Article

Reflecting on the Value of Community Researchers in Criminal Justice Research Projects

Caroline Doyle [1], Sophie Yates [1,*] and Jen Hargrave [2,3]

1 Public Service Research Group, School of Business, UNSW Canberra, Canberra 2610, Australia; c.doyle@adfa.edu.au
2 Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, Melbourne 3052, Australia; jen.hargrave@unimelb.edu.au
3 Women with Disabilities Victoria, Melbourne 3000, Australia
* Correspondence: s.yates@unsw.edu.au

Abstract: While the importance of community researchers has long been acknowledged in disability studies, inclusive research practices such as these are less common in research about another marginalised group: people who are in prison or have spent time in prison. Over the past decade in Australia, the number and rate of people imprisoned has risen rapidly, and recidivism rates remain high, indicating a need for improved services. In this article, we draw on methodological reflections from two case studies on research with marginalised communities, one in disability studies and one in post-prison research. We apply insights from disability research to argue the importance of incorporating community researchers in qualitative research projects seeking to explore the experiences of people involved with the criminal justice system, such as people who have been released from prison.

Keywords: disability; inclusive research; community researchers; prisoners; former prisoners; criminal justice system

1. Introduction

Over the past decade in Australia, the number and rate of people imprisoned has risen rapidly, and by 2019 the Australian prison population was at its highest-ever recorded level (ABS 2019). A majority of people in Australian prisons have been incarcerated before, with prison and unstable housing or homelessness representing a 'revolving door' for many individuals (Baldry et al. 2018; COAG 2016; Schetzer and StreetCare 2013). People who have spent time in prison are disproportionately likely to face a range of challenges and intersections between oppressive social structures such as mental and physical ill health, disability, substance abuse, socioeconomic disadvantage, racism, and stigma of criminal history (AIHW 2019; Western 2018; Johns 2017; Young et al. 2017).

Community researchers (also known as peer researchers or participant researchers) are members of the community or group being researched. It is increasingly acknowledged that community researchers are important when exploring research issues that impact marginalised (sometimes termed 'vulnerable') populations, such as people with disability.[1] Community researchers are beneficial for academic research teams because they have unique knowledge of the problems to be investigated by virtue of their lived experience, can increase the real-world impact of projects by making sure the concerns and interests of the marginalised groups are central to the research, and have the methodological potential to help academic researchers access (and anticipate participation barriers for) 'hard to reach' populations. For the community researchers, involvement in research can be empowering, allow their voices to be heard regarding issues that concern their communities, build self-advocacy, and provide training, skills, and new job opportunities (Edwards and Alexander 2011; Strnadová et al. 2020; Warr et al. 2011).

This article draws from two case studies to argue the importance of an underutilised resource in criminal justice research: incorporating community researchers in qualitative research projects seeking to explore the experiences of people involved with the criminal justice system (here focusing particularly on people who have been released from prison). We firstly review relevant literature on people with disability in prisons and their experiences post-release. We show how characteristics associated with marginalisation intersect within this population. We then consider the benefits and challenges associated with conducting qualitative research about people's experiences after their release from prison. The article then moves to the first case study, a qualitative research project which investigated gendered barriers to women's participation in individualised disability funding schemes. This project employed a community researcher, and we provide a reflection from both the academic and community researchers on how they worked together and what each brought to the project. The second case is a qualitative research project that investigated the experiences of people following their release from the only adult prison in the Australian Capital Territory (the ACT). This project did not employ a community researcher and we provide a reflection from the academic researcher regarding the challenges associated with recruiting participants and developing trust and rapport with participants.

Drawing from these case studies, we argue that when conducting qualitative research about the experiences of people exiting prison, academic researchers should strongly consider an inclusive research design, specifically the engagement of community researchers. Whilst the importance of community researchers has been acknowledged in the disability literature for several decades as part of the movement towards 'inclusive research' or 'participatory research' (Bigby et al. 2014; Nind and Vinha 2014; Vaughan et al. 2019), these practices are far less developed and employed in research about people who are currently in prison or have spent time in prison (Awenat et al. 2018; Haarmans et al. 2020; Watson and van der Meulen 2019). This is particularly true in Australia (Doyle et al. 2021a; Lewis and Ditloff 2021). We argue that employing community researchers in this space is important as people in prison, or who have spent time in prison, are likely to experience a complex intersection of marginalising social structures such as race, mental ill health, and socioeconomic disadvantage. Insights about inclusive disability research are also likely to apply to criminal justice research, as there is considerable overlap between the disability and prison populations—up to 30% of the Australian prison population are known to have chronic health conditions that limit their ability to participate in daily tasks, education, or employment (AIHW 2019). We therefore recommend that qualitative academic researchers investigating the experiences of people following their release from prison should ensure they engage with community researchers in their efforts to gain a holistic understanding of the post-release experience. By gaining this understanding, academic researchers will be better placed to provide insights into designing and implementing more appropriate policies and programs for this population, during incarceration and post-release.

2. The Experiences of People in Prison

It is widely acknowledged that people in Australian prisons are a disadvantaged group. They commonly have high rates of chronic and infectious disease, alcohol and other drug dependence, and mental illness (AIHW 2019; Butler et al. 2007; Dias et al. 2013). The AIHW conducted a prison census in 2018 and found that around 30% of prison entrants self-reported having a chronic health condition (which the AIHW considered as analogous to disability) that affected their participation in day-to-day activities, education, or employment (AIHW 2019). Internationally, the overrepresentation of people in prison with intellectual disability is of particular concern, with estimates ranging from 2–40% of the prison population, depending on the methodological, diagnostic frameworks and terminology adopted by researchers (Dias et al. 2013; Hellenbach et al. 2017; Hayes et al. 2007; Jones 2007; Young et al. 2017).

Upon release from prison, people face a range of challenges. These includes systemic barriers that lead to their exclusion from basic needs such as secure and stable housing

(especially housing that is suited to disability access requirements, such as proximity to public transport and social services) and employment (including support to transfer skills gained in prison) (Doyle et al. 2020, 2021b; Baldry et al. 2018; Johns 2017; Schetzer and StreetCare 2013). As well as structural exclusion, people can face underlying identity-based and confidence issues in their efforts to obtain and maintain employment (Cherney and Fitzgerald 2016; Doyle et al. 2021b; Johns 2017). This points to the importance of post-release support and the need for a continuum of care to extend beyond the prison and into the community (Baldry et al. 2018; Cherney and Fitzgerald 2016; Johns 2017; Schetzer and StreetCare 2013). The post-release challenges are further compounded for people with disability, as they often have complex physical health, mental health, and substance use treatment needs (Bhandari et al. 2015; Dias et al. 2013; Heslop et al. 2014; Young et al. 2017). Scott and Havercamp (2014) argue that increased support is needed in the community for people with intellectual disability upon release from prison.

3. Research Methods for Investigating the Experiences of Marginalised Populations

There is a long-established tradition of qualitative research with people with disability (Barnes 1992; O'Day and Killeen 2002). Following the social model of disability—in which impairments are seen as disabling for individuals due to socially imposed barriers such as inadequate transportation, unsuitable infrastructure, and discriminatory attitudes— Berger and Lorenz (2016) argue that qualitative methods are best suited for exploring the social experiences of people with disabilities in ableist societies. They are important for establishing how the impairment itself, societal attitudes, and public programs combine to shape an individual's experiences (O'Day and Killeen 2002). In disability research, qualitative methods are tied strongly to an interpretive approach to knowledge production, in which academic researchers acknowledge their positionality and the impossibility of achieving objectivity, and aim to get to know the social world being studied first-hand. Academic researchers in this tradition try to understand and depict the social world as it exists for those being investigated (Barnes 1992).

The importance of community researchers has been acknowledged in the disability studies field since the 1990s, forming part of the movement towards 'inclusive research' or 'participatory research' (Bigby et al. 2014; Nind and Vinha 2014; Ward and Simons 1998). Community researchers have also been employed with many other marginalised populations, such as drug users, residents of socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and sex workers (Warr et al. 2011). In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community researchers have been employed to assist academic researchers with ensuring research projects are community-led (Bell et al. 2021).

Community researchers have unique knowledge of the problems to be investigated by virtue of their lived experience. They can draw on their networks to increase the research team's access to participants in the disability community, and can plan and design research in ways that improve the potential of the research to uncover useful information (for example, by anticipating barriers to participation) (Strnadová et al. 2020). When conducting interviews, community researchers may be able to more easily build rapport through shared experiences (Warr et al. 2017)—although as Barnes (1992) notes, disability experiences and impairments are varied and having an impairment will not automatically lead to a good understanding of disability. For the community researchers, involvement in research can be empowering, allow their voices to be heard regarding issues that concern their communities, build self-advocacy, and provide training, skills, and new job opportunities (Strnadová et al. 2020; Warr et al. 2011). Benefits for academic researchers without disability include personal growth and the development of new skills, such as greater understanding of the disability community and the challenges facing it and better ways of putting knowledge into action, as well as the potential to achieve greater real-world impact for their research (Strnadová et al. 2020).

Whilst the importance of community researchers has long been acknowledged in disability studies, the employment of community researchers and other inclusive research

or participatory research practices is comparatively underdeveloped in projects investigating the experiences of people serving time in prison and upon release (see Abbott et al. 2018; Awenat et al. 2018; Crabtree et al. 2016; Doyle et al. 2021a; Haarmans et al. 2020; Lewis and Ditloff 2021; Sullivan et al. 2008). The limited literature available on service user involvement in prison and post-prison research sometimes conflates service users as *participants* contributing data, with service users as research *co-collaborators* guiding and influencing the study as a whole (Awenat et al. 2018). However, a convict criminology movement has been developing, particularly in the United States and United Kingdom (UK). Convict criminology generally refers to research by people in prison (or who have spent time in prison) who have combined their prison experience with a higher degree in criminology (Earle 2018; Ross et al. 2016).

One study that did reflect on how access barriers to current prisoners altered the scope of their research is Watson and van der Meulen (2019). They concluded that it would have been advantageous to include people who have spent time in prison in their research design, data collection, and analysis as it could have improved not only the quality of the research but also contributed to supporting the skill development and personal capacity of this population. A UK study by Awenat et al. (2018) involved former offenders with lived experience of suicidal thoughts or behaviour during incarceration as part of the research team. They found that participants felt accepted and valued by the research team and argued that the involvement of this population was highly influential to participants' sustained engagement in the study. More recently, Haarmans et al. (2020) shared their experiences of organizing a participatory action research project in a UK prison. They noted that despite the challenges associated with involving people in prison as part of the research team, their active involvement in research can lead to new knowledge and personal transformation.

In Australia in the last few years, there have been few qualitative projects investigating the reintegration experiences of people following their release from prison (Baldry et al. 2018; Carlton and Segrave 2016; Cherney and Fitzgerald 2016; Doyle et al. 2020, 2021b; Griffiths et al. 2017; Johns 2017; Schetzer and StreetCare 2013). The academic researchers conducting these studies all noted the challenges associated with conducting this type of research, such as recruiting participants and obtaining and maintaining trust and rapport (Doyle et al. 2020; Baldry et al. 2018; Johns 2017; Carlton and Segrave 2016; Cherney and Fitzgerald 2016). These studies did not employ community researchers; the research was either conducted by academic researchers or in collaboration with service providers that work with people upon release from prison. For example, in Schetzer and StreetCare's (2013) study on the experiences of people recently released from prison into homelessness and housing crisis, interviews were conducted by members of StreetCare with support from the Homeless Persons' Legal Service. StreetCare does employ people with lived experiences of homelessness, but not prison (StreetCare 2020).

We now move to two case studies of qualitative research projects. The first, which employed a community researcher, investigated gendered barriers to women's participation in individualised disability funding schemes. The second investigated the experiences of people following their release from the adult prison in the ACT. This project did not employ a community researcher. The purpose of these narratives is not to provide the results of these studies, but rather to show the important role of community researchers in research about marginalised populations, and to highlight the need for community researchers to be employed in the criminal justice sector. The reflections focus on research design, participant recruitment, building trust and rapport with participants, and how community researchers can strengthen these aspects.

4. Case Study 1: Gendered Barriers to Accessing Individualised Disability Funding Schemes

Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is a major policy reform based on an international trend towards personalisation in social care. It aims to increase choice

and control over services and supports for people under 65 years of age with permanent and severe disability, thereby boosting citizen empowerment and improving health and social outcomes (Malbon et al. 2019). However, women and girls are underrepresented in the NDIS; they make up about half the disability population overall, but the female participation rate has been approximately 37% since the inception of the scheme (NDIS 2021). Marginalisation of women with disability is a major concern in Australia and internationally (Sakellariou and Rotarou 2017; Smith 2008; UN Secretary-General 2017).

The NDIS has attributed the low female participation rate to the fact that males (particularly young males) are more heavily represented in the types of disabilities primarily funded by the scheme (NDIS 2019). However, it is increasingly recognised that disabilities such as autism can be underdiagnosed in women (Zener 2019), and several disabilities or chronic health conditions more common in women have been given insufficient attention from the disability support and medical systems (Mirin 2021; Briones-Vozmediano et al. 2018; Samulowitz et al. 2018). Other relevant issues in the exclusion or underservicing of women with disability may include complications related to caring responsibilities (particularly mothering) (Malacrida 2012), and gender socialisation to undervalue their own needs and requirements in situations where negotiation is required (Amanatullah and Tinsley 2013). The latter may lead to women being less effective self-advocates than men in schemes such as the NDIS, that put an unprecedented emphasis on individuals to navigate care systems and advocate for their own needs and rights (Yates et al. 2021). However, at the time this project was conducted there had been little research investigating women's outcomes in relation to individualised disability funding schemes, and none at all focusing on women's experiences with the NDIS.

This project was an exploratory interview-based study, funded with a seed grant from the Disability Innovation Institute, UNSW. Two of the present authors (Sophie Yates and Jen Hargrave) were part of a research team partnering with two disability organisations (Women with Disabilities Victoria and Women with Disabilities ACT) to investigate women's experiences accessing and navigating disability support in Australia, particularly the NDIS. As there had been no previously published research into gender inequality in the NDIS, the study sought to establish themes and directions for future research in the area. Inclusion criteria were women with disability over the age of 18, located in the state of Victoria or the ACT, who had applied or considered applying for the NDIS.

Women were recruited for the study through the contact lists of the two partner organisations. Jen Hargrave (third author), who also worked for Women with Disabilities Victoria, acted as a peer or community researcher, and organised and led most of the interviews, which were jointly conducted with Sophie Yates (second author), in her role as Principal Investigator. The interviews were originally planned as face-to-face encounters but were required to move online due to COVID-19 restrictions. Data were collected using two methods: semi-structured interviews using questions co-designed by the research team and partner organisations, and a visual mapping exercise known as System Effects. This exercise allowed participants to identify barriers to accessing disability support, the factors they saw as influencing those barriers, and any connections between barriers. Participants were compensated for their time with an AUD 100 online Mastercard, which the partner organisations considered to be an appropriate amount for interviews of approximately one hour. They were assured their contributions would be anonymous, and many chose their own pseudonyms for use in publications.

4.1. Research Design

Sophie: My background is in public administration and gender research, so I was new to the disability field when we started planning this project. Having internalised the doctrine of 'nothing about us without us' from other social justice research, I knew that co-design (where research is designed by both academics and partners from the target group) and the employment of a peer researcher would be crucial to the success of the project—both for my own comfort levels as someone unfamiliar with the field, and

for designing and implementing a project most likely to uncover valuable insights for addressing gender inequality in the disability support system. I was lucky that I already had Jen in my networks and was able to approach her to secure her involvement and that of her organisation before we applied for the grant.

Jen: I grew up with a disability and with a mum with a disability, which put me in the position to learn firsthand about barriers to disability supports for myself and for my mum—many of which we didn't conceptually identify at the time.

I am not an academic, but I came to this community researcher role with a little formal research experience which was also helpful to understand common research processes and constraints. Without these prior experiences I may not have had the confidence, the trust in myself to step into the role. Working beside an experienced researcher was a critical enabler to the project. Sophie did all the establishment and management of the project. She got me on board fairly early in the process, prior to the ethics application, seeking my involvement and input. She was open to my questions and recommendations. In a short time, I knew I could trust her to genuinely try to understand my perspectives and implement changes appropriately.

Sophie: Jen had input into the grant application and—crucially—the ethics application and interview schedule. She explained which language was most appropriate to use and why, and challenged me about the inclusion of women with intellectual disability in our project. I had thought that it would be too difficult to obtain ethics approval for this cohort, but Jen pointed out that she had never before excluded particular disability types from interview recruitment, and was not comfortable doing so now. This made me confront my own biases—I realised she was right, and we reworked the ethics application to make our processes appropriate for women with intellectual disability (for example, developing easy read and guardian consent forms). Obtaining ethics approval was not actually as difficult as I had anticipated, which made me think about the ways that researchers' apprehension about ethics procedures may lead to the exclusion of certain participant groups. Without Jen's input, we would not have obtained insights from this important group of NDIS participants. I also found the input of partner organisation, Women with Disabilities ACT, very useful, as one of their staff members suggested the inclusion of a question that provided useful insights into how the NDIS communicated with participants.

4.2. Recruitment, Trust and Rapport

Jen: Trust around recruitment was something Sophie and I discussed. I pointed out that recruiting through community organisations is quite an ask and she was curious why. I work for a community organisation, Women with Disabilities Victoria. I explained that it can take quite a bit of time to recruit, that recruiting for a researcher can be like setting up participants on a blind date, and that if the participant does not have a good experience of the research, they may raise this with the organisation they trust rather than with the academic directly, and even seek follow up support from the organisation. Perhaps this is an argument for building trusted community members and community workers into projects to support recruitment in a deliberate and resourced way.

It is not new to say, but my personal experience was something that could establish trust with interviewees, and some even referred to it, e.g., 'I feel better knowing that (I am taking to someone who will understand my experiences).' This is not to say that as a disabled individual I can create an instant connection to every other identity or experience, but to say that it is conducive. My own experiences as a research participant, a service recipient, and as a disabled community member do give me some insight into how we can wait for someone to show they can be trusted. Sometimes, if not often, trust might not come in a one-off interview. While participants were quite open about their experiences of being a woman accessing disability supports in Australia, speaking with them over a series of interviews could have allowed them to share more of the really difficult stuff.

Something I noticed setting up and co-facilitating interviews was how my different professional experiences informed my work. For example, previous roles included phone

counselling in a feminist service (which gave me a strengths-based approach with interviewees), creating Reasonable Adjustments for tertiary students with disabilities (which gave me confidence in organising disability-access supports for interviews), and systemic advocacy on gender and disability (which orientated me to the diversity and the patterns of women's individual experiences of ableism and sexism).

A prominent background experience on my mind was my experience using research in systemic advocacy, and that potential power of research was a constant personal motivator. It is perhaps reckless to admit to this, as it is precisely this point that is held as a criticism of community researchers—that they are motivated by advocacy and bias; it is not an easy criticism to counter to people who cannot understand how informing lived experience is.

Sophie: When it came to recruitment and rapport-building, Jen's involvement was invaluable. Drawing on her professional experience and lived experience as a woman with disability and an NDIS client, she was able to build rapport with participants during the recruitment and set-up process, which often involved several phone calls to explain what the project was about and how the interview would be conducted. She was sensitive to accessibility requirements, which enabled the inclusion of a wider variety of participants and helped them feel they were talking with a research team genuinely interested in their needs and experiences. I learned from her about appropriate language to use and the importance of avoiding deficit-related constructions of disability. Lastly, her professional advocacy experience and lived experience as an NDIS client led her to ask astute follow-up and probing questions that would not have occurred to me, while my gender research background enabled me to zero in on some issues that might be relevant to gender. I think we would both agree that our skills complemented each other well.

I was glad that we had built financial compensation into our research design. I didn't get the sense that it helped much with recruitment—in fact, many participants seemed surprised when I reminded them that I would send them a voucher after the interview. I got a bigger sense that people valued having their stories heard and hoped telling us about their experiences would help drive change. Some also just appreciated having a chat after being stuck inside for months due to COVID-19! However, it became clear that while some participants were financially stable, a number of them would actively benefit from an AUD 100 Mastercard to help with household expenses, so I felt pleased that we could show our gratitude for their participation with this material compensation.

We did have a few issues with recruitment in that we originally planned to interview 15 women from Victoria (one of Australia's most populous states) and 15 from the ACT (which is a much smaller jurisdiction). However, despite trying for months, we could not find enough participants from the ACT who fit our recruitment criteria. Several people agreed to be interviewed but later changed their minds or stopped responding to emails, so we decided to make up the numbers with Victorian participants. Thus, despite the involvement of a community researcher and recruitment assistance from a local community organisation, there can still be challenges with finding enough research participants from small and potentially 'over-researched' groups.

We now move to the second case study, where inclusive research practices such as community researchers were not employed.

5. Case Study 2: The Experiences of People following Release from the Canberra Prison

The ACT opened its first adult prison in 2009. The prison is the first (and only) one in Australia designed and built to operate as a 'human rights' prison (ICS 2019). It was expected to house 270 prisoners (known as detainees in the ACT); however, in recent years, the population has reached over 350 (ABS 2021). The prison houses male and female detainees at all classification levels (minimum, medium, maximum), sentenced and unsentenced (remand). Similar to other Australian jurisdictions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over-represented, comprising over a quarter of the prison

population. Recidivism rates in the ACT are even higher than in the rest of the country, with 78% of detainees in the AMC having been incarcerated previously (ABS 2021).

Various support services are available to people exiting the prison in Canberra to assist them in reintegrating into the community (see Bartels and Doyle 2020). One service, the Throughcare Outreach Program, is tailored to each client, commences pre-release, and offers short term support, with the assistance of local service providers (CatholicCare n.d.; Griffiths et al. 2017). There has been limited qualitative research investigating the experiences of people following their release from the prison. One recent study, the 2017 *Evaluation of the Extended Throughcare Pilot Program*, employed qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate clients' experiences with Throughcare and suggested areas of improvement (Griffiths et al. 2017). Overall findings were positive, however, challenges included confusion by clients about the Throughcare program, insufficient stable and suitable housing in the ACT, and insufficient engagement with employment services.

The purpose of the qualitative pilot project reported here was to gain an insight into the challenges people face following their release from the prison. Interviews were conducted throughout 2019. There were two conditions that participants needed to fulfil to qualify for the study: they needed to have spent at least one month in the Canberra prison and have been released in the last six months. Previous studies have shown even a short period of incarceration can have an adverse effect on reintegration into the community (Australian Law Reform Commission 2017). People serving shorter sentences are more often those who have committed multiple less serious offences and tend to cycle in and out of the justice system (Baldry et al. 2018; Borzycki 2005; Dowse et al. 2009). It was initially intended that follow up interviews would be conducted with participants around two months after the initial interview, but due to recruitment difficulties, further discussed below, each participant was only interviewed once. Most interviews lasted for around 60 min.

5.1. Research Design

Following approval from the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee, permission from ACT Corrective Services, and support from a range of service providers in the ACT, a flyer with information on the project was placed in the offices of government and non-government organisations that provide support to people upon release from the prison. These service providers also provided some guidance during the design stage, such as the wording on the flyer and where the flyer should be placed in their offices. The flyer had the contact details (phone number and email) of the academic researchers and details of the financial compensation for participation. Participants were paid in AUD 20 Essentials cards, with the intention that they would receive AUD 30 for a second interview and AUD 40 for a third interview.

5.2. Recruitment, Trust and Rapport

Caroline Doyle (first author): At the time of the interviews, I was the President of Prisoners Aid ACT, a non-government organisation that provides assistance to current and former detainees and their families in the ACT. I have been involved with this organisation for the past seven years and therefore had some understanding of the challenges people can face whilst incarcerated and post-release.

I found that the majority of participants saw the flyer in the reception area of a service provider and called the listed phone number. During the initial phone contact, I spent time developing rapport with participants. For example, I would explain my involvement with Prisoners Aid ACT, my motivation for the research project, and ask them how they were adjusting to life following their release. We would agree on a time to meet and at the beginning of the interview, I made sure that I continued to develop this rapport with participants. I found that participants felt comfortable in knowing my experience with Prisoners Aid and that I wasn't just 'another researcher', but rather someone who had some knowledge and understanding of the day-to-day challenges they were facing.

Some participants did ask during the initial phone contact 'but, is this really going to change anything?' I found that participants appeared to be motivated by two factors. The first was the monetary payment, with some specifically referring to the fact that they were 'really struggling at the moment' and needed it to buy food or baby clothes. However, others mentioned that they were not interested in the monetary payment, but rather wanted to see changes for future people in the same position and that this was the first time someone had asked about their experiences. Whilst they were interested in seeing change, they were very sceptical about any change happening.

In terms of establishing trust with participants, I explained to them, in simple language, the information on the consent form—'the admin part' as I called it. I especially focused on how anything they told me would not be shared with ACT Corrective Services or any other government agencies. I also reminded them that anything they said during the interview would not affect any services they would receive from Prisoners Aid or other service providers. I found this was an important reminder as one participant explained to me how they had told confidential information to a service provider and then this information was used against them. One challenge with completing the consent form was that some participants did not yet know their mobile phone number or email address as they had been recently released and had forgotten their passwords, and only knew their prison email address information. Many also did not know what their permanent address would be, or even have stable accommodation.

In interviewing participants, I had to ensure that I was aware of my positionality. For example, given the interviews were conducted face-to-face, I thought about the clothing I needed to wear. I considered it was appropriate to wear clothing that wasn't too formal. I also used language that I considered appropriate, such as 'COs' and 'screws' when referring to custodial officers or a 'shot of ice' when referring to taking crystal methamphetamine. But I did find during interviews when I asked participants to discuss their post-release experiences, they said things like "I'm only giving you pretty much the basics but, you wouldn't know unless you've been in there". For some, they saw me as just 'another' person who wouldn't have any idea as to what it would be like to walk in their shoes.

Several participants spoke about their feelings of embarrassment when explaining their prison episode(s) to potential employers or landlords. They would tell me about how going to prison was their own fault and that they can't rely on anyone. I had to be very careful to show participants empathy and that I wasn't judging them for their past. I was prepared with the contact details of service providers that assist people post-release in the ACT.

Whilst it was initially proposed that participants could tell other people who fit the inclusion criteria about the research project, this proved to be difficult for two reasons. Some reported that they did not want to socialise with other former detainees, and some participants said that their peer group was still inside the prison. Another challenge related to the difficulty of arranging interviews with participants in 'the future'. Most participants requested to meet within the next 24 to 48 h, as they were not sure of their future plans, such as a potential job interview, a court date and time, or a housing inspection. Furthermore, on two occasions I made arrangements to meet participants, but they did not turn up at the pre-arranged time and did not answer follow-up phone calls/messages. The target had been to interview 20 participants but given these challenges only 11 participants were interviewed.

After each interview, I learnt more about the experiences and challenges people can face following their release from prison. I also gained more understanding about the lack of confidence people can have following a custodial sentence. I feel that if I had had a community researcher (such as someone who has served time in prison) working with me during the research design stage, the recruitment process, and interviews, then I would have been in a better position to not only access participants and help them feel comfortable sharing their experiences, but also to ensure that the concerns of people who had spent time

in the prison were central to the project. I also feel that involving a community researcher could have offered an opportunity for someone from that community to gain research experience, build skills, and increase their sense of self-efficacy. These are all very important for people who have spent time in prison: as I consistently found through my interviews, many former detainees have very low self-confidence.

6. Discussion

The two marginalised communities explored in this paper share some commonalities. Disability is common among the prison population, with the AIHW (2019) finding that around 30% of prison entrants self-reported having a disability that affected their participation in day-to-day activities, education, or employment. Generally speaking, both people who have spent time in prison and women with disabilities have experienced disadvantage and may have distrust of institutions as a result of their experiences. Both groups have experienced barriers to their full participation in society, with people released from prison often feeling like they are not welcomed in the community. These issues, combined with the more practical barriers discussed, can make it difficult for academic researchers to access these communities and learn more about their experiences.

Comparing our experiences conducting research with marginalised communities helps to demonstrate the importance of involving people from those communities in the research process. While Caroline had knowledge of the problems facing people who have spent time in prison (both from her research experience and involvement in an organization that assists people in prison and their families), her lack of lived experience was noted by participants. She was sometimes seen as one more person who didn't understand their story, which made it more difficult for them to explain their experiences. She also experienced challenges with recruitment, not having networks that could easily reach people who had spent time in prison or the trust to support them to feel their stories would be heard and would make a difference. Conversely, Jen's status as a member of the disability community—particularly as someone who had worked in disability advocacy—meant she provided the research team with better access to community members than they would otherwise have had. She was also able to improve the research experience for participants, designing procedures that increased accessibility and using her own lived experiences and passion for helping her community to build rapport with participants. As highlighted in the literature, working in partnership with an academic researcher enabled Jen to feel like she was developing her research skills and formally contributing to the knowledge base to inform advocacy for women with disabilities, which was important to her on a personal level.

We have no counterfactual to inform what Caroline's experiences would have been like if she had partnered with a community researcher; however, we feel that some of the challenges we have discussed here would have been ameliorated by incorporating this kind of inclusive research technique. Of course, inclusive research with people who are or have been in prison does bring its own set of challenges. Some of these are similar to those identified in disability research, namely building in the time necessary for dialogue, training and explanation of concepts and vocabulary, and enabling community researchers to disagree with the academic researchers through acknowledging and mitigating power differentials (Haarmans et al. 2020). As noted above, many people who have spent time in prison also have disabilities—particularly intellectual disabilities—so that some insights regarding inclusive research in disability contexts will have relevance to criminal justice contexts. Further, Sullivan et al. (2008, p. 18) note that challenges they faced in their prison-based project relating to 'hierarchical power structures, the relative powerlessness of participants, and their general lack of research experience' are common in most participatory research contexts. Other challenges will be more unique to prison and post-prison research, such as prison regime routines (e.g., correspondence restrictions) and disruptions (e.g., prisoner transfer); the need to obtain buy-in from prison managers and other authority figures; and disruption stemming from housing, addiction, and other difficulties people often face upon

release from prison (Abbott et al. 2018; Crabtree et al. 2016; Piché et al. 2014; Sullivan et al. 2008).

This article contributes to the methodological, disability, and criminal justice literature by highlighting the value (and potential value) of community researchers in both fields. Through analysing reflections on using a community researcher in a disability research project, we argue that academic researchers will gain a deeper and more holistic understanding of the post-release experience through engaging community researchers in the criminal justice space, such as in projects seeking to understand the experiences of people who have spent time in prison. This will also provide opportunities for people with prison experience to gain skills and increase their sense of self-efficacy. As Hill et al. (2015) note, research practices that help prisoners (or former prisoners) regain a sense of autonomy and personhood are especially appropriate, given the institutional restrictions and constrained choices that people face inside prison. In employing these methods, scholars of criminal justice could build on findings from previous studies which acknowledged the importance of employing people with prison experience in mentoring others exiting prison (Graffam et al. 2019; Seppings 2015; Weaver and Lightowler 2012).

Ultimately, we argue that incorporating inclusive research methods such as community researchers into criminal justice system research will provide policymakers with useful insights to design better policies and programs for people currently in prison and upon release, and ensure they are provided with the most appropriate support to assist in their (re)integration into the community.

7. Conclusions

By acknowledging incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people in Australia as a disadvantaged group across a range of social, economic, and health outcomes, and by advocating for more inclusive methods in research with this population, we have sought in this article to bring the sensibilities of disability scholarship into conversation with the criminal justice arena. Through the use of community researchers, combined with other inclusive techniques, we urge researchers to attend to process and relationship in addition to the more common criminal justice system goals of outcomes and efficacy. Our case study comparison has provided practical insights into the benefits community researchers could offer academic researchers seeking to understand the experiences of people following their release from prison. While we do acknowledge the challenges of adopting community researchers in this space, the benefits of collaboration for both academic and community researchers, as well as the production of knowledge itself, can be significant. We also argue that support, in the form of financial compensation, training, and counselling (if required), should be provided for these community researchers. We hope that scholars of criminal justice read this article and consider the benefits of adopting community researchers in their future research projects. Doing so may facilitate new ways of thinking about long-standing issues with an ever-escalating prison population.

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Note

1   Here we should note that while the language of vulnerability is still prevalent in research on the criminal justice system, in this article we follow researchers and community activists who critique the use of 'vulnerable' as implying personal weakness and obscuring the structural bases of disadvantage (e.g., Lee 2020; Katz et al. 2020; Walker and Fox 2018). We prefer the language of marginalisation, which draws attention to the social processes that actively disadvantage people (Walker and Fox 2018).

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