



ACT
Government

Walking with women on the
Pathway to change

Working together to reduce reoffending
and meet the needs of women: A framework
for ACT Corrective Services

Executive Summary
February 2021



We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the ACT, the Ngunnawal people. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

Walking with women on the

Pathway to change

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Objective and context of the framework

The ACT Corrective Services (ACTCS) Walking with Women on the Pathway to Change Framework (the 'Framework') has been developed to support a gender-responsive, individualised service delivery that recognises that women are a minority in the correctional service system and have specific needs that are fundamentally different to male offenders.

The purpose of the Framework is to provide evidence-based guiding principles for a holistic response to the management of women offenders in the ACT in both custodial and community correctional environments.

ACTCS acknowledges that partnerships with other government agencies and community sector providers are fundamental to the integration and continuity of supports and services for women; to ensure appropriate responses to cultural diversity; and to maintain community connectedness.

The Framework incorporates elements which have been identified through research and in consultation with government and non-government partners and stakeholders, including women with lived experience of the justice system.

“Support us in creating better lives” (Women offenders)

The Framework highlights contemporary evidence-based practice and principles that support the objectives of ACTCS to reduce (re)offending and (re)incarceration by improving the lives and wellbeing of women in the correctional system.

The Framework is also aligned to the ACTCS *Rehabilitation Framework* within which a key concept is *Risk Need Responsivity* (RNR), which is established as the evidence-based foundational approach across all Australian correctional services. The Framework will implement a *Risk Need Responsivity* model for women using strategies that support *relationships, rehabilitation, and reintegration*.

...integration and continuity
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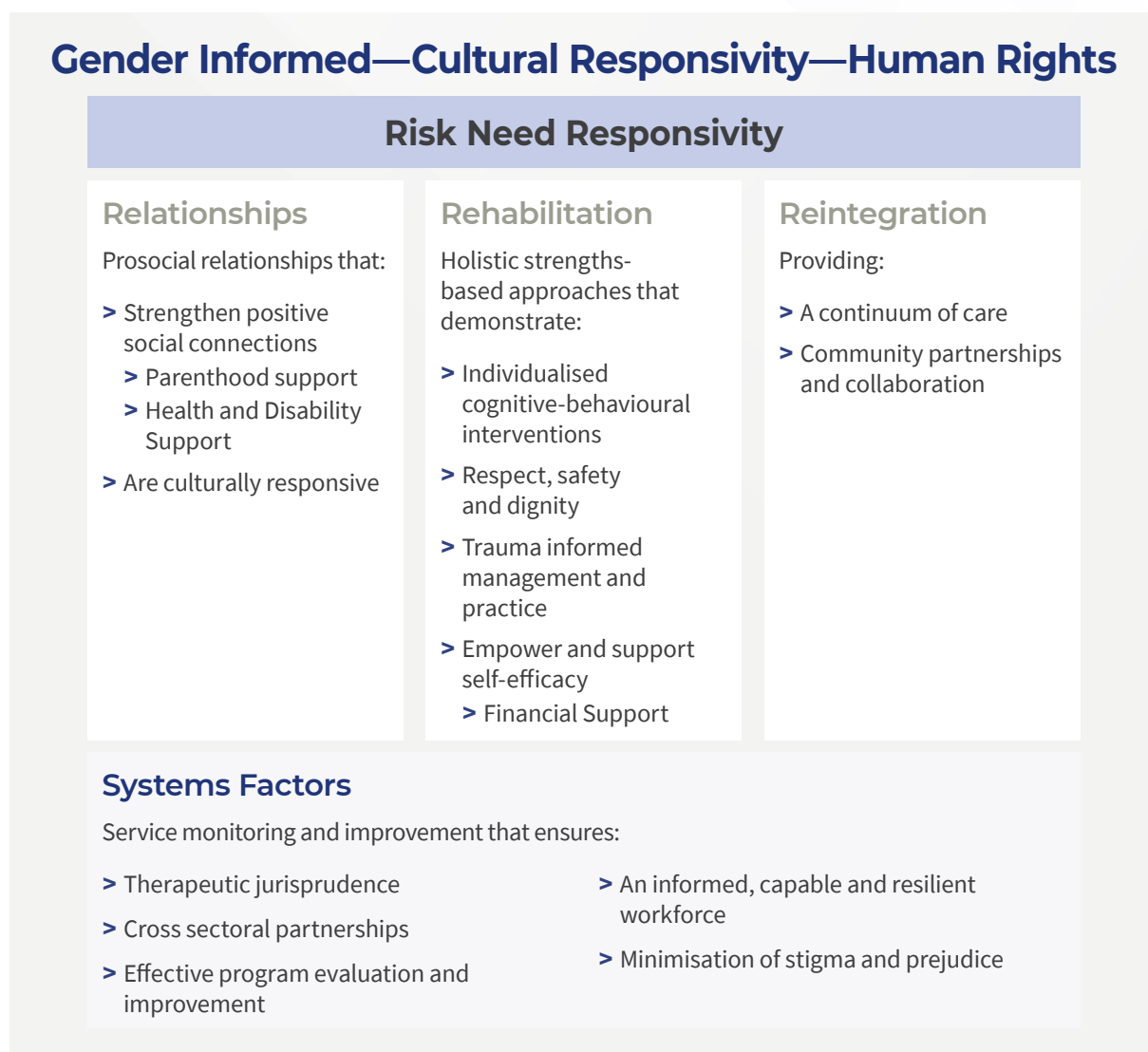
Part 1: Principles and levers

The Framework is consistent with national and international best practice for corrections and incorporates principles and levers to effect change that have been identified through research and stakeholder feedback. The four principles of this Framework are: gender informed approach, human rights, cultural sensitivity and holistic approach.

Within these principles sit four levers that enable positive action in the context of the principles and overall approach of responsiveness. The levers are:

Relationships, Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Systemic Factors. Each lever affects the others, and the degree to which any one is successful will depend in part on the successful interventions of the others. Systemic Factors underpin the other levers as a critical dependency that spans across the whole model and support and enable effective program and practice changes.

Each of the principles and levers are depicted in the diagram and considered in more detail below.



1. Gender-informed Approach

A gender-informed approach is built on theories of women's crime. Services and programs provided to women should be gender-aware at design, development and delivery stages. A gender-responsive approach promotes positive behaviour change which in turn contributes to reduced reoffending and a safer community.

2. Human Rights

A human rights approach is achieved through:

- > treating people with dignity and respect and respect for the right to privacy
- > empowering people to participate directly in decisions about their health and wellbeing
- > self-determination in relation to their life choices
- > informed consent and adequate and accurate information to support decision making
- > adopting strategies to improve self-esteem and self-worth
- > access to non-judgmental and non-discriminatory services
- > respect to the right of privacy
- > access to advocacy processes to protect rights in service delivery and basic consumer rights.

3. Cultural Sensitivity

ACTCS recognises that strengthening cultural competency within organisational practice is important in addressing the cultural needs of all women to deliver culturally appropriate and safe services. Careful consideration of a person's individual life experience and perspective is critical in the development of responsive programs for women.

4. Holistic Approaches

Every individual has overlapping and interconnected social identities including gender, sexuality, culture, nationality, socioeconomic background, ability, health status, familial and other relationships and individual characteristics. The variation in these factors impacts women's lived experiences and their pathways to offending behaviour or a law-abiding lifestyle. Interventions for women therefore require holistic approaches, multiple systems of support, and integrated service delivery to meet varied and complex needs.

5. Responsivity

Responsivity is about tailoring support and services to the specific needs of the offender, and incorporating targeted interventions matched to an offender's individually assessed risk level and circumstances. Responsivity includes the use of cognitive social learning methods to influence behaviour, and factors such as staff interactions and a constructive environment that supports behaviour change. Gender-responsive support should target key factors that are relevant to women offenders, including parenthood, physical and mental health, disability and financial independence.


Responsivity is the core principle for the Framework and provides the foundation for relationships, rehabilitation and reintegration.

6. Relationships

Women generally attach a great level of importance to relationships and their interactions with others. Developing and maintaining positive relationships between women offenders, their support network and support services creates a foundation for change. This Framework identifies two main aspects underpinning this Principle: strengthening positive social connections and cultural responsiveness.

Strengthening positive social connections is essential in the development of relationships and the rehabilitation and reintegration of women offenders. Beneficial outcomes increase where support services engage with women soon after they enter custody. This enables relationships and trust to develop so women know how to continue to access services upon release and are motivated to do so, consistent with the concept of reintegration.

In the ACT, the two largest cultural groups women offenders identify with are Caucasian or Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have a significant cultural overlay on their issues and risk factors for offending, including historical and inter-generational trauma. The holistic concept of social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal people includes connection to land, culture, spirituality, family and community, which differs from traditional western health concepts.



...relationships and trust to develop so women know how to continue to access services ...

7. Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation provides important foundations for reducing reoffending by considering the programs and services provided to women in custody and the community that deter from reoffending through promoting prosocial values and skills. Rehabilitation explores why offenders should lead a prosocial life and helps build the foundations to do so, but also should address the realities of women's lives.

A holistic, strengths-based approach is critical in rehabilitation. The approach must be linked with reintegration to provide the necessary supports in the community to increase the likelihood of success and incorporate:

> **individualised cognitive-behavioural interventions that target:**

- > dynamic risk factors;
- > criminogenic needs of higher risk offenders; and
- > those with cognitive-behavioural interventions in a manner that is conducive to the offender's learning style, motivation, abilities, and strengths;

> **respect, safety, dignity, as the individual desires and interests of each woman should be acknowledged;**

> **trauma-informed management and practice:**

- > trauma and abuse, mental health issues, dependence on antisocial connections, and alcohol and other drug issues are underlying factors that impact on offending and are more prominent for women;

> **empowerment and supporting self-efficacy:**

- > engaging women in trauma-informed services and empowering them to seek support is challenging and the complex interaction of barriers may lead to a cycle of victimisation, disempowerment, and offending.

8. Reintegration

Reintegration should be the follow through from rehabilitation and provide the means for women to achieve their rehabilitation goals. Reintegration is a critical transition period and support is essential for women to build desistance. Issues critical to supporting successful reintegration include: housing, finances, health, trauma, and other barriers that prevent women from leading prosocial lives. This support can be enabled through a continuum of care and community partnerships.

Continuity of care

Continuity of care is essential to the success of reintegration for women offenders. Three aspects of continuity of care are demonstrated to be key components of successful interventions:

- > service continuity across sentence management
- > continuity of service between custody and release into the community
- > a collaborative and holistic model of care through community partnerships.

Community partnerships and collaboration

The offender, their family and friends, organisations (government and non-government) and the broader community collective support reintegration into society and encourage desistance. Offenders are likely to experience practical restrictions arising from having a conviction including access to housing and employment, and psychosocial effects, including experiencing stigma and prejudice.

Access to housing

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience greater difficulty in accessing housing post-release than non-Indigenous women. The literature suggests housing for women should:

- > be independent where possible, not shared with antisocial influences
- > enable mothers to reside with their children
- > be in collaboration with surrounding and on-call supports where appropriate.

Access to employment

Women are more likely than men to be employed in fields with enhanced pre-employment checks, (working with children, aged care, other health/human services, retail). Having a criminal record will often impact a person's employment prospects. This limits the range of employment options for women who may then occupy low level positions with little chance of advancement.

9. Systemic factors

Systemic factors relate to, and affect, all other levers for engagement with women offenders and provide the background and context that make it possible for other interventions to succeed. Key systemic factors that contribute to improving outcomes for women are:

> approaches based on therapeutic jurisprudence which incorporates:

- > consistent and fair application of policy, expectations, and consequences;
- > reinforce and model prosocial behaviour;
- > build self-confidence and a sense of self-worth;
- > enable skills and social supports;

> an informed, capable and resilient workforce including:


- > fostering cross-sectional partnerships;
- > ensuring that service providers apply a gender-responsive lens to women;
- > appropriate policies and flexible practices that recognise the intersectionality of gender, race, and disability;
- > ongoing training, coaching and support to equip staff to respond to particular situations and offender groups, consistent with the needs of women offenders;
- > staff are supported to maintain their own wellbeing and resilience;

> effective program evaluation and improvement through:

- > evaluating programs to ensure their criteria, effectiveness, accessibility and integrity is critical for success, including monitoring progress and outcomes of women offenders; and

> community enablers:

- > education about the needs of women offenders is important to address negative public perceptions and the stigma of having been in the justice system.



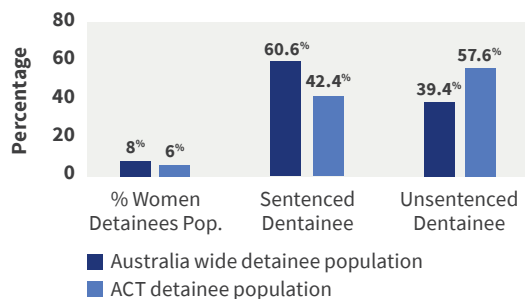
...consideration of a person's individual life experience and perspective is critical in the development of responsive programs...

Part 2: Women in the ACT correctional system

10. Custodial

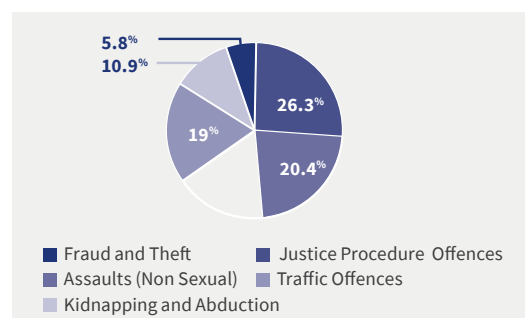
In the 2018-19 financial year, ACTCS Custodial Operations managed a total of 139 women through 173 episodes of custody (remand and sentenced) at the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC). A person may serve more than one episode of custody during the one reporting year. Of these, 139 (48.2 per cent), had a prior episode, which equates to 67 detainees. ABS 2019 snapshot data shows the smaller population size and variations in remand and sentencing between ACT detainees and the national average on that day.

ACT vs National Snapshot Detainee Population



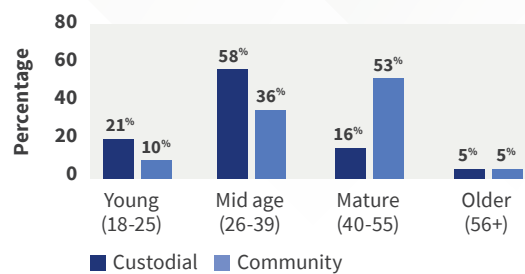
More than 80 per cent of offenders' 'most serious offence/charge' fell into one of five categories including:

Offenders Most Serious Offence/Charge



In the 2018-19 year, women serving custodial sentences (139) had a younger age profile overall than those serving community-based sentences (596).

Custodial vs Community Age Demographics



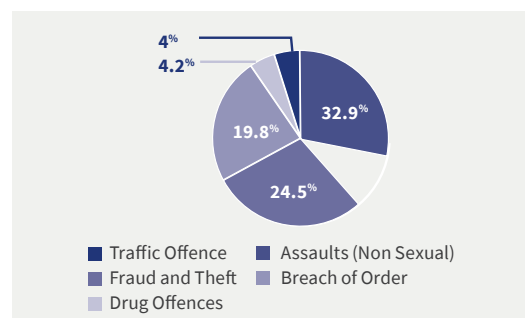
11. Community Corrections

In the 2018-19 financial year, ACTCS Community Corrections supervised a total of 596 women serving 1,919 court and parole orders in the community.

Of the 596 women, 172 served 919 Bail Orders, 529 served 983 Probation Orders and 14 served 17 Parole Orders. A person may serve more than one category of order at the same time, or at different periods, during the one reporting year.

More than 85 per cent of offenders' 'most serious offence/charge' fell into one of five categories.

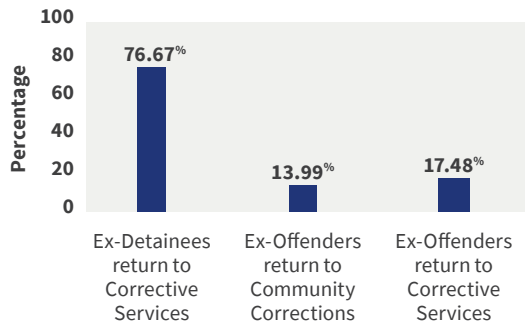
Offender's Most Serious Offence/Charge



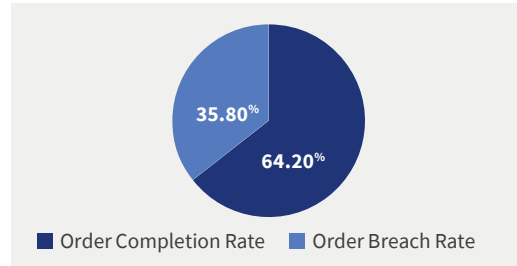
Order completion rates for women in 2018-19 were 64.2 per cent, which was 6.6 per cent lower than for men (70.8 per cent) in the ACT.

The order completion and breach rates as well as the detainee/offender return rates in that year are depicted below.

Detainee/Offender Return Rates



Order Completion/Breach Rate



...the degree to which any one is successful will depend in part on the successful interventions of the others...

Part 3: Key issues for women offenders

Both the literature and women offenders tell us women's experiences vary in relation to family and relationship issues, age/stage of life, sentence length, spiritual and religious needs, culture, health and disability. Experiences more commonly faced by women, and their associated effects include:

12. Short Term Custody

The literature identifies a variety of challenges and issues for women associated with short-term custody, including:

- > lack of access to and disengagement with treatment services
- > impact on children and perinatal care
- > loss of accommodation.


The literature suggests there are cultural considerations for short-term custody as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are more often held on remand and serve shorter custodial sentences more frequently.

13. Community vs Custodial interventions

Interventions delivered in a community setting can be more effective than those delivered in custody (McGuire, 2000). However, programs and services offered in the community context need to consider many factors that are not present in the confined custodial environment. Badly designed or poorly implemented services will be ineffective regardless of the correctional setting.

14. Therapeutic Communities

Therapeutic communities are effective in the treatment of alcohol and other drugs as they provide a comprehensive approach through psychotherapy, self-help and mutual support. ACTCS has an established therapeutic community service that will be used to inform future comprehensive gender-specific services to women offenders.



...cultural considerations
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Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander women...

Part 4: Better practice for women offenders

15. Effective interventions

The principles of effective intervention are the result of the ongoing effort of correctional scholars to cumulate knowledge on 'what works' to reduce reoffending. Three fundamental concepts emerge from rehabilitation literature:

- > offender treatment achieves the greatest reductions in recidivism when it targets dynamic risk factors (e.g. antisocial personality, antisocial cognition, antisocial associates)
- > the criminogenic needs of higher risk offenders
- > cognitive-behavioural interventions provided in a manner that is conducive to the offenders' learning style, motivation, abilities, and strengths i.e. RNR.

The findings of a meta-analysis support the contention that women are more likely to respond well to gender-informed approaches if their backgrounds and pathways to offending are associated with gendered issues.

Appropriately designed and administered intervention programs include the following key characteristics:

- > **Theoretical soundness and focus on criminogenic needs**
- > **Structure** – is understood by staff and participants and the program is clearly aligned to individual needs.
- > **Responsivity** – services are tailored to individual needs, learning styles and motivations and programs employ gender-responsive approaches wherever possible.
- > **Integrity** – program staff are qualified and appropriately supervised and supported. The integrity of the program is continuously evaluated.
- > **Criteria** – participants meet eligibility criteria and there are defined entry and exit criteria.
- > **Evaluation** – programs are evaluated for their short- and long-term effectiveness in lowering criminogenic risk and reducing reoffending.





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