

Evaluation of the Women's SupPORT Pathways Project

Final report

April 2024



Authors: Catherine Caruana, Riley Ellard and Elena Campbell.

Suggested citation: Centre for Innovative Justice (2023), *Evaluation of the Women's SupPORT Pathways Project*, RMIT University, Melbourne.

The Law and Advocacy Centre for Women Ltd (LACW) is a not-for-profit, gender-responsive community legal centre in Victoria providing women in, or at risk of entering, the criminal legal system with gender-informed legal advice, representation and holistic, case-management support. LACW's integrative practice model aims to ensure that all women in Victoria can access pathways out of the justice system.

The Centre for Innovative Justice (CIJ) is a research and reform body within RMIT University that seeks to develop, drive and expand the capacity of the justice system to meet and adapt to the needs of its diverse users. The CIJ meets this objective by conducting rigorous research – most of which involves hearing directly from service users – that focuses on developing innovative and workable solutions.

Acknowledgments

The Centre for Innovative Justice (CIJ) at RMIT University acknowledges the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nation on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of the University.

The CIJ also acknowledges the devastating and ongoing impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal communities – impacts which have a direct relationship with the vastly disproportionate rate at which Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal women in particular, have contact with the criminal justice system.

Both the Law and Advocacy Centre for Women (LACW) and the CIJ gratefully acknowledge the financial contribution to this project from the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety's Crime Prevention Innovation Fund, without which the delivery of the project, and this Evaluation, would not have been possible.

We also acknowledge contributions both to the delivery of the project and to the Evaluation made by social work students on placement at LACW. In particular, we thank Evie Isaac and Ariane Greenfield for assistance with the literature review.

We acknowledge the volunteers at the community football clubs, and the women participating in the project, who generously made time to share their experiences.

Finally, we recognise the extraordinary strength, resilience and humour of the women who signed up for the project, committed to their club, and kept turning up despite the many challenges they faced.

Terminology

This report uses the terms ‘criminalised women’, ‘women involved in the justice system’, or ‘women in contact with the criminal justice system’, rather than ‘offenders’ or ‘prisoners.’ In doing so we seek to avoid reducing people to their status in the justice system and to recognise that many people held in Victorian prisons have not yet been convicted of the offence for which they have been charged.

Just as relevantly, the term ‘criminalised women’ recognises the prevalence of the systemic drivers of women’s interaction with the justice system, including the failure to address women’s prior experiences of trauma and victimisation from gendered violence, which for many are directly and inextricably linked to their criminal justice involvement. Any discussion of the ‘needs’ of criminalised women throughout this paper is not in any way intended to equate to a discussion of ‘deficits’ but instead refers to needs created and compounded by structural inequality.

The term ‘women’ in this report is used to include cisgender women as well as trans and gender diverse people who identify as women.

References to ‘Aboriginal people’ in this report is understood to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, consistent with the usage across Victorian Government and policy contexts.

Acronyms

Term	Definition
AFL	Australian Football League (also known as Australian Rules)
AFLW	Australian Football League Women's (competition)
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
CIJ	Centre for Innovative Justice
CISP	Court Integrated Services Program
CCO	Community Corrections Order
DPFC	Dame Phyllis Frost Centre
FTE	Full time equivalent
LACW	Law and Advocacy Centre for Women
MCV	Magistrates' Court of Victoria
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
VAFA	Victorian Amateur Football Association
WWC	Working With Children Check
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

Table of contents

Acknowledgments.....	3
Terminology.....	4
Acronyms.....	5
Table of contents.....	6
Executive summary.....	8
1 Introduction.....	14
1.1 Background to the Evaluation.....	14
1.1.1 Women in the justice system.....	14
1.1.2 Engagement with sport as crime prevention.....	15
1.2 Establishing the Pathways Project.....	18
1.2.1 Piloting and expansion of the Pathways Project.....	18
1.3 Defining success.....	20
1.4 Evaluating the Pathways Project.....	22
1.4.1 Evaluation scope and objectives.....	22
1.4.3 Evaluation principles.....	24
1.4.4 Data collection.....	24
1.4.5 Limitations.....	27
1.5 Structure of the report.....	28
2 Evaluation findings.....	30
2.1 Implementation.....	30
2.1.1 Success, barriers and enablers.....	30
2.1.2 Recruitment of participants.....	39
2.1.3 Recruitment of clubs.....	42
2.2 Effectiveness.....	44
2.2.1 Supporting women to engage with clubs.....	44
2.2.2 Creating safe and inclusive spaces for women.....	46
2.2.3 Positive experiences for women.....	49
2.2.4 Facilitating engagement with external supports.....	54
2.3 Appropriateness.....	55
2.3.1 Responding to the particular needs of women.....	56
2.3.2 Cultural safety and inclusion.....	60
2.3.3 Scalability.....	61

2.4	Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.5	Impact	63
2.5.1	Program engagement as a protective factor for women	63
2.5.2	Impacts for clubs	68
2.5.3	Increased community understanding	70
3	Recommendations	72
3.1	Recruitment and intake	72
3.2	Supporting women	72
3.3	Supporting clubs	73
3.4	In-reach and events	73
3.5	Resourcing	74
3.6	Conclusion	74
Appendix A: Project timeframes and key activities		76
Appendix B: Theory of Change (original program design)		77
Appendix C: Theory of Change (adapted program design)		78
Appendix D: Indicators of good practice		79

Executive summary

This report presents findings from the Evaluation of the Women's SupPORT Pathways Project, an initiative of the Law and Advocacy Centre for Women (LACW). This innovative program supports women involved in the justice system, or at risk of such involvement, to engage with community football clubs as a pathway to greater social connection and wellbeing.

Background

Funded by the Crime Prevention Innovation Fund,¹ the project provides specialist support for criminalised women – a cohort commonly experiencing multiple and complex life challenges – to participate in mainstream community sports, with a focus on the emerging Australian Rules women's football league in Victoria.

The program supports women to participate in club activities in a range of ways, including as players or assisting with training, team management, player support or social activities. Clubs participating in the project are also assisted to provide a safe and inclusive environment for the women. It operates on the simple premise that facilitating access to the world of community sport provides women in contact with the justice system with opportunities to experience acceptance, connection, stability, confidence and skills development – and crucially, to connect with the services needed to address their multiple support needs. A secondary aim of the project is to contribute to greater understanding in the community about the individual and systemic drivers of offending.

The project as initially conceived involved LACW working in partnership with the Victorian Amateur Football Association (VAFA) with LACW providing support to program participants and VAFA responsible for recruiting, on-boarding and supporting community clubs. Challenges faced by the association and member clubs in the aftermath of the pandemic, however, resulted in VAFA withdrawing from the proposed formal partnership, while continuing to support the project.

Delivered in two stages, the project involved a targeted pilot in the 2022 season (Stage I), which allowed for initial testing of the model, with an expanded pilot in 2023 (Stage II) delivering a refined and scaled up model, including through expansion to additional clubs. This second stage also saw the program expanded to include football clinics delivered at Tarrengower Prison, a minimum-security women's prison in regional Victoria; fitness sessions for women living in social housing; and a series of stand-alone 'Come and try' events at a range of locations.

In line with the flexible and adaptive approach to project delivery and learning, the project included a developmental evaluation component to capture and consolidate learnings across the project lifecycle. This involved the Centre for Innovative Justice (CIJ) walking alongside LACW for the life of the project to understand what was working well, as well as opportunities to strengthen program design and delivery. Emerging data and insights were then used to inform program adaptations and future planning, as well as to assess the extent to which the program was able to contribute to positive outcomes and experiences for participating women and clubs.

¹ The Crime Prevention Innovation Fund grants is part of the Victorian Government's Building Safer Communities Program which includes grants and a series of community forums across Victoria.

This report brings together findings from four key areas of inquiry, those being implementation, effectiveness, appropriateness and impact of the project and associated Pathways Program.

Evaluation findings

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

While the duration of the project and the limited number of women linked with community clubs limit opportunities to make assertions about long-term outcomes from that component of the project, the findings point to positive experiences for women participating – some of which the women may be encountering for the first time – that have potential to support pathways of desistance. These include:

- Validation, acceptance and social connection;
- Sustained relationships with an agency that supports engagement with a wide range of social, practical and therapeutic services;
- Structure and routine;
- Increased confidence and empowerment as women take on new activities, challenges and responsibilities; and
- The development of new skills.

Evaluation findings also indicate positive outcomes for clubs, as well as some challenges both for clubs and participating women. This report highlights areas where programming could be strengthened to address these challenges and to ensure that participants experience clubs as safe and supportive environments.

Implementation

The program was implemented largely as intended and in a way that was consistent with the program's objectives and values. This included the adoption of an adaptive and evidence-informed approach to continuous learning and improvement, which was a central feature of implementation and allowed for adaptations to address emerging challenges.

Implementation was further enhanced by the delivery of the program by an organisation with deep expertise and experience working with criminalised women. Operating under an integrated practice model, LACW was able to offer access to both specialist legal and trauma-informed, case managed social support. This context was identified as a key enabler of implementation.

Consistent with the piloting of emergent and innovative interventions, the Evaluation also identified opportunities to strengthen aspects of the program.

In light of the mixed success in recruiting participants who were ready to be linked with clubs, a priority for the program moving forward is attracting a cohort of women with low to moderate needs, including via the in-reach social housing program. This should be coupled with a close attention to program resourcing to ensure that this remains matched to the level of need and complexity within the program, acknowledging the significant scaffolding required to maintain women's positive engagement in mainstream club settings.

Ensuring clear and documented processes relating to recruiting, on-boarding and supporting both women and clubs was also identified as an area for further development, as well as an important opportunity to consolidate learnings from the pilot around 'what works'.

Other key implementation findings included continuing to work towards implementation of the peer mentoring component of the program, which was unfortunately unable to be delivered during the pilot as a result of relatively low numbers of women linked with clubs. Continuing the delivery of the highly successful in-reach programs and events was also identified as a core component of the Pathways model moving forward.

Effectiveness

A total of 33 women participated in project activities. Of these, five participants progressed to be linked with clubs in the community. Two participants who signed up to a club, maintained engagement for at least one full season, with the other three participating in multiple club events.

While the numbers of women joining clubs may appear relatively low, they should be understood in the context of the high levels of need with which program participants presented, with all but one having significant, complex and overlapping experiences of trauma, physical and mental health challenges and/or disability. For some women, experiences of trauma were ongoing, as was the presence of Court orders, including bail, therapeutic treatment orders, Community Corrections Orders and parole.

In this context, the sustained engagement of two women, as well as the more limited engagement of other participants, represents a significant achievement that carried with it a range of benefits for the women involved.

In particular, the specialist support provided by the program team was experienced positively by participants and was key to sustaining their engagement with the program, as well as supporting their engagement with other external services. In addition to the specialist support provided by the Program Manager, participants benefited from access to LACW's wider case management team, as well as ready access to legal advice.

There was strong evidence that the women experienced participation in the program as positive, affirming and enjoyable – including through the addition of in-reach programs and 'Come and try' events. The prison program emerged as being particularly successful in facilitating rewarding and encouraging experiences for participants. For those women who experienced some difficulties in their connection with clubs, the project team provided consistent and wrap-around support to work through challenges.

The program also appeared to provide women with opportunities for positive connection – including with the program team, club members, wider services and with each other. The women’s relationship with the program team emerged as a particular and key benefit of the program. This appeared to be a product of the program’s unique focus and the context in which it was delivered.

The challenge for the program team and the participants is how to ‘hold the positives’ when difficulties arise, including in the club environment. The Evaluation also identified a range of ways that the program could more effectively screen and support clubs to ensure that they are able to provide a safe and inclusive environment for participants.

Appropriateness

The model designed and delivered by LACW was highly responsive to the needs of criminalised women. It incorporated multiple elements associated with good practice in sports-based programming for vulnerable cohorts, as well as good practice when responding to criminalised cohorts more broadly.

All aspects of the program were informed by an understanding of trauma, its impacts and the ways in which those impacts might shape and influence women’s experiences at clubs. This included a proactive and ‘open door’ approach to engagement; scaffolding of women’s engagement with clubs; a focus on supporting clubs to provide a safe, and de-stigmatising environment; and a collaborative approach to resolving issues and challenges in relation to women’s engagement with clubs. The program’s close linkage to LACW’s wider case management program also meant that it was highly responsive to changing or escalating needs.

Particular strengths emphasised through the Evaluation included the highly skilled and committed program team, as well as the program’s capacity to act as a touchpoint in the service system for women. This in turn provided a window of opportunity to understand women’s needs and to strengthen protective factors in their lives. The expansion of the program in Stage II to include in-reach programs and events was also seen to enhance the capacity of the program to respond to differing levels of readiness with which women presented.

Opportunities to strengthen the model to ensure that the program is experienced as culturally safe and responsive have been identified, as have other refinements which can build the scalability of the program. The Evaluation emphasised, however, that any expansion should include close monitoring to identify any unintended consequences, such as increased demands placed on limited resourcing resulting in a reduction in support for women or clubs.

Impact

As discussed above, feedback from participants suggests that engagement with the program provided a range of positive benefits associated with desistance. This included by enhancing social connection, physical and emotional wellbeing and skills development - factors which have the potential to be protective against future criminal justice involvement.

Seemingly small but important successes were identified throughout the Evaluation. This included women having the courage to try a new sport for the first time; to push through their initial social anxiety in a mainstream community club environment; and to participate in skills development opportunities, such as coaching accreditation. This in turn brought women a sense of confidence in their capacity to challenge themselves, to form new relationships, to forge an identity that's part of a wider entity, and to feel accepted. The structure and routine that training and playing schedules brought to women's lives, as well as the responsibility that came with membership of a team and a club, helped women to stay on track.

Engagement in the program also demonstrated positive impacts for clubs. Multiple members, for example, reflected positively on the opportunity to strengthen their club's commitment to inclusivity. As noted previously, strengthening processes for the selection, onboarding and ongoing engagement with clubs will better equip clubs to deal with challenges associated with the program, including the time and resource demands.

Insufficient data is available from the Evaluation to determine whether the program has contributed to broader objectives of crime prevention, such as strengthening the community's ability to understand crime. 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. The limited data available did, however, 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.

Recommendations

The following recommendations aim to consolidate key learnings from the Evaluation and to enhance the significant potential of the model moving forward:

1. Develop recruitment resources for women which can be used to promote the program in key settings, such as prisons, social housing and services for criminalised women.
2. Develop recruitment resources for clubs, including a self-assessment to identify readiness of the club to provide a safe, inclusive and de-stigmatising environment for criminalised women.
3. Continue to adopt a highly supported and suitably paced approach to assessing and onboarding women, including identifying opportunities to streamline the process where possible.
4. Develop clear practice guidance and operational guidelines to support program delivery and promote consistency.
5. Work with clubs and participants to determine if having a designated support person or 'buddy' at the club would be beneficial for individual participants.
6. Continue to work towards opportunities for formal and informal peer support, in consultation with women.
7. Partner with a relevant Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation to improve access and engagement of Aboriginal women with the program.

8. Consider the development of Memorandums of Understanding or other formalised agreements with key participating clubs which set out high-level principles informing club involvement, as well as clear roles and responsibilities for supporting women's engagement and safety.
9. Incorporate regular check-ins with clubs into program processes to assess how the relationship is working and whether additional support or guidance is required.
10. Continue to foster a relationship with the VAFA, with a view to VAFA actively promoting the program to its membership and working with LACW to resolve any league-level issues which may impact on program participants.
11. Establish a clear process for transition from the in-reach prison program to the community-based program on release.
12. Continue to work with Corrections and prison staff to strengthen the in-reach prison program, including through formal inclusion in prison programming, opportunities for women to engage in community-based activities on a day release basis and expansion to other custodial settings.
13. Review the required level of resourcing to take the program to scale, including consideration of target case numbers, hours of service available to each client and additional functions to be undertaken by staff, such as delivery of sub-programs and events.

Conclusion

Clear and promising evidence was apparent that the program, if properly resourced, can deliver a range of benefits for criminalised women, including community connection, a sense of purpose, structure and routine, as well as opportunities to improve fitness, develop skills and link with support services. This is in addition to providing opportunities for positive, meaningful and, at times, empowering experiences. Given the wider evidence base regarding the complex support needs of criminalised women, the significance of these experiences for women with long histories of trauma, negative service responses and marginalisation should not be underestimated.

Findings from the Evaluation also indicate potential for the program to increase understanding about the reasons for criminal justice involvement and to shift negative perceptions about people in contact with the justice system.

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. This, however, demands careful consideration of the resources necessary to deliver a program of this kind.

A clear learning from the evaluation 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.

1 Introduction

This section outlines the background to the Evaluation, as well as setting out the purpose, scope and approach taken to evaluating the project.

1.1 Background to the Evaluation

1.1.1 Women in the justice system

The number of women in Victorian prisons, and the rate of imprisonment for women in Victoria, has been steadily increasing over the past decade. Between 30 June 2010 and 30 June 2019, the number of women in Victorian prisons rose from 313 to 575. This represents an increase of 83 per cent.²

In that same period, the imprisonment rate rose from 14.5 per 100,000 people to 21.9 per 100,000 people, an increase of 50 per cent. Police charges against women have also increased, with the number of offences alleged against women growing from 22,395 in 2012 to 44,968 in 2021 (101 per cent increase), and the alleged offender rate for females growing from 891.5 per 100,000 in 2012 to 1505.9 per 100,000 in 2021 (69 per cent increase).³

A significant body of research confirms that women who become involved in the justice system are a highly vulnerable population with complex and multiple support needs, requiring tailored and gender-focussed interventions.⁴

High rates of trauma from childhood abuse and intimate partner violence – as well as the issues resulting from this – are recognised as primary drivers of women’s contact with the justice system. Compared to men, justice-involved women enter the system with near universal experiences of victimisation and trauma; present with higher rates of physical and psychological ill-health, including substance misuse; are disproportionately impacted by homelessness; are more likely to be the primary carer of dependent children; and cycle in and out of the prison system at a faster rate.⁵

² Crime Statistics Agency, 2021. Alleged Offender Incidents (Table 2, Alleged offender incidents and rate per 100,000 population by sex and age).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Caruana, C., Campbell, E., Bissett, T & Ogilvie, K. (2021). Leaving custody behind: Foundations for safer communities and a gender-informed criminal justice systems. Centre for Innovative Justice, RMIT University, Melbourne.

⁵ Johnson, H., ‘Drugs and crime: A study of incarcerated female offenders.’ AIC: Research and public policy series, 2004, xiv; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Government, The health of Australia’s prisoners 2019 AIHW, 2019; Department of Justice and Community Safety, Victoria. Women in the Victorian Prison System, 2019; Walker, S., Sutherland, P., & Millsteed, M., Characteristics and offending of women in prison in Victoria 2012-2018, Crime Statistics Agency.

Available data also suggests an increasing level of need and complexity among criminalised women. A study by the Crime Statistics Agency, for example, found that unsentenced women who entered prison in 2018 had more extensive offending, substance dependence, victimisation and family violence histories compared to women who entered prison in 2012 – although the study also noted that there was no evidence of an increase in the seriousness of offending in this cohort.⁶

The evidence base indicates, therefore, that crime prevention programs directed towards women must include access to support services to address the underlying causes of justice system contact, as well as ongoing case management to facilitate meaningful engagement with supports. Research into prison transition support and community-based sentencing more broadly also suggests that programs which are perceived by participants as being meaningful and non-punitive, and which are tailored to the individual, are more likely to be effective in achieving rehabilitative outcomes.⁷

1.1.2 Engagement with sport as crime prevention

The effectiveness of sport and physical activities as a crime prevention mechanism within certain communities is well documented.

Evidence emerging primarily from programs relating to at-risk youth suggests that well planned sports programs, delivered as part of a broader program of personal and practical support, help to promote community connection and pro-social behaviour in vulnerable cohorts.⁸

Research indicates that “involvement in sport and physical activities can reduce crime by providing accessible, appropriate activities in a supportive social context”⁹ and can support protective factors by “promoting social skills, competence and attachment to family, encouraging a sense of belonging and providing access to social services,” while at the same time inhibiting “risk factors” such as alienation and family violence.¹⁰

Sport and physical activity has been found to improve cognitive and problem-solving skills,¹¹ to reduce boredom as well as the depression, distractibility and loneliness associated with

⁶ Walker, above n5.

⁷ See, for example, Green, R., Hopkins, D., and Roach, G. (2020) ‘Exploring the lived experiences of people on Community Correction Orders in Victoria, Australia: Is the opportunity for rehabilitation being realised?’. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, (2020) 0(0) 1-21; Trotter, C., & Flynn, C. (2016) ‘Literature Review: Best practice with women offenders,’ Monash University Criminal Justice Research Consortium; Barnett, G., & Howard, F. (2018) ‘What doesn’t work to reduce reoffending? A review of reviews of ineffective interventions for adults convicted of crimes.’ 23(2) *European Psychologist*, 11-129

⁸ Cameron, M., and MacDougall, C. ‘Crime Prevention through sport and physical activity’ (2000) Australian Institute of Criminology, Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice, No. 165, 1; Morris, L., Sallybanks, J., Willis, K., and Makkai, T., ‘Sport, physical activity and anti-social behaviour in youth’ (2003) Australian Institute of Criminology, Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice, No. 249; Bartels, L., ‘Crime prevention programs for CALD communities in Australia’ (2011) Australian Institute of Criminology, Research in Practice, Report No. 18, 4.

⁹ Cameron and MacDougall, 2000, above n8.

¹⁰ Bartels, 2011, above n8.

¹¹ Danish, S. and Nellen, V. ‘New roles for sport psychologists: Teaching life skills through sport to as-risk youth (1997) *Quest*, 9/29, pp. 100-13.

boredom;¹² and to have a positive influence on anti-social behaviour.¹³ The literature also suggests that engagement in sport can mitigate the impacts of trauma – such as periods of chaos and instability, hyperarousal, depression and anxiety – by providing opportunities for play, skill development and the identification of strengths. This in turn contributes to a more positive sense of self.¹⁴

Sports-focused interventions have also been associated with greater social competence and autonomy, with participation in team sports found to be particularly effective in providing a sense of social connection and belonging.¹⁵

Similar benefits are evident from culturally validated and community-led programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.¹⁶ Improvements in physiological health for Aboriginal people engaged in sport or fitness activities, for example, have been found to be significant.¹⁷ Other benefits for Aboriginal people and communities include increased social cohesion,¹⁸ as well as connection with wider populations.¹⁹

Important to note, however, is that mainstream leisure activities can be seen as part of a systemic structure that can intensify feelings of exclusion and stigma for those on the margins.²⁰ Sports programs that actively foster inclusion – including through the provision of educational resources and training for players and/or club personnel that destigmatise criminalised individuals – are therefore likely to be more effective in promoting positive experiences for criminalised people.²¹

¹² Coalter, F., Allison, M., & Taylor, J. The role of sport in regenerating deprived urban areas (2000) The Scottish Executive Central Research Unit, Edinburgh.

¹³ Verdot, C., Champely, S., Clement, M., & Massarelli, R., 'A simple tool to ameliorate detainees' mood and well-being in prison: Physical activities' (2010) *International Review on Sport & Violence*, 2, 83-93.

¹⁴ See, for example, D'Andrea, W., Bergholz, L., Fortunato, A., and Spinazzola, J. (2013). Play to the whistle: A pilot investigation of a sports-based intervention for traumatized girls in residential treatment. *Journal of Family Violence*, 28, 739– 749; Whitley, M., Donnelly, J., Cowan, D., & McLaughlin, S. Narratives of trauma and resilience from Street Soccer players (2022), *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 14:1, 101-118;; Bergholz, L., Stafford, E. and D'Andrea, W. (2016) Creating Trauma-informed Sports Programming for Traumatized Youth: Core Principles for an Adjunctive Therapeutic Approach, *Journal of Infant, Child, and Adolescent Psychotherapy*, 15:3, 244-253.

¹⁵ Martinek, T.J. and Hellison, D.R. 'Fostering Resiliency in Underserved Youth Through Physical Activity' (1997), *Quest*, 49, pp. 34 49; Hellison, D.R. 1995, *Teaching Responsibility Through Physical Activity*, Human Kinetics, Champaign, IL.

¹⁶ ORC International, Indigenous Australians' participation in sports and physical activities Part 1, Literature and AusPlay data review Final report (2017); Bartels, L., 'Diversion programs for Indigenous women' (2010) Australian Institute of Criminology. Research in Practice, Report no. 13; Cameron and MacDougall, 2000, above n8.

¹⁷ ORC, 2017, above n 16.

¹⁸ Rossi, T. 'Expecting too much? Can Indigenous sport programmes in Australia deliver development and social outcomes?' (2015) *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 7(2), pp.181- 195.

¹⁹ Rynne, S 2016, 'Exploring the pedagogical possibilities of Indigenous sport-for-development programmes using a socio-personal approach', *Sport, Education and Society*, 21(4), pp.605-622.

²⁰ Yuen, F., Arai, S., & Fortune, D., 'Community (dis)connection through leisure for women in prison' (2012) *Leisure Sciences*, 34(4): 281–297.

²¹ Newson, M., & Whitehouse, H. (2020). The Twinning Project: how football, the beautiful game, can be used to reduce reoffending. *Prison Service Journal*, 248, 28–31.

1.1.2.1 Understanding the benefits of sports-based programs for marginalised women

While there is a growing evidence base for the effectiveness of programs targeting young people as a means of reducing youth crime, as well as the correlation between access to organised sport and physical activity in prisons and improved wellbeing of people in custody,²² little is known about the effectiveness of sports-based interventions in reducing women's contact with the criminal justice system.²³

This is in part because women, who tend to have lower rates of engagement with sport and physical activity in the community generally,²⁴ also face more limited sports options in custody.²⁵

In developing sports programs for marginalised women, it is important to remember that this is a cohort that commonly has limited experience of engagement in sport in the community and may find club policies, processes and costs, as well as highly competitive environments, stigmatising and alienating without appropriate support and scaffolding. A participant in previous research conducted by the CIJ examining a women's bail support program, for example, noted that:²⁶

"[E]veryone always talks about that – 'can we fit you in with the local netball club?' - as if you can just walk in and make friends and make connections! If you're already dealing with [domestic violence] or have been a ward of the state or have been in custody – people ask you questions, you feel shame or you feel uncomfortable, so you don't go back."

More broadly, there is a growing recognition of the need for tailored, gender-specific responses to reduce women's criminalisation. This emerges from evidence of the specific factors driving women's contact with the justice system, as well as the ways in which systems, programming and services designed primarily for men can inadvertently compound disadvantage for women and their children.²⁷

²² Elger, B. S., 'Prison life: Television, sports, work, stress and insomnia in a remand prison' (2009). *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 32, 74-83; Meek, R., and Lewis, G., 'The Role of Sport in Promoting Prisoner Health' (2012) *International Journal of Prisoner Health* 8.3/4, 117–130; Buckaloo, B. J., Krug, K. S., and Nelson, K. B., 'Exercise and the low-security inmate: Changes in depression, stress, and anxiety' (2009) *The Prison Journal*, 89, 328-343.

²³ One 2018 study in the US looking at the impact of female sports participation following the introduction of the Title X program,²³ found a two per cent decrease in female arrests among the 25 - 39 age group, suggesting an estimated \$600 million US in benefits of crime avoidance. Sabia, J., and Kumpas, G. *Does female sports participation reduce crime? New evidence from Title 1X*. Paper delivered at the 2019 Annual meeting of the Population Association of America, Austin, Texas, April 10-13.

²⁴ *Inquiry into Women and Girls in Sport and Active Recreation. A Five-Year Game Plan for Victoria*, 4. Accessed 30/8/21 from <https://changeourgame.vic.gov.au/the-initiative>.

²⁵ Meek & Lewis 2012, above n22.

²⁶ Centre for Innovative Justice, *Women Transforming Justice: Final Evaluation Report*, December 2020.

²⁷ Caruana et al., 2021, above n 4.

1.2 Establishing the Pathways Project

Building on the above body of research – as well as their deep expertise and experience working alongside criminalised women – LACW developed the Women’s SupPORT Pathways Project (the Pathways Project). The project was funded by the Department of Justice and Community Safety through its Community Crime Prevention Innovation Fund and was conducted from July 2021 to October 2023.

The overarching aim of the project was to address drivers of women’s contact with the justice system by designing, delivering and evaluating a pilot program (the Pathways Program) to support women in contact with, or at risk of contact with, the justice system to engage in sporting clubs and activities at a community level.

Recognising the gap in the literature regarding the benefits of sport-based crime prevention initiatives for women, a specific aim of the Pathways Project was to develop and build an evidence base for gender-specific sports programming for criminalised women. This includes understanding the capacity of the Pathways Program to contribute to safe and inclusive spaces for this highly marginalised cohort of women, free from the stigma commonly experienced following periods of incarceration. It also includes understanding the extent to which *supported* involvement in community clubs can act as a protective factor in the lives of women facing heightened and multi-faceted disadvantage, and the potential for this to contribute to women finding a pathway out of criminal justice involvement.

The project also offered an exciting opportunity for LACW to broaden the scope of its work in addressing the growing criminalisation of women through the development of positive, supported and preventative interventions for women leaving prison, or at risk of justice system contact.

The CIJ was engaged in July 2021 to work alongside LACW across the project lifecycle in its capacity as a developmental evaluator (see section 1.4).

1.2.1 Piloting and expansion of the Pathways Project

The project was delivered over two broad stages (a targeted pilot and expanded pilot), framed by an initial planning and design phase at project commencement, and a consolidation and future planning phase at the project’s conclusion. A high-level description of each project stage is outlined below, with a broad overview of project phases included at Appendix A.

1.2.1.1 Initial planning and design (July 2021 – September 2021)

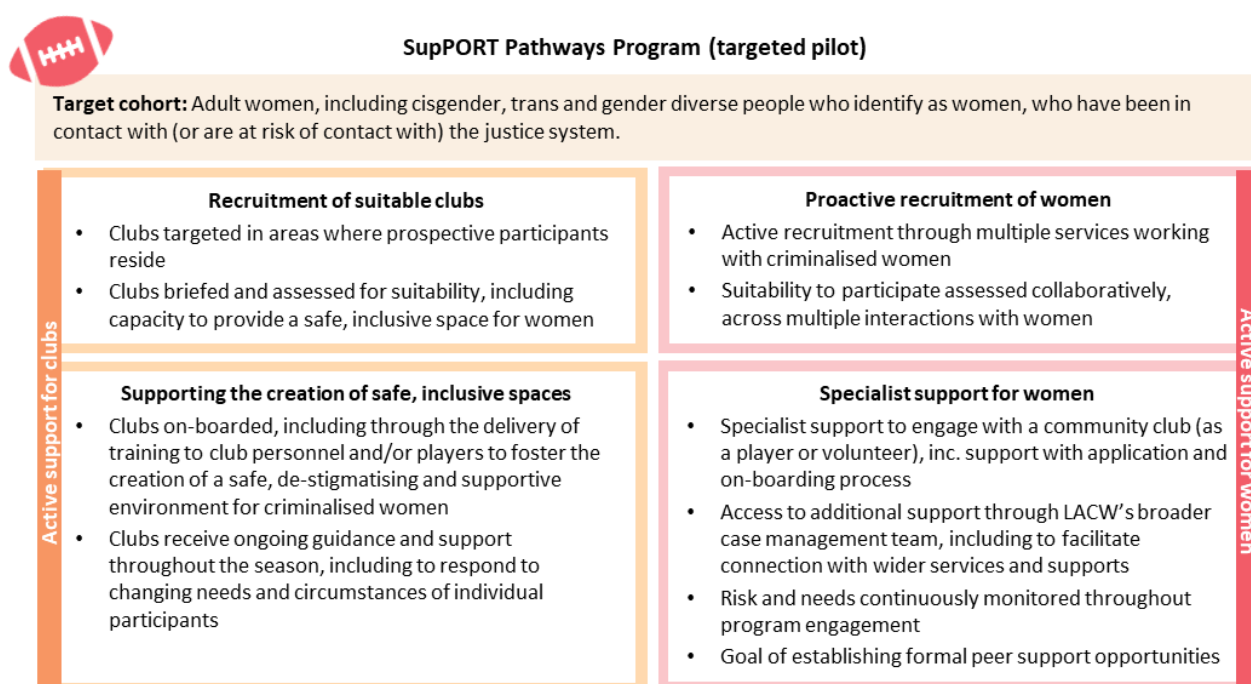
The project commenced with a brief planning and design phase, with LACW and the CIJ working together to confirm the scope and intended outcomes of the Pathways Program model.

This included the development of a Theory of Change to underpin the program design and delivery, which was intended to act as a living document which could be updated at key points of the project to reflect emerging learnings and program adaptations (see Appendix B).

1.2.1.2 Targeted pilot (Stage I) (October 2021 to August 2022)

Following this phase, LACW transitioned to the delivery of a targeted pilot (Stage I), which involved the initial rollout of specialist support for women in the community to join an Australian Rules football club at the community level, either as a player or to assist with training, club administration, team management, player support or social activities. This stage was conducted during the 2022 football season and involved two community clubs. An overview of the program model delivered during the targeted pilot is provided at Figure 1.

Figure 1: Pathways Program model overview (targeted pilot)



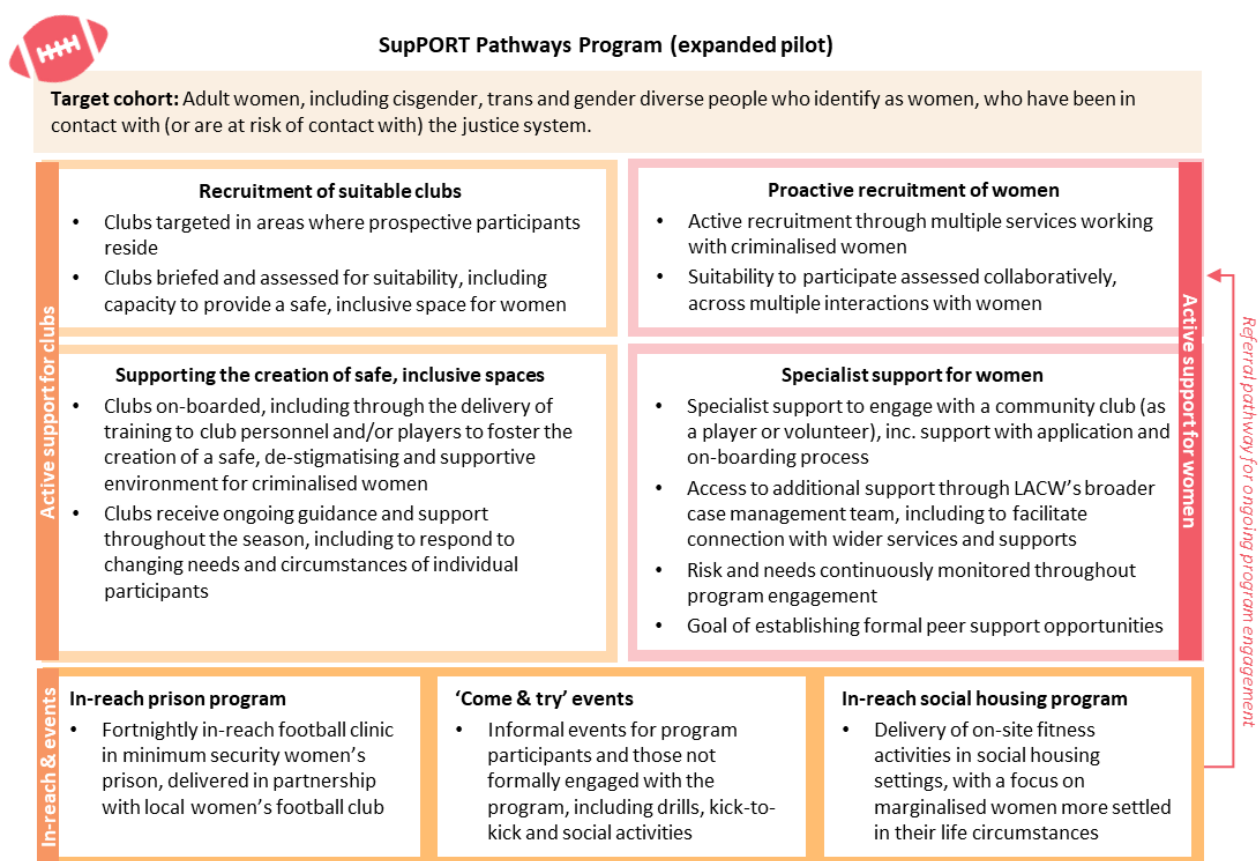
During this initial stage, the project was delivered by a dedicated Program Manager based at LACW – an experienced social worker with a background in community sports – with additional support provided by LACW case managers.

Students on social work clinical placements also contributed to the project across both phases in a wide range of ways. This included helping to develop and deliver the club training sessions and the intake and onboarding processes with participating women. In Phase 2, students played a vital role in organising the 'Come and try' events and actively participated in running activities on these occasions, as well as at the prison and in social housing settings. In addition, two students contributed to the literature review for the evaluation.

1.2.1.3 Expanded pilot (Stage II) (September 2022 to August 2023)

The expanded pilot (Stage II) occurred during the 2023 football season and included an expanded rollout to two additional clubs, as well as the incorporation of additional in-reach programs and community-based events for women in different settings and at different stages of readiness. An overview of this expanded model is provided at Figure 2.

Figure 2: Pathways Program model overview (expanded pilot)



A dedicated Program Officer role was also established during this stage to support engagement with community clubs and to contribute to the delivery of in-reach programs and other events.

A Theory of Change reflecting the evolved program model delivered in the expanded pilot period is provided at Appendix C.

1.3 Defining success

In defining success for the Pathways Program model, the LACW team was 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 highly familiar with the multiple challenges that make it difficult for criminalised women to engage, as well as maintain engagement, with *any* service or program. For example, the evaluation of the *Women Transforming Justice* bail support program in Victoria highlighted the way in which service engagement of any kind can be a major achievement for criminalised women, given their:

- history of being repeatedly let down by services and mistrust of services where child removal may be a risk;
- exclusion from services where their multiple and trauma-related needs may see them classified as too 'complex'; or

- exclusion from support services because of their contact with the criminal justice system, including where they have been classified as a perpetrator of family violence.²⁸

There is increasing recognition²⁹ of the need for more realistic and nuanced measures when evaluating responses to programming for women who are in contact with the criminal justice system. These can include markers of subtle, positive change that has the potential to support desistance including:

- improvements in physical health;
- increased social connection;
- ability to access stable housing, employment or education and training;
- reduction in substance dependence or risky substance use;
- management of mental health conditions, via engagement with services and/or stabilisation on medication;
- improved family connection, including retaining or gaining custody or access to children;
- reductions in experiences of family violence; and
- stabilisation of financial status, including accessing benefits (e.g., disability pension, NDIS funding).³⁰

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 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. As is evident from the research, providing opportunities to forge ongoing and supportive connections; to develop social and other skills; and to find structure and routine where trauma and systemic disadvantage have precluded those experiences can lead to significant improvement in wellbeing.³¹

The evaluation therefore emphasised the need for more nuanced measures of success with intermediate and end-of program outcomes for women emphasising connection, positive experiences and feelings of safety (see Table 1).

It was also important to LACW that the framing and articulation of program outcomes provided opportunities to celebrate women’s individual achievements, as well as to accommodate and account for the individual barriers and challenges that women may face.

²⁸ Centre for Innovative Justice, 2020, above n 26. Analysis from Caruana et al., 2021, above n 4.

²⁹ Gelb, K., Stobbs, N., & Hogg, R. (2019). *Community-based sentencing orders and parole: A review of literature and evaluations across jurisdictions*. Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council. <https://www.sentencingcouncil.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/615018/edited-final-literature-review.pdf>

³⁰ See Caruana at al., 2021, above n 4.

³¹ Cameron and MacDougall, 2000, above n 8; D’Andrea et al., 2013, above n 14; Whitley et al., 2022, above n 14; Bergholz et al., 2016, above n 14.

Table 1: Key intermediate and end-of-program outcomes for women

Timeframe	Key outcomes
Intermediate outcomes (3 – 6 months)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women are connected with the program and have a safe, positive touchpoint within the service system. • Barriers which may impact women's capacity to access and engage with community clubs are understood and addressed. • Women experience community clubs as safe, inclusive and de-stigmatising places. • Women build confidence and positive relationships through different opportunities to engage, including by building readiness for club participation (expanded pilot only).
End-of-program outcomes (6+ months)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protective factors in women's lives are enhanced. • Women form and maintain positive connections with program staff, clubs, wider services and other women.

Source: Centre for Innovative Justice.

Further detail on short-term, intermediate and end-of-program outcomes (including at the club and project-level) is included in the Theories of Change at Appendices A and B.

1.4 Evaluating the Pathways Project

1.4.1 Evaluation scope and objectives

The Evaluation operated alongside program implementation and delivery for the duration of the project via a developmental evaluation approach. 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.”³² this approach allows for timely feedback to inform adaptations and improvement of the program.

In addition to informing continuous learning and improvement, a key aim of the Evaluation was to contribute to the evidence base on gender-specific crime prevention strategies for women with justice system involvement, including understanding how clubs experienced the program and their engagement with criminalised women.

1.4.1.1 Key Evaluation Questions

In addressing these broad aims, the Evaluation sought to understand the program's implementation, effectiveness, appropriateness and impact. As outlined above, it was crucial, that this included recognition of the high levels of intersecting needs with which program participants presented. It was equally vital that it adopted an approach to assessing program effectiveness which could capture and celebrate incremental progress and achievements within the program.

³² 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.>

Key Evaluation Questions which underpinned and framed the evaluation activities are outlined at Table 2.

Table 2: Overview of Key Evaluation Questions

Key Evaluation Questions	Sub-questions
<p>Implementation <i>To what extent has the program been implemented as intended?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have key activities been implemented as intended, and what factors (if any) promoted or inhibited implementation? • To what extent were recruitment process and pathways successful in engaging women in contact with (or at risk of contact with) the justice system? • To what extent were recruitment processes successful in identifying and engaging with community clubs with capacity and commitment to support the program?
<p>Effectiveness <i>To what extent does the program show evidence of promise?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent was the program effective in supporting women to remain engaged with community clubs? • To what extent was the program effective in supporting clubs to create safe, inclusive and de-stigmatising spaces for women? • To what extent did the program contribute to women's improved engagement with wider supports, including those aimed at addressing underlying causes of justice system contact? • To what extent did the program contribute to positive experiences and connections for women?
<p>Appropriateness <i>To what extent is the program appropriate for different cohorts and/or for delivery in different contexts?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent is the model responsive to the particular needs of criminalised women? • To what extent did Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants and those from CALD communities experience the program as culturally safe and inclusive? • To what extent is the program ready for rolling out more broadly to other community football clubs and in other contexts?
<p>Impact <i>What have been the wider impacts of the program?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What other impacts has the program appeared to have on women, including by acting as a protective factor against future justice contact? • What has been the impact on community football clubs engaged in the program? • To what extent has the program contributed to some of the broader objectives of crime prevention, such as strengthening the community's ability to understand crime and community safety issues?

Source: Centre for Innovative Justice.

1.4.3 Evaluation principles

The design and delivery of the Evaluation, including data collection, analysis and reporting, was underpinned by a set of guiding principles that are aligned with the ethos of the project itself. These principles are:

- **Participatory** – The Evaluation team, working alongside LACW, adopted an iterative and user-centred approach to developing and refining the model, with program participants and club personnel providing feedback on the program design throughout the life of the project.
- **Trauma-informed** – Women’s experiences of the program are viewed through the lens of complex trauma, recognising the ways in which this might affect an individual’s engagement with the program and outcomes from that engagement. In addition, the research approach was based on the CIJ’s established methodology for engaging with people with justice system contact, which privileges participant choice and safety.
- **Strengths-based** – The Evaluation aimed to recognise and uphold the strengths and resilience of participating women, and to celebrate their achievements through the program. Project snapshots throughout this report aim to capture the positive experiences created through the program, and the ways in which these can contribute to improvements in women’s wellbeing, self-esteem and sense of social connection.
- **Culturally responsive and safe** – All data collection, analysis and reporting aim to be culturally informed, strengths-based and informed by insight into the specific issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.³³
- **Future-focussed** – The Evaluation sought to identify learnings which can inform the expansion of the project to other contexts, as well as the broader use of sports-based crime prevention programs for women and other vulnerable cohorts.

1.4.4 Data collection

An overview of proposed data collection and analysis, as well as challenges and limitations associated with specific data collection processes, is outlined below.

1.4.4.1 Consultations with program staff

The CIJ Evaluation team conducted consultations with program staff (and wider LACW staff) at key points across the project lifecycle. Consultations provided an opportunity to seek program staff’s perspectives and insights in relation to the delivery of the project. This included the factors supporting and hindering implementation; modifications made to the model to address challenges in delivery; and insights into the ways that the program could be improved.

1.4.4.2 Interviews with women

The CIJ conducted in-depth interviews with four of five women who formally engaged with clubs. Women were actively supported throughout the process to ensure that participation in the research was a positive experience and did not result in distress, re-traumatisation or harm.

³³ This is important given the over-representation of Indigenous women in the female prison population and the fact that 30 to 40 per cent of LACW’s client base identifies as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.

Acknowledging the relatively small sample size, interviews with women elicited rich data and insights in relation to their experiences of the program. This included feedback on the support provided by the program team; insights about their reception at the club; perceived benefits and disadvantages of their participation in the program; and opportunities to contribute to the refinement of the model.

Further, qualitative sampling strategy aims for either ‘thematic saturation’ or ‘theoretical saturation’ – that is, the point at which no new themes or content are emerging and “the collection of new data does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation”.³⁴

While the level at which saturation is reached varies across studies, one widely cited experimental study found that theoretical saturation was approaching after only 6 research interviews and was definitely achieved after 12 interviews.³⁵ In a similar study investigating the focus group method, researchers found that, in a study that actually involved 40 focus groups, 80 per cent of the themes were identifiable within 2 to 3 focus groups and 90 per cent were identifiable within 3 to 6 focus groups.³⁶ As such, it is likely that four interviews identified a significant proportion of potential themes.

A key limitation of interviews with women was the exclusion of women participating in the sub-programs introduced in Stage II. In Victoria, research involving direct engagement with clients of the justice system requires review and approval by the Justice Human Research Ethics Committee (JHREC). This process requires a detailed research methodology, including recruitment pathways and processes for supporting participants, to be clearly outlined, with amendments to the methodology requiring a subsequent review and approval.

As a result of these requirements – and given that the research methodology was based on the Stage I program design and did not anticipate the Stage II expansion of the model to in-reach programs and community events – women who participated in the additional components of the Stage II expanded model (in-reach prison program, in-reach social housing program and ‘Come and try’ events), were not eligible to participate in an interview, except where they were also engaged with the community club component of the program.

1.4.4.3 Observation of in-reach programs

Acknowledging the limitation outlined above (in relation to capacity to engage with in-reach program clients), the CIJ was invited, with the participants’ consent, to observe several sessions of the in-reach prison and social housing programs. This provided a vital opportunity – in the absence of interviews with participating women – to observe how women experienced program activities.

³⁴ Mason M. (2010) Sample Size and Saturation in PhD Studies Using Qualitative Interviews. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 11: 1-19.

³⁵ Guest G, Bunce A and Johnson L. (2006) How Many Interviews Are Enough?: An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability. *Field Methods* 18: 59-82.

³⁶ Guest G, Namey E and McKenna K. (2016) How Many Focus Groups Are Enough? Building an Evidence Base for Nonprobability Sample Sizes. *Ibid.* 29: 3-22. Similar findings were replicated in Hennink MM, Kaiser BN and Weber MB. (2019) What Influences Saturation? Estimating Sample Sizes in Focus Group Research. *Qualitative Health Research* 29: 1483-1496.

1.4.4.4 Resilience and wellbeing tool

During the targeted pilot, the CIJ assisted LACW to source, adapt and validate a self-reported resilience and wellbeing tool designed to help gauge shifts, however small, in women's overall resilience and wellbeing during their involvement with the Pathways program and other project-based services that LACW may deliver in the future. This includes by measuring the presence of protective factors such as connection between an individual and another significant person; perceptions of more general social connectedness, sociability, and social confidence; attitudes to education and skills development; and self-esteem. It was also envisioned that the tool could be used to identify and celebrate progress at the end of the participant's involvement in the program. As required by the creator of the measure, LACW took steps to validate the tool for use in this context, testing it with case management staff and clients and making adaptations as deemed necessary.

The project team intended to administer the tool to Pathways participants during the expanded pilot at program entry and exit, with a view to better understand changes in wellbeing over time. In practice, resource constraints within the program (see section 2.1.1.1) meant that the tool was not administered consistently to program participants and was therefore excluded from the Evaluation.

1.4.4.5 Consultation with club personnel and players

The CIJ conducted consultations with personnel from participating clubs, with a view to understanding their experiences of the program, as well as their perceptions of how women experienced the engagement with the club. This included seeking feedback on initial understandings and expectations of the program and wider project; the degree to which they were consulted about the club engaging in the program; any benefits or disadvantages for clubs in participating in the program; and whether involvement had been a positive experience for them.

A key limitation was the low participation in consultations by clubs in this process. For example, while a sample of players and members of the club leadership participated in consultations at two clubs, the participation of others was limited to a single interview with a member of the leadership team or the provision of written feedback. This limited the capacity of the CIJ to understand how clubs experienced the program, particularly in contexts where challenges in relation to women's participation at clubs emerged.

Despite best efforts to encourage completion, this meant that unfortunately the CIJ received limited responses to surveys administered to club members (22 responses to the pre-season survey), with significant attrition for the post-season survey (8 responses). Reasons for this included the voluntary nature of club roles, which in turn meant limited capacity to take on additional club-related commitments, as well as the fact that consultations occurred at the end of the season when clubs were focussed on preparation for the finals.

Given the low completion rates – and likelihood of selection bias within this sample – survey data has largely been excluded from the Evaluation.

1.4.4.6 Observation of on-boarding activities for clubs

The CIJ observed the training sessions delivered by the program team at two clubs – one club participating in the program at Stage I and the other at Stage II. The aim was to understand more about the content and form of the training package; the clubs' response to the information provided; and the role played by the program participant (if any).

1.4.4.7 Community crime attitudes survey

Data was also collected from club personnel via an 'attitudes to crime' survey. The aim of the survey was to explore whether there were any shifts in understandings of, or attitudes to, criminal offending and criminal justice responses. Surveys were a combination of questions sourced from existing national community crime attitude surveys, as well as questions developed by the CIJ to reflect the specific context of the program.

Club members with direct involvement in the program were invited to complete the online survey at the beginning of the club's involvement in the program, with the same participants asked to repeat the same survey at the end of the season.

Uptake of surveys was relatively low, with high attrition rates for the post-season survey. On this basis, analysis of survey data has focussed on understanding baseline attitudes to crime but is of limited utility in demonstrating change over time.

1.4.4.8 Program data

Throughout the Evaluation, LACW collected verbal and written feedback from women linked with clubs in the community, as well as those accessing the in-reach prison program. Feedback was also sought from club members about their views on the usefulness of on-boarding activities.

De-identified feedback collected through these processes was shared with the Evaluation team, alongside other program data such as referral data.

1.4.4.9 Literature scan

In addition to the data collection activities outlined above, a literature scan of sports-based crime prevention initiatives for women and other vulnerable cohorts was conducted to contextualise available data and to inform further program adaptations.

1.4.5 Limitations

Building on the limitations and challenges outlined above (in relation to specific data collection activities), the Evaluation is subject to the following overarching limitations.

1.4.5.1 Capacity to measure key outcomes for women

Because of challenges associated with the implementation of the resilience and wellbeing tool (see section 1.4.4.4), data relating to key outcome measures was limited to qualitative insights gleaned from interviews with women,³⁷ practice observations and consultations with program staff.

³⁷ Noting the further limitation that the CIJ was unable to obtain feedback from women participating in the in-reach and community event components introduced in the second stage of the project, as discussed above.

More robust data in relation to key indicators of wellbeing and resilience, including self-esteem, social connection and access to resources and social support was not available or able to be included in the Evaluation.

1.4.5.2 Capacity to track participants over time

The CIJ also had limited capacity to track the trajectories of program participants over time. This was in part because of the time-limited nature of the intervention, as well as the challenges inherent in maintaining engagement with this cohort.

As a result, while the Evaluation identified a range of positive experiences and changes for women through their engagement with the program, it was not always possible to track or quantify more substantial improvements over time in an accurate way, including impacts of the program on either recidivism or 'gateway' outcomes that can support desistance from offending.

1.4.5.3 Capacity to attribute change to the program

The Pathways program sits alongside LACW's broader integrated legal and social work service model, which involves wrap-around case management and referral to external services and supports. An additional challenge of the Evaluation, therefore, is the capacity to attribute improvements or changes in the lives of participants to involvement in the program, the broader support provided by LACW (and resulting engagement with other relevant services), or a combination of these interventions.

1.4.5.4 Capacity to understand the impact of the program on clubs

Finally, as outlined above, the capacity of the CIJ to understand the impact of the program on clubs, including on community attitudes to crime, was hampered by low uptake of surveys, consultations and other research activities at some clubs.

This highlighted wider challenges in seeking to conduct research in the context of primarily volunteer-run organisations where people are managing competing demands and may have limited capacity to contribute to (or investment in) research activities.

1.5 Structure of the report

This Evaluation Report is structured as follows:

- **Section 1 (Introduction)** – outlines the background to the Evaluation, as well as setting out the purpose, scope and approach taken to evaluating the project.
- **Section 2 (Evaluation findings)** – sets out detailed findings relating to the implementation, effectiveness, appropriateness and impact of the program.
- **Section 3 (Recommendations)** – presents opportunities for further refining and strengthening the program.

A series of 'Project snapshots' interspersed throughout the report provide small case studies of aspects of the project or challenges encountered. Practice and program design insights are also highlighted.

In addition, an overview of project phases is provided at Appendix A, with Theories of Change at Appendices B and C reflecting changes in the program design over time. Appendix D provides a summary of good practice indicators in the development and delivery of sport-focussed crime prevention strategies.

2 Evaluation findings

This section sets out the Evaluation findings against key areas of inquiry, namely the implementation, effectiveness and appropriateness of the project and impacts arising from delivery of the project.

2.1 Implementation

2.1.1 Success, barriers and enablers

Have key activities been implemented as intended and what factors (if any) promoted or inhibited implementation?

The Evaluation found that the Pathways Project was largely implemented as intended, and in a way that was consistent with the objectives and values of the project.

Key to this was the adoption of an adaptive, continuous learning mindset to accommodate challenges and learnings as they emerged. This resulted in several important changes to the program to respond to unforeseen challenges, including the withdrawal of the Victorian Amateur Football Association (VAFA) from its role as a formal partner in the project (see section 2.1.1.1).

The findings also point to aspects of the program's design and implementation that could be strengthened moving forward. In particular, the Evaluation identified a need to enhance the level of support and guidance provided to clubs, with LACW staff acknowledging that the consistently high and complex needs of women participating in the program required additional scaffolding and engagement with clubs to ensure that they functioned as a safe, inclusive and de-stigmatising space for women.

The establishment, maintenance and monitoring of recruitment pathways (for women and clubs) is addressed separately at sections 2.1.2 and 2.1.3.

2.1.1.1 Foundational activities

Overall, foundational activities identified in the program's original Theory of Change (Appendix B) were implemented as intended, with the key exception being establishment of a formal partnership between LACW and VAFA to support delivery of the program. As outlined below, however, this was ultimately understood to have a positive impact on the program.

In addition, consistent with the iterative approach to program design and implementation, the scope and aims of some foundational activities shifted over time based on emerging learnings (as reflected in the adapted Theory of Change, Appendix C). Key changes are identified below.

Partnership with the Victorian Amateur Football Association

The project was initially conceptualised as a partnership between LACW and VAFA. Preliminary conversations with VAFA anticipated that LACW would be responsible for providing wraparound support to program participants, while VAFA would be responsible for recruiting, on-boarding and supporting community clubs through a dedicated project resource.

It became evident during the establishment phase of the project, however, that formal participation in the project had not been fully socialised with all relevant VAFA stakeholders. This challenge was compounded by the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which required VAFA to focus its limited resources and efforts on facilitating safe participation for all amateur footballers within the league. As a result, VAFA withdrew from the partnership.

Although the withdrawal of VAFA represented a significant departure from the original project intent, LACW staff and leadership reflected at the conclusion of the project that it ultimately strengthened the Pathways program by enabling LACW to build more direct relationships with clubs. In holding these relationships, LACW felt more able to support positive engagement between clubs and women, including by ensuring that clubs were adequately briefed and received ongoing guidance throughout the season.

Despite withdrawing its formal partnership, VAFA remained supportive of the program. As such, an area for future development of the program may be fostering a positive, ongoing relationship with VAFA to support awareness of the program across the league.

Recruit and on-board the Program Manager

The project was largely resourced as intended, with LACW engaging a suitably skilled, trauma-informed Program Manager to lead the implementation and ongoing delivery of the Pathways Program. This role was intended to be responsible for providing specialist support to women, complemented by LACW's wider case management team where more intensive case coordination and case management was required.

A key challenge for this role was the early withdrawal of VAFA from the project, noted above, resulting in the Program Manager becoming responsible for both recruiting and supporting clubs, as well as recruiting and supporting program participants during the targeted pilot period (Stage I). More broadly, the 0.5 full time equivalent (FTE) allocation for LACW staff to deliver the project was found to be inadequate given the inherent challenges in working with women with high support needs, as well as the after-hours requirements of the position.

Moving into the expanded pilot (Stage II), funding earmarked for the VAFA role was reallocated to LACW. This enabled the Program Manager's role to increase from 0.5 to 0.6 FTE and supported the creation of a new 0.2 FTE Program Officer role responsible for engaging with clubs.

The Evaluation findings indicated, however, that the program would continue to benefit from increased program resourcing, given the high support needs of program participants and the need for active scaffolding of engagement with clubs to ensure a safe, inclusive and understanding environment for program participants (discussed in further detail at section 2.3.3.3).

Develop tailored intake and assessment tools and processes

As part of the program design and roll-out, the program team developed an intake and assessment tool to support onboarding of participants. The form collects key demographic data; practical and program-specific information (previous sports involvement, club activities of interest, equipment needed to participate and available transport options); and other information needed to support engagement in the project. This includes concerns about participation, questions about housing, physical and mental health, experiences of family violence, issues with drug and alcohol, legal issues and engagement with support services.

Intake and assessments tools and processes have continued to be refined throughout the project lifecycle (see section 2.1.1.2). This has included incorporating adaptations to streamline and simplify the intake and assessment process, and to ensure a stronger focus on readiness to engage (and associated support needs).

An area for future development is the creation of additional frameworks to inform service delivery, including operational and practice guidance. Incorporating learnings from the two pilot periods and the associated Evaluation, the development of detailed program documentation can help to 'systematise' program delivery; ensure consistent practice; and reduce the risk that program knowledge and processes are lost as a result of staff turnover.

2.1.1.2 Influencing activities

The Evaluation found that successes were also achieved through the implementation process in relation to influencing activities – that is, those activities expected to produce change over time (see Appendix B).

As with the project's foundational activities, an adaptive and organic approach to the implementation of influencing activities was a feature of the project. In a pilot setting involving an innovative and emergent intervention, this was seen as a key strength, with activities implemented in a way that prioritised flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of program participants.

Moving forward, however, a priority of the program should be to consolidate learnings which emerged from the pilot and to develop more well-defined processes, tools and frameworks to underpin program delivery. This should occur while still enabling practitioners within the program a degree of flexibility to respond to individual client needs and preferences.

Assessment, intake and on-boarding process

The Evaluation indicated that assessment, intake and on-boarding processes evolved relatively organically and incorporated learnings along the way.

The assessment and intake process was initially intended to maintain a strong focus on the women's engagement with clubs, with the Program Manager remaining somewhat at arms-length from the women's past and current criminal justice involvement. This approach was also intended to reduce the need for women to re-tell their story, particularly given the target cohort was likely to be engaged with multiple other services.

It became evident, however, that there was a need to collect more information about each woman's history to inform an assessment of their support needs. This was both to ensure that appropriate supports were put in place and to assess whether individual clubs had the capacity to support the participants.

As a result, the program has since moved to a more structured assessment and intake process. This involves gathering a broad range of personal information about the participant that can help the program team to support both the participant and the club to understand certain behavioural responses, as well as to implement strategies to manage them. Where it was used, the Program Manager reflected that the resilience and wellbeing tool could provide useful information as part of this process.

On-boarding processes have also continued to be adapted based on reflections shared by women, with a particular focus on reducing complexity. One participant, for example, emphasised the need for information to be provided in Plain Language and to avoid providing too much information in the one sitting. She also expressed a preference for written information to be provided in a way that enabled her to take it away and read it in her own time. This is consistent with wider research conducted by the CIJ, in which service users consistently express a preference for tailored and staged information provision to reflect their individual communication needs and reduce overwhelm.³⁸

Low through-put rates from referral to program engagement (see 2.1.2) suggest that refining intake and on-boarding processes to remove barriers to entry should remain a focus of the program. It is useful to note, however, that low through-put may be a product of the high support needs of women referred, which can in turn impact suitability and readiness to engage.

Key practice and design insight

Where possible, an in-depth understanding of women's needs and justice system contact should inform assessments of readiness to participate and engage, as well as planning around support needs within the program. This includes understanding women's concerns about connecting with a mainstream organisation; how their specific needs and experiences may play out in a community or club context; and having strategies in place to manage this with both the participant and the club.

Specialist support to engage with clubs

The primary component of the Pathways Program is the provision of specialist support for women to join an Australian Rules football club at the community level as a player or to assist with training, club administration, team management, player support or social activities.

This aspect of the program was implemented and delivered by a dedicated and suitably skilled Program Manager, who established a range of processes and practices to support all women participating in the program. This included actively facilitating the completion of club application forms and initial engagement with the club (such as an introductory meeting); linking women with a range of services; and the provision of ongoing support during the season to deal with issues as they arose.

³⁸ See, e.g., Ellard, R. & Campbell, E., (2020), *Improving support for victims of crime: Key practice insights*, Centre for Innovative Justice (RMIT University).

The Program Manager reflected on the proactive and intensive nature of specialist support provided just to recruit participants to the program, observing that:

“[O]n average, to recruit someone to come to an appointment requires repeat contacts ... texts, calls, making face-to-face times to meet ... which many do not get to.”

Program Manager

More broadly, the Program Manager supported women through an initial needs assessment, regular phone and face-to-face check-ins, and targeted case coordination, referrals and advocacy (see below). Further detail on the nature and effectiveness of specialist support provided through the program is outlined at section 2.2.1.1.

Access to additional case management

Although the Program Manager is a trained and suitably experienced social worker, the intent of the model was for program participants to have access to case management and case coordination (where required) through LACW’s existing case management program. This, in turn, was intended to enable the Program Manager to focus their efforts on providing specialist support and scaffolding around engagement with clubs.

Overall, case management was delivered as intended – that is, by leveraging LACW’s existing case management team. This was complemented by the capacity of the Program Manager to provide case coordination, referrals and advocacy in limited circumstances, for example, where the need was time sensitive, the case management team had limited capacity, or the Program Manager had established a particular relationship of trust with the participant.

The Program Manager reflected on the appropriateness of this design noting that, in the limited circumstances where they were required to provide broader support, this was a time-intensive process that could not be sustained if it was to be provided to all women within the program.

Key practice and design insight

Research on crime-prevention programming for vulnerable cohorts highlights the importance of embedding psycho-social supports for participants. Situating gender-specific, sports-based crime prevention initiatives within organisations that operate under an integrated practice model that includes case-managed support can create value-for money. Engagement with the program is more likely to be sustained when a change or escalation in a participant’s needs can be responded to promptly and in the context of an existing relationship.

Ongoing support and guidance to clubs

As noted above, the provision of support and guidance to clubs was originally intended to be delivered through a dedicated resource employed by VAFA. Following VAFA’s withdrawal from the program, however, this function was absorbed by LACW and eventually resulted in the creation of a dedicated, LACW-based Program Officer responsible for engaging with clubs.

The provision of support and guidance to clubs emerged as a critical feature of the program. Key aspects of engagement with clubs, at different stages of their engagement, included:

- ensuring that clubs have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in delivering the program, as well as the nature of support that will be provided to them to facilitate their participation;
- understanding club culture and how this might impact on women’s experiences and feelings of safety;
- understanding the extent to which club personnel and members have a foundational understanding of the factors driving women’s justice system contact, and delivering additional training around these factors (and associated support needs) as required;
- closely monitoring women’s early engagement with clubs to identify any emerging risks and issues, and to provide additional guidance and support as required; and
- supporting clubs to manage issues relating to women’s wellbeing, behaviour within the club environment and other issues which may arise.

While the pilot approach to the provision of support and guidance to clubs was relatively adaptive and guided by club needs and preferences, specific aspects of ‘good practice’ did emerge over time. This included learnings in relation to information sharing within clubs; participation of women in club on-boarding processes; and maintaining support and visibility beyond women’s initial engagement.

An area of future focus, therefore, will be to consolidate learnings from the pilot through the establishment and documentation of clear processes and expectations for supporting clubs, as well as the development of training and other resources to facilitate clubs’ engagement with the program and build their capacity to provide a safe, inclusive environment for women.

Peer mentoring and support

It was intended at inception that the program would provide opportunities for women participating at Stage I to act in a peer mentor role for women joining the program at Stage II. Provision was made in the project budget for women to be compensated for undertaking this work.

The provision of peer support in this formal way did not eventuate in Stage II. According to the Program Manager, this was primarily because there were simply not enough participants engaged with the program for the process to gain traction. In addition, one of the two Stage I participants disengaged from the club and was dealing with more pressing personal issues in the second year.

It was evident from the interactions with the two Stage I participants that they had the skills and personalities to excel in such a role. One noted that she would love to step into a mentoring role and that this would contribute to a growing sense of connection and belonging:

“...I’ve gone through so much of my own trauma struggles with the criminal stuff, and everything else. So I’ve got so much more, you know, empathy and sympathy And I think it [mentoring] would give me like an aspect to be excited [about] because you know, you like to feel wanted.”

Participant

Planning for ongoing delivery of the program should, therefore, include consideration of ways to ensure that this aspect of the model is brought to life.

Monitoring, evaluation and continuous learning

In line with what is considered good practice³⁹, LACW identified clear project aims at the outset and maintained commitment to monitoring success in meeting those aims by embedding an independent evaluation into the project design. In addition, an ethos of continuous learning and improvement saw the project team actively consulting with and collecting feedback from women and clubs across the two years of delivery and adjusting the program design and approach in response to this feedback. In some instances – such as the program’s approach to intake, assessment and on-boarding of women – this enabled processes to emerge organically and in a way that was highly responsive to women’s needs and preferences.

More robust data collection, including administration of the resilience and wellbeing tool, was a key gap in the Evaluation and an area for future development. This will significantly enhance the capacity of the program to understand and track improvements in women’s resilience and wellbeing over the course of their engagement with the program, particularly improvements in ‘gateway’ outcomes linked to desistance.

2.1.1.3 Additional influencing activities (Stage II)

During the expanded pilot (Stage II), the program team incorporated additional activities comprising an in-reach prison program; an in-reach social housing program; and community-based ‘Come and try’ events (see Appendix C).

The intent of these sub-programs was to act as a gateway to more formal program involvement. In this regard, in-reach programs and events have been successful, with several women commencing the process to engage more formally with the program, or indicating an interest in doing so when they return to the community from prison and have established stable housing and wider supports (see section 2.1.2).

³⁹ See table 4 at Appendix D.

The program team found, however, that in-reach programs and ‘Come and try’ events have also functioned as an important alternative to formal participation and a way for the program to expand its reach and respond to differing levels of readiness.

In-reach prison program

Located in Central Victoria, Tarrengower Prison is Victoria’s only minimum-security women’s prison. Tarrengower is intended to have a particular focus on preparing women for a return to the community at the end of their sentence and provides programs that aim to support education and employment opportunities.⁴⁰

To facilitate the delivery of football clinics to women at Tarrengower, the program team established links with a recently established women’s football club in a nearby town. This club could work with the program team to deliver regular Australian Rules football activities at the facility– the only team sports activity available to women at Tarrengower. Clinics were initially held every month but transitioned to fortnightly delivery at the request of participants, with a total of 13 footy clinics held at the prison over the 2023 season on a volunteer basis.

In-reach social housing program

In Stage II of the project, relationships were established with social housing providers to facilitate the provision of onsite fitness activities for residents. Three sessions were delivered at a YWCA rooming house for women.

As with the ‘Come and try’ events, these sessions were initially envisaged as a form of recruitment, but with a focus on women who have secured housing and connection with support services, and therefore are likely to be in a better ‘headspace’ to engage.

LACW staff also reflected that the in-reach social housing program affords them an opportunity to offer something in return to, and build stronger connections with, housing services to which they regularly refer their clients in the context of providing legal services and support. In-reach social housing was also understood by the program team as an additional opportunity to intervene early and provide positive connections which can prevent potential contact with the justice system.

Community-based ‘Come and try’ events

Finally, ‘Come and try’ events were implemented as a way of providing women with an opportunity to engage in fun activities, as well as allowing women who may be considering joining the program to meet the program team and to get a feel for the program and the sport. In total, three events were held at different locations across Greater Melbourne, including one event hosted by a participating club.

Events include activities such as drills and kick-to-kick activities, guest speakers, including AFLW players, a sausage sizzle and the celebration of achievements by program participants. They are publicised through LACW’s networks with service providers working with women. Women who are already signed with clubs, or who are part of the wider pool of possible recruits, are also invited to participate.

⁴⁰ Department of Justice and Community Safety website, retrieved October 2023 from <https://www.justice.vic.gov.au/tarrengower-prison>

The program team have also expressed an interest in organising other sports-based events and excursions for women. For example, during Stage II, the program team organised for program participants to attend an AFLW game where the women were invited onto the ground to form a guard of honour for the presentation of the previous season's premiership cup.

Key practice and design insight

Offering a range of activities in different settings not only provides alternative entry points to programming for hard to engage cohorts, but can also accommodate differing levels of motivation, skill and capacity to participate.

2.1.1.4 Key barriers and enablers

In addition to specific barriers and enablers identified above, the following were identified as having a range of impacts on project implementation.

COVID-19

It is important to note that the project commenced as community football clubs were still dealing with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was evident that clubs signing up in Stage I were struggling to re-group and re-establish basic operations following two years of recurring community lockdowns. As well as seeing a reduction of volunteers and members, clubs were navigating strict return-to-play protocols. This resulted in delays to the start of season in Stage I, as well as some delays and challenges when initially seeking to engage with clubs.

At the same time, an unexpected impact of COVID-related disruption of the football season was that reduced membership following extended periods of community lockdowns meant that clubs were more open to accepting players and volunteers from all backgrounds.

COVID-19 impacts were also evident in relation to the recruitment of participants, with the Program Manager noting that it was initially difficult to mobilise women to engage in the program, resulting in a recruitment 'lag' that lasted until March 2022.

An additional impact of the pandemic was the fact that repeat community lockdowns restricted access to services, both in prison and in the community, disrupting women's engagement with support services. In some instances, this required additional work at the intake stage to reconnect or strengthen women's connection with services, including to obtain treatment for medical or dental conditions left untreated during the pandemic.

Adaptive mindset

As noted elsewhere, it was evident that LACW approached the project with a highly adaptive mindset and willingness to learn, particularly through ongoing consultation with program participants. This meant that even where challenges emerged, such as the withdrawal of VAFA from the project partnership, LACW was able to change their approach and deliver on project (and program) outcomes. Other key examples of this adaptive mindset include the expansion of the program to include in-reach sub-programs and community-based events, as well as a range of improvements incorporated into intake and assessment processes.

Specialist capability and capacity

Another key enabler of effective implementation was the situating of the program within a women's community legal service. This provided participants with access to seamless, holistic support via LACW's highly specialist legal services and existing case management program. Women facing charges were assisted in the resolution of their criminal matter and had access to advice on a wide range of issues relevant to their criminal justice involvement. In addition, the program team (and program participants) benefitted significantly from LACW's deep expertise in working with criminalised women and could draw on the expertise of LACW case managers where additional support was required.

Working with voluntary organisations

As organisations that are run after-hours by volunteers, community footballs clubs have limited time and resources to undertake extraneous activities associated with a program such as the Pathways Project. They are also organisations that can have fluid leadership and membership.

The challenges this created, both for the program team and for the evaluators, was reflected in delays in scheduling key meetings and in low uptake of evaluation activities such as the survey and group consultations. It was also reflected in comments made by club members about their capacity to deal with issues that may arise with participants. Realistic expectations of club capacity to engage, and the level of support that may need to be provided around that engagement, emerged as an important learning from the project.

High levels of needs and low levels of readiness

Finally, a key implementation challenge that emerged was the consistently high level of needs across women referred to the program. Although LACW's core service delivery involves working with women with multiple, complex and intersecting needs at the point of justice system contact, it was originally anticipated that women seeking to access the program would present with a moderate level of need and more stable personal circumstances. The higher levels of need across women seeking to access the program meant that, unfortunately, few women who were referred to the program were at a point in their lives where they could engage with a community club. Those who were able to engage required a greater level of support and scaffolding to maintain positive engagement than had initially been envisioned.

LACW responded to this challenge by expanding the program's remit and sub-program offerings to match different levels of readiness. The program team reflected that a greater mix of needs would likely have a positive impact on program uptake and capacity to maintain engagement, as well as ensuring that program resourcing was sufficient to maintain an appropriate, needs-informed level of support for all participants.

2.1.2 Recruitment of participants

To what extent were recruitment processes and pathways successful in engaging women in contact with (or at risk of contact with) the justice system?

Initial project targets were that the program would link eight to 10 participants with clubs in the community during the targeted pilot (Stage I), with the project scaled up to involve 10 to 20 participants in the expanded pilot (Stage II).

Overall, the program received 77 referrals to the club-participation component of the program across both the targeted and expanded pilot periods. Of these, 27 completed an application form (35 per cent), seven were introduced to clubs (9 per cent) and five participated in multiple club activities (6 per cent), with two of those five completing at least one full season with their club (3 per cent). The program, therefore, fell short of its target case numbers, despite significant efforts by the Program Manager and wider LACW team to facilitate engagement.

A key issue identified was the low levels of readiness of referred women to participate in the program. For example, the most common reasons for recruits being unable to proceed with the program related to personal circumstances such as housing instability, mental health issues, recurrent involvement in the criminal justice system or family-related issues. Difficulty maintaining contact with women also contributed to participant attrition. Several of the women recruited were unable to continue with clubs for more positive reasons, for example when they obtained a job or moved into vocational training.

These challenges are likely to have resulted, in part, from the initial focus on recruiting women from within LACW's own programs, as well as other programs and services working with criminalised women, including community legal centres, disability services and housing services.

Although these pathways clearly yielded significant referral numbers and interest from women, LACW indicated that the current nature of women's contact with the justice system meant that they typically presented with very high levels of need and relatively unstable personal circumstances.

This in turn impacted their readiness to move from the application stage to being introduced to a club, and then from the introduction to the club to sustained engagement over the season.

The agencies from which referrals were received, and outcomes from those referrals are set out in Table 3.

Table 3: Program referrals and outcomes

Agency	Referrals received	Applications received	Introduced to clubs	Participated in club activities
LACW	56	16	4	2
Youthlaw	7	3	1	1 (partial season)
YWCA Richmond House	5	4	1	
Yooralla	1	1	1	1 (partial season)

Agency	Referrals received	Applications received	Introduced to clubs	Participated in club activities
Ozanam House	1			
Other (self-referral, word of mouth)	3	2		
Tarrengower Prison	4 expressions of interest received. Waiting for women to be released and established in the community before completing application forms.			

Source: LACW program data.

Based on emerging findings reflecting women’s varying levels of readiness to engage in a mainstream club setting, the program expanded its recruitment activities in Stage II to include community-based ‘Come and try’ events, an in-reach prison program and in-reach social housing program (see Appendix C).

As outlined previously, these activities were intended to function as a ‘soft entry’ to the program, enabling women to participate in a less formal environment with women with similar circumstances and needs. In practice, they have provided an important alternative option for women with varying levels of readiness to participate in, and benefit from, the program.

The introduction of the in-reach social housing, in particular, has enabled the program to reach women who were in a better position to engage. According to a member of the program team:

“The best approach is to target service agencies [that women are attending], for example housing services. That way, you’re more likely to get participants who have stable housing, supports in place, routines established, and criminal matters resolved or on the way to resolution and therefore in a better headspace to participate. Women recruited elsewhere just weren’t in a position to really participate much further than a ‘Come and try’ day.”

Program team member

Important to note is that the expansion of program activities to include the in-reach social housing and prison programs resulted in *more* women than anticipated participating in the program over the life of the project – and participating in a wider range of ways than originally predicted.

Over the two years of the project, an estimated 28 women engaged with the various components of the program. In addition to the five women referred for linking with clubs in the community, this included an estimated 18 individuals who participated in the in-reach prison program, and 10 social housing residents who attended in-reach activity sessions.

Key practice and design insight

Women currently engaged with the justice system may present with levels of need and personal circumstances that limit their capacity, at that point in time, to engage in overly structured sports-based activities or activities in mainstream settings. Recruiting women from adjacent service settings likely to be responding to women *at risk* of justice system contact, such as social housing and/or family violence services, may be more likely to attract women with higher levels of readiness.

2.1.3 Recruitment of clubs

To what extent were recruitment processes successful in identifying and engaging with community clubs with capacity and commitment to support the program?

Despite initial challenges associated with the withdrawal of VAFA, the project was successful in recruiting clubs appropriate to match with participants. This was the case both in relation to the proximity to the participants' place of residence (or accessibility via public transport) and in the club's express commitment to the aims of the program and wider project.

A total of 10 clubs engaged with the program to some degree and five clubs signed up to participate in the program. The latter includes three inner-city clubs, one outer suburban club and a regional club delivering the program at the Tarrengower prison, as mentioned above.

Following an initial approach, LACW typically briefed the club leadership (President and/or Committee), with the program team reflecting on the overwhelmingly positive support of the program from leaders across multiple clubs. Following endorsement from club leadership, more detailed engagement with operational-level personnel, such as the team coach, would occur to identify potential roles for the participant and find practical ways to create a welcoming and inclusive environment.

Prior to women engaging with a club (or early in their engagement), the program team formally on-boarded club personnel, including through the delivery of an in-person training session outlining information about LACW; issues commonly experienced by women in the justice system; systemic drivers of disadvantage and justice-system involvement; and the importance of ensuring cultural safety. More information about the briefing process can be found at section 2.2.2.1.

It was evident from the observations of program activities and from feedback provided by club members that clubs varied in culture, demographics and approach to engaging with the program.⁴¹

For example, a notable characteristic of several clubs participating in the program was what appeared to be relatively high levels of awareness of the criminogenic effects of socio-economic disadvantage and the wider drivers of criminal justice involvement. For at least two of these clubs, these attitudes – perhaps linked to what appeared to be a high number of club members working in the community services sector – translated into a real commitment to the aims and ethos of the program, and a particularly inclusive and welcoming experience for participants.

⁴¹ The CIJ acknowledges that these are impressions only and are dependent, to a large degree, on the level of contact the evaluators had with club members, and who from the club elected to participate in the Evaluation.

Where challenges did arise, this pointed to the need for adequate screening of clubs, including to tailor the level of support and guidance to club readiness to participate. One club member, reflecting on the negative experience of a program participant at their club,⁴² remarked:

“Potentially, I think also from the program’s point of view, I would do more vetting of the club before I put a particularly vulnerable person with complex needs into a situation... just to really understand whether I thought that skills mix was there, whether I thought the sort of structures, the foundations, those sorts of things are there ... a bit more of a forensic look at the way that community club works and the personnel that are there and the sort of ways that ... might play out and how that suits particular sort of clients.”

Club member

Similarly, a member of the program team emphasised the need for both the program and participating clubs to be cognisant of the many barriers faced by participants, including at the most basic level of not having previous experience of participating in team sports growing up.

“I think you just kind of assume that everyone’s probably having a good time ... I definitely come from a position where, when I started football, I could play, I made friends quite easily, I grew up in a really supportive family, always had access to sport or resources, equipment – I guess, you know, quite a privileged life. So coming into the project ... I got a taste of what it might be like for someone who doesn’t have those things. Or does have those barriers and different challenges ...”

Program team member

These reflections highlighted the central importance of robust screening and on-boarding processes for clubs. This included assessing club culture, knowledge of issues faced by participants, and the availability of resources to support women’s transition into the club environment, including to support club personnel and members where challenges arise.

Key practice and design insight

Robust and suitably structured screening and on-boarding processes to assess and build club readiness are a central feature of team-based crime prevention initiatives which bring people in contact with the justice system into mainstream community sports settings.

⁴² Crucial to note, the situation which developed at this club did not appear to have resulted from poor screening or suitability of the club. Having observed the project briefing session delivered to the club’s leadership team early in the season, the evaluators were impressed by what appeared to be members’ commitment to supporting the participant; their insight into the complexity of some issues that they may face in doing so; and the fact that there were designated mental health support roles on the women’s teams.

2.2 Effectiveness

2.2.1 Supporting women to engage with clubs

To what extent was the program effective in supporting women to remain engaged with community clubs?

Of the five participants who progressed to be linked with clubs in the community, two maintained engagement for at least one full season, with the other three participating in multiple club events.

While these numbers appear low, they should be understood in the context of the high levels of need with which program participants presented, with all but one having significant, complex and overlapping experiences of trauma, physical and mental health challenges and/or disability. This was in addition to dealing with unstable housing, as well as past and ongoing experiences of trauma, all while being subject to ongoing court orders, including bail, therapeutic treatment orders, Community Corrections Orders, and parole.

Acknowledging the significant and intersecting needs outlined above, the continued engagement of two participants with a community club for one or more seasons is a significant achievement, as was the more targeted engagement of the other three participants.

Participants clearly experienced the specialist support provided to them as positive, with one participant describing the Program Manager as being “unbelievably supportive” in helping her deal with recurring depression and noted that she meets with her as often as she can.

2.2.1.1 Nature of specialist support

The tailored support provided by the Program Manager, an experienced social worker, is informed by an initial needs analysis conducted with the participant at intake. Recognising that the participant may require varying levels of support at different times, these needs are reviewed throughout the participant’s involvement with the program, and participants are referred to external services as required. Referrals can be provided through the Program Manager, although wider support needs, including referrals, case coordination and advocacy, are primarily addressed via LACW’s broader case management team (see section 2.2.1.2)

Ongoing, the support provided to participants includes regular phone and in-person check-ins to see how participants are tracking; whether their needs have changed; and any potential challenges or barriers to participation and engagement with their club. This commonly involves, at a minimum, weekly phone calls, in-person meetings every four to six weeks and regular communication with external workers the participant is linked with. The Program Manager maintains an ‘open door’ policy in relation the dealing with issues as they arise and estimated that, for participants with particularly high needs, the support required can require up to six hours of her time per week.

Importantly, this regular contact provides continuity for participants; helps to build trust; and allows for stable and non-judgmental social contact. The Program Manager noted that:

“I remain a constant – another person in their corner. That helps it stick.”

The Program Manager also indicated that, in some cases, she has more regular contact with the women linked with the program than their designated caseworker at another service. For some participants, involvement in the program had reportedly been the longest service engagement that they have experienced.

The Program Manager emphasised the need to provide more intensive support for participants in the early weeks of engagement with a club, with potentially less intervention needed as the participant settles into the new environment. For one Stage I participant, having the Program Manager's support for her introduction to the club was essential, remarking that:

“That [support is] the reason why I kept doing it.”

Participant

It is evident, however, that some participants may have benefited from having a stronger program team presence at the club. According to one club member, having somebody from the program attending games and training in the early stages would allow them to have more visibility of the club environment and how this might be experienced by the participant:

“You can actually see the kind of dynamics. You can see how the coach speaks. You can see how [the participant] is receiving that information – like those sorts of things that a club person is not necessarily going to know how to communicate that, but a program person will know how that's received by a client, right?”

Club member

2.2.1.2 Role of wider case management support in maintaining engagement

In addition to the specialist assistance provided by the Program Manager, LACW case managers are available when more intensive support is required, including when participants subject to court orders – such as bail or a supervised community order – need assistance to comply with the order.

In addition, the program team can provide practical assistance with food vouchers, child-care or transport costs. Because the program is based at a legal service, lawyers are also on hand to provide advice on issues as needed.

One participant was appreciative of the range of supports available and noted how this made it easier for women to participate in the program:

“That’s not something your normal average therapist will do with you. It was nice ... to have that kind of support ... because realistically, if you can’t figure out some of the bigger things that are going on in the early stages with a trauma drama, (and trauma and drama is why people are in the program) then ... you won’t keep going to the program because your life’s not getting better.”

Program participant

Another key learning from the pilot is the need to sustain women’s engagement when things occur that have the potential to disrupt women’s progress – such as the death of a relative, health issues, or a personality clash at the club. In these contexts, the Evaluation found the situation of the program within LACW’s wider suite of services was a key strength, with specialist support and scaffolding to engage with clubs able to be complemented by more traditional case management, practical support and referrals.

“... it’s not going to be a linear progression. So, there’s going to be ups and downs. There’s going to be bumps along the road, but I think the benefit in having an organisation like ours delivering a program like this is that we don’t give up on people easily and we kind of meet people where they’re at. We appreciate that. You know, there’s other priorities in their lives and things might not always run to plan, and it’s about us educating others on how to engage with the women that we work with.”

Program team member

Overall, the Evaluation found significant evidence of promise in relation to the program’s capacity to support women to engage, and remain engaged with, community clubs. Given the complex needs of the five program participants, the Evaluation also suggested that the inclusion of women with more moderate support needs in the program cohort is likely to build on early program achievements and contribute to an even higher success rate for maintaining engagement for one or more seasons.

2.2.2 Creating safe and inclusive spaces for women

To what extent was the program effective in supporting clubs to create safe, inclusive and de-stigmatising spaces for women?

Findings in relation to the program’s effectiveness in supporting clubs to create a safe and inclusive environment for participants were mixed.

For one participant, the reception at the club was overwhelmingly welcoming and the acceptance and camaraderie that she experienced was sustained throughout the season. Others reported that, while they initially experienced a warm reception at the club, they faced challenges in establishing connections within the club for a range of reasons.

One particularly negative experience resulted in a participant who was keen to hone her skills and make new friends being suspended from the player group because of conflict with a teammate. The participant experienced related incidents at the club as rejection by her teammates, and ultimately came to a decision with the Program Manager that the club was not a safe place for her, withdrawing from participation.⁴³

Importantly, the variable experiences at clubs provided opportunities for learning. Key elements of the support and guidance provided to clubs during the pilot, as well as opportunities to strengthen this aspect of the program, are outlined in the following sections.

2.2.2.1 Processes for on-boarding clubs

All participating clubs received a training session by LACW at the commencement of their engagement with the program, with feedback indicating that both the participants and the clubs valued the insights that the training provided. The following project snapshot outlines one positive example of the training sessions provided.

While training sessions were broadly well-received, some useful suggestions were made about ways to continue to strengthen this aspect of the program. These included providing information on trauma-informed approaches in sport; ensuring cultural safety and gender inclusion in football clubs; as well as providing clubs with more information in advance about the purpose and content of the training and who should attend. Respondents also indicated that the training is most useful when delivered early in the participant's engagement with the club.

One issue that emerged was the absence of a consistent approach to sharing information about the context of program participants' involvement with the club. Guided by the preferences of each club, the program team initially adopted a flexible approach. LACW reflected at the conclusion of the pilot, however, that a decision made by one particular club not to share information about the context around the participant's club involvement may have contributed to the participant's negative experience at that club.

LACW staff reflected that the club had been well-intentioned in wanting to respect the participant's privacy and treat her 'like any other player'. Ultimately, however, a better understanding of participants' circumstances and support needs (shared in consultation with program participants) is likely to contribute to a safer, supportive and more accepting club environment.

Key practice and design insight

Where sports-based crime prevention initiatives link justice-involved people with mainstream clubs, careful consideration of the benefits and drawbacks associated with disclosing information about the participant's circumstances and support needs is required. Where information is not shared, this can contribute to a lack of understanding within the club environment where issues or challenges arise. Decisions about disclosure of information should, of course, be made in close consultation with program participants.

⁴³ Importantly, however, the program has provided a constant touchpoint in the system for the participant, who remains linked with the program team and open to the possibility of finding an alternative club.

Clubs also indicated a need for clearer expectation setting as part of the on-boarding process, including ensuring that clubs have an understanding of roles, responsibilities and key processes, such as communication and risk management protocols. The experience at one club also highlighted the importance of documenting key information to ensure an understanding of program parameters, including where changes to club leadership occur.

Other opportunities to strengthen on-boarding processes identified by club members include:

- a transparent approach to introducing the club to the program, where the broader membership is consulted about potential involvement;
- delivery of the club briefing as early as possible in the pre-season, ideally before the participant commences their engagement with the club; and
- tailoring training materials to meet club needs and levels of readiness, including exploring options for additional training and up-skilling of club members.

Members of the program team also commented on the need for further consideration of how to involve participants in the club on-boarding process in a way that is comfortable for them and promotes a sense of agency, including by offering opportunities to be a part of the process in less formal ways, such as a coffee and chat with the coach.

2.2.2.2 Designated support person at the club

At some clubs, participants formed a special bond with one or two club members, and these people became their designated support person or ‘buddy’. In some instances, this relationship was proposed by the program team, with the designated support person receiving targeted support from the program team to act in that role. In other instances, the relationship appears to have evolved organically between the participant and relevant club member.

The following account from one such ‘buddy’ describes the nature of support that can be provided.

“A lot of the time she’d call me or text me and if she texted it would be like, ‘hey are you free to call?’ ... and it would be sometimes it was five minutes, sometimes it was half an hour. [Sometimes] it’s just her venting, it was just saying like, this is what’s going on in my life ... Footy was part of it, [but often] it would sort of be more about the issues [she was experiencing at the club] ...

She [seemed to appreciate] me, not being a formal worker, I wasn’t, you know, trying to get her to do something or anything, I was just someone that she could call ...”

Club member

In addition to supporting the participant’s integration into the team more effectively, having a closer contact at the club offers an important opportunity for the program team to be kept informed of things happening on the ground, including how the participant may experience particular situations.

2.2.2.3 Ongoing support and involvement

The Evaluation suggested that, while the early stages of a participant's engagement with clubs often required the most support, it remained important to maintain visibility of the participant's experience at the club throughout their involvement.

This emerged as particularly critical where participants had negative experiences at clubs, with the Evaluation identifying one example in which the program team did not become aware of a situation impacting on a program participant until after she had received disciplinary action. This represented a missed opportunity to support a less punitive response, and to ensure that the participant felt properly supported to navigate challenges within the club environment.

2.2.3 Positive experiences for women

To what extent did the program contribute to positive experiences and connections for women?

A key strength of the program identified through the Evaluation – including through interviews with (and feedback from) women, as well as opportunities to observe program delivery – is its capacity to provide women with positive experiences and connections. For the latter, this included connections with program staff, with clubs and with other program participants, although connections with the program team emerged as the strongest and most positive relationship formed during the pilot period.

Opportunities to observe program delivery revealed a relaxed and enjoyable setting in which women supported each other; connected with people in the wider community; and built relationships of trust and rapport with the program team and supporting clubs. This is a positive outcome in its own right, but also one which the evidence suggests is key to effective programming⁴⁴ and can contribute to broader benefits for women.⁴⁵

2.2.3.1 Positive experiences

Participants linked with clubs clearly enjoyed engaging in the wide range of experiences possible through the program – whether that be making new friends, learning a new skill, meeting AFLW legends or just kicking a footy around.

This was evident in the overwhelmingly positive feedback provided to LACW by the women at Tarrengower Prison, with women describing the program as their “favourite day of the week”, a “fun, supportive, positive environment” and “the best program that has been on offer”.

Women described appreciating having something “different” to do, as well as enjoying the health benefits of the program and an opportunity to come together. Women also clearly established positive relationships with the program team and supporting club, with one woman remarking that she, “loved learning from the legends.”

⁴⁴ See Table 4, Appendix D.

⁴⁵ See section 1.1.2.

“Great job to all who participate with us girls to bring joy and new skills to our day ...”

In-reach prison program participant⁴⁶

The club members delivering the sessions at the prison were also “pretty blown away” by the engagement of the women, the enjoyment that they got from the session and how thankful they were, with one member remarking:

“I didn’t think there would be so many laughs – it was [lots of] laugh out loud [moments]. It was silly and it was fun and you have people absolutely cracking up.”

Club member

Another commented that it was about so much more than just footy for the women, but rather an opportunity to “just be a human.”

The following project snapshot describes the scene at Tarrengower, and the benefits observed by the Evaluation team.

⁴⁶ Feedback provided to LACW via program feedback processes.

Project snapshot: Footy clinics at Tarrengower Prison

The sessions run for one hour on a Wednesday afternoon on a small patch of uneven grass outside the administration building. On wet days, the activities move indoors.

Three to four members of the local women's football club facilitated the sessions with the assistance of members of the program team.

Between 5 and 10 women participated in the sessions – some who were eagerly awaiting the start of the session and others who appeared to spontaneously join the activities. The women displayed various levels of ability from skilled footballers to women who were kicking a ball for the first time. A group of women observed from the sidelines and cheered the participants on. The toddler of one of the women playing was keen to join in but was shepherded to safety by onlookers.

The clinic involved warm-up and stretching exercises followed by a series of handball, bounce, and kick-to-kick drills. The women, including the facilitators, then broke into two teams for a mini game in the limited space available.

There was evidence of great teamwork, acceptance of differing ability, light-hearted competitiveness and general hilarity, particularly when the ball went up onto the admin building roof, as well as when a player's boot sailed up into the air along with the ball. At the end of the game, the group formed a circle and everyone received a positive assessment of their play.

With their side colours on, and because of the degree of familiarity and comfort with each other, there was no demarcation between the facilitators and the participants. Rather, the evaluation team observed that it was just a group of women playing footy, and evidence of what can be achieved through human connection when the concept of a 'level playing field' is genuinely realised.

Source: Evaluation team observations.

2.2.3.2 Positive connections with the project team

All the participants consulted for the Evaluation valued the connection that they had established with the program team. This connection appeared to transcend the usual 'service provider/client' relationship and participants spoke highly of the support and encouragement that they received. According to one participant:

“... they are very supportive, they're very enthusiastic and they are really, really great to talk to and laugh with. And there's honestly no one else better. No one else that I can find that's better ... I'm so glad to have them part of my life.”

Program participant

For two participants in particular, the relationship that they had with certain program staff extended to that of role model and mentor.

Participants appreciated the regular calls and 'check-ins' from the Program Manager.

One participant described being especially appreciative of the support provided to her at court by the project team members early in her engagement with the program. She felt like this helped the “bonding process” by providing the Program Manager with the “bigger picture” of her personal situation. She also described the value of conversations with the Program Manager and students which are not solely about football, but also her broader life. In speaking specifically about the program's impact, she clearly valued the wider context in which assistance from the project team is provided, noting that “it is about community, not just about support.”

Overall, the fact that all but one of the participants have remained connected to the program is testament to the strong connection that the program team was able to forge with the participants. Findings relating to these supportive relationships points to the need to view crime prevention programming like the Pathways project as a longer-term intervention, allowing for connection and support to develop and be sustained over multiple years.

2.2.3.3 Positive connection with the club community

There is strong evidence from the research that participation in team sports at the community level has the potential to promote social connection and a sense of belonging.⁴⁷ This understanding lies at the heart of the Pathways program and also appeared to be the primary motivation for clubs to participate, with one member noting that:

“There's nothing like doing team sports as an adult – there's nothing better. It makes you feel like you're part of something bigger, like you've got 30 people who give a shit about you.”

⁴⁷ See discussion at section 1.1.2 above.

Club member

Despite the challenges that some participants experienced at the clubs with which they were linked, participants described positive experiences of connection and acceptance within the club community. According to one participant:

“I was just like, welcomed with open arms. It was just like, welcome back to family. None the girls had issues with me – they knew where I’d come from ... Yeah, they love having me around.”

Program participant

It was clear from consultations with club members that the strong personal connections that the participant was able to make manifested in many small ways, such as team members giving the participant lifts to and from the club where possible and responding as a group when she was moving house and needed furniture.

Underscoring this participant’s experience at the club was an intense feeling of loyalty to both the program and the club. She characterised herself as someone who was willing to undertake any task that needed doing “without having to be asked”, whether that was washing dishes in the canteen, or ‘pooper scooping’ the oval before a game, demonstrating the commitment that she believed engagement with the club demanded.

“What you get is what you put in – you reap what you sow. If you’re going to join the program just to try and get bail, then fuck off. If you’re gonna do the program and do it for the best of your ability and commit, then welcome aboard.”

Program participant

Club members delivering clinics as part of the in-reach prison program also described a real connection with the women at Tarrengower Prison. One member remarked that the fact that they were not there to deliver a ‘service’ but were attending as volunteers without any agenda other than to engage in a fun activity with the women strengthened the relationships that they were able to build.

“You feel yourself slipping into this ‘worker’ role and you have to catch yourself. We’re not here to ‘save’ these women. We’re just here to hang out and build those social connections.”

Club member

Building connections with the club community was not without its challenges though – both in terms of making these social connections in the first place, and then sustaining them. For at least one participant, this stemmed in part from the fact that there was a degree of fluidity within the teams as players moved between levels, making it more difficult to develop and sustain friendships.

2.2.3.4 Positive connection amongst participants

With the women linked with different clubs, there was always the intention within the project to bring participating women together to share experiences, support each other and celebrate achievements. The two participants that joined the program in Stage I benefited from this approach and reported being able to establish a positive, supportive connection with each other.

It would appear, however, that the expansion of the program in Stage II and the resulting increased demands on the time of the program team, combined with the logistical difficulty of bringing the women together as a group, meant that there were limited opportunities for participants to connect in Stage II outside of ‘Come and try’ events. One participant expressed the desire, echoed by two other participants, that the program team “get [them] together more often”.

The delivery of footy clinics at Tarrengower Prison also allowed for greater connection and camaraderie amongst women detained there. Although the facility only has capacity to house approximately 40 women, not all the women necessarily know each other, and the population can at times be very fluid as women are received or discharged.

A member of the program team noted that, at the first session she attended, there were women participating in the session who had never spoken to each other before. This program team member explained that, after playing in the same team in a mini game, the women were “giving each other high fives and...we [knew that when we left] that they would still interact and say, ‘hey, are you going to come to footy next time?’”

2.2.4 Facilitating engagement with external supports

To what extent did the program contribute to women’s improved engagement with wider supports, including those aimed at addressing underlying causes of justice system contact?

Many of the participants came to the program already connected with a range of community-based agencies, with some already working with a dedicated case manager. As such, responding to women’s wider support needs emerged as a secondary aim within the program, with many women already having their needs addressed through other services. The needs assessment conducted by the Program Manager at intake, and the periodic review of that assessment, helped the program team to address and respond to support gaps as needed.

Although facilitating engagement with wider supports was not a key focus of the program, the Evaluation identified a range of examples in which connection with the program supported women’s wider engagement with services.

For one woman, the Program Manager became a part of her wider care team, advocating for the participant in that context (and particularly in relation to her access to supports via the NDIS), and acting as a sounding board when relationships with other workers became strained. The Program Manager also described instances of actively advocating for women to ensure that referrals were responded to in a timely manner so that key needs, such as housing, could be met.

In other examples, women engaged directly with LACW's existing case management team, who were able to work alongside the specialist support provided by the Program Manager to provide wraparound support for women.

Overall, the Evaluation suggests that the program contributes to women's access to wider services and supports by acting as a crucial touchpoint within the system. Across all interviews, the relationship of trust developed between the program team (and wider LACW staff) and participants was evident, with the relationship between LACW and participants continuing even where women's engagement with clubs was not sustained.

This, in turn, increases the likelihood that women will reach out to LACW where their needs change or escalate, providing a window to intervene and change women's trajectories at critical points in their lives.

Key practice and design insight

Program staff should adopt flexible, individualised approaches in facilitating engagement with external services. Intake and case management review processes are important mechanisms by which support needs can be identified and addressed.

2.3 Appropriateness

The Evaluation found that LACW has developed and implemented a program model that is highly responsive to the needs of women, incorporating key aspects associated with good practice in sports-based programming for vulnerable cohorts. These included trauma-informed specialist support, facilitation by skilled, enthusiastic staff; an emphasis on building trust, relationships and stability; and a strengths-based approach with a focus on non-competitive, fun activities with opportunities for skills development (see Appendix D).

LACW's commitment to continuous learning and improvement throughout the pilot also represents best practice when working with this cohort, demonstrating an openness to learn and revise program processes and practice in response to women's needs, preferences and level of readiness to engage.

At the same time, the Evaluation identified opportunities to strengthen the capacity of the model to respond to women generally and to embed a stronger focus on cultural responsiveness and safety. It also identified several areas which could be enhanced to enable the program to be scaled up without diminishing the clear benefits of the program.

2.3.1 Responding to the particular needs of women

To what extent is the model responsive to the particular needs of criminalised women?

The Pathways program model provides an effective framework for working with marginalised women to identify their strengths and needs; to understand how these might shape interactions with clubs; and to put in place the necessary scaffolding to support their engagement at the club. The following elements of the program (as well as values underpinning its delivery) were identified as being particularly key to its capacity to respond to the needs of criminalised women.

2.3.1.1 Trauma-informed and responsive

The evidence base on sports-based crime prevention initiatives emphasises the importance of program staff who have insight into trauma and the underlying issues impacting on participants, including those associated with offending (see Appendix D).

This was identified as a key strength of the Pathways program, with the Program Manager having high levels of insight into the impacts of trauma and trauma-informed practice. Importantly, this insight was complemented by deep practice experience and expertise within LACW more broadly, including within legal services and the organisation's case management team. In the words of a member of the program team, the service is one that "doesn't give up on people easily" but "meets people where they're at".

This breadth of knowledge meant that all aspects of the program were informed by an understanding of trauma, its impacts and the ways in which those impacts might shape and influence women's experiences at clubs.

Key features of trauma-informed practice adopted within the Pathways program and identified through the Evaluation include:

- a proactive approach to engagement, with program staff maintaining frequent contact with participants and understanding that their engagement may drop off at certain points due to changes in their needs and circumstances;
- relatively intensive scaffolding of women's initial engagement with clubs, recognising that this could be a particularly stressful time for participants that would benefit from the program team walking alongside;
- the delivery of training to club personnel prior to or early in women's engagement, with a view to building club understanding of trauma and building capacity within the club to understand challenging presentations and behaviours through a trauma-informed lens. The training also provides an opportunity for women to tell their stories, where they choose to do so, and for club members to celebrate women's strength and resilience;
- a collaborative approach to resolving issues, with program staff working in consultation with women to understand their experience and goals, and to determine an appropriate course of action; and

- the program’s close linkage with LACW’s wider case management program, which can provide additional wraparound support to women as required, including where needs change or escalate.

It is important to note that not all women had positive experiences at clubs, and that challenges which emerged often appeared to have a direct or indirect link to women’s experiences of trauma and harm, and how these shaped their interactions with other club members or otherwise functioned as a barrier to sustained engagement.

This highlighted that, even in the context of a deeply trauma-informed and well-delivered program, there are always opportunities to learn from less positive experiences and outcomes, and to continue to refine program processes and practice to minimise the risk of harm.

Acknowledging this challenge, the Evaluation found that LACW is uniquely placed to deliver a program of this kind given the organisation’s deep understanding of the support needs of women in the justice system and its expertise in providing a holistic service response.

Key practice and design insight

Trauma-informed practice should be embedded across all aspects of program design and delivery when developing sports-based crime prevention initiatives, particularly those being delivered in mainstream settings. This includes actively working to address barriers to access and engagement, and working with program participants to manage any issues or challenges which may arise at the club.

2.3.1.2 Highly skilled and committed team

Also key to the program’s capacity to respond to the needs of the target cohort is LACW’s ability to bring together a team with highly relevant skills and experience to deliver the program. This is recognised in the literature as a key to good practice in the administration of sports-based crime prevention interventions (see Appendix D).

The Evaluation found that the collective skills and experience of the program team was wholly appropriate for facilitating a program of this kind. The Program Manager is an experienced social worker with a background in community sport and the Program Officer has a long history of engagement with women’s football, including as a coach and player for the AFLW.

The social work students on placement with the program came with a range of backgrounds including in community support and women’s football, including two who are heavily involved in the AFLW in a range of capacities. In addition to contributing insights from their studies about emerging social theories, the involvement of students provided the Program Manager with a bigger team to discuss ideas and approaches – a useful resource when implementing a new program.

Women’s appreciation for the program team (including social work students) shone through in interviews, as well as their pride in forming positive, close relationships with program team members.

One program team member figured particularly as a mentor for two of the women, including by supporting one of the women when she was finding her first few weeks at the club socially challenging. For this woman, having a trusted person with her at the club smoothed her transition and helped to build her confidence within the club environment. Women reflected on this team member's warm, inclusive approach and willingness to be open about her own experiences in life.

The high-profile status of some of the team members also helped to build the profile of the program and was a drawcard for many of the participants. In addition, the links with the AFLW provided opportunities for experiences that participants would not ordinarily have, such as forming the guard of honour at an AFLW event.

Reflections from women about their relationships with the program team highlighted the importance, not only of skills and experience, but also the personal qualities of program staff. Where women experienced program staff as warm, genuine and accepting, this had a significant impact on their experience of the program and their sense of safety.

Key practice and design insight

The personal qualities and values of program staff can be just as important as staff skills and experience when delivering sports-based crime prevention programs, contributing to genuine connection and a team-like relationship between program staff and participants.

2.3.1.3 Acting as a touchpoint in the system

As reflected throughout this report, an emphasis and strength of the program has been its capacity to build trust, relationships and stability for program participants (see section 2.2.3.2).

Participants and program staff spoke in terms of being a 'team' and reflected a camaraderie between program participants and program staff which extended beyond a typical 'client-worker' relationship. This was a result of the unique context in which women were engaging with the program – that is, a context focused on play, fun and connection. In turn this meant that women appeared to feel both emotionally and physically safe when engaging with the program team – even where challenges emerged in the club context.

The expansion of the program to include in-reach sub-programs and events are an important feature of the program in this regard. By expanding the program's reach, these aspects of the program enabled LACW to establish relationships with a wider range of women. This was the case both in the context of the Pathways program, as well as in circumstances where women may seek to engage with LACW's wider service offerings, including legal and case management programs.

LACW staff reflected at the conclusion of the project that, from their perspective, a key achievement and outcome of the program was the way in which it provided a positive point of connection for women within the system, and one that they could return to when needed. This in turn provided a window of opportunity to understand women's needs and to strengthen protective factors in their lives.

2.3.1.4 Catering to different levels of readiness

Finally, the evidence base emphasises the importance of accessible and enjoyable activities forming the basis of sports-based crime prevention initiatives. This includes providing opportunities for play and having fun; reducing the focus on rules and competitiveness; and offering activities which respond to and accommodate all activity levels (see Appendix D).

The addition of in-reach programs and 'Come and try' events significantly enhanced the program in this respect and should be considered a core component of program delivery moving forward, rather than an 'add-on'. As illustrated by the program snapshot below, these activities provide a safe space for women of varying abilities to come together and build skills and fitness levels; to form positive relationships; and to fulfil that fundamental need to feel like a valued human.

Project snapshot: In-reach social housing

In-reach fitness sessions were delivered in a women-only rooming house which supports low-income workers, older women, women with disabilities, and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Almost half of the residents have experienced family violence.

The one-hour sessions are held after the fortnightly house meetings at the facility, and are facilitated by members of the project team, with a housing officer on hand to introduce participants to the team.

Five women participated in the particular session observed by the evaluation team, including one woman who was in the process of signing up to the community club component of the program.

A brief description of the Pathways program was provided to women for context, and a flyer was circulated. While women were encouraged to talk to the team after the session if they were interested in being linked with a community sports club, the focus was not on recruitment but on building rapport and having fun. Activities included a series of stretching and strengthening exercises run by a member of the project team who is also an experienced personal trainer. The second half of the session was a game of improvised mini golf in an adjoining room.

The evaluation team observed that the women clearly enjoyed the session. They engaged well with the exercises and were actively asking questions about how they could be modified to accommodate certain mobility and health issues.

In addition to simply having fun while being active, the session helped to break the ice with the women; to provide an experience of teamwork; to boost confidence in their physical abilities; and to allow for incidental conversations about what was happening in their lives and the sports in which they were interested.

By the end of the session, the other participants had also signed up with the program. All of the women were invited to join participants from the wider project in a planned trip to attend an AFLW game.

Source: Evaluation team observations.

Importantly, these sub-programs can also function as a referral pathway into the community club component of the program. Several women who participated in the in-reach activities commenced more formal engagement with the program or indicated a desire to do so. This included multiple women from the in-reach prison program who hoped to connect with the local club as part of their transition back to the community.

The considerable benefits of the sub-programs incorporated into program delivery during Stage II reflect the importance of providing a range of options to engage, as well as reflecting the value of a continuous learning and improvement approach to program implementation.

Key practice and design insight

The wider research evidence stresses the importance of accessibility as a critical feature of sports-based crime prevention programs. This includes consideration of the practical and material support needed, as well as catering to a range of skill levels, abilities and readiness to engage. Programs requiring more structured and sustained engagement, such as participation in mainstream leagues and club settings, can benefit from a suite of complementary activities and sub-programs to build readiness and confidence.

2.3.2 Cultural safety and inclusion

To what extent did Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants and those from CALD communities experience the program as culturally safe and inclusive?

Given the over-representation of Indigenous women in the female prison population and the fact that 35 per cent of LACW's client base identifies as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent,⁴⁸ it is essential that the program incorporates features that promote cultural safety for First Nations participants, as well as women from a CALD background. The low number of participants overall, however, makes it difficult to assess in any definitive way the cultural safety of the program as delivered. The limited data that is available suggests that additional attention may be required to ensure that club environments are experienced as culturally safe for participants.

Program referral data has indicated that, as with other women, there was a low through-put of Aboriginal women referred to the program. This means that, while there were relatively high numbers of Aboriginal women referred to the program (28), uptake and engagement was minimal. An estimated 15 of the total number of women referred to the program in Stage I (or approximately 34 per cent) and 13 (or around 43 per cent) in Stage II identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Two of the five participants linked with clubs across the pilot period identified as Aboriginal, representing 7 per cent of Aboriginal women referred.

There was no indication from the interviews with the two participants who identified as Aboriginal that any difficulties that they encountered at their respective clubs were associated with their identity as an Aboriginal person, or that their contact with the LACW program team was anything other than inclusive and supportive.

For another participant however – a woman of bi-cultural background – the experience of being linked with a club with minimal cultural diversity proved to be somewhat alienating.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ LACW Annual Report 2013, p.11..

⁴⁹ It is important to note that the participant had limited options in relation to clubs in the areas she was living given her access to transport.

“Yeah, and like with me, I grew up around different cultures all the time, like Aboriginals, Africans, even Australians, but like, yeah, that’s kind of where ... I don’t know how to explain it, it’s just ... they grew up differently to how I did, or like how my friends did, you know. Yeah, so it was just hard to connect in a way, I guess.”

Program participant

Program staff reflected that, although LACW regularly works with First Nations women, as well as women from other cultural backgrounds, there were clearly opportunities to take a more purposeful approach to embedding cultural safety and responsiveness within the program model – particularly to ensure that club environments were experienced as culturally safe spaces.

Planning for further refinement and expanded delivery of the program should therefore include consideration of the additional barriers First Nations and women from a CALD background face in engaging with mainstream activities and ways to promote more active participation in the program by these cohorts. This could include seeking to engage with Aboriginal sports clubs, such as the Fitzroy All-Stars, an Aboriginal football and netball club in the inner north of Melbourne. It could also include building stronger relationships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations for recruitment and ensuring that women have access to wraparound support.

2.3.3 Scalability

To what extent is the program ready for rolling out more broadly to other community football clubs and in other contexts? What would it take?

In the first two years of delivery, the program team has developed and refined a range of processes and activities, establishing a strong foundation for delivery to a wider range of sporting clubs. Consideration of the recommendations emerging from this Evaluation, and those relating to project funding, will help to consolidate these foundations further.

2.3.3.1 Clear processes and practice frameworks

The Evaluation identified several areas in which the program could build on and consolidate learnings from the pilot, with a particular focus on establishing clear, documented processes and practice framework to underpin program delivery. This includes:

- clear processes for recruiting, assessing and on-boarding women, including by assessing readiness to engage and developing tailored support plans focused on women’s engagement with the program and relevant community club;
- tools to support the intake, assessment and planning process, to be completed in collaboration with women;
- clear processes for recruiting, assessing and on-boarding clubs, including documentation clearly setting out roles, responsibilities and processes for responding to risks and issues which may emerge, particularly in relation to women’s safety and wellbeing; and

- practice guidance and/or frameworks setting out key elements of specialist support delivered to women through the program, including ways to scaffold engagement with clubs.

Clear and comprehensive program documentation will support LACW to deliver the program in a consistent way, including in the context of staff turnover and the resulting loss of organisational and program knowledge. A clearly scoped and documented program, supported by a suite of for-purpose assessment and planning tools, can also support ongoing data collection and monitoring.

Key practice and design insight

While the evidence suggests that a flexible and individualised approach should be a key feature of sports-based crime prevention initiatives for women in contact with the justice system, the value of clear practice frameworks, operational guidelines and tailored assessment and planning tools to underpin program delivery are also important in ensuring consistent, evidence-based practice and program fidelity.

2.3.3.2 Suite of options for participation

The Evaluation identified the inclusion of in-reach programs and ‘Come and try’ events as one of the most positive elements of the program, with high uptake by women with different levels of readiness. Where delivery of these additional sub-programs and events can be achieved within program resourcing – including through partnerships with community clubs – they represent a relatively low-cost and high-impact complement to the community club component of the program.

Any efforts to take the program to scale should, therefore, ensure that a suite of options for participation are made available to women in different contexts. As noted by LACW, this should include a continued effort to identify and deliver sub-programs and events into settings in which women are like to have moderate needs and more stable life circumstances, as these women are more likely to be in a place to transition to more formal involvement in the program.

It should also include a continued focus on delivery of in-reach sports-based programs in custodial settings. The Evaluation highlighted the particular value placed by women in these settings on their program participation, as well as the unique potential to establish trusted, positive relationships with women that can then be maintained as they transition to the community.

2.3.3.3 Resourcing and level of service

As noted at section 2.1.2, numbers of program participants who progressed to and maintained engagement with community clubs was relatively low and below the target case numbers for the project. At the same time, a key theme emerging from the Evaluation was the insufficiency of program resourcing to ensure that women and clubs all received the level of support required to maintain positive engagement and to achieve the full benefits of the program. This included ensuring that women received intensive support during their initial engagement with clubs, as well as maintaining support and visibility (including by attending training sessions and games) throughout women’s engagement.

This suggests that any efforts to take the program to scale – whether geographically, by expanding to different community sports settings or by aiming to increase participation and case numbers – are likely to compound existing resourcing challenges and may result in women (and clubs) failing to feel adequately supported.

It will therefore be important for LACW to model the required level of resourcing, taking into consideration target case numbers, average hours of service to be provided to each client and additional functions to be undertaken by staff, including the delivery of sub-programs and events.

This approach, accompanied by consistent monitoring of program resourcing and levels of service, should ensure that program resourcing is sufficient to meet both the demand and level of complexity with which program participants present as the program is taken to scale.

2.4 Impact

What other impacts has the program appeared to have on women, including by acting as a protective factor against future justice contact?

Acknowledging gaps in data collection outlined at section 1.4.4.4, the Evaluation suggests that the program contributed to development of protective factors in the lives of participants in several ways. This included by facilitating experiences that provide the foundations for social connection, physical, social and emotional wellbeing and skills development, as well as by strengthening participant's links with support services.

As the program continues to build its capacity to work alongside clubs to ensure that these environments are experienced as safe, inclusive and de-stigmatising for participating women, it is likely that these positive impacts will be amplified.

2.4.1 Program engagement as a protective factor for women

2.4.1.1 Social connection and a sense of community

As outlined at section 2.2.3, a key benefit of the Pathways program is the way in which it provides opportunities for women to experience acceptance, social connection and a sense of belonging in mainstream environments. This includes in the context of relationships with the program team, with club members and with each other.

It was clear that developing new, pro-social friendships in the community, combined with a sense of purpose, was important to all the participants with whom the CIJ spoke. For at least one participant, club members also observed the importance of her identity as a club member, including the fierce support and loyalty she demonstrated for her club.

Insights from research relating to the significance of identity, 'identity fusion'⁵⁰ and desistance from crime are relevant here⁵¹ The centrality of relationships in women's lives suggests that building relationships outside of criminal offending, which allow women to view themselves as 'worthy' and 'connected' is important in developing new identities.⁵² Bringing together criminalised individuals and the wider community and then promoting relationships based on shared experience can contribute to 'pro-social outcomes' and ultimately reduce recidivism. Key to this is the ability to shift public opinion regarding criminalisation from one that is stigmatised, punitive and separatist toward a more restorative view.⁵³

Opportunities for social connection were also intrinsically important for women participating in the in-reach prison program. Although the CIJ were unable to interview participants at the prison because of the project constraints described at section 1.4.4.2 above, de-identified feedback provided to the program team indicates that the women valued this aspect of the program highly. For example, of the 10 responses to a feedback survey question asking participants to rate any improvements and benefits that they have experienced from participating in the program, eight rated the benefits for social connection as 'high' or 'very high'.

Other comments provided through feedback process include:

"I think it's great for confidence, socialising and working as a team together with peers."

"Being accepted by everyone at the [club] made me feel ready to be back in the community."

"Brought me closer with girls in the jail and I've now made new friends."

In-reach prison program participants⁵⁴

Several participants engaged through the in-reach prison program also indicated a desire to remain connected with the program post-release, including exploring the option to join a local sports club. Another participant provided the following feedback to the program team:

⁵⁰ This term describes the process of creating alignment within a group, based on the merging of personal and group identities. See Whitehouse, H., and Fitzgerald, R. (2020) Fusion and reform: the potential for identity fusion to reduce recidivism and improve reintegration. 27(1) *Anthropology in Action*, 1-13.

⁵¹ See Maruna, S. (2001). Making good. How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives. Washington: American Psychological Association. Cited in Taylor, J., Convery, I., and Barton, E. (2013). Social connectedness and female offending. *Forensic Update* 111. The British Psychological Society.

⁵² Taylor et al. 2013, *ibid*.

⁵³ Whitehouse & Fitzgerald, 2020, above n 48.

⁵⁴ Feedback provided to LACW via program feedback processes.

“I am particularly struck by the essence of how your project addresses things that we feel, such as the stigma of being a prisoner, the disconnection we feel from the community, and our fears of being discriminated against when we re-enter the community.”

In-reach prison program participant⁵⁵

It was clear, however, that participants linked with clubs in the community faced challenges in seeking out friendship, particularly in the large, busy mainstream environments that are football clubs. In addition to overcoming a range of personal challenges, the women were also dealing with the added stress of legal proceedings and correctional supervision. The women invariably described themselves as shy or acutely socially anxious.

“Like at the start it was ... nerve wracking. Umm I was a bit shy, yeah, to meet those girls. And then trying to keep up with knowing what their names [are] and I don't wanna say the wrong name, because then I'll look like an idiot, or they might get offended or upset.”

Participant

Despite these significant barriers, there is evidence that the program has provided participants with experiences of supportive connection with others and brought them a sense of confidence in their capacity to form new relationships and feel accepted. Women also clearly gained a sense of empowerment from stepping up to engage in activities that took them outside their comfort zone and to develop new skills in the process.

Key practice and design insight

Programming that facilitates participation in team sports or group activities, whether in the community or in prison settings, is a powerful and cost-effective way to promote social connection, confidence and skills development for marginalised women. Scaffolding to support women's integration into mainstream sports clubs in the community, however, is crucial to address the many barriers to engagement that women experience, including stigmatisation.

2.4.1.2 Improved physical, social and emotional wellbeing

Participants who provided feedback on the program, including women participating in the in-reach prison program, reported feeling physically and mentally healthier for having joined. According to a participant linked with a club:

⁵⁵ Feedback provided to LACW via informal feedback process.

“Like everybody, you get the endorphins with running around and exercise and moving your body. You can go there and feel like shit, and then you're like, oh, I'm really glad I went. I'm glad I forced myself out the door.”

Participant

The women were of different ages and levels of fitness, and some had chronic physical conditions. Comments on the prison feedback forms mentioned old injuries and bad knees with one commenting “I’m a bit slow these days, but still a dead eye in front of goal!” This highlights the need for the program to accommodate different levels of skill and ability, with options to participate in lower intensity drills or to help at the clubs in ways other than playing, such as in the canteen.

In terms of women’s mental health, a recurring comment from participants was that involvement in the program provided routine, structure and a welcome distraction from other pressing concerns.

“I will try anything to keep myself distracted. Let’s give it a try. I’ve never liked balls flying at my face, but I really needed a distraction from all the negative things that were going on in my life.”

Participant

For women linked with clubs in the community, putting themselves in situations outside their comfort zone helped to build confidence. For one this meant delivering a speech at the club and for several it meant learning a new sport. For all of the participants just signing up for the program gave them a sense of achievement.

“It made me feel more confident about doing something and just giving it a go. And it made me think like, it doesn't really matter what people think of you, just do it anyways.”

Participant

One woman at the prison provided feedback to LACW⁵⁶ talked about the particular psychological significance of the program for her. She stated that she and another player have been kicking the footy to each other in prison for years and that, when they’re playing, they are taken back to a time in their lives pre-prison when they were active and doing something that they loved.

⁵⁶ Feedback provided to LACW via program feedback processes.

2.4.1.3 Skills development

In addition to two of the participants learning a completely new sport, and for others the chance to improve existing skills, participation in the program provided the women with opportunities to gain new skills and qualifications.

For one woman, this saw her progress from a temporary assistant coaching position at the club, to her completing her junior coach accreditation with the assistance of the program team, noting proudly that “it was a group effort, but it was my answers that got it over the line.”

Another participant undertook a strapper’s training course, learning how to do preventative taping. Her greatest achievement on the program, however, was in the development of social skills.

“Learning in a group, a team has been a huge benefit and a huge challenge, a struggle ... it's all in a positive way because I basically never put myself out there to build strategies. So when I get into a bigger social group with people for even like a normal everyday kind of outing, I get real social anxiety. So it slowly helps ... being around big groups of people ... Yeah, it's still a challenge, but it's a good thing to push through that.”

Participant

2.4.1.4 Criminal justice involvement

The duration of the program and the small numbers of participants means that there is limited evidence available in relation to the broader impact of participation in the program on criminal justice involvement. Program data indicates, however, that over the course of the two years during which the pilot was delivered, only one of the participants linked with a club had new criminal justice involvement while connected with the program.

As discussed above, participant feedback also suggests that engagement with the program may help enhance social connection, physical and emotional wellbeing and skills development, which are recognised as being protective against future criminal justice involvement.⁵⁷ There are indications that participation in the program can therefore support and contribute to women’s attempts to chart a new path away from the justice system.

Connection with the support team at LACW also appeared to have a positive impact by de-escalating situations that may have led to further justice system contact. One participant noted that she would go to the program team, “for advice if anything was upsetting me, bothering me ... to prevent myself from getting either locked up and breaching my 12 month [good behaviour bond] as well.”

The potential of the program and the sense of acceptance and connection that it engenders to help women to stay free of justice involvement is articulated in the following reflection by a member of the program team:

⁵⁷ Cameron and MacDougall, 2000, above n8.

“So I think ... that's it – having something that you love and that fulfills you and somewhere where you're accepted and ... you're part of something and you've got responsibility. It's huge ... I think [footy] means that much to [the participant] that it could go a long way to stop her, you know, making decisions that she might have made prior.”

Program team member

At a more concrete level, it was evident that delivery of the project in a community legal service setting was beneficial for women with ongoing criminal matters or dealing with other legal issues. As discussed at section 2.1.1.4, one participant was able to have her legal matter addressed by the legal service, which was potentially the most beneficial component of her involvement in the program, at least in the early stages. For others, having ready access to legal advice helped to ease the stress and uncertainty of looming court appearances, as well as being of practical assistance in other ways. For example, one participant received advice around her Working With Children (WWC) status through referral to a lawyer during her participation in the project.

Key practice and design insight

Facilitating access to legal services is an important component of the holistic support in programming for people with criminal justice involvement.

2.4.2 Impacts for clubs

What has been the impact on community football clubs engaged in the program?

Overall, engagement in the program appears to have had a positive impact on clubs, with multiple club members reflecting positively on the opportunity to strengthen their commitment to inclusivity.

For those clubs where the aims of the program were shared widely, members who participated in the on-boarding process and were aware of the support needs of the participant indicated that their understanding of disadvantage was enhanced by being involved in the program. Respondents overwhelmingly reported that training delivered by LACW as part of their program participation had increased their understanding of issues impacting women in the criminal justice system and that they would recommend the training to other clubs.

Although clubs demonstrated a clear commitment to the program and its aims, a concern expressed in consultations with club members was the extent to which clubs are equipped to support participants with high needs. Club members reflected on the time and emotional energy required to manage difficult situations when they arise, particularly for club members acting in a de facto support role.

More broadly, club members spoke of the time impost of participation amongst the other demands of running a club on a volunteer basis, particularly at the onboarding stage. One person on a club leadership team, for example, commented that attending project meetings and briefing sessions, and participating in evaluation activities, “was a stumbling block for us.” For another club, the time required to engage with the program team and to support participants meant that they would only have capacity for one participant to be linked with the club.

This finding emphasises the need to wrap adequate support, not just around women, but around participating clubs as well.

2.4.3 Increased community understanding

To what extent has the program contributed to some of the broader objectives of crime prevention, such as strengthening the community's ability to understand crime & community safety issues?

As outlined at section 1.4.4.7, low uptake of the community attitudes to crime survey, particularly the post-season survey, meant that limited insights could be gleaned from this activity.⁵⁸

Responses to the survey completed by club members in Stage II (n=22), which was administered at the start of their participation in the program in 2023, indicated a good level of understanding of the wider, systemic drivers of engagement with the justice system. This level of understanding was also reflected in observations of the briefing sessions delivered to two of the clubs, as well as in interactions with members as part of the consultation process.

For example, while the number of survey responses was small, there was consensus (or near consensus) in relation to multiple areas, which could be indicative of a shared attitude towards these issues within the group surveyed:

- Almost all respondents in the pre-season 2023 survey reported low levels of confidence in the extent to which the justice system is 'working well' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people', with 77 per cent of pre-season respondents reporting 'no confidence at all' and 18 per cent reporting 'not very much confidence'.⁵⁹
- Almost all respondents in the pre-season 2023 survey reported low levels of confidence in the extent to which the justice system is 'working well' for women, with 36 per cent of respondents having 'not very much confidence', and 55 per cent having 'no confidence at all'.
- A majority of respondents in the pre-season 2023 survey either strongly agreed (27 per cent) or agreed (50 per cent) with the view that 'Sentences that are served in the community provide better opportunities for people to stop offending' (14 per cent of these respondents answered 'don't know / can't say').
- A majority of respondents in the pre-season 2023 survey either strongly disagreed (50 per cent) or disagreed (45 per cent) with the statement, 'Women in prison commit the same types of offences as men' (5 per cent of these respondents answered 'don't know / can't say').

Free text responses to explain the growth in the prison population also reflected a good level of understanding of the drivers of justice system contact.

⁵⁸ A total of 13 members from the two clubs participating in Stage I completed the survey at the beginning of their involvement with the project, with no completed responses received at the end of that season. Twenty-two responses were received from the four clubs linked with participants in Stage II at the beginning of the season, with eight providing responses at the end of the season.

⁵⁹ Note: percentages are rounded and may not equal 100

Unfortunately, the high attrition rates for the post-season survey mean that it was not possible for the Evaluation to assess changes in attitudes to crime over time. That said, the moderate uptake of the pre-season survey indicates a strong baseline knowledge, which is consistent with the ways in which clubs generally embraced women's participation.

3 Recommendations

This section sets out recommendations to strengthen the design and delivery of the model moving forward.

3.1 Recruitment and intake

1. Develop recruitment resources for women which can be used to promote the program in key settings, such as prisons, social housing and services for criminalised women.

This could include short video interviews with participants and club representatives, as well as leveraging AFLW contacts to promote the program via program 'champions'.

2. Develop recruitment resources for clubs, including a self-assessment to identify readiness of the club to provide a safe, inclusive and de-stigmatising environment for criminalised women.

Recruitment resources should also include clear information about roles and responsibilities – both for clubs and the program team – to ensure that clubs have an understanding of what program participation will involve.

3. Continue to adopt a highly supported and suitably paced approach to assessing and on-boarding women, including identifying opportunities to streamline the process where possible.

This includes streamlining intake and assessment forms to ensure that these collect relevant information and can support planning around women's safe engagement with clubs, without acting as a barrier to women's engagement. Use of the resilience and wellbeing measure at the beginning of a participant's engagement with the program, and at the end, will support intake as well as collecting useful data on the impact of the program.

3.2 Supporting women

4. Develop clear practice and operational guidelines to support program delivery and promote consistency.

Practice guidance should allow for flexibility and individualised support, while also providing information around how to approach key issues such as responding to concerns about women's welfare; supporting women to make decisions about disclosure of personal information to club members; and supporting women to understand club rules and codes of conduct.

5. Work with clubs and participants to determine if having a designated support person or 'buddy' at the club would be beneficial for individual participants.

This role would preferably be situated in the same team as the participant and performed by a club member who is able to commit to supporting the participant and to work with the program team to facilitate the participant's transition into the club.

6. Continue to work towards opportunities for formal and informal peer support, in consultation with women.

In addition, program funding should continue to include an allowance to remunerate women acting in a formal peer support capacity, as well as ensuring clear support arrangements for women fulfilling such a role.

7. Partner with a relevant Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) to improve access and engagement of Aboriginal women with the program.

In partnership with one or more relevant ACCOs, review the program to ensure that cultural responsiveness and safety is properly embedded, including by exploring opportunities to jointly deliver the program to Aboriginal women. This should also include exploring opportunities to establish a formal partnership with Aboriginal sporting clubs, such as the Fitzroy All-stars.

3.3 Supporting clubs

8. Consider the development of Memorandums of Understanding or other formalised agreements with participating clubs which set out high-level principles informing club involvement, as well as clear delineation of roles and responsibilities for supporting women's engagement and safety.

Memorandums of Understanding or other formalised agreements should clearly set out expectations in relation to key issues such as disclosing information about women's circumstances and managing issues or conflict. In the absence of formal agreements, this information should be provided in the form of guidelines or a club resource.

9. Incorporate regular check-ins with clubs into program processes to assess how the relationship is working and whether additional support or guidance is required.

Ideally, with the consent of the participant, this will include occasional in-person attendance at training sessions or games to enable program staff to observe and understand women's experiences of participation. Club feedback indicated that this can be particularly crucial in the early stages of engagement at the club.

10. Continue to foster a relationship with VAFA, with a view to VAFA actively promoting the program to its membership and working with LACW to resolve any league-level issues which may impact on program participants.

To build this relationship, LACW may consider providing regular snapshot reports to VAFA highlighting strengths and achievements of the program or offer to provide brief reports on program delivery at key VAFA meetings and events.

3.4 In-reach and events

11. Establish a clear process for transition from the in-reach prison program to the community-based program on release.

Given the need for support at the point of transitioning to the community, there is value in the program being available alongside such transitions. This could be achieved by ensuring a clear process for transition from the program in custody to the program within the community.

12. Continue to work with Corrections and prison staff to strengthen the in-reach prison program, including through formal inclusion in prison programming, opportunities for women to engage in community-based activities on a day release basis and expansion to other custodial settings.

The in-reach program was well received by participants and should be strengthened and expanded where possible.

3.5 Resourcing

13. Review the required level of resourcing to take the program to scale, including consideration of target case numbers, hours of service available to each client and additional functions to be undertaken by staff, such as delivery of sub-programs and events.

This should include ensuring that a sufficient level of support is available both to women and clubs during on boarding and initial engagement, as well as on an ongoing basis and where issues arise. In addition, program resourcing should be monitored and regularly reviewed to ensure that it is keeping steps with the level of demand and complexity of clients.

3.6 Conclusion

The Evaluation found clear evidence that, when resourced adequately, the Pathways Program can provide criminalised women with community connection, a sense of purpose, structure and routine and opportunities to improve fitness, develop skills and link with support services – all in an enjoyable, recreational context.

Insights from club consultations, surveys and practice observations also indicate that the program has real potential to shift negative perceptions in the community about people in contact with the justice system, and to increase understanding about the reasons for that involvement.

It was always anticipated that delivery of a program of this nature to a target cohort with complex life histories and support needs would be challenging and that progress would be incremental and non-linear. Acknowledging this ‘two steps forward, one step back’ experience over the last two years, it is important to ensure that the positives are not lost. Project snapshots throughout this report provide insight into the positive, joyful and, at times, empowering experiences afforded to women through participation in the program.

LACW’s flexible approach to implementation of the model has enabled it to overcome significant challenges in delivering a novel program to a cohort with complex and overlapping support needs. It has not only successfully trialled the provision of tailored support for marginalised women to join sporting clubs in the community but was able to expand the model for delivery in prison and to women in social housing settings. Findings from the Evaluation provide useful insights for strengthening the delivery of the program in new sporting contexts going forward and for further refinement of the model. This, however, demands careful consideration of the resources necessary to deliver a program of this kind.

Despite the limited numbers of participants linked with clubs in the community, and the inability to track long term outcomes for women, findings from this evaluation point to significant benefits for participants that have the potential to lead to a path of desistance. It clearly demonstrates, however, that programming of this kind must be properly resourced to allow for extended engagement and delivered in a collaborative and whole-of-community context for it to be successful. While resource intensive, such an approach will inevitably be far less costly than incarceration – both in financial and social terms.

Finally, it is a testament to the resilience and courage of program participants that they elected to embark on a new activity in an unfamiliar environment,⁶⁰ despite the significant barriers that they faced. Members of both the program team and the clubs with which the women were linked remarked on this tenacity, with one of the former noting:

“[I] saw the resilience of these participants to deal with all the adversity they’ve dealt with ... and [I] have a slight understanding of what they’ve gone through ... it just provides me with such a good perspective and how important our project and our program is in these participants lives and how much more impact that we could have [by] being able to introduce this project to more women.”

Program team member

⁶⁰ At least two of the women had neither played Aussie Rules before nor been a member of a sporting club.

Appendix A: Project timeframes and key activities

The following provides a high-level overview of project activities and phases, with associated Evaluation activities mapped along the bottom.

	Planning & establishment	Stage I: Targeted pilot	Stage II: Expanded pilot	Future planning
Project activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding for Pathways project allocated via DJCS Crime Prevention Innovation Fund LACW Program Manager recruited and on-boarded Detailed project planning and program design, inc. recruitment and on-boarding processes Efforts to establish formal partnership with Victorian Amateur Football Association (VAFA) (see Stage I) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revised club recruitment process following VAFA withdrawal from project Women recruited, assessed and placed with clubs Clubs on-boarded and provided with ongoing guidance and support throughout the season Women provided with specialist support via Program Manager and wider LACW social work team Women and clubs consulted around program design, implementation, potential barriers to participation and engagement and opportunities to overcome barriers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women continued to be recruited, assessed, placed with clubs and supported via Program Manager and wider LACW team Increased support for clubs through the establishment of a dedicated Project Officer role Continued consultation with women and clubs to refine program design and implementation Inclusion of a prison in-reach program, social housing in-reach program and 'Come and Try' events to facilitate additional referrals and provide alternative options for participation and engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued engagement with women, including through delivery of in-reach programs Review of program model and opportunities to take to scale, based on insights and findings from the evaluation
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring & Evaluation Framework developed Ethics application developed and submitted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data collection and analysis Process review completed, inc. interim recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data collection and analysis, inc. direct engagement with women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delivery of Summit Workshop Delivery of Final Evaluation Report
	July 2021 to September 2021	October 2021 to August 2022	September 2022 to August 2023	September 2023 to October 2023

Appendix B: Theory of Change (original program design)

The following Theory of Change outlines the original scope, activities and intended outcomes of the Pathways Program (and the wider Pathways Project within which the program was being established).

Goal	The Victorian community is kept safe through improved understanding of, and capacity to respond to, the unique factors underpinning women's offending and justice involvement							
End-of-project outcomes	Protective factors in women's lives are enhanced		Women form and maintain positive connections with program staff, clubs, wider services and other women			Clubs have an increased understanding of factors impacting on criminalised women		
Intermediate outcomes	Women are connected with the program and have a safe, positive touchpoint within the service system		Barriers which may impact women's capacity to access and engage with community clubs are understood and responded to		Women experience community clubs as safe, inclusive and de-stigmatising places		The project contributes to the evidence base on sports-based community crime prevention initiatives for women	
Short-term outcomes	Women are aware of and access the program through a range of referral pathways	Women's needs, goals and readiness to participate are understood	Women are supported to plan for and navigate their engagement with clubs	Women are supported to access and engage with relevant services	Clubs understand their roles and responsibilities in providing a safe, welcoming environment	Where challenges arise, clubs are supported to manage these in a trauma-informed and inclusive way	Women learn from each other and see the potential for positive change in their lives	The program is continuously improved, adapted and evaluated based on insights from women, clubs and wider evidence
Influencing activities	Recruitment pathways for women are monitored, maintained and expanded (as required)	Women are actively supported to engage in the assessment, intake and on-boarding process	Women's engagement with community clubs is scaffolded through specialist support	Women have access to additional case management to respond to wider needs	Vafa recruits and on-boards clubs	Vafa provides ongoing support and guidance to clubs	Women have the opportunity to provide or receive peer mentoring and support	Establish monitoring and evaluation processes, inc. direct engagement with women and clubs
Foundational activities	Recruit, on-board and support a skilled, trauma-informed program manager		Develop tailored intake and assessment tools and processes		Establish recruitment pathways for women		Establish partnership with Vafa to support club recruitment	
							Engage a development evaluator	

Appendix C: Theory of Change (adapted program design)

The following Theory of Change outlines the adapted scope, activities and intended outcomes of the Pathways Program, including the incorporation of wider sports-based programs and events to expand the program's reach and to reflect differing levels of readiness to engage. It also incorporates a set of program values underpinning design and delivery, which were identified over the course of the Evaluation.

Goal	The Victorian community is kept safe through improved understanding of, and capacity to respond to, the unique factors underpinning women's offending and justice involvement							
End-of-program outcomes	Protective factors in women's lives are enhanced		Women form and maintain positive connections with program staff, clubs, wider services and other women			Clubs have an increased understanding of factors impacting on criminalised women		
Intermediate outcomes	Women are connected with the program and have a safe, positive touchpoint within the service system		Barriers which may impact women's capacity to access and engage with community clubs are understood and responded to		Women experience community clubs as safe, inclusive and de-stigmatising places		Women build confidence and positive relationships through different opportunities to engage (inc. by building readiness for club participation)	
Short-term outcomes	Women are aware of and access the program through a range of referral pathways	Women's needs, goals and readiness to participate are understood	Women are supported to plan for and navigate their engagement with clubs	Women are supported to access and engage with relevant services	Clubs understand their roles and responsibilities in providing a safe, welcoming environment	Where challenges arise, clubs are supported to manage these in a trauma-informed and inclusive way	Women across multiple settings have access to positive experiences, connection and play	Women learn from each other and see the potential for positive change in their lives
Influencing activities	Recruitment pathways for women are monitored, maintained and expanded (as required)	Women are actively supported to engage in the assessment, intake and on-boarding process	Women's engagement with community clubs is scaffolded through specialist support	Women have access to additional case management to respond to wider needs	Clubs are assessed for suitability and on-boarded	Clubs receive ongoing support and guidance throughout their engagement with the program	Wider sport-based programs and events are offered, inc. in prisons and the community	Women have the opportunity to provide or receive peer mentoring and support
Foundational activities	Recruit, on-board and support a skilled, trauma-informed program team	Support program delivery through operational and practice frameworks and tools	Establish recruitment pathways for women	Establish recruitment processes for clubs	Embed culturally responsive and safe, inc. partnership(s) with relevant ACCOs	Embed data collection, learning and continuous improvement processes		
Values	Strengths-based		Trauma-informed		Inclusive		Fun	
							Flexible	
							Teamwork	

Appendix D: Indicators of good practice

The literature highlights multiple program characteristics that are indicative of good practice in the development and delivery of sport-focussed crime prevention strategies.⁶¹ These are outlined at Table 4 and have informed the Evaluation team's assessment of the program's appropriateness, alongside consideration of wider evidence on the specific needs of women in contact with the justice system.

Table 4: Indicators of good practice in sports-based crime prevention initiatives

Good practice in sports-based crime prevention interventions	
Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear program aims and monitoring of outcomes against these aims. • Staff are skilled, enthusiastic, committed and reflect the values that the program seeks to impart.
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of a stable environment where participants feel physically and emotionally safe. • Emphasis on building relationships and trust. • Strengths-based approach with opportunities for skills development. • Culturally validated and community-led programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people from culturally diverse backgrounds.⁶²
Embedded support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program facilitators have insight into trauma and the underlying issues impacting on participants, including those associated with offending. • Sport activities are part of a broader strategy of accessing multi-agency support (health, psycho-social, employment and education services). • Support is provided on completion of the program to link participants with ongoing activities and contacts.
Focus on enjoyment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities provide opportunities for play and having fun.
Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership and other opportunities for active engagement in the delivery of the program, including via peer mentoring. This can promote feelings of ownership, loyalty, competency and connectedness. • Participants have opportunities to contribute to the further refinement of the model and project activities.
Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced focus on rules and competitiveness. Activities accommodate all ability levels. • Provision of practical support to participate e.g., ensuring access to sports equipment and uniforms, addressing child-care needs or providing transport after dark.

Source: Centre for Innovative Justice (summary of literature).

⁶¹ These indicators are drawn primarily from Cameron and MacDougall, 2000, above n8, and are complemented with insights from more current literature.

⁶² ORC, 2017, above n 16; Bartels, 2010, above n16; Cameron and MacDougall, 2000, above n8.