

## **Unprepared release: a qualitative study of women's contraception experiences in Australian prisons: A socio-ecological perspective**

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**Introduction:** Contraception is crucial for women prisoners in preventing potential negative consequences arising from unplanned pregnancy. Despite Australian prisons offering universal healthcare, including effective contraception, the utilisation of contraception services seems to remain low, and the factors influencing women's contraception use are unknown. This study aimed to explore the multilayered factors influencing women's decisions to commence contraception whilst in New South Wales (NSW) prisons in Australia.

**Methods:** Qualitative interviews were conducted to explore the experiences of currently or recently pregnant women (n=31) with a history of substance use in two adult women's prisons in NSW, Australia, between April and October 2022. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded line-by-line in NVivo. Transcripts were analysed using a thematic approach embedded within a Socio-ecological Model (SEM).

**Key Findings:** The study reveals that women's contraception use was often neglected while in the community due to competing priorities, including drug use prior to imprisonment. As a result, many women viewed prison as the only realistic opportunity to prioritise contraception. However, despite their willingness to seek it, women were influenced by complex factors, including interaction with healthcare providers, peer influence, systemic barriers, limited awareness, underprioritized contraception in the prison culture, and uncertainty about the length of incarceration, often hindering their access to contraception.

**Discussions and Conclusions:** Prison offers an opportunity for women of childbearing age to access contraception, but addressing a multitude of complex barriers is crucial to engage with the service and enhance the uptake of contraception among incarcerated women.

**Implications on communities, practice, policy:** For timely expansion of contraception access for all childbearing-aged women in prison, integrating existing routine contraception services into pre-release care pathways may be a critical step towards preventing unplanned pregnancies and their associated adverse outcomes post release.