

# Resilience Against Adversity: Pregnant Women with Substance Use History in New South Wales Prisons

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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Justice Health and  
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A close-up photograph of a palm frond, showing the intricate texture of the leaflets and the central rachis. The frond is set against a clear blue sky, with the leaflets creating a radial pattern. The lighting is bright, highlighting the green and yellowish tones of the leaves.

## Acknowledgement of Country

I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, who are the traditional custodians of the land we meet on today. I pay my respects to Elders past, present.



## Acknowledgement of Lived Experience

We honor the lived and living experience of our community members. By respecting your unique journeys, we are able to learn, grow, and work collaboratively to achieve better outcomes and foster a more inclusive environment.

# Acknowledgements

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## **Project team**

*Carolyn Day, Bethany White, and Maja Lindegaard Moensted, University of Sydney*

*Katerina Lagios, Justice Health and Forensic Mental Health Network*

*Jillian Roberts, Hunter New England Local Health District*

## **Protocol Steering Committee**

*Lachlan McPhail, Elizabeth A Sullivan, Wilson Lai, and Finbarr O'Neill, JHFMHN*

*Michael Doyle, University of Sydney*

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# Pregnant women in NSW prisons

## As at June 2025 in NSW

- 13,122 prisoners
- 903 (6.9) women
- 34% Aboriginal

- 164 pregnant women entered custody- 7% of all women prisoners in Australia *(AIHW, 2023)*
- 53% of pregnancy cases identified through mandatory pregnancy testing at prison intake *(Kim et al 2023, IJDP)*
- 88% of pregnancies were unplanned – almost no antenatal care or follow-up prior to custody
- Upon arrival, pregnant women face overwhelming conditions and limited care tailored to pregnancy-related needs *(Abbott et al., 2024, CCJ)*.



# Rationale

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- Relatively little research exists on the lived experiences of pregnant women in prison
- Most existing studies focus on hardship, systemic barriers, and unmet daily needs faced by pregnant women in prison
- Very little is known about resilience among pregnant women
- No existing data yet from the NSW prison context

## Aim

- To explore how pregnant women understand and experience resilience, and the factors that support it within NSW prison context

- **Setting and population**

- In-depth interviews with incarcerated women (current or previously pregnant) in two of three women's correctional centres in NSW, in 2022

- **Data collection and analysis**

- Thematic analysis using NVivo 12
- Framework: Ungar's resilience theory
- \$30 reimbursed into their prison account

- **Ethics**

- Justice Health & Forensic Mental Health Network
- Corrective Services NSW
- Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW

# Key Findings

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- **Resilience fostered by conditional nature of pregnancy care within the prison system**
  - *“Because I was pregnant, it kind of gave me a VIP card, a kind of thing... I was seeing the midwife every week. I could ask her to put, like.. I need this or like that, like, should get it done for me straightaway. That’s the way” (Liv, 36-year-old., 28 weeks pregnant)*
  - *“Everything stopped. The midwife sees you six weeks after having your baby, and then she discharges you. You don't have to see her anymore. So, I feel really sad... the officers look at you differently like ‘you had baby’, and all of your medical care stops unless you ask for it.” (Wendy, 36-year-old, recently gave birth)*

# Key Findings

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- **When formal care ends, the responsibility shifts to peer networks**

## ***Collective adaptive strategies ‘wave of repetition’***

- *“It is deliberately freezing, and we literally only just got a spare blanket. We’re supposed to have winter pyjamas already, but none of us has got winter pyjamas yet. Everybody still has their summer pyjamas, which are shorts and a T-shirt. [...] Like we’ve asked every single day. [...] we’re all asking for. Every single one of the girls in the wing asked for the winter pyjamas.” (Ivy, 26-year-old, 12 weeks pregnant)*

# Implications and Conclusion



Understanding women's resilience helps shape tailored, sustainable interventions in prison settings

Policies and programs should support peer networks and the empowerment women already have

- A peer mentor 'buddy' program

# Questions?

- What are your thoughts?
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