

Evaluation of the Women's SupPORT Pathways Project – A summary of findings

The Project

An initiative of the Law and Advocacy Centre for Women (LACW), the Women's SupPORT Pathways Project supports women involved in the justice system, or at risk of such involvement, to engage with community football clubs and sports activities.¹ An evaluation of the project by the Centre for Innovative Justice (CIJ) was embedded in the project design.

The project operates on the simple premise that access to community sport provides participants – a cohort commonly experiencing multiple and complex life challenges – with opportunities to experience acceptance and connection in a mainstream setting. Women are also supported to access a broad range of therapeutic and social services as part of the scaffolded support provided by the project team. In addition, participating clubs receive training from the team on the individual and systemic drivers of offending, the impacts of imprisonment on women and guidance on ways to create a safe and inclusive environment for participants.

Following a targeted pilot in 2022, the model was refined and scaled up in the second season. The expanded model included the facilitation of football clinics at Tarrengower Prison;² fitness sessions for women living in social housing; and a series of stand-alone 'Come and try' events at various locations. The diagram on the following page provides an overview of the expanded model.

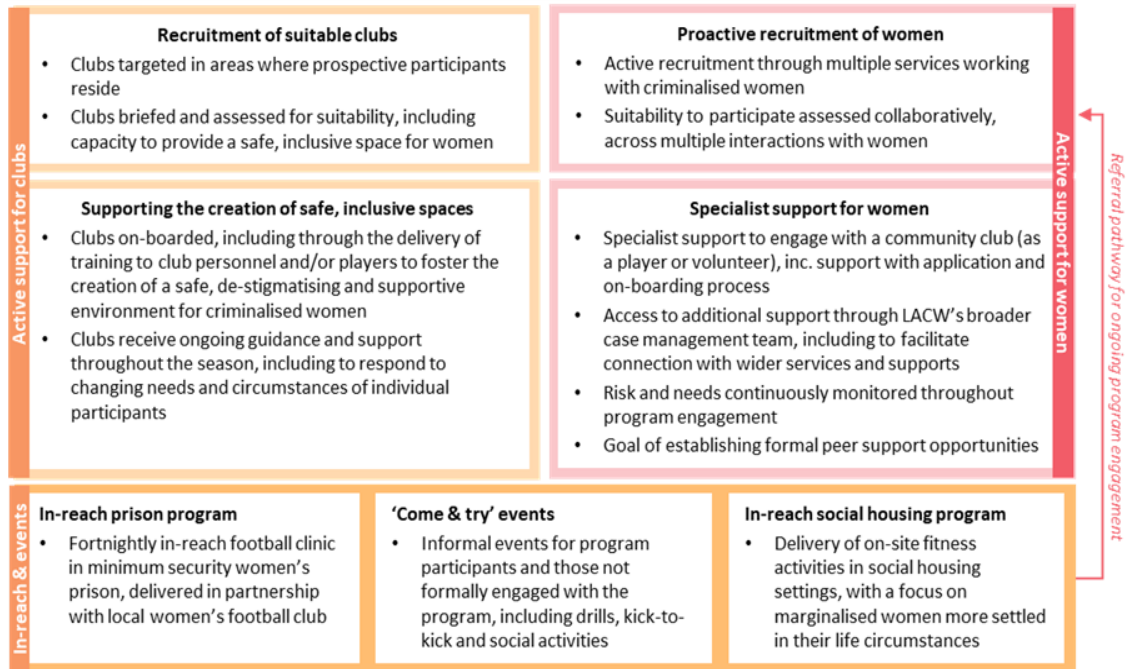
¹ The focus in the first two years of the project, funded by the Crime Prevention Innovation Fund, was on the emerging Aussie Rules women's football league in Victoria. This was subsequently expanded to include other sporting clubs.

² A minimum-security women's prison in regional Victoria.



SupPORT Pathways Program (expanded pilot)

Target cohort: Adult women, including cisgender, trans and gender diverse people who identify as women, who have been in contact with (or are at risk of contact with) the justice system.



Source: CIJ

The Evaluation

The Evaluation operated alongside the delivery of the program, adopting a developmental approach³ to assessing the extent to which the program contributed to positive outcomes and experiences for participating women and clubs. This allowed for emerging insights from the pilot phase to inform program adaptations in the second season of delivery, as well as contributing to the evidence base on gender-specific crime prevention strategies.

In defining success for the Pathways Program model, both the LACW team and the CIJ were cognisant of the high levels of intersecting needs with which program participants were likely to present. Like many services working with people experiencing extreme disadvantage, LACW practitioners are familiar with the multiple challenges that make it difficult for criminalised women to engage, and maintain engagement, with services or programs.

In this context, while a broad aim of the program is to contribute to desistance and crime prevention, it was important to frame intended program outcomes in more incremental and nuanced terms. This recognises that the simple experience of feeling acceptance and belonging in a positive and supportive environment is a powerful outcome in itself for people with lifelong histories of trauma and exclusion – and is potentially more significant than successfully completing a program.

³ This approach is seen as particularly appropriate in the context of the delivery of innovative programming where "inputs, activities and outputs may not yet be known, or may be in a state of flux". Australian Institute of Family Studies (2018) Developmental evaluation. Retrieved October 2023 from: <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/practice-guides/developmental-evaluation#:~:text=Developmental%20evaluation%20helps%20an%20organisation,as%20goals%20emerge%20and%20evolve.>

The evaluation therefore emphasised intermediate and end-of program outcomes for women emphasising connection, positive experiences and feelings of safety.

Evaluation activities

The CIJ's evaluation included the following components:

- Literature scan;
- Consultations with program staff (and wider LACW staff) at key points across the project lifecycle
- Interviews with participants at the end of the second season;
- Observation of in-reach programs i.e., sessions delivered in prison and in social housing settings;
- Consultation with club personnel and players;
- Observation of on-boarding activities for clubs;
- Community crime attitudes survey administered to club members; and
- Analysis of program data, including de-identified written feedback from participants and clubs.

Findings

Clear evidence emerged that the Pathways project was associated with a range of positive impacts both for women linked with clubs or who engaged with the project in other ways, and for the participating clubs.

While there is limited scope to make assertions about long-term outcomes from the project, the findings point to positive experiences for the participating women, including:

- A sense of validation, acceptance and social connection;
- Sustained engagement with the project team allowing for scaffolded access to a wide range of social, practical and therapeutic services;
- Experiences of structure and routine;
- Opportunities to forge an identity that's part of a wider entity;
- Increased confidence and empowerment as women take on new activities, challenges and responsibilities;
- Opportunities to improve physical health and fitness; and
- The development of new skills.

Evaluation findings also indicate positive outcomes for clubs. This was both on a personal level, with members reporting having gained greater insights into the drivers of justice involvement and the impacts of incarceration and, more broadly, in strengthening a culture of inclusivity within participating clubs.

There was also evidence of challenges in how both participants and clubs experienced the program. Some women linked with clubs reported difficulty fitting in, maintaining commitment to playing and training through personal crises, and navigating difficult situations and dynamics at the club. Conversely, club members reflected on the time and emotional energy required to manage difficult situations when they arose, particularly for those members acting in a de facto support role for the participant.

Despite significant time and resource constraints, however, the project team provided consistent and appropriate support to assist participants and clubs to work through these challenges. This demonstrates the importance of locating delivery of a program such as this in an organisation with deep expertise and experience working with criminalised women. Further, these insights provided opportunities to strengthen programming to better ensure that the clubs provided participants with a safe and supportive environment.

While there was insufficient data⁴ to determine whether the program contributed to broader objectives of crime prevention, for example by strengthening the community's ability to understand crime, the limited data available did indicate a good level of understanding of the wider, systemic drivers of engagement with the justice system – a finding which was consistent with the ways in which clubs generally embraced the program.

Conclusion

LACW's flexible approach to implementation has enabled it to overcome significant challenges in delivering a novel program to a cohort with complex life histories and support needs. Findings from the Evaluation should provide useful insights for strengthening the delivery of the program in new sporting contexts going forward and for further refinement of the model.

A clear learning from the evaluation, however, is that for programming of this nature to deliver on its promise, it needs to be properly resourced. It also needs to be delivered in a collaborative and whole-of-community context, leveraging specialist skills and practice models that currently exist in the community sector. Investment in this context can help to slow or halt women's repeat contact with the justice system and, by doing so, be far more cost effective than the financial and social impact of incarceration.

⁴ Uptake of an 'attitudes to crime' survey to be completed by club members at the beginning and at the end of the season was relatively low, with attrition rates high for the post-season survey.