CONSULTANTS



Learnings from the field

Why Prisoner voice matters in the evaluation of criminogenic programs

Acknowledgement of Country



We also acknowledge the talent and artistry of Emma Walke, who designed the artwork for our acknowledgment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The design shows a story of connection to country and people, representing the breadth of work we do with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia. The colours represent the land, and the lines in between represent the water that connects us all.

Who we are:



Paula Shaw

Senior Manager

Projects involving interviewing prisoners:

- Women's Re-entry Support (Qld)
- Women's sexual violence counselling (Qld)
- Financial Counselling in Prisons (Qld)
- Men's and Women's Bail Support Program (Qld)
- Post-release Supported Accommodation (Qld)
- Lemongrass Place Transitional Support Unit (SA)



Syl Johns

First Nations Associate

Projects involving interviewing prisoners:

- Financial Counselling in Prisons (Qld, WA, SA, Vic, NT)
- Men's Bail Support Program (Qld)
- Post-release Supported Accommodation (Qld)
- Remand DV (NSW)

Overview

- About prisons and prisoners
- The ethics of inclusion for prisoners
- Formal ethics processes – key considerations
- Learnings – about ethics processes
- Learnings – about interviewing prisoners

Why do we have prisons?

- Exclusion of “dangerous” people to help maintain community safety. Prisoners are excluded from:
  - participating in public (and family) life
  - freely communicating
  - accessing services.
- Punishment and disempowerment – prisons are total institutions where prisoners are subject to the rules, regulations and routines of the system, and those that enforce them.
- Rehabilitation of those exhibiting criminal behaviour.
  - Educational and criminogenic programs – like the ones we evaluate

Some quick facts about prisoners in Australia

- 3 in 10 prisoners in Australia have had limited formal education (Year 9 or lower).
- >50% of the prisoner population have experienced the child protection system.
- 95% of female prisoners have experienced DFSV.
- Many have experienced CSA and other forms of childhood abuse.
- 40% of the prisoner population have cognitive impairment.
- The numbers are unknown, but there is emerging evidence that a very high proportion of prisoners have undiagnosed neurodiversity that includes behavioural issues.
- Prisoners have very high rates of substance dependence (80%), and mental illness (60%).
- 36% of the National prisoner population are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander – but in some locations, this can be more like 90%.

As a population, prisoners in Australia are among our most disadvantaged.

The ethics of inclusion for prisoners

What to consider when thinking about including data collection with prisoners.



What are the risks/challenges and benefits of including prisoners' voices?

Risks and challenges

- Navigating ethics processes
- Prison access
- Fear/reticence for prisoners around participation in an "interview"
- Limitations on compensation for participants' time
- Evaluation team willingness and capacity – confronting environment
- Interpersonal politics for prisoners

Benefits

- Increased understanding of program delivery **context**
- Understanding of service user needs
- First-hand perspective on service user experience – triangulating findings
- For prisoners – sense that their experience matters to others
- Opportunity for prisoners to contribute towards program improvement
- Developing skills of evaluation team members
- Greater system accountability

Formal ethics and other processes

- Highly vulnerable population – **interviews with prisoners will meet the threshold for formal HREC approval.**
- Potential for **multiple approval processes** – e.g. formal HREC that is willing to see projects involving First Nation's participants **and** Corrective Services HREC in every jurisdiction where the program is delivered.
- **In addition:** Police checks, security clearances and required training for team members.
- Access to the prison and an appropriate space within the prison – will you have access to a private room? Who will escort you inside the correctional centre?
- Negotiating the best date/day for doing interviews – are there lockdowns/activities that prisoners must be involved in?
- Do you need written permission to bring a recording device?
- What are you allowed and not allowed to bring with you into the prison? (e.g. no phones, no nicotine spray)



What are the ethical risks for interviewing prisoners? – and how you can respond to them

Bias in the sample

- Provide plain English information flyers – include photos and very brief bio for interviewers – avoid the word "interview"
- Process for gaining initial consent – risk of coercion in power dynamics? How will this information be communicated to you?
- Acknowledge sample may be determined by availability on the day of interviews – build in flexibility and be realistic about how many you can get done.
- Likely to be reliant on the service provider to recruit directly – if high-turn over facility (remand), don't recruit too soon.

Prisoners' understanding and capacity to provide informed consent

- Plain English or easy read consent forms, options for verbal consent processes – Keep it simple.
- Voluntary participation and ability to end the interview at any time.
- Consideration in recruitment – should you exclude prisoners who may not be able to give fully informed consent? What is the risk if they're included vs excluded?

Interviewer wellbeing

- Do interviews in pairs – work with an interview partner.
- Make sure all interviewers are briefed properly beforehand – give realistic expectations.
- Build in deliberate processes for escalating if there are any concerns and for debriefing – formally and informally.

What are the ethical risks for interviewing prisoners? – and how you can respond to them

Uncovering criminal activity

- Have a clear protocol for what to do if you think a person is divulging information about previously unknown criminal activity – and make sure these are compliant with jurisdictional reporting obligations – particularly around CSA.
- Avoid questions about offending. Redirect people if needed.
- Keep your questions focussed on what you're evaluating.

Compensation for prisoners' time

- Work with the corrective service agency to find acceptable ways for this to happen – you may be able to make deposits into people's prison accounts, or you may be able to organise for a grocery voucher to be available through a reintegration service provider, or provide a voucher to a family member.
- It may not be possible.

Managing prisoner wellbeing and safety

- Assurances of confidentiality (relating to service provider, corrections, and other prisoners).
- Offer options for who does the interview – either or both interviewers.
- Appropriate and realistic distress protocol – who within the prison can provide this kind of support? Helplines are not accessible for most prisoners.

Cultural safety

- Have First Nations interviewer/s, gender matching to interviewees.
- Where language is a barrier, consider who may be able to support? (e.g. ALOs, peer support workers?)
- Avoid culturally sensitive questions in your interview guides.
- Have First Nations researchers involved in developing tools and approaches.

Some important things that formal ethics won't ask about



Plan your logistics well ahead of time – build in plenty of travel time. Prisons are often far from your accommodation.



Ask in advance about how/where/what you will eat during the day of the interviews. The days can be long and options limited.



Ask about prison schedule (e.g. When and how often does Muster happen? How will this restrict your ability to continue with interviews?) Build in time to account for this.



Do what you can to make your interviewing space less threatening (e.g. how are the tables and chairs set up? Where will you sit?).



Be a real person and be friendly – build in an opportunity for gently breaking the ice and introducing yourself with humanising information.



Read the cues and be responsive – some people will want to talk, so listen. Others won't, so let them.



Make the most of opportunities for observation and informal learning - talk to the prison officers.

Questions, comments and feedback

- What else would you like to know about?
- Contact us:

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Connect with us

