

## **Child protection and drug use: a qualitative pilot study with women and service providers**

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### **Introduction / Issues**

While Australian guidelines state that drug use should not be conflated with parenting issues, drug use is routinely used to justify surveillance and child removal. Estimates of child protection cases involving parental drug use range from 40–80%, yet little recent evidence explores the intersection of drug use and child welfare in Australia. This pilot study investigates women's and service providers' experiences.

### **Method / Approach**

Informed by feminist, decolonising and harm reduction frameworks, this study uses qualitative interviews with women who have lived experience of drug use and child protection involvement, as well as professionals from child protection and relevant health and welfare services. Participants were recruited through community partner organisations across the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria. Thematic analysis is being used to analyse interview data.

### **Key Findings**

Data collection is currently underway, and preliminary findings will be presented. Drawing on interviews with women and professionals, the presentation will examine: experiences of accessing care as a parent who uses drugs; the nature and impact of child protection involvement, including experiences of surveillance, case management and child removal; and the conditions that women and professionals identify as necessary to make help-seeking safer and more accessible. Together, these findings aim to elucidate how child protection systems are experienced by women who use drugs, and how professional practice shapes - and is shaped by - assumptions about parenting and drug use.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

This pilot study addresses a significant gap in the Australian evidence base on women who use drugs and their interactions with child protection services. Preliminary data will inform the design of a larger study and contribute to the understanding of how systems can better support women and their children.

### **Implications on communities, practice, policy and/or First Nations communities**

Findings have direct relevance for policy and practice across drug treatment and child protection as well as the broader health and welfare sectors. Given the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the child protection system, this research has particular significance for First Nations communities. Results will be used to develop recommendations that centre on human rights, harm reduction and equity.

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