

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Children Affected by Parental Incarceration

Melbourne—Wednesday, 30 March 2022

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WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Professor Susan Dennison, Director, Transforming Corrections to Transform Lives, Griffith Criminology Institute, Griffith University.

The CHAIR: Hello, everyone, welcome back. As I am sure you are all aware, this is the public hearing for our Inquiry into Children Affected by Parental Incarceration.

We are very pleased to be joined now by Professor Susan Dennison, who is the Director of Transforming Corrections to Transform Lives, and this runs out of the Griffith Criminology Institute at Griffith University. Welcome, Professor Dennison. Thank you so much for joining us.

If I could just let you know that all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is as provided by our *Constitution Act* but also by our own standing orders of the Legislative Council. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing. However, if you were to repeat the same things outside this hearing, you would not have the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee could be considered a contempt of Parliament.

This is a public hearing, so we have Hansard here recording and transcribing this session. You will receive a copy of that transcript. I would encourage you to have a look at it and make sure we have not misheard or misrepresented you. Ultimately it will be made public on the committee's website.

Again, on behalf of the committee, we very much appreciate the time that you are giving us. If you would like to make some opening remarks, we will then open it up for committee discussion.

Prof. DENNISON: Great. Thank you so much. My name is Susan Dennison, and I am a professor in the Griffith Criminology Institute at Griffith University. For nearly two decades I have focused on understanding the impact of incarceration on children who have incarcerated parents and also the impact on the parents themselves, so I am grateful for the opportunity to address the committee about this important topic.

I am coming to you from the land of the Jagera people, and I pay my respects to elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In particular I acknowledge that Australia's First Nations people are the most incarcerated population in the world, and these shocking and unacceptable incarceration rates have harmful consequences for Indigenous men and women, their children and their communities.

Today I will address all three of the committee's terms of reference, starting by making a brief statement in relation to the first term of reference regarding the impact of parental incarceration on children. I will make two main points. First, extensive research shows that the incarceration of parents has a detrimental impact on most, but not all, children. These impacts include stigmatisation, behavioural and mental health issues, poor school performance, early school leaving and early pregnancy. Australian research has shown some particularly harmful effects of maternal incarceration on young children, with increased rates of child protection system contact and rates of children being formally placed outside the home before the age of two—27 times higher for Indigenous children and 110 times higher for non-Indigenous children compared to children whose mothers had no history of imprisonment. Impacts on children may be direct, through severed or altered contact with their imprisoned parent, or indirect, through the strains placed on a child's caregiver or the disruptions caused to the child's developmental system, including their interactions with other social service systems. Most of these impacts heighten children's own risk of offending and incarceration. Today more than a quarter of young adults coming into prison have experienced incarceration of a parent.

My second point is that imprisonment does not impact children for a defined period in their lives. Many children of prisoners experience what Peggy Giordano and her colleagues call packages of risks. These positions acknowledge that many children who experience imprisonment of their parent also experience various forms of adversity through their childhood and adolescence. This can include child maltreatment, exposure to domestic violence, exposure to high levels of substance use, housing instability and homelessness, instability in education through excessive school moves, disengagement from school, poverty, out-of-home care and exposure to criminal behaviour.

The experience of parents has cascading effects on their children before and during imprisonment and after their release from prison. Most people leave prison worse off than when they entered prison, with opportunities to address entrenched disadvantage curtailed by eroded support networks and family relationships, low education levels, a history of unemployment, trauma, unmet mental health needs, risks for returning to substance use, inadequate housing support and stigmatisation by the general community and potential employers. Post-release support for parents is usually inadequate to meet their needs. The implications of these life-course experiences of adversity for parents and their children is that many families are likely to require multisystemic, multimodal support over an extended period of time to overcome entrenched cycles of disadvantage, trauma and offending.

So this leads me to the second term of reference with respect to existing programs and services, and here I will be very brief. I argue that it is virtually impossible to break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and offending with current policies and practices and underfunding of services. There is as yet to my knowledge no service that is dedicated to children of prisoners that works across government and the NGO sector to address families' multiple service needs. I say 'families' because we cannot hope to create sustainable support and change without addressing the needs of the entire family system. I acknowledge, though, that there are services that are doing terrific work—and I know that you are speaking to some of those services as part of this inquiry—who for many years have supported children with a parent in prison and developed and delivered programs for parents in prison to build their parenting capacity, to nurture parent-child relationships and also to support children in schools or in care, but they cannot meet the needs of all children and families with their current resources and funding cycles. The burden is likely left to families to navigate a very complex array of potentially useful government and non-government services, and to be quite blunt, they are falling through the gaps of these service systems and agencies.

So this brings me to the committee's third term of reference with respect to identifying areas for improvement of services and policies. For the past 18 months I have been leading the Transforming Corrections to Transform Lives project here in Queensland. We were funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation to co-create the new model of service provision for imprisoned mothers and their children during custody and after release to create conditions for families to thrive. We used a co-creation approach, working in close consultation with mothers in prison, with stakeholder service agencies, including government and non-government agencies, and with Queensland Corrective Services. We held 17 separate workshops made up of 38 different focus groups comprising 166 participants. Our workshops with stakeholders focused on better understanding the current supports available for children and young people with a mother in prison. We wanted to understand where the gaps in services were and what the barriers were to families accessing support when they needed it. These workshops with stakeholders revealed that there were multiple missed opportunities to support children and young people often because the needs of children with an imprisoned parent are not the core business of those agencies. So, for example, when a parent first comes in contact with the police, they may be arrested. There is not necessarily a trigger point there to look at what the needs of those children might be and provide them with support and start that process. A siloing of services and government practice—so even within particular government departments or agencies sometimes children can only access a particular service to meet one particular need because that is how that particular service has been funded. They need to access a different area of the department in order to meet another need or go across government, for example.

There is a lack of knowledge of available services amongst service providers. Some service providers are quite well connected in their communities and across different agencies, but many services are not aware of what other services might be available that might meet the multiple needs of children and their families. There is a lack of awareness within some agencies regarding how they might support children with a parent in prison. So, for example, within the education system, which has very little overlap with the criminal justice system, there is a general lack of awareness in terms of how to interact with parents in prison when working with a child who has a parent in prison—how to best support them, what the impact looks like for a child who has a parent in prison and how they might actually connect with that parent in prison to best support that child through their education and keep them engaged in school. There is a lack of training in the service sector with respect to the needs of children and young people with a parent in prison. Quite sadly, there is also a reluctance to share information across agencies to assist case planning. Much of what we heard was a fear of breaching privacy legislation, but it places the burden on children and their families to retell their stories, which can be re-traumatising.

Our findings pointed to a need for someone to help mothers, children and young people and their families through the complex myriad of services and government assistance that exists. Community stakeholders agree that families could not do it on their own, but neither did they see their own organisations taking the lead as system navigators. There was also a recognised need and desire among the stakeholders to break down system barriers to enable a more holistic approach to supporting mothers, children and young people.

So for us the key outcome of this project was the design of the Transforming Corrections to Transform Lives model. I believe the committee has been provided with a diagram of that model. We propose three innovative strategies to achieve real and sustainable change for mothers and their children. The first is developing a Transforming Corrections hub to drive system change, to break down agency silos and to promote integrated service provision. We really felt that as much as more program support is needed for children, if we are doing that program work within a broken system, then we are going to hit walls. Often the system pushes back against real transformation, real change and real support for families, so that system work is really critical.

The second is a Transform Lives program, which provides holistic and proportionate continuity of care and system navigation for women and their children during imprisonment and well beyond release—and we are talking up to three years post release—where mothers and children are provided with a coach who actually navigates them through all the services and systems that they need to engage with in order to access the kind of support that they need. Then there is also a research and evaluation program to build a much-needed evidence base to determine what actually works for mothers and children and to enable informed decision-making around future investment.

In relation to children and young people, our goal was for children to be supported in succeeding. As I said, the program provides children with a coach to support them through activities such as individual case planning, which is also designed to be culturally sensitive and connect them with appropriate referral agencies, and that can be Aboriginal-led organisations if that is the desire of the participant; to deliver trauma-informed interventions and support—so some children miss psychological support in relation to early childhood trauma that may or may not be connected with the parent's imprisonment but is exacerbated by the additional stress of incarceration; to collaborate effectively with families and schools around the needs of the child; to develop and repair relationships with families and peers, including with the mother in prison where that is appropriate; to build a support network around the child to create stability in their life through formal and informal supports, including with schools to improve school attendance and engagement; and developmentally appropriate skill building.

What we found across a number of studies is that many children who experience parental incarceration have learning deficits or early childhood behavioural problems that are not addressed early and that are often missed at schools. Many of the children that experience high levels of disadvantage and parental incarceration are in schools that are often ill equipped to actually assess all of the needs of children and bring in additional support. That is part of this model as well: to ensure that necessary assessments and supports are actually brought in to support the child and to leverage that; to engage them in extracurricular activities as well to kind of develop a strong, developmentally promotive context for that child; to reduce school suspensions and expulsions, which are also much higher in children who experience parental incarceration; to look at flexible learning options; and to recognise and foster the strengths in the child as well.

We designed this model to be flexible for scaling up based on the trial of the program—and also scaling it out, with the potential to be offered to fathers and their children and trialled in other jurisdictions as well. The program is individually tailored, designed to meet the cultural needs of participants. The model has only recently been developed, I have to say, and it is currently untested, but I felt that it was important to share it with you today since it speaks directly to the terms of reference and really included the voices of mothers in prison and stakeholders in the community as well as corrective services in the development of this.

Thank you for your time, and I welcome any questions you have.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for that. Two decades of work in this area really shows in just that brief presentation that you have provided for us. In thinking about the hub, and I think we have all thought this in the past: given that we know the trajectory for a child who has a parent incarcerated, we should be wrapping services around that child then, because we know the exponential chances of them going into the justice system. So the hub would focus on the child. With that hub, would that naturally sit in justice even though that

person would then be connecting with education, would be connecting possibly with child protection, health et cetera? Do you think it is a place for justice to take the lead? Because they almost have the most to gain from this.

Prof. DENNISON: Yes, that is an interesting question. So we designed the model to sit independently, outside of government, and part of the reason for that was because the mothers in prison told us that if they were going to engage with a coach, they wanted that coach to be independent from corrective services, but they also wanted them to be independent from child safety, which is our child protection organisation in Queensland. To be able to really kind of build that trust and kind of therapeutic relationship that is needed for the model to work effectively, they wanted to be able to fully trust that person and for them to be separate from agencies that they have a long history with and many of their families have a long history with, because those are all negative experiences for them. So we kind of designed this. I have to say we have a proposal at the moment for forward funding to actually trial the model—to really sit at this university level to trial it but to potentially in the future be funded by government. That is the idea; we see this as being government's responsibility to actually provide this kind of change, this leadership and these services as well, but it might need to sit in an independent organisation, outside of government, if it is at the point of being scaled up and so on.

Maybe the larger pot of money comes out of justice and so on, but really it is a whole-of-government initiative and a whole-of-government responsibility that we see for something like this. Much of the change needs to happen at the criminal justice system level, but there is also a real need to bring in other departments such as health and such as education, for example. NDIS, housing—they are all departments that sit on the fringes of this but actually have a really key role to play in helping families overcome the disadvantage that they are experiencing.

The CHAIR: I know. This committee just last week tabled a criminal justice inquiry, and it does not matter actually what inquiry we are doing—housing, education and health.

You mentioned some things are, I think you said, impossible under current policy and legislation. Are there any specific policy areas or legislation that the committee should be aware of to consider when recommending changes?

Prof. DENNISON: There are a whole lot of policies, whether that is within corrective services or youth justice and so on—and child safety—that are there with good intentions. But what they do is actually prevent agencies effectively talking to each other, and part of this Transforming Corrections Hub that we designed is actually working at identifying exactly what those policies are over the next 18 months and working with the systems change board to actually review those policies and look at how they can be changed.

One of the really difficult things I think that especially mothers in prison experience is that ability to actually have meaningful contact with child protection in relation to their children. That relates to their short phone calls that they are able to make while in prison, the time that they spend trying to track down the right person to speak to within a department within that time frame and then an ability to actually understand and communicate effectively around what kinds of orders their children are under and what they need to do in order to start addressing those orders so that they will be able to regain custody of their children again at some point or to prevent long-term orders being put in place, which can happen quite quickly as well. I think that there are policies—and I do not know specifically what they are—that actually prevent this kind of effective communication, and that is why we talk about having a system navigator who actually can spend the time making those phone calls, finding out what the order actually is and then coordinating a meeting between a mother and a child safety officer, for example, to actually talk through and develop a plan in a facilitated kind of way, because I think often parents are really on the back foot with these agencies when they are trying to figure out how they actually navigate their way through, and they are in a very disempowered position at that point in time as well.

Privacy legislation I think is probably one of the main points that virtually every organisation talked to us about. There are exceptions within privacy legislation that allow you to share information when it is in the best needs of children, but I think that most of these organisations are quite fearful of whether or not they are stepping over the line of that legislation—whether this truly is an exception or not. I think that the staff who are the frontline service providers probably are not empowered enough to make those decisions. So either it is a review of the

privacy legislation to ensure that there is greater flexibility there or it is more training being provided for those frontline workers to really understand when and how they can actually share information in order to facilitate case planning, because we need that whole wraparound support for children but it is just not happening at the moment.

There are some good examples: youth justice has an integrated case management system for really high risk offenders. The police have a multi-agency responder team that goes out in some communities, where they have a child safety officer or a youth justice worker with them as well. So there are some examples of how there is some cross-agency work, but they are generally small pockets of that kind of work.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you. I will actually give someone else the call. I will go to Tania, then Cathrine, then Rod, and if I have got time I will come back. Tania.

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you, Chair. Professor, thank you so much. Every time I jotted down a question from when you were speaking, then you would answer it. But I do have a couple for you. Would you agree that as part of the recommendations we actually need to have a Victorian child strategy developed which encompasses pretty much everything you have said today but also what we have had other witnesses say—which outlines the work we need to do with children who have family members incarcerated? And when I say ‘family members’, this is not just about parents. I have worked with young people who have had siblings incarcerated, and I think that certainly up to now they are almost being overlooked in this process too, because that can have an enormous impact on those siblings that are still at home and can at times lead to them offending to be with that sibling. I have experienced that. So I think that we probably need to broaden this out a little bit to include those siblings, not just the parents who have been incarcerated. But would you think that it would be beneficial to address not only what you have discussed today? I mean, we have a youth justice strategy and we have so many other strategic plans, but I think that that could be a very valuable document for the Victorian government to develop and administer to those organisations.

Prof. DENNISON: Yes, absolutely. I think that instead of every single kind of department developing strategy that might encompass the children of prisoners as part of core business—and I think that most agencies do not see children of prisoners as their core business, they see them as a small number of children within the broader population that they are actually working with. We are still going to have those silos if we develop that work within individual organisations. Sure, they need to develop their expertise as well, but having that across government, a whole-of-Victorian kind of approach to ‘How are we actually going to address the needs of families of prisoners?’.

I agree with you that it is not just children with a parent in prison; it is not just children with a biological parent in prison. It can be step-parents, it can be aunts and uncles and it can be siblings that all have an impact. We have done research here in Queensland on household imprisonment, and there is still an effect on children in relation to somebody in their household being imprisoned, because that places additional strains on family members as well and those stresses then impact children as well. So, yes, we need to be all encompassing in a way, in terms of the families that we are talking about, and we need to have that broader strategy that actually then brings in all the departments that have a stake in supporting children and all the service agencies that are out there to be better connected.

That is where we came up with the proposal that we have within the hub—of having communities of practice as well to actually bring together across the sector people who can become experts in working with children of prisoners and then share that expertise within their own departments and agencies as well, because we need to build the capacity for this kind of integrated service provision that we are talking about and then kind of a board that actually works at that high level of cross-government to say, ‘Okay, we’ve got barriers here. We’ve got policies that are actually butting against each other. How are we going to address those?’. But in bringing people together across the sector what we found with the workshops was that the various people that came along to our workshops were like ‘This is the first opportunity I’ve had to talk with other people who are also supporting children of prisoners’. We had guidance officers from school who had never talked to another organisation before that was connected with children of prisoners. They were just in the workshop sharing resources with them and talking to them about what is available and how they could better understand the needs of children, so that kind of ground-level work is just not happening.

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you. You spoke briefly about consent and the contentious issues with gathering consent and passing on information. Do you think that we need to have stronger frameworks not only within organisations—that there are consent boxes that are there that have to be ticked—but also I am wondering whether our child safety standards need to actually be investigated to determine if it is in the best interests of that child that that information is shared with the relevant supporting agency but also then to allow managers to make that decision, because as you said, the person taking that initial call may not have that sufficient training. So I am just wondering whether our child safety standards do cover that ability to have that child sharing information.

Prof. DENNISON: Yes. I mean, I think an investigation into that is definitely needed, because when you go high enough in a department there is an ability to actually share that information, and they say, ‘Oh, no, no. You can share this information, we just need to get permission from the parent or the caregiver or if they are under state care’. But I think the issue is that things do not move up in an organisation generally, so most frontline service providers do not necessarily like to escalate questions like that up to managers, because it creates extra work for everybody. So what we have is people saying no at the lower level because if they do not it is going to create more work. And I am not saying that people are not willing to work hard or anything like that, but it is just a kind of management of an overload of cases to manage at the same time as well. You know, ‘Do we just say we can’t share this information, or do I push it up and it’s going to work its way through the system over the next month or two before I even get an answer and so I’m not going to be able to do anything about it today anyway?’. So, yes, we absolutely need to look at what can be done at that child safety or child protection level in terms of those standards around sharing information. We need to have kind of teams that actually can sit together and case plan. You see it happening in justice reinvestment programs and things like that within communities. They get together around the table and they talk about a particular person in the community, and only those people who are relevant to the discussion need to be there. They are all there with their best interests in terms of trying to provide support. We need to try and create that environment through some sort of broader policy that this is actually what is needed in order to provide that kind of support for children and their parents as well.

I think the other issue is seeing parents and children as separate, which is generally what happens. Even when a parent is leaving prison, the department of housing sees them as one individual, and sometimes they have an adolescent in youth detention who is leaving youth detention at a similar time. That youth is then assessed in terms of their housing needs separately to the mothers being assessed in terms of their housing needs. They are unlikely to be jointly housed together.

So there are all these barriers that actually just do not cooperate with each other in terms of meeting the needs of parents and their children, because we keep seeing them as these separate islands rather than as families. I think there are maybe some judgements around some of that as well in terms of whether the families are in the best position to actually be providing care for their children and so on, and there are questions there that do need to be addressed, but in many cases, especially when we are talking about teenagers, they want to be back with their parents again. Providing a way for that to occur in a supported environment so they are actually getting all the supports that they need and so the parents are getting the support that they need to be able to support their children as well is so critical, and that is what is missing. We cannot just provide housing to one parent and housing to a young person when that young person is going to run away in order to get back to be living with their parent again and then that parent is in a position where they are kind of breaching their parole conditions and the conditions of their housing in order to take people in who are not supposed to be living in the house.

So we have all of these kinds of multi layers that we have heard from the women in terms of all of these challenges. The decisions we make around parents coming out of prison directly impact the children.

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you for that.

Prof. DENNISON: Sorry, it was a very long answer to a fairly straightforward question. I should have just said, ‘Yes, do that’.

The CHAIR: Cathrine.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Thanks, Chair. Hi, Professor Dennison. As Ms Maxwell said, the more you spoke, the questions were sort of being answered, but something that I have been thinking about—and I thought about it when the previous witness gave evidence—is the children we have been talking about, in my mind, have been older children. But I am interested to know about women who enter prison pregnant and then give birth in custody and the access to prenatal and postnatal support—more about that and any observations or insights that you can give in that respect, because it is something we have not touched on yet, and I am interested to know more.

Prof. DENNISON: Yes. Look, we did talk to mothers in prison about their experiences of being pregnant and giving birth in prison. There are some very clear policies in prisons in relation to women getting access to antenatal care and being able to request that their baby stays in prison with them after the birth as well. That is certainly in Queensland, where every women's centre has a mother-baby unit. It is not necessarily the case in other states in Australia, I am aware of that. So we have clear policies in place to actually support all of this. What we heard from women, though, was that this operates in more of an ad hoc kind of way in terms of some women had good experiences with that and felt that they got the support they need. Many women felt that they had not got the support that they need, that they had not got adequate prenatal advice and antenatal care. I suppose we are talking about children more generally, but also there were mothers who also experienced miscarriages in prison as well and felt that they did not get the medical care that they needed after the miscarriage, for example, in terms of having to return to their regular cell and sit on hard benches and all of those kinds of things.

Look, in relation to the pregnancy and then giving birth they were able to have a support person with them during the birth itself, but that person needed to leave immediately after the birth. They talked about how in some cases where their baby was born preterm or was born with health problems and needed to stay in the hospital for an extended period of time they felt very alone during that period, because they were unable to have any support person come and support them through that kind of process and often may have had to return to the prison without the baby at that particular point in time as well. There were varied experiences, I would say, and some women were kind of quite upset about the experiences that they had had, and others said that it had gone more according to policy. It is a very I think stressful experience for any of them anyway, even where all the policies are operating as they should, because entering motherhood is a stressful time anyway, and doing it in a prison environment with the journey to hospital and back is very stressful.

Other issues that they raised with us were around health care in relation to nutrition and things like that. They did feel that in some cases they were not getting the adequate nutrition that they needed while pregnant but then also after they had given birth in terms of being able to support breastfeeding and things like that and having adequate nutrition. In the case of our project we did feed all of this back to corrective services, and they immediately responded and put in place different nutrition guidelines and increased the food available and things like that to pregnant women. So I know that they did respond immediately to those kinds of concerns. That was the beauty of working alongside them as part of this project. Where we saw opportunities for immediate change we fed it directly back to corrective services, and those changes were able to be put in place. But I think that it speaks to broader issues that women in prison probably right around Australia experience in relation to that health care; that nutrition; that kind of support; not knowing necessarily what to expect; being able to be part of prenatal classes and things like that in order to be able to care for an infant after they have given birth as well; whether that infant is going to be living in prison with them or not; how to build that attachment and that bond; and having all those kinds of supports and resources available for them.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Thank you. Thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Rod.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Professor Dennison. You have been working on this for 20 years, and a lot of other good people have been doing lots of good things. I want to know why we have not been able to kick the door open and get this addressed.

Prof. DENNISON: Well, that is a really good question, because I know I have felt like I have been banging my head against a wall for a long time. I think that there has not been an appetite. We have policies right across Australia that are tough on crime, and it creates a dialogue where the public does not think about incarcerated parents, does not think about incarcerated children. We are fed media images of young people engaging in

violent crimes, whether it is a car chase that has led to a horrific accident and an innocent person being killed, and all of those kinds of events keep up that tough-on-crime approach that politicians like to sell, especially around election times. We have this approach, and we have seen this play out in rising incarceration rates over the last two decades as well, so actually we have gone in the opposite direction to what we should be going in.

I just do not think there is enough of an understanding of the impact of imprisonment on children and the intergenerational consequences of that that we are going to pay the price for many, many years to come in terms of the rate of incarceration that we have now and the rising rate of women being imprisoned as well. In Queensland here we have seen an increase of 130 per cent of Indigenous women in the last decade. That is going to have intergenerational effects, and it takes a long time to put in place supports that are actually going to negate those impacts.

I think that there has not been a general will, and we probably have not been united at the state level or the federal level in actually having a united approach and getting this front and centre on politicians' agendas. I think we could communicate better with the general public as well. That is on us as researchers as well to maybe make our work a bit more digestible and communicate effectively to the broader public that this has a real impact and that we all pay the price for it in our taxes. Where we have a society that is so unequal, with so many people experiencing these high levels of disadvantage that we know track into the criminal justice system, really the onus is on all of us to actually think about how we could do this differently.

I do not think there is anybody out there who really believes that our criminal justice system is working effectively when you look at the rates of recidivism. As soon as you speak to any person in the community about those rates of recidivism and also the impact of parental incarceration on children, they all say, 'Well, isn't this happening, that happening and that happening?'. And when you explain, 'No, it's not', they are like, 'Where does all the money go?'. Unfortunately at the moment the money goes into building prisons to house the increasing incarceration rates. That is not on corrective services; they are just the end of the line. They are receiving prisoners and trying to manage them as best they can. But it is at the court level. It is on the policies around bail—making bail so tough that especially those women who experience high levels of disadvantage and so on are being refused bail or are placed in positions where they are returning to violent households as well in order to have a roof over their head to enable them to have bail. We have some really dangerous conditions there. The parole conditions are so tough for people to meet as well—they are breaching parole at such high levels too.

So that is where the changes need to be happening. We need that kind of legislative change and policy change to reduce those incarceration rates to enable corrective services to actually do better work at rehabilitation but also to divert some of that funding to services to support children. And this has to be at the treasury level; it has to be across government that everybody is digging in their pockets and actually funding work to support these children.

Mr BARTON: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Professor. I do think it is kind of baffling sometimes when we circle around this problem. This committee—this is our ninth inquiry into justice issues and social issues, and yes, constantly we hear similar tales and similar stories around this. Has there been any economic modelling around this—the ongoing cost of the harm that is done to that child? I do not actually know how you would do it because, as you say, it is these pockets of harm and it is not the same across the board.

Prof. DENNISON: Yes. There has not been any really good economic modelling done around this. I think the Queensland Productivity Commission when they were looking at incarceration rates in Queensland a few years ago said that for every person sent to prison there is about a \$40 000 cost in relation to the effect on families. Now, I think that that really underdoes that impact on families. The federal Productivity Commission inquiry kind of stayed away from that impact on families, and so we do not have good modelling.

We have done a little bit ourselves just in terms of looking at what we know of how many children are likely to end up in the child protection system, how many children are likely to end up in the youth justice system, what days in youth detention cost and what days in prison cost. And we did that in relation to the development of the model that we came up with and that kind of program and the coach model to kind of showcase that actually we can fund something like this at a cost that is exponentially lower than the cost to have children in

out-of-home care, to have children going into youth detention, to have parents in prison or to have those children going into the adult corrections system themselves. And that is just around the big three—child protection, youth justice and the adult corrections system.

I do not have the numbers in front of me right now in terms of what that looked like, but I would be happy to provide them. They were kind of rough estimates based on the data that we have, but unfortunately the data is not that great. We could do some really good modelling by actually, first of all, knowing which children experience parental incarceration. At the moment we do not record that at the corrections level in terms of who is coming into prison, whether or not they have children and how many children they have. We have linked some of that data here in Queensland with corrective services data and Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages data, so we know people who have gone into prison and we can tell if they have ever given birth. What we have not been able to do yet, though, is link those children as they travel through government departments, but that is entirely possible to do. There are now good data linkage systems in place to do that kind of work. We just need funding to actually enable that—where we would actually be able to see, ‘Okay, so what’s the increased rate of these children actually touching the child protection system, the youth justice system, the adult correctional system’. But also we need to be clever about how we think about their connections to Centrelink. That is much trickier—so, bringing federal data into the mix as well but also health data.

So, you know, what we see are higher rates of emergency visits and things like that. What we would want to see is actually a lowering of emergency visits and better access to community mental health care, better access to visits to GPs and things like that to have preventative care and then that lowering of emergency visits, particularly in relation to harm to children but also in relation to domestic violence incidents involving their mothers, for example.

So those are all things that the data exists for; we just need to do a better job of being able to access that data. Governments need to be willing to actually collaborate in sharing that data across agencies and for researchers to actually use that data and ask those important questions, and then we can actually cost it as well.

The CHAIR: Does anyone else have any other questions?

Mr BARTON: One last question if I may, Chair.

The CHAIR: Yes. I will just go first and then you can finish up, Rod. You may not know this at all, Susan, but I am constantly flummoxed by the cost of communications for people in prison—the cost of those phone calls, particularly when a mother might be trying to deal with finding a teenage daughter or whatever the circumstances might be. Do you know why those communication costs are so high?

Prof. DENNISON: I have tried to figure it out myself. I am not entirely clear. I think that there are arrangements with the prisons, with corrective agencies in each state, with a particular provider and they are secure systems. So they sit outside of the way that we make phone calls, whether that is through your Telstra, Optus, those kinds of things—an actual provider of the system that they use. My understanding is that is what actually creates a more expensive system for those phone calls. It is not necessarily because corrective services do not want to reduce the cost and make this actually more affordable for families to stay connected. But there is something there around that providing of that system that costs money. I do not know. I have not followed the trail that far, but that is my general understanding. Hopefully I am not incorrect.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Yes, I have sort of heard something similar, and then when we saw with COVID the ability for teleconferencing, all of a sudden all of those costs were out the window. It did not cost anything for someone to have a Zoom meeting with their family.

Prof. DENNISON: Yes. I suppose on that, it kind of came into place at the same time as we were doing the workshops with mothers in prisons, so we were asking mothers, ‘Are you using the videoconferencing facilities?’. Some were. What we found in some centres, particularly where there was a higher Indigenous population in those centres, was that there was less use of those videoconferencing facilities, and we spoke to the women about why they were not accessing it. I think it is important to note that it does require more paperwork again. So it does not matter that you have got the paperwork already filled out to make a phone call, you still need to fill out the paperwork to be able to access that videoconferencing. It is also then about ensuring that the family members on the outside, particularly in remote communities and things like that, have access

and are able to complete the paperwork that is required on their side in order to be able to access it and then can also access the computers at the time that that videoconference is going to take place.

For many women, particularly for Indigenous women, they did say to us that it is just too hard—‘I can’t fill out my paperwork. I don’t know what it all means, and it’s going to be too hard. I don’t want to put that burden on my family to try and figure it out on the outside to have access to the internet and all of those sorts of things’. I think that is something that actually needs more support as well to ensure that people are able to access the facilities that are there to have that kind of contact, because it is potentially much more meaningful to do that contact than to have the telephone conferences. But it is also a little bit too resource intensive for some of the families to actually connect that way as well without some support to do so.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Rod.

Mr BARTON: Thanks, Chair. Just a quick one, Susan. In your opinion, is there any state or territory that is doing this work better than anybody else?

Prof. DENNISON: That is a good question. I would not say that I am intimately familiar enough with how every state is actually doing it to be able to really comment. I would say here in Queensland we have had the privilege of working alongside corrective services, who have been very open to this project and have opened the doors and let us talk to any staff within corrective services that we have wanted to talk to, whether that is within prisons or whether that is within head office, to really identify what the gaps are, what is not working, even to the point of trying to understand: well, if you have got this program, how many people are actually participating in the program? What are some of the barriers to people accessing the programs? And things like that. We have been developing this model alongside them, and then they report back to us about immediate changes that they are making as well.

I actually think that here in Queensland they are very well placed to actually take this model on board and, if we get the funding, to trial it, to actually have indicated an absolute commitment to actually trialling this model. So I think that we are well placed to lead some of this work, but we want to be able to share it with other jurisdictions as well, because it is all about building an evidence base. There is no evidence base here in Australia in terms of what works. I think we looked at programs around Australia that were for mothers in prison, and there were 51 different programs being operated. There was a lot of duplication, and not one of them had a published evaluation. That is not to say that they do not get evaluated in house; many do get evaluated in house. But unfortunately we do not see those evaluations, and then, because they are not published at that kind of standard that we look at as researchers, we do not know actually the rigour of those evaluations as well. So we really want to see also not only funding put into the services but funding put into actually evaluating these programs properly, and that means collecting data from the start of the program—not going in at the end of the program and asking people whether they liked it or not, but actually looking at how it is working and being flexible to make changes with a program in relation to: is it working? Is it not working? What do we need to change in order to get the best outcomes possible? That requires a willingness to fail, to do a bit of trial and error at the same time but to build that knowledge.

Mr BARTON: Fantastic. Thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Music to Tania Maxwell’s ears. Music to all of our ears, but I could see hers pricking up.

Thank you, Professor Dennison, for all the work that you have done for the last two decades and really being so generous with your time today and with your thoughts. Any information that you think we would be interested in, and certainly some of that economic modelling that you spoke about, we would be very grateful if you could pass on to us.

Prof. DENNISON: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: The committee will take a short break and reconvene at 3.05.

Witness withdrew.