

More than one in three female Queensland prisoners Indigenous

By Felicity Caldwell
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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders make up more than one in three of the women in Queensland's prisons.

The figure is revealed in an Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland report, which argued the situation of female prisoners was not improving.



Female prisoners walking in the Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre in Queensland.

Deputy Anti-Discrimination Commissioner Neroli Holmes said the current model was "broken" and the continued over-representation of Indigenous women should be a priority for the government.

The female population grew by 59 per cent between 2006 and 2016, while the percentage of female prisoners who were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander grew by 26 per cent to 35 per cent.

The Anti-Discrimination Commission made 46 recommendations, including that low-risk Indigenous prisoners be managed in the community rather than sent to jail to

allow more rehabilitation, continuity of family relationships, and lower costs to the justice system.

The report found the increasing female prison population had created resourcing problems and, until recently, resulted in severe overcrowding in the Brisbane Women's Correction Centre. The Southern Queensland Correctional Centre was re-commissioned as a women's prison in late 2018, which delivered 302 more beds for women prisoners. Ms Holmes said many women in prison had experienced trauma and were not receiving the support they needed, either in prison or after they left.

"Some will have nowhere to go after prison and end up reoffending or breaking their parole conditions and getting sent back to prison, where they have limited access to supports like counselling or substance abuse programs," she said.

"Half the women in prison are there for less than three months.

"The disruption caused to their dependent children can be very harmful, and there needs to be a focus on other ways of dealing with these women's offending that are less costly to our community and less disruptive to their families."

Sisters Inside chief executive Debbie Kilroy said the situation for women in prison was getting worse.

"Enough is enough, we must think outside the bars," she said.

"We have seen the number of women in prison for domestic violence offences go through the roof, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women."

Ms Kilroy called on the Queensland government to significantly expand transitional and long-term housing available for women in prison to end the cycle of imprisonment.

A lack of available, appropriate and affordable housing had resulted in women being refused bail or parole and may have contributed to women reoffending, the report said.

"Homelessness continues to be the main issue for women in prison," Ms Kilroy said.

"Whether it is for bail or parole, women are spending longer in prison due to inadequate housing."

Corrective Services Minister Mark Ryan said the research for the report occurred in 2017 and many of the issues had already been addressed.

"This includes addressing overcrowding of women's high security facilities," he said.

"We will consider the report carefully to see how it can further inform the significant changes Queensland Corrective Services has already introduced to improve conditions for women prisoners in Queensland."

Mr Ryan said recommissioning the Southern Queensland Correctional Centre had significantly improved women's living conditions, access to healthcare, programs and vocational and education opportunities, as well as doubling the number of beds available for mothers with babies in prison.

"Additionally, since the ADCQ's research, we have participated in a number of initiatives to reduce the number of women on remand by connecting them with support services to help them access bail, as well as address the issue of secure housing for women on parole," he said.