matters raised in documents such as the *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997), the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Reports* (1991) and the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence Report* (2000), this paper is yet another step toward raising key Indigenous issues for further debate and action.

Government policies and processes have led to the dispersal of individuals from clan and tribal groups resulting in the fragmentation of Indigenous cultures. The breakdown of familial and cultural norms has been accompanied by an increase in antisocial and criminal behaviour. This has resulted in over-representation of Indigenous people in prisons in Australia, a matter of great concern. Overwhelmingly, these prisoners are male, and we can assume that many of them are fathers. Given the history of Indigenous people, in terms of dislocation and cultural fragmentation, the questions of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males learn to be men and learn how to father are particularly problematic ones. Incarceration adds another dimension, serving to further fragment Indigenous families and communities, and affecting the male role models available for Indigenous children. This paper is concerned with the impact of incarceration of the father on the Indigenous child.



# The Historical Context

## *“Traditional” Indigenous life*

There is a significant misconception today about the Indigenous people of Australia being two homogeneous groups (Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people). To the contrary, in pre-contact Australia, over 700 nations (250 languages) existed on mainland Australia (Gibbs 1993; Edwards 1987; Broome 1982). In addition, many of the hundreds of islands across the Torres Strait were inhabited by Island people speaking languages traditional to their regions (Beckett 1989; Singe 1989). Indigenous Australians are considered to be the composite of all these nations (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation 1994, p.1). The existence of these nations, documented in early time by explorers and anthropologists, sets Australia as one of the most diverse and intriguing continents in the world. Understanding this diversity is integral to understanding the current conflicts and confusion present in many Indigenous Australians' lives.

This diversity also highlights the limitations of the word 'traditional' which is often used in the literature. Culture itself is dynamic and continually adapting; no society's culture is static. Within the Aboriginal and Islander peoples, there were many different clan groups each reflecting similarities and differences with regard to what is now called 'the traditional culture', and each in its own way changing and adapting. References made throughout this paper to 'traditional' must therefore be seen in the light of these limitations.

The 'Indigenous World View' is fundamental to this discussion. This flows from the connection between Indigenous Australians (as culturally unique family groups within Australia) and the land, which continues to be the spiritual essence that lies deep within all Indigenous people. It represents the connection to nature and the environment as an essential part of being, constantly promoting the family and cultural lore as composites of the 'Dreaming'.

*The narratives of the Dreaming encoded our behaviours, attitudes, culture and social formation as well as describing how the physical environment came to be. It enshrined the relationship between Indigenous people and the land and it is the land that the law has founded (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation 1994, p. 36).*

In the past, clan groups were clearly connected to areas of land that represented to them their very being and spiritual existence. Reflecting this understanding, King-Boyes refers extensively to the 'cosmology' of Aboriginal culture:

*The Aborigines used their Cosmic myths to express concepts of Being, and the Creator-Heroic mythology as their charter for the possession of tribal land and the terms of reference for the totemic structure of their social organisation (1977, p. 26).*

The 'Indigenous World View' denounces individualism while constructing and connecting spirituality to identity, which in turn locates the individual within a familial and community base. The 'Indigenous World View' is holistic, with each element interacting with and dependent upon each other to provide the spiritual, physical and psychological strength and nourishment of the individual and the family.

In the past, the lives of Indigenous Australians, from birth to death and beyond, were governed by principles and values that determined their cultural and social responsibilities. Kinship relationships are and always have been at the core of Indigenous Australians' identities.

*These relationships were of extreme importance and at the heart of the Aboriginal social system... Young children enjoyed considerable freedom... Older children undertook many practical activities. These gave children training for adult life, imparting skills through experience rather than theory... Parents gradually demanded more from their children, requiring them to understand their responsibilities as members of a group. Proper behaviour towards parents was expected. Then as the children grew older they learnt songs and dances, preparing them for the important future learning of ceremonial songs and dances. They also learnt to bear pain and hunger, which they would probably experience in ceremonies and on other occasions later in life (Gibbs 1993, p.58).*

In traditional Indigenous communities, men and women were both independent and interconnected, each with specific roles and responsibilities. Lore based on gender and age governed social activity and communication among people. Parenting responsibilities were functional and defined, as were the duties and expectations assigned to the individual, the extended family and the broader community. Brothers and sisters of the father/mother assumed many of the primary duties and responsibilities, unlike Western families. Training for cultural ceremonies, initiation for achieving adulthood and 'moral' education through story telling and performance were included as primary responsibilities (Gibbs 1993).

In traditional Aboriginal society, men had many roles that had their roots in ritual and ceremony. A young man's role was not defined by one major ceremony at the onset of puberty. Rather, the role changed through a series of stages in life that were accompanied by the passing on of knowledge and skills that would serve both family and community needs throughout a lifetime. The cultural information that was passed on was essential to fulfil ceremonial traditions and for the ongoing survival of the individual and group.

*For more than a year they must travel over their tribal territory with some of the older men, inspecting the sacred places of their tribe, hearing and learning the legends of their people, the songs of their totem (Tindale and George 1971, p.42).*

While there were no uniform initiations across Australia, every clan had a process to assist the transition of boys into men and from one stage to the next through the transmission of morals, values and knowledge. Through such a process, the gender, cultural and social identities of individuals were strengthened and nurtured.

Men were seen as protectors, providers, leaders and skilled hunters. The role of young men was clearly defined, as were the roles of all members in traditional society. Along with respect came the reciprocal obligation of meeting defined responsibilities. Infringement or failure to accomplish this provider and protector role had repercussions or punishments for the person, according to cultural lore. The socialisation of the children, the preservation and passage of traditional lore and knowledge, and the survival of the community itself depended upon men and women meeting their specific obligations and responsibilities.

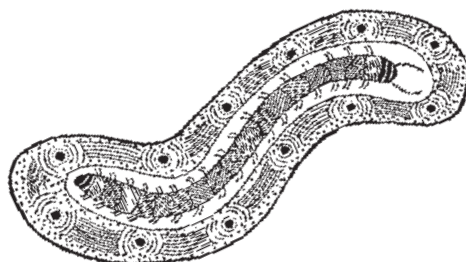
### ***Colonisation***

Colonisation has been a powerful, destructive force in the lives of Indigenous Australians. Initially, frontier violence left many groups traumatised and dispossessed. Legislation removed people to reserves, took children from their family, and separated husbands and wives. Systematic dispossession worked to destroy relationships with and ownership of land, economic autonomy, law and political processes, cultural and spiritual beliefs and ceremonial practices, and social and family relationships. This led to a dependency on the economic, educational, legal, health, religious, welfare, political and social systems of the colonisers.

The ramifications of such processes for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous sectors of the community have been much more profound than generally acknowledged (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence 2000).

*Yeh, it was after I was taken from my mother because when I was taken from my mother I remember being in the children's home and rebelling against that decision knowing or feeling that everything was wrong what was happening to me at this stage, you know. I used to smash fire alarms at the centre, children's home, I was only seven years of age (Personal communication with Barry Malezer:- Indigenous father who has been incarcerated, 23 June 2000).*

For Aboriginal people, the consequences of colonisation and subsequent oppression have been immense. Dignified, proud, self-sustaining and healthy by tradition, Indigenous Australians today live a very different existence. Many are still proud and dignified in the face of great adversity, but many are wounded, suffering poor health, affected by continuing discriminatory processes and haunted by a profound sense of loss. Alcoholism, violence, abuse and poverty are the legacies of the colonisation process. For many Indigenous people, the policies of removal and subjugation have eroded the security that the traditional family unit once provided. Yet some search to locate themselves in a familial and cultural environment, seeking to gain the security, assurance, nurturing and protection that a family and an extended family unit traditionally offered.



# The Contemporary Context

## *The impact of colonisation on Indigenous Men and Women*

When Communities were established, the administration and authority of these Communities were in the hands of the “protectors”. Aboriginal men no longer controlled the physical and emotional safety of the family unit. They were not permitted to hunt for the essential food for the family. Ceremonies including rites of passage were forbidden as were language and other cultural practices. Traditional lore was clearly unable to function in this environment. The father-son relationship suffered dramatically in terms of the transferring of cultural knowledge, skills and the functional ‘Law’ in the community (Johnston, Hinton and Rigney 1997).

*I mean the second round of blokes I went in with, we had a couple of Indigenous young people in there and they just have no idea about their culture, their perception of the law, is that: I'm in trouble again. What have I done? That's their perception and that's been their perception ever since they were young. I think it's because of what their families been telling them how much in regards to the Stolen Generation. These people, these young people in jail it's the law, it's about tearing families apart (Personal communication with Barry Malezer:- Community workshop, June 2000).*

Many Indigenous men have now been raised in environments where trauma, low self-esteem, abuse, violence, alcohol, substance abuse and role confusion have been evidenced across generations. Rather than viewing such factors as historical legacies that must be challenged and addressed, an increasing number of young Indigenous men are succumbing to the cycle of oppression and depression that they experience:

*That would drive anybody to self-harm. I mean you take the power away from your role as a father, it would make you feel down, feel totally worthless and you'd feel like doing self-harm to yourself (Personal communication with Barry Malezer:- Indigenous father aged 29 at community meeting, March 1999).*

Many women consulted by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence indicated that the men needed help to heal if progress was to be made in decreasing the level of violence and abuse in the lives of many Indigenous Australians. The women also spoke of the need to revive the family unit and to help Communities to reunite in order to overcome their social illnesses.

One result of colonisation has been to change the role of Indigenous women to that of the dominant care giver with greater responsibility. Many Indigenous women manage the burdens of social change, oppression and discrimination, but their pool of resources, including the extended family, is limited. There are a significant number of women who have been unable to cope. Their experiences have been compounded by the limited contributions that Indigenous men have been able to make to counteract the levels of poverty that exist in Indigenous families and communities and to nurture and care for the young.

*And I think from a fathering perspective, that bonding between father and son and especially in the Indigenous community is very, very important. The fact is that we need to get back to the fathering role, where the males can take their rightful role as leaders of their community. And that's all just part of the culture and at the moment by not letting the child see the father, it's taking everything away from it. The fathering role, their leadership, their responsibilities is just taking everything away from them. I think it's important. It needs to be addressed and to change. The whole system needs to change... It should be appropriate for their kids to be able to have contact with their fathers (Personal communication with Barry Malezer:- Interviews of three Aboriginal men in different settings regarding the family, 1999).*

Elders still exist as role models, as respected members of the community. Today they still support younger members of the community, offering advice, guiding their progress and strengthening kinship ties. Their role is essential to the ongoing survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and is based in reciprocal obligation:

*I remember them old fullas, they would come down and help us out and encourage us (Personal communication with Barry Malezer:- Community Workshop, June 2000).*

*Our Elders would catch the bus down and visit us and support us (Personal communication with Barry Malezer:- Community Workshop, June 2000).*

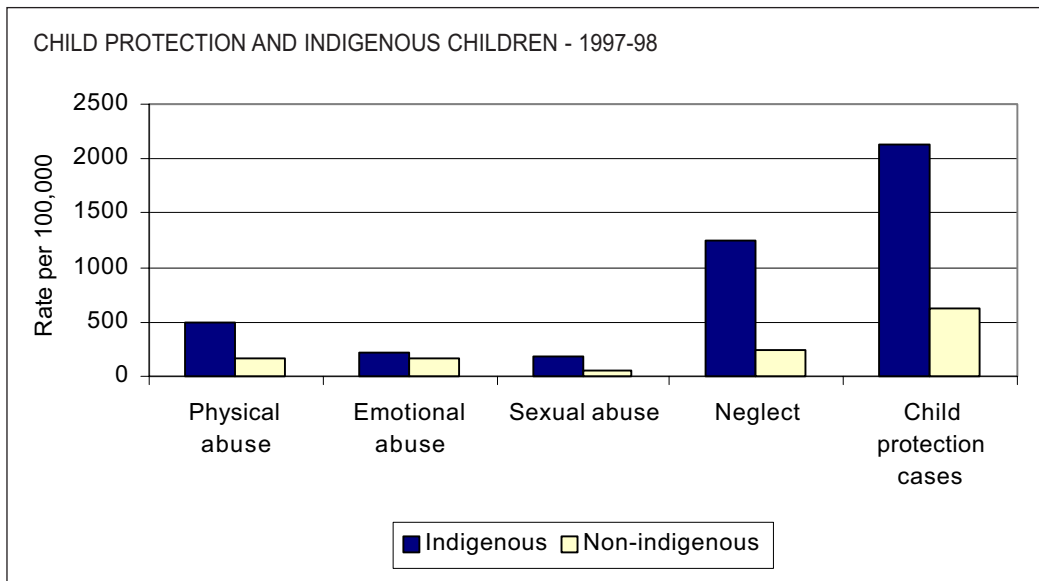
It is in this context of the impact of colonisation on the Indigenous family, and on the roles of and relationships between Indigenous men and women, that issues associated with the impact of incarceration of the father on the Indigenous child need to be considered.

### ***The impact of colonisation on Children and Young People***

The colonisation process has affected generations of Indigenous Australian children who have suffered from the impact of poverty and cultural fragmentation. In some communities, children have had multiple traumatic experiences witnessing violence and abuse on an all too frequent basis, with little if any support from key figures within the community. These same children may not be able to acknowledge their hurt, due to a number of factors. Perhaps they cannot share what they have seen, heard and felt, because family/community members are in crisis themselves. Parents may not be able to protect their children because they cannot protect or care for themselves (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence 2000).

*...even though we were going through bad stages in life we all come from similar backgrounds of domestic violence and the separation from Mum to Dad and children, that similar era where domestic violence was rife in the early seventies. Alcoholism was also rife. Violence! You know, it is hard to pinpoint, but the people that I grew up in the streets with were those same people who spent time in institutions. We were all under the Children Services Act one way or another (Personal communication with Barry Malezer:- Indigenous man - 20 years experience of detention within institutions, June 2000).*

The rate of child protection cases involving Indigenous children remains consistently higher than that of non-Indigenous children. For example, in 1997-98 there were 2,131 substantiated cases per 100,000 Indigenous children. This was more than three times the rate for non-Indigenous children (621) (Office of Economic and Statistical Research 1999). See figure 1.



**Figure 1. Child protection and Indigenous children**  
*(Office of Economic and Statistical Research 1999, Crime Statistics Bulletin #7, Abuse of Children)*

This graph also shows that in 1997-98 Indigenous children suffered physical abuse at almost three times the rate of non-Indigenous children, as well as almost four times the rate of sexual abuse and more than five times the rate of neglect. The higher rate of child protection cases for Indigenous children results in a higher rate of all forms of out of home care.

A key factor in this fragmentation of Indigenous families is that many Indigenous adults who have been exposed to past policies and practices have not enjoyed the comforts of being raised within a nurturing family environment. They may have lacked role models to teach them appropriate parenting skills. Having been denied the safety and protection of their culture and their biological and cultural parents, many Indigenous men and women express feelings of immense sadness and disillusion when they speak of the current experiences of their family and children. Feeling unable to function adequately as a parent, a partner or a contributing member of the community, many resort to intoxicants to deal with their alienation and despair. This situation has directly impacted upon the quality of socialising that their children receive, the provision of positive role modelling and the stability of the family which had been the cornerstone of Indigenous survival and existence. The situation is compounded by the often absent father figure within Indigenous families.

## ***The impact of colonisation on Indigenous peoples***

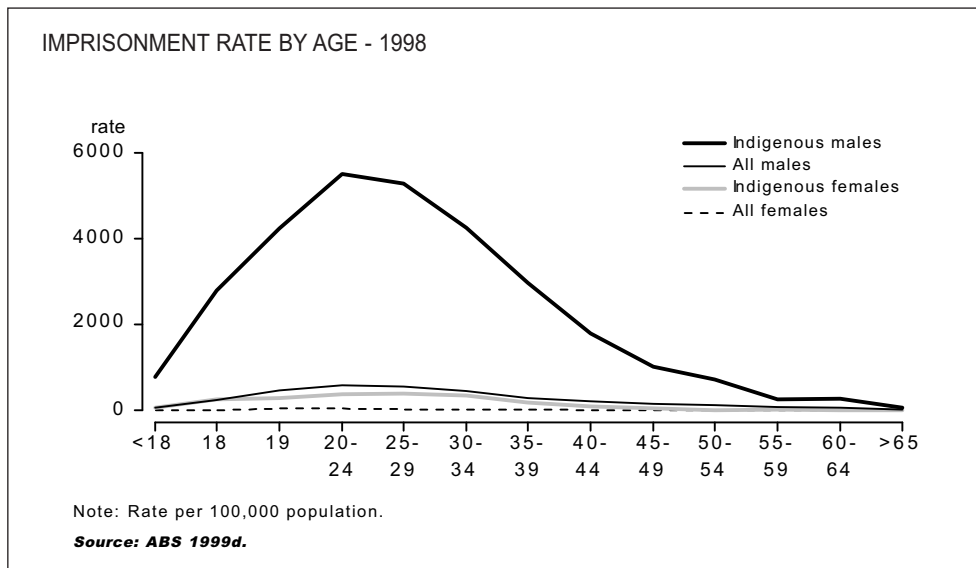
The repercussions of colonisation are reflected in the following statistics:

- *In the 1996 census the median income for Indigenous people aged 15-29 years was \$171 per week. This is two-thirds of the median income for the total population aged 15-29 years.*
- *The unemployment rate for Indigenous youth in 1996 was 28.6% - double the corresponding rate for all youth. While the unemployment rate declines for adults aged 30 years and over, the rate of unemployment among Indigenous Australians remains more than double that of all Australians.*
- *The percentage of households with more than 10 people living in them... shows that 9% of Indigenous people aged 15-29 years live in households with more than 10 residents compared with 0.4% of all young people.*
- *By the age of 19, an age at which involvement in tertiary education might be expected, only 12% of Indigenous people were in full-time education. This is one-third the rate for the total population at the age 19.*
- *Birth rates for Indigenous women aged between 15 and 24 were 2-3 times higher than for the total female population of that age group.*
- *In 1997, 15.3% of all deaths of Indigenous people occurred in the 15-34 age group. This compares to only 3.5% of death of non-Indigenous people in the same age group (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1999).*

These social indicators reflect the disadvantaged position of the Indigenous family in contemporary Australian society.

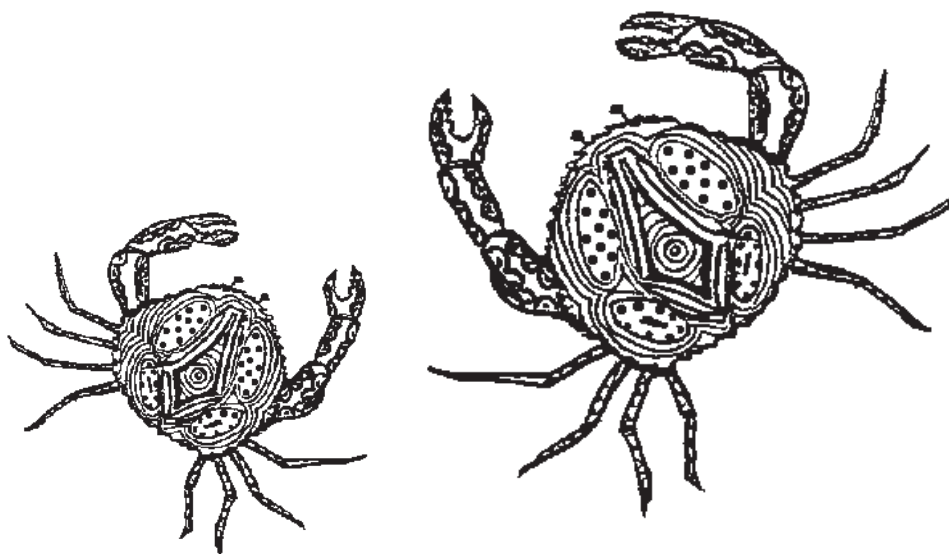
### ***Incarceration***

Data from the National Prisoner Census conducted in 1998 clearly demonstrate the over representation of Indigenous people in prisons (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1999). On the night of the Prisoner Census, 18.8%, or nearly one in five prisoners, was recorded as Indigenous. Expressed in terms of the rate of imprisonment, that is, comparing the number of people in prison per 100,000 of that population, the rate for Indigenous females is 14 times higher than for all females and the rate for Indigenous males 12 times that for all males (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1999). This disproportionate ratio can be seen in Figure 2 (p. 12) which shows the rate of imprisonment per 100,000 of the population by age.



**Figure 2. Imprisonment Rate By Age Group by Gender and Indigenous Status (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999).**

The comparatively low rate of female imprisonment does not as readily demonstrate, on a graph using a scale to accommodate male imprisonment, the 14 times higher rate of imprisonment for Indigenous females compared with all females. The disproportionate rate of Indigenous male imprisonment, however, can easily be observed in Figure 2. The rate peaks in the 20-29 age groups, but the higher rate of imprisonment of Indigenous males is obvious from the earliest category, that is, under 18, and remains higher across all age groups, although the rate difference decreases in the older age groups. Although a relatively high proportion of offences for which Indigenous people are incarcerated comes under the assault category, they are also more frequently imprisoned than non-Indigenous people for good order offences and offending against justice procedures (Carcach, Grant and Conroy 1999).



# The Impact of Incarceration on Children and Young People<sup>1</sup>

The proportion of children within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is much higher than the overall proportion of children in the State, and stands at 46.9 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996). This means that for every Indigenous adult there is an Indigenous child, which has enormous implications for socialisation and emotional and economic provision for the child. This relatively disproportionate number of children to adults in today's terms has implications in many areas, from housing to mentoring, and creates a different dynamic from that of the population of the rest of the State. In communities where many of the adult males are absent through incarceration, the adult to child ratio is even less. The implications for socialisation, support and economic provision for these children are profound.

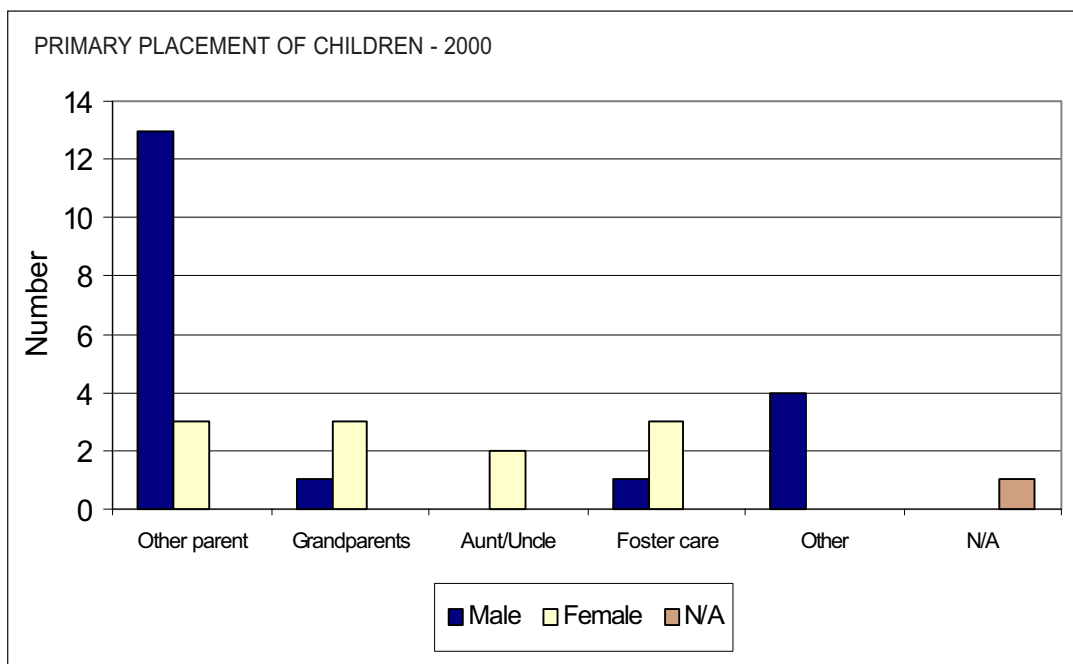
The long-term effects of incarceration can be devastating on family members, often called the "hidden victims of crime" (Howard 1994; Seymour 1998). Parents remain parents, even when incarcerated, yet public policy and programs for prisoners often overlook children as a group of secondary victims. This is particularly surprising given the mounting evidence that, along with substance-abuse treatment, education, and job skills, having a family to return to is one of the most important factors in an offender's successful reentry into society (Florida House of Representatives Justice Council 2000; Healy, Foley & Walsh 2000). There is also an argument that, while prisoners' children remain largely unrecognised and uncared-for, they are "a potential reservoir of future criminality and deviant social behaviour" (Shaw 1992, p.192).

There has been very little research in this area and what has been done is largely not Australian, and is hindered by small sample sizes, inadequate comparison groups and does not usually extend to longitudinal studies (Seymour 1998, p.471) or specifically consider Indigenous peoples. The implications of imprisonment on men as fathers have received even less attention (Hairston 1998, p.619). As a recent report of a Queensland study of parents in prison (Healy et al. 2000, p.5) points out, "The family support needs of parents in prison, their spouses and their children... are everyone's business... and no-one's concern". Nevertheless, this paper will now briefly summarise some of what we do know about the effects of imprisonment on the family.

A significant issue when women are imprisoned is the provision of alternative care for their children, as women are more likely to be the primary caregivers. In the above study of Queensland parents in prison and their families, Healy et al. (2000 pp.15-16) found that gender was a significant factor in the stability of care arrangements for children of inmates. See Figure 3 (p. 14).

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<sup>1</sup>The content of this section is taken from Howard, S., 2000, *Fathering behind bars*, Paper presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> AIFS Conference, Sydney, July 2000.



**Figure 3. Primary placement of children by gender of incarcerated parent in Queensland (Healy et al. 2000 page 15)**

As can be seen from the above graph, children of male inmates are more likely to be cared for by the non-incarcerated parent, that is the mother, than children of female inmates. Children of female inmates are variously looked after by the other parent, grandparents, aunts and uncles or are placed in foster care.

This is one aspect of the fragmentation and disintegration of the family which may be experienced, though the partners of male prisoners are more likely to work to maintain family ties. Regardless, it is very difficult for relationships to continue and flourish when one person in that relationship is in prison. Intermittent contact, and a sense of losing touch with loved ones can cause all parties great anguish.

Howard (1994) argues that families may feel similar grief to that experienced with the death of a loved one, and she refers to studies which have shown “that a higher percentage of wives of inmates experience more grief symptoms than do wives of prisoners of war and servicemen missing in action”. Yet the normal outlets for grieving are often denied because of the nature of the loss. This appears to be more traumatic for a child who had a good relationship with the parent before incarceration (Howard 1994).

Visitation procedures are often not conducive to the maintenance of family ties (Florida House of Representatives Justice Council 2000; Healy et al. 2000) and can be particularly difficult for children.

It is very common for families to feel stigmatised when a member is imprisoned. For certain crimes, such as sexual offences against children, this can be intensified. Such “social stigmatization” is probably most damaging on the children of the offender who may be harassed or ostracised (Howard 1994). Families may also feel shame, embarrassment, and even guilt for what has occurred.

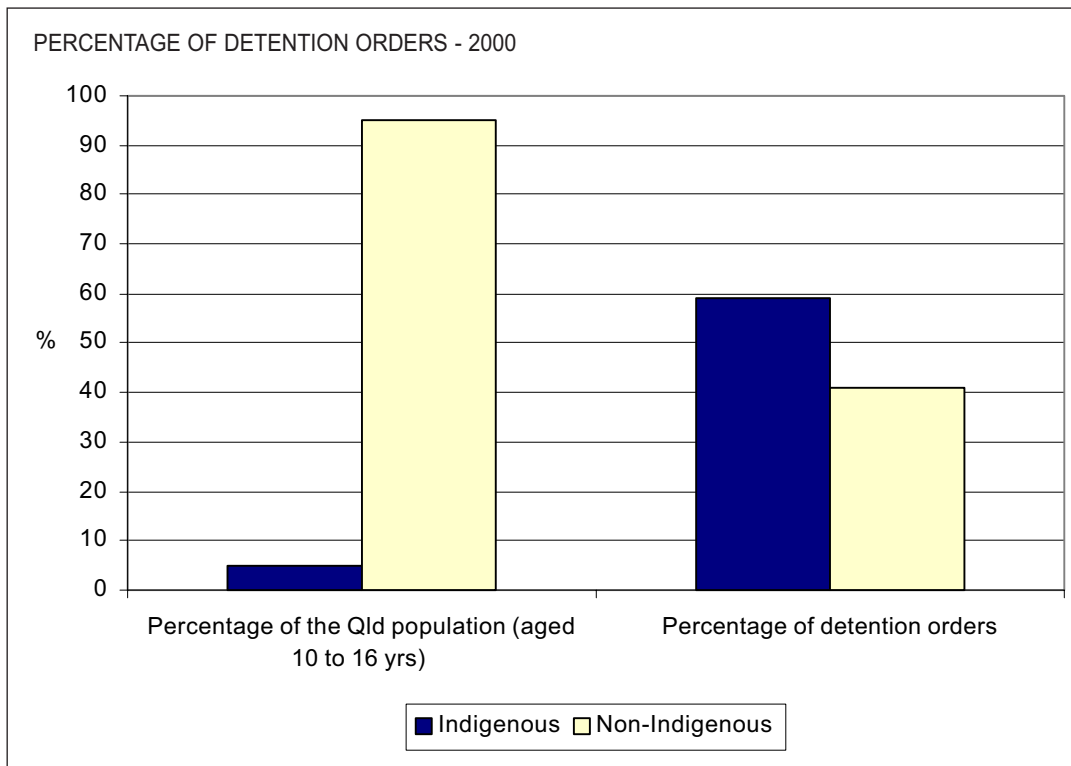
Studies of children whose parents are separating indicate that children often blame themselves for the trouble between their parents. This self-blame can also occur in the case of incarceration. Alternatively, the child may blame the other parent. Such feelings can negatively impact on the child’s self-image and on family relationships.

The financial hardships the family of a prisoner can experience have been quite well documented (Florida House of Representatives Justice Council 2000; McDermott & King 1992). In many cases where the father is imprisoned, the family income is seriously affected by the loss of the breadwinner, and family costs increase through the expenses involved in phone calls to the inmate, travelling to the prison for visits and perhaps in providing financial support for the inmate.

It is common for families to feel helpless and confused when a close member is incarcerated (Howard 1994). One of their greatest needs is for information, both to understand what is happening to their loved one, and so that they know what to expect in terms of the procedures for contact. The inmate and the family both have a need for relevant information and for this to be presented in a manner and language that is accessible to them. This confusion can be intensified for children whose understanding of the world in general is still developing, and whose need for information is often not met through a desire to protect them.

Indigenous men who are incarcerated are often sent to prisons that are a long way from their communities, and resource constraints mean that it is usually difficult, if not impossible, for their families to visit on a regular basis. When fathers and young single men are taken from their community and put in jail, the composition of the community changes, and the social dynamics are changed. This affects all relationships and eventually impacts on community well-being as a whole. If a large proportion of the males from a community is absent, it seems even more likely that young Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders will not have a significant male figure in their lives.

Having a father in prison provides a role model for young men which, it appears, they often emulate. Consider the numbers of Indigenous youths in youth detention centres. In 1998/99 Indigenous young people, who constituted just under 5% of the Queensland 10-16 year old population, accounted for 59% of all young people admitted to detention orders which were not immediately suspended (Families, Youth and Community Care Queensland 2000). See figure 4 (p. 16).



**Figure 4. Indigenous young people as a percentage of Queensland’s population of young people and their representation in being admitted to detention orders (10-16 years)**  
*(Families, Youth and Community Care Queensland 2000)*

The over-representation of Indigenous young people generally increases with the severity of the juvenile justice order (Families, Youth and Community Care Queensland 2000).

The over-representation of Indigenous boys in youth detention centres is perceived by some Elders to be a new rite of passage that they have adopted, which culminates, when they reach 18, in a sentence to the “big house”:

*I had spent 20 years of my life in institutions. Like I said before, in and out - I could have had a choice to stop after the age of 18 but the juvenile system at that stage of children services actually nurtured me to be an adult criminal. They nurtured me in their system. They basically prepared me for no other life because of the isolation that was surrounded, that we were put in as children (Personal communication with Barry Malezer:- Indigenous man - 20 years experience of detention within institutions, June 2000).*

The situation is indeed grim, but, as Healy and her colleagues (2000, p.8) point out:

*Although the prison environment is often destructive to family relationships, it can also provide a window of opportunity for change. National and international research indicates parents in prison are often motivated to use this period to reflect on their relationships with their children and to improve their capacity to parent...*

## Supporting Indigenous children and their incarcerated fathers

This paper has identified some aspects of the impact on children when Indigenous fathers are incarcerated. There are many factors that need to be considered when exploring strategies to support these children and their fathers.

Recognition of the loss of identity and cultural fragmentation experienced by descendants of those who inhabited this land before the European settlers is the starting point. Rebuilding culture and reestablishing pride may help lead to a new sense of identity which promotes a new form of Indigenous “family” to encompass supportive family relationships like those which existed then:

*Strengthening the role of family and helping the young feel dignified and proud are means by which our culture can be protected across generations with both young men and women playing a part in cultural preservation and respect. Our survival is not based on the continuance of cultural skills and knowledge as they were traditionally set, but rather on new skills that have evolved from the old ones that play the same role within the immediate and extended family and kinship units now (Personal communication with Barry Malezer:- Indigenous male community leader, July 2000).*

The words of an Indigenous male capture another aspect - ownership of action, the need for Indigenous males to help Indigenous males:

*The job for us all now as men within our communities is to learn from the past and recognise what we must do to regain our roles within the family and taking care of our women and children. Our men have got to help each other to understand what has happened to us and our families and the roles that we play within it. We have to take back what the white fellas have taken from us, that is, if we want to break this cycle of self destruction and erosion that many of our brothers, fathers, uncles, Elders have suffered (Personal communication with Barry Malezer:- Indigenous male aged 42 at community meeting, March 1999).*

This means that any programs or strategies to support Indigenous prisoners and their children need the involvement of Indigenous people, in both their development and their delivery. The role of Elders will be fundamental.

While the focus of this paper is on children and their fathers, the role of the mother is integral to the issue. Relationships between mother and child, and mother and father are also relevant. In particular, strategies would need to ensure that the child does not become a pawn in power plays between the parents. Strategies for supporting father-child relationships should not in any way diminish or threaten mother-child relationships.

In considering the development of programs for prisoners aimed at maintaining positive family relationships, it is important to remember that most male inmates are relatively young, have low levels of education and are poor at the time of their arrest (Hairston 1998; Healy et al. 2000).

Drug or alcohol dependence is also likely to be present. In addition, the antisocial behaviour of prisoners that led to incarceration often includes violence, and may include child abuse. Programs for prisoners who have abused their children will need to be constructed carefully and may require support personnel outside the prison to ensure the child's well-being. If prisoners are already undertaking programs related to these issues, coordination of these with any further programs focussing on their relationships with their children is an issue.

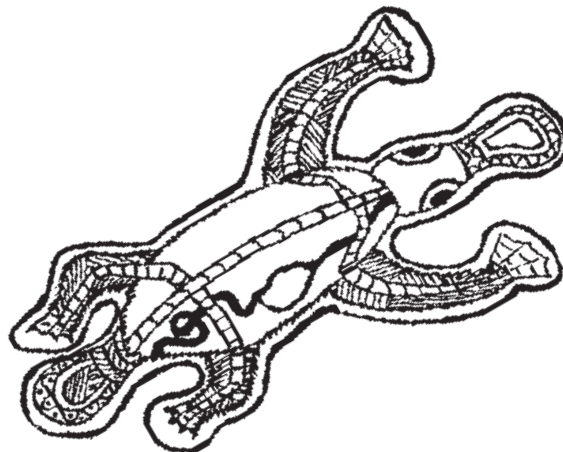
Other relevant factors relate to what is known about adult learning. This is most effective when it is contextual, builds on existing skills and expertise, and when there is plenty of opportunity to practise skills as they are being learnt. Hence, if the skills in question are about communicating with children, it is best if programs include opportunities for fathers to practise by communicating with their children, preferably in face-to-face situations. Learning theory also alerts us to the limitations of one-off sessions and highlights the importance of learning over time. The role mentors can take in changing behaviour may also be worth considering.

Fundamental to maintaining and rebuilding family relationships in this context is the amount of contact father and child may have while the father is incarcerated - access issues. This will involve a consideration of the visitation policies of correctional centres, and, in situations where distance makes it difficult for family visits, consideration of other means of fostering regular communication between father and child.

There has been little research done on the experiences of children when a parent is incarcerated. However, information about what is happening to the parent in an appropriate format, appears to be a need.

The challenges that inmates face when released from prison in picking up their lives and changing their behaviours provide a further factor for consideration. Mechanisms which support their reintegration into the community and strategies for supporting positive relationships with their children may play a crucial role in change.

Supporting incarcerated Indigenous males to build positive relationships with their children offers them and their children a new starting point. It could provide the children with the male support, role models and relationships they need, while increasing the fathers' sense of belonging and inclusion. Providing this support, while not an easy task to attempt, is an essential one, for the sake of these children.



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