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Supporting Children of Incarcerated Mothers: Creating Conditions for Integrated Social Service Delivery Using Scenario-Based Workshops

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Abstract
Understanding the service delivery system for children of incarcerated mothers is crucial for developing evidence-based innovations that promote integrated social service delivery. However, the system's complexity and invisible infrastructure pose challenges in gaining a comprehensive overview, and there is limited literature detailing methods to navigate this complexity. Our study bridges this gap by evaluating the efficacy of using fictional scenarios to foster conversations about collaboration among service providers who support the children of incarcerated mothers. In total, 21 service providers from seven agencies participated in scenario-based workshops. The workshops were audio recorded, transcribed, and qualitatively analysed. Findings indicated that the scenarios resonated with the participants and revealed details of the often invisible infrastructure within the system. The emotional resonance of the scenarios played a pivotal role, cultivating empathy, enriching the exploration of shared experiences, and prompting discussions on broader systemic issues. Importantly, the scenarios stimulated conversations about collaboration, showcasing a genuine desire among service providers for collaborative efforts and clarifying roles and responsibilities within the complex system. These findings underscore the scenario method's effectiveness in identifying the complexities of the service system, fostering collaborative conversations, and providing crucial insights to enhance the service delivery system supporting children of incarcerated mothers. Future research should explore whether embedding this method into a more structured approach, such as a Community of Practice, could lead to measurable and sustained improvements in integrated service delivery for the children of incarcerated mothers.

Keywords Maternal incarceration · Integrated service delivery · Scenario method · Collaborative

Highlights

- Workshop conversations create shared understandings of barriers to collaboration
- Shared belief in the need for collaboration was created in workshop conversations
- Relatable scenarios lead to service providers working towards solutions
- Scenario-based discussions generated shared understandings of service systems

Introduction

The need for a collaborative approach to support children with incarcerated mothers is evident when exploring the many ways that maternal incarceration can trigger or increase disadvantage for children and adolescents. This includes difficulties in accessing stable housing, education, and employment (Western & Smith, 2018); feelings of social exclusion or isolation (Dennison & Besemer, 2018); destabilisation of relationships with family members (Arditti & Johnson, 2020; Turney & Wildeman, 2015); and increasing and normalising contact with the criminal justice

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system (Murray et al., 2007). The needs associated with these multiple risks—referred to by Giordano and Copp (2015) as "packages of risk"—suggest that children who experience maternal incarceration are likely to interact with, and need additional support from, multiple service agencies. These agencies are likely to be funded by, or located within, different government departments (e.g., corrections, education, child protection, health), meaning that there is no one agency responsible for the wellbeing of children with an incarcerated parent. As a result, support for children whose mothers are incarcerated is fragmented (Axelson et al., 2020) and complex to navigate.

A deep understanding of the service delivery system is essential to address the fragmentation in systems serving children of incarcerated mothers. Such understanding paves the way for researchers and policy makers to develop evidence-based innovations that promote integrated social service delivery for these children. Service providers, who cater to the needs of children of incarcerated mothers, provide valuable insights into how their agencies operate and the challenges they face. Yet, creating a comprehensive overview of the entire system is difficult because of its inherent complexity (Bammer, 2019) and invisible infrastructure that shapes each agency's relationship within the wider system (Ghate, 2016). These challenges underscore the need for specialised research methods. However, there is a distinct lack of research that adequately details these methods. We aim to fill this gap by evaluating the efficacy of scenario-based workshops in facilitating discussions on collaborative approaches among service providers. Such efforts can lay the foundation for sustainable integrated service delivery models. Before discussing our approach, we describe the context of this study; the 'service delivery system' for children of incarcerated mothers.

The Complex Service Delivery System for The Children of Incarcerated Mothers

In this study, the service delivery system for the children of incarcerated mothers comprises the service agencies that support these children, which are staffed by service providers. Before explaining the details, it is important to understand the jurisdictional context. In Australia, there are a range of facilities in which people are incarcerated with some slight differences between the jurisdictions. They are operated at the State/Territory level and in the State of Queensland, adults who are remanded to custody (pre-trial detention) or sentenced to custody are held in State operated 'correctional centres'. Correctional centres can have different security levels but most individuals will enter a centre at the maximum-security level before progressing to lower security, sometimes within the same centre. Our focus is on women in correctional centres; however, the women and

service providers sometimes refer to this as prison and/or jail. When service providers deliver support to women in correctional centres, they may engage with women who are held either on remand (in pre-trial custody) or sentenced custody

In this study we focus on the agencies that encompass not only the services that children typically use, such as pre-schools and schools, but also those they might access due to maternal incarceration. These can include child welfare, justice agencies, housing support, or specific programs tailored to support families of incarcerated parents (Axelson et al., 2020). Some service providers also offer support directly to the incarcerated mothers through initiatives like parenting programs, which may positively influence the children's outcomes. The service providers participating in this research include, but are not limited to, teachers, social workers, counsellors, police officers, and correctional officers. Collectively, the service agencies and the service providers within these service agencies make up the service delivery system, depicted in Fig. 1. The service agencies within this system share common goals or opportunities to contribute positively to the outcomes of children affected by maternal incarceration (Axelson et al., 2020). However, because these service agencies are situated in, or funded by, different governmental systems, which are often highly complex on their own, the service delivery system is fragmented, and the common goals and opportunities are not always clear to the service providers.

There is broad consensus among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners that collaborative approaches are essential to address fragmentation and enhance support for children experiencing maternal incarceration (Axelson et al., 2020; Dallaire, 2007; Giordano & Copp, 2015). Due to legislative constraints, resource competition, and varied governance structures, fragmentation is frequently encountered within social service systems. However, the unique circumstances of children with incarcerated mothers present distinct challenges in service coordination. These challenges complicate the establishment of collaborative methods that cater to individual needs while also aligning with the wider service delivery framework. To navigate this landscape, service providers need mutual understanding of each agency's role within the system (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2006). This insight is vital for fostering cross-sector cooperation, ensuring that providers recognise how they can contribute to the support system while maintaining their role boundaries (Garstka et al., 2014; Hood et al., 2017). Ultimately, effective collaborations are built on mutual understanding of the system and a recognised need for integrating supports.

Understanding the system that caters to the children of incarcerated mothers poses significant challenges. Specifically, there is an absence of a clear delineation of roles and

Fig. 1 The service providers and service agencies that make up the service delivery system for the children of incarcerated mothers. Note. This figure is illustrative of the service providers in the current research and not intended to be an exhaustive list of service providers and agencies involved in supporting children of incarcerated mothers. Also, the roles of service providers may not be exclusive to any one agency. For example, schools, youth justice, child protection, and non-government organisations may all have psychologists and youth workers within their service agencies
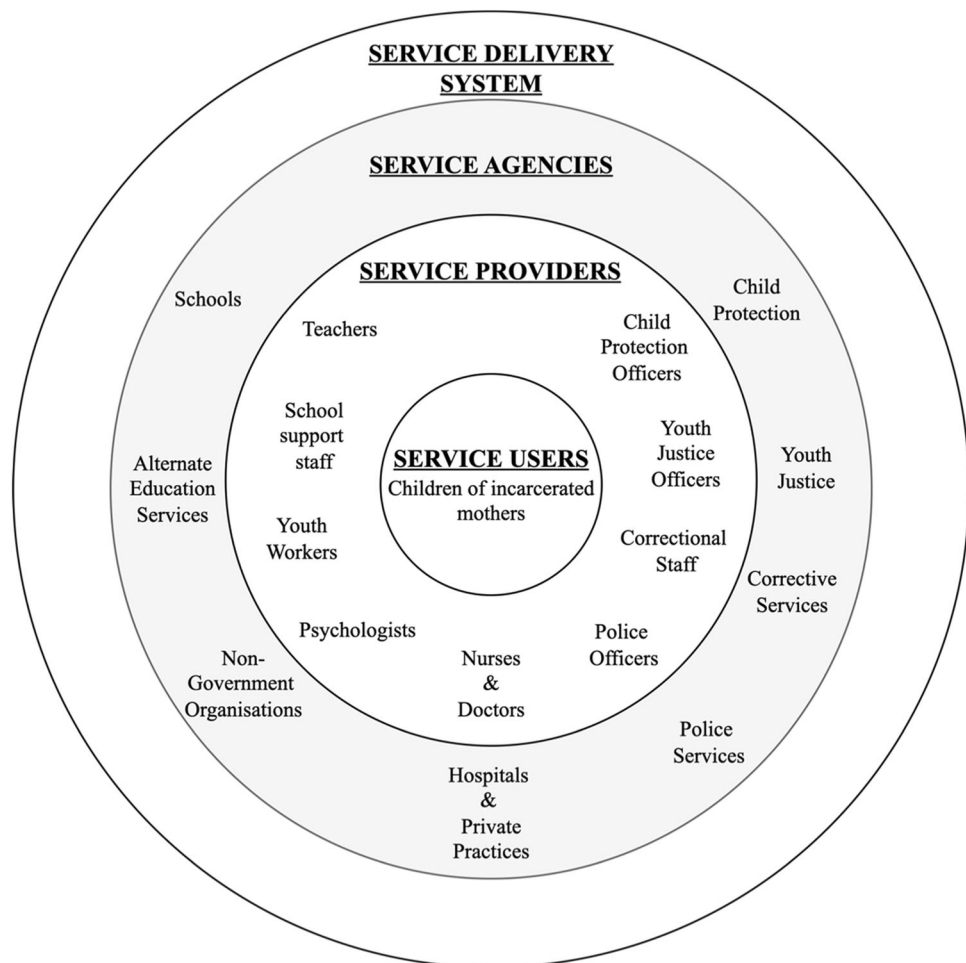
responsibilities in meeting the needs of these children. Despite the rising rates of female incarceration in recent years, the low prevalence of female incarceration (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021) means that providers in larger service agencies might possess limited experience in supporting children with incarcerated mothers. While specialist service providers exist, funding constraints often limit the supports they can provide. This necessitates a reliance on larger service agencies to address issues associated with maternal incarceration, underscoring the importance of inter-agency collaboration.

Further complicating matters, caregivers and children frequently withhold pertinent information from service agencies to avoid potential stigma linked to the mother's incarceration (Chui & Yeung, 2016; Dallaire, 2007; Poehlmann, 2005). This lack of disclosure limits opportunity to access necessary services and may hinder service providers already engaged with these children from addressing issues directly related to their mother's incarceration. Such dynamics contribute to a complex service delivery system for a difficult-to-reach demographic. Given these factors, service providers may face difficulties

articulating their precise role in supporting the children of incarcerated mothers, in relation to the broader system.

The Scenario Workshop Method

Considering the complexities and challenges highlighted in the broader service delivery for children of incarcerated mothers, there is a pressing need to leverage innovative methods to gather information that accurately reflects the system. A deep understanding of service providers' views regarding working collaboratively is crucial. This not only helps researchers bridge the divide between research and real-world application but may also pave the way for service providers to make informed decisions about supports for the children of incarcerated mothers. Interactive methods, like the scenario workshop method, can provide the means to stimulate conversations about collaboration, potentially accelerating impactful system change.

Fictional scenarios or qualitative vignettes are carefully constructed stories used to gather service providers' perspectives on the strengths and challenges of complex

service delivery systems (Bain, 2023; DeWulf et al., 2007). The scenario's primary strength is its ability to foster discussions among diverse service providers, revealing the system's invisible infrastructure (Wei & Yeik, 2022). Avoiding the service-centric jargon common in operationally complex organisations (Abdel-Salam et al., 2017; Macaulay & Rowe, 2020), these scenarios enable service providers to see the system as a whole and discern where their roles diverge or overlap with others. Importantly, they also provide a comprehensive view of the system's barriers without casting blame for shortfalls in service delivery on any one organisation (Wright & Cairns, 2011).

The application of scenario-based workshops, specifically tailored to understand service delivery to children of incarcerated mothers, is notably absent. Nevertheless, research in analogous service frameworks suggests there are distinct benefits of scenario-based workshops that can be applied to support these children within the system. A notable study employs fictional scenarios featuring families confronting a range of social challenges to elicit insights from health and child protection professionals (Przeperski & Taylor, 2022). These scenarios served to clarify the roles of service providers, and the findings emphasised the significance of transparency and responsibility in child welfare decision-making across the service system. Another advantage of this method, as demonstrated in previous research, is the emotional resonance these scenarios evoke, particularly when they offer realistic depictions of sensitive issues (Aujla (2020); Jackson et al., 2015). This resonance encourages introspection, engages participants, and, by eliciting empathy, can reshape perspectives (Agllias et al., 2021; Aujla, 2020; DeWulf et al., 2007). Moreover, the scenario method may foster interprofessional collaboration among service providers. For example, Morrison and Estes (2007) found that scenario sessions encouraged in-situ mentoring among science teachers and scientists, leading to mutual learning and skill development. The findings of these previous studies provide tangible evidence of the ability of fictional scenarios to cut through the complexity of the system, revealing hidden infrastructure and highlighting opportunities for improved collaboration.

The fragmented social service system for children of incarcerated mothers presents clear challenges for service users, providers, and researchers. While the broader social service literature often highlights the need for accurate information in shaping evidence-based interventions (Ghate, 2018), there is a lack of detailed accounts of specific methods for navigating the complexities of such systems. Our research addresses this gap by evaluating the efficacy of scenario-based workshops in generating productive conversations about collaboration among service providers. This was an important first step in reaching our future goals of creating a model of service delivery that can promote a more integrated service approach tailored to the specific needs of children experiencing maternal incarceration.

Method

Design

This study is part of a larger project, the Transforming Corrections to Transform Lives (TCTL) project, aimed at co-creating a new model of support for incarcerated mothers and their children during prison and after release. The broader program of work employs the Design Council UK's (2021) systemic design approach to developing social services. The current study is positioned in the *explore* stage of this approach, which includes building relationships, making new connections, and gaining a full picture of how the existing system, relevant to the social service being designed, is operating. This study contributed to the explore stage and sought to generate conversations about collaboration across different government and non-government agencies that are supporting the children of incarcerated mothers, as well as providing an opportunity to understand the system barriers experienced by children whose mothers are incarcerated. The study focuses on the service providers' conversations about collaboration generated by the scenario method. The research protocol for this project was approved by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref No: 2020/777).

Participant Selection

To select appropriate participants, the project team identified which service agencies could have a role in supporting the children experiencing maternal incarceration. The project director contacted key leaders and supervisors within seven relevant service agencies to explain the project and invite agency representatives to the workshop. These service agencies included government and not-for-profit agencies responsible for child protection and out-of-home care, health, youth justice, education, corrective services, police, and one agency that delivers direct services to children with incarcerated parents. Contact with the service agencies was made approximately six weeks prior to the workshop, with one-on-one meetings occurring between the director and the organisation leader shortly after.

During these meetings with organisation leaders, it was sometimes necessary to more fully describe how and where children of incarcerated mothers have contact with that service agency. Some agency leaders were apprehensive about engaging in a project that was working within the correctional system because the service providers within their agencies, to their knowledge, had never had contact

with prisons, correctional staff, nor people who were incarcerated. In these situations, the director drew on existing research to discuss the impact of maternal incarceration on children, their unmet needs, and described how benefits could be realised for children by drawing together all the service agencies that have contact with these children, regardless of the reason for that contact, and therefore avoiding missed opportunities for support. In all instances, the key leaders agreed to send service providers to represent their service agencies.

Once attendees were confirmed, they were each assigned to one of the four fictional scenarios described in more detail below. Scenario allocation was determined by the degree to which scenarios involved direct contact with child protective services and placements in out-of-home care, contacts with police, disengagement from education or problems within a school setting, youth justice system involvement, mental health needs, and various contacts with the correctional system itself. Where relevant representation was missing for a scenario, the service agency was contacted and invited to send an additional service provider. Altogether, the service agencies each sent one or more representative, resulting in 21 participants who were divided into four groups with three to six participants in each group. Each group discussed a different scenario.

Case Selection and Materials

Prior to the development of the scenarios a series of workshops were undertaken with incarcerated mothers. The four scenarios developed for the workshop in this study were based on the findings of these workshops (Sapkota et al., 2022). Using these data and expertise of team members with extensive research knowledge of children experiencing maternal incarceration, and practice in fields such as youth justice, youth development, and health, we developed four scenarios that detailed the experiences of fictional children with an incarcerated mother. Each scenario included a series of negative consequences experienced by the child that were directly or indirectly a result of maternal incarceration.

Each of the scenarios focussed on a different developmental stage and the fictional children each had different system contacts and outcomes. Scenario One presented a young person aged 16 and focused on her disengagement from school and involvement in the youth justice system. Scenario Two presented a young person aged 13 and focused on the difficulties he experienced in securing accommodation with his mother post-incarceration and engagement with child protection services. Scenario Three presented a child aged 10 who was relatively well supported by his father but who experienced changes in relationships and expectations within the school community as a result of

the disclosure of his mother's incarceration, that impacted on his wellbeing. Scenario Four focused on a mother who experienced difficulties engaging with child protection services regarding the impending birth of her child and subsequent attempts to keep the infant in custody with her in the correctional centre. The full scenarios are provided in the supplementary material for this article.

The scenarios were between 370 to 670 words, dependent on how much detail was necessary to provide a full picture of the children and young people's experiences of the service delivery system. Scenarios were written primarily from the child's perspective but included information about the mother's experience necessary to map the child's experiences at each point of the mother's incarceration. These details included why the mother was arrested and also any issues that the mother had with the service delivery system that directly impacted on the child. The mother's experiences were more prevalent in the case of scenario four, where the mother was pregnant at the time of her incarceration.

A chart containing six wellbeing domains for children and young people was also provided for each discussion group as a framework for discussing the potential support needs of the children depicted in the scenarios. These wellbeing domains include children and young people having opportunities to be: 1) loved and safe, 2) healthy, 3) learning, 4) contributing and participating, 5) to have material basics, and 6) to feel supported in their culture and identity (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth [ARACY], 2014). This framework was chosen because the domains are related to the services provided to children and align with the wellbeing domains that previous research has suggested are impacted by maternal incarceration (e.g., Dallaire, 2007; Giordano & Copp, 2015; Murray et al., 2012). Using this framework provided an overview of the interrelated nature of the service needs of the children of incarcerated mothers and an opportunity to create an understanding of shared goals and language among the service providers taking part in the workshop.

Data Collection

The service providers participated in guided discussions led by a project team facilitator. Facilitators used guiding questions to keep the conversations focused on the circumstances surrounding the scenario and encourage the participants to reflect on their own experiences or potential opportunities to support children and young people in similar situations. These questions included, asking the participants if they felt that the scenarios were plausible; what services were already available to support these children; where they believed there were gaps in services; and what the child in the scenario would need for improved

outcomes across the six wellbeing domains. Facilitators were provided with prompts to elicit further information about collaboration, when raised by the participants, but guiding questions were intentionally broad to allow themes to emerge organically. The workshop ran over three hours, with time built in for refreshments and networking.

Separate audio recordings were captured for each group and facilitators took extensive notes, supported by two additional members of the research team and the director who acted as observers. There were approximately 260 minutes of audio captured and transcribed by a professional transcription service (167 pages). To protect the confidentiality of the service providers, the transcriptions were de-identified.

Thematic analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was undertaken to explore the transcripts of the conversations that were generated by the scenarios provided to the service providers. Transcripts were examined for evidence that scenarios generated conversations about collaboration and allowed service providers to: 1) reach a shared understanding of the system that supports the children of incarcerated mothers; and 2) understand the benefits of collaborating to meet their needs.

Five phases of the reflexive thematic analysis were completed, based on guidelines from Braun and Clarke (2019). These phases include familiarisation and coding of data, followed by the generation, review, and defining of themes. Data were coded in version 1.6.0 of QSR International's NVivo software. The themes that were generated include, the defining of the service delivery system, the recognising of shared problems and barriers, the understanding (or lack of understanding) of service providers for the need for integrated service delivery, and the seeking and sharing of advice among participants. These themes will be explained in more detail in the following sections.

Findings and Discussion

We investigated the efficacy of using scenarios to gather data about collaboration across the system that supports the children of incarcerated mothers. These scenarios were instrumental in gathering this data, in two distinct ways. Firstly, they served as catalysts, enabling service providers to recognise and discuss shared challenges in the service delivery system, thereby showcasing the method's capacity to map the landscape of this complex system. Secondly, the scenarios prompted providers to reflect upon and convey their expertise pertaining to the children of incarcerated mothers, fostering an environment of knowledge sharing.

The use of fictional scenarios not only deepened discussions on collaboration but also created avenues to identify ways to improve practices through information sharing. Here, we present the evidence for the efficacy of the scenario-based method in facilitating discussions on collaboration among service providers.

Mapping the Landscape of Shared Experiences

The efficacy of the scenarios in mapping the landscape of shared experiences emerged through three principal findings. Firstly, the scenarios reflected the experiences of the service providers, who drew parallels between the fictional children depicted and real-life situations they had encountered. This familiarity with the hypothetical scenarios prompted service providers to reflect on the system's efficacy in addressing the needs of children in similar circumstances. Secondly, participants frequently expressed empathy, indicating that the scenarios resonated emotionally. This emotional connection facilitated discussions about the system's direct impacts on the children of incarcerated mothers. Lastly, the scenarios were effective in bringing out detailed information about the complex system and its often invisible infrastructure, highlighting the depth and breadth of shared experiences within the system. Each of these findings will now be discussed in detail.

Familiarity and Resonance with the Scenarios

The first opportunity for service providers to reflect on the scenarios occurred when they were asked about their thoughts on the plausibility of the scenarios provided to them. The plausibility of the scenarios to the service providers was high, with many service providers not only deeming the scenarios plausible but also referencing their own experiences to highlight why there was a breakdown in integrated service delivery for the fictional children in the scenario. Specifically, service providers who worked directly with young people similar to those depicted in the scenarios reflected on the complex dynamics of the system portrayed in those scenarios.

The strength of the scenarios in illustrating the real-life experiences of children experiencing maternal incarceration was especially evident in relation to the adolescents in the scenarios who had contact across multiple systems. For example, one service provider highlighted the breakdown in information sharing across departments and its resulting cascade of adverse events for young people similar to the fictional child, Carla:

Facilitator: Great, so maybe it would be useful to start by just asking you to reflect whether this sounds like a

realistic or even familiar scenario. Is this something that you all would have come across in your experience.

Service Provider: Yeah, definitely

Facilitator: Does anybody have any particular comments about it?

Service Provider: Just that it's a domino effect, really. You can just see how one thing leads to the next, to the next, and it all happens generally pretty rapidly. Also, I think because there is a breakdown in communication often between the different departments. That police might not know about this and then [child protection] might not know about that and so on and so on. We don't know that—the bits that have happened. We, isolatedly, if you pulled somebody over in a car and there was a warrant. You'd do what you normally do. But we don't necessarily have all the other stuff. The same with other parts of the story.

Another service provider, who had worked across multiple service agencies expressed the frustration they often face when negative outcomes are not prevented, despite children like the fictional child Bryce, having come into contact with multiple service agencies:

Service Provider: A scenario I have seen a lot of.

Facilitator: Okay, that's good. That was going to be my first question was how much of this do we recognise? Is this a reasonable, plausible scenario?

Service Provider: Yeah that's so typical. You pull your hair out because you think to yourself there are so many departments, so many people around, what could have been done to prevent all this? The kids are spiralling out of control, you hear it on the news about these terrible kids, duh-duh-duh. There's so much more behind it, there's so much more behind it.

The initial discussions about the plausibility of the scenarios, though brief, enabled service providers to relate the scenarios to their own experiences. As found in previous studies (Aujla 2020; Jackson et al., 2015), the plausible scenarios enabled providers to draw parallels between the fictional children's circumstances and those of the children they support. These findings underscore the scenarios' strength in illustrating both the children's complex lives and, by extension, the system's complex dynamics.

Emotional Resonance

The exploration of shared experiences was further enriched by the service providers' expressions of empathy for the depicted children and mothers in the fictional scenarios. Service providers initially demonstrated deep emotional responses specific to these children, this emotional resonance led some to share analogous personal experiences and details of real-life cases. For example, a service provider with lived experience, was moved to provide insight into the deeper feelings the fictional child Lenny would have as

a result of his teacher's response to finding out about his mother's incarceration.

Importantly, the empathy conveyed by the service providers catalysed deeper reflections on the overarching system and potential shortcomings contributing to the adverse experiences of families similar to those in the scenarios. In one notable exchange, the transition from case-specific empathy to broader reflections on the systemic needs for children experiencing maternal incarceration became evident:

Service Provider 1: The other thing I wrote down was the shame. We talked about the shame. So, just considering the shame around parents in prison and how you deal with that. If they don't feel safe to talk about it—sorry.

Service Provider 2: Yeah, and that's what Lenny [fictional child] says at the end, "I wish I'd known how to ask for help as a child."

Service Provider 1: Oh darling. Stop it.

Service Provider 2: Poor little fella. It's going to be all right Lenny.

Service Provider 1: It's going to be all right Lenny. The reassurance goes a long way, doesn't it?

Service Provider 2: Yeah.

Service Provider 1: Kids want boundaries, they want reassurance, they want to be heard.

Service Provider 2: Even though mum is not there, she's still part of those boundaries. So, I think it's so critical that she has the opportunity to say, "wait a minute".

In the preceding exchange, the service providers highlighted the shame Lenny would have experienced and his lack of a secure outlet for self-expression. Using their empathy for Lenny as a catalyst, the service providers extended the discussion to address the broader needs of children and emphasised the importance of respecting mothering roles, even when mothers are incarcerated.

In another instance, a service provider expressed empathy for the fictional child, Carla, and drew parallels between her situation and larger operational challenges. The service provider first empathised with Carla's struggle to stay connected with her siblings during her own incarceration—a consequence of her actions after her mother's arrest—the provider then confirmed that similar barriers exist in real-life visitation processes:

Facilitator: Alright, moving on. The next one is about the child feeling loved and safe and what we can do for Carla at this point to assist her to improve how she feels in this area?

Service Provider: She needs to be reconnected with her family. She is on a downward spiral. There is no mention that she's even having any sibling contact. Any supervised family contact at all. It's really, really sad. But from a youth detention centre's perspective, Carla is more likely to be able to do the interfacility video links with her mother and

father than she is to have her siblings come and visit. That's really, really sad.

The service provider in the example clearly conveyed empathy for Carla's particular situation. This empathy led to insights about specific challenges, like ensuring sibling contact when a child is incarcerated in a detention centre. This instance underscores how emotionally resonant scenarios encourage service providers to reflect on current practices.

Central to the efficacy of our scenario-based workshops was the ability to foster emotional resonance among service providers. This resonance facilitated an environment where service providers could not only connect with the fictional narratives but also share and introspect on their own experiences with the system. This introspection was crucial for mapping the landscape of shared experiences among service providers. Our findings align with previous research (Agllias et al., 2021; Aujla 2020; DeWulf et al., 2007) indicating the effectiveness of scenarios which, through their emotional resonance, draw out insights about the social service system supporting the children of incarcerated mothers.

Revealing the Invisible Infrastructure Through Shared Experiences

Expanding on the previously discussed findings, the effectiveness of the scenario method was further demonstrated by its ability to reveal the invisible infrastructure within the complex social service system for children of incarcerated mothers. By cutting through agency-specific jargon, the scenarios revealed the common experiences of service providers across diverse agencies. Such insights underscore the potential of the scenario method to map the extensive landscape of shared experiences within this complex system.

One example illustrating these shared experiences emerged from a dialogue that highlighted the discrepancies and lack of alignment among various government departments:

Facilitator: That's the start of this story, is that minor exiting, and you've got these different organisations waiting on the other person, the other organisation and those things are not aligning. So, my first question for solutions then, how does that—how do you make that work? What would be required to make that whole nexus of Housing, Child Safety, Corrections and Community Corrections all get on the same page with enough time to establish housing for Rosa [fictional mother] on her way out?

Service Provider: That's the billion-dollar question. Because we work with disengaged kids from school. That's what my role is now, so we work with the chronically disengaged. So, families we meet are those families. There

are lots of things that have happened. I think the biggest battle—barrier, I'd say, is literally getting everybody together, everybody discussing the needs instead of this person talking and then you turning up and trying to sort it out, and then you turning up. There needs to be more in every situation, not just this scenario, We need to work out—and I don't know the answer—we need to work out how we can work more collaboratively. The non-government agencies and the government agencies, we need to find a way—we wouldn't be in these roles if it wasn't for the kids. We wouldn't want to help. We wouldn't do it. But we all need to work together and talk a lot more and be a lot more open and also have access to information. Obviously, there's privacy, but it's very hard to try and help a family when you're not aware of the whole situation. So, that also is a barrier too. Not that we all want to know everyone's business, but how we can know to help. That's the barriers that I've seen. So no, I don't have the answers.

In the above dialogue, the challenges of miscommunication and departmental silos in service delivery are highlighted. The lack of cohesion across multiple departments becomes evident, revealing the complex challenges that service providers face in systems supporting the children of incarcerated mothers. Building on this, another example further reveals the complexity of navigating the system:

Service Provider 1: Yeah. In this scenario you've got seven different departments.

Facilitator: Who coordinates now?

Service Provider 1: That's the gap.

Facilitator: Nobody?

Service Provider 2: No.

Service Provider 1: You've got seven - all different departments, with different priorities, different systems and you've got one young person.

Facilitator: So, a 16-year-old is expected to navigate all by herself?

Service Provider 3: Yeah, and if—there is so many early intervention points that have been missed here. The very first one. Rod [fictional father)]is in jail for violent offences against Mary [fictional mother]. So right there. Dad's a DV perpetrator. Where was the DV resource to provide support to the family? Then you've got—the school is three kilometres away from the family's Department of Housing accommodation. Why is the family that far away from the school when they don't have transport?

This exchange brings to light the complex nature of the system. The service providers emphasise the urgency of early interventions and integrated efforts that may be hindered by difficulties associated with system navigation. While it is not relevant here to deeply explore these systemic challenges, the example serves to underscore the scenario method's efficacy in drawing out information

about these issues and endorse their status as common experiences across the system.

Collectively, these scenario-driven conversations underscore the utility of the scenario method in exposing the shared experiences and challenges of service providers supporting children of incarcerated mothers. These findings highlight the method's utility in prompting meaningful discussions that map the landscape of shared experiences, thereby revealing the invisible infrastructure of the social service system. Our findings extend on previous literature that suggests the scenario method can cut through complexities to create a comprehensive picture of the system (Bain, 2023; DeWulf et al., 2007; Wei & Yeik, 2022). These findings attest to the merit of scenario-based discussions in gathering essential data that may inform more integrated service delivery tailored to the unique needs of children experiencing maternal incarceration.

Eliciting Conversations About Collaboration

The scenarios' capacity to elicit conversations about collaboration was evident in three distinct findings. Firstly, the scenarios highlighted the specific needs of incarcerated mothers and ways to collaborate that may also improve the outcomes of their children. Secondly, service providers actively sought and offered advice within these conversations, showcasing a genuine desire for and propensity toward working collaboratively. Lastly, through these discussions, service providers discussed the roles and responsibilities of different agencies in supporting the children of incarcerated mothers, emphasising the efficacy of the scenarios in drawing out such conversations. Each of these are now described in more detail.

Eliciting Collaborative Insights Through Scenarios

The strength of the scenario method in eliciting collaborative insights became evident through discussions surrounding the fictional pregnant mother, Layla. As Layla was being held within a correctional centre, service providers naturally leaned toward discussing service-specific barriers to coordinated care in these settings. One provider highlighted the challenges, stating:

Service Provider: I always think what we know about women generally and offending and reintegration, as different to men, is they require wraparound services. What we need to do, and I think [our service agency] has always done this poorly because we're trying to be everything to everyone, what we can do well is [our core business]. What we need to then have at the side is the menu of options of all those wraparound things so that we can then take this individual and her needs and plug into her from that menu

of options which will be completely different to what we plug into the next woman. Whereas we're quite insular in what can we provide inside. So just go see a counsellor for that and, oh, well, we don't know anything about that so I can't help you. We put a full stop on that, which is where her frustration or why she then goes to someone who maybe can't facilitate that. So, I think it's about broadening and understanding all of the different services that need to wraparound women and then allowing an individual to be that, an individual, and to give her to access to those services. Recognising that it changes over time as well.

From the service provider's reflections, it becomes evident that the service provider recognises a need to move toward a more collaborative approach. The reflections illustrate the importance of a diversified, dynamic suite of services, tailored to cater to the evolving needs of women like Layla. Collectively this and examples presented earlier show that service providers used the scenarios to articulate their views on the need for more collaborative approach to supporting both mothers who are incarcerated and their children. Such conversations have the potential to provide a starting point to addressing the multifaceted challenges within the service landscape for incarcerated mothers and their children and breaking down existing siloed approaches.

Seeking Advice and Sharing Information

Service providers sought advice from each other, occasionally leading to in-situ collaborations through the sharing of information. In instances where the scenario-driven discussions revealed knowledge gaps, service providers turned to others for advice. Their queries often revolved around better understanding specific processes and accessing resources that could enhance their own agency's strategies and personal understanding for supporting children of incarcerated mothers. For example, one service provider questioned another about communicating with incarcerated mothers:

Service Provider 1: So [our service providers] are pretty resourceful. They'll hunt and gather wherever. But so, one of the questions I guess I've got for you is, is there a visitor's—how to communicate with a prisoner guide? Is it easy to access that information?

Service Provider 2: There's absolutely a professional visitor process that we could utilise.

Another service provider, after expressing frustration with current practices around information sharing in her agency, asked how the strong external network of service providers formed by another service agency was developed:

Service Provider 1: So that's an important point. As a service provider, how do you know or how do you nurture a relationship with another service provider? Is that just

something you took initiative with, or did you know you were allowed to, or you could?

Service Provider 2: On our referral forms we ask if any of our ladies are involved with any other services…Then… because we have a privacy form…they sign…to give permission for us to contact [child protection] or whatever organisation that they're connected to, we will make that contact.

Service Provider 1: That's a good process.

The discussions of workshop scenarios shown here highlight the potential for service providers to collaborate and strengthen their networks in order to achieve their agency's goals. These discussions were grounded in concrete details of the scenarios, allowing for the exchange of practical advice. This approach has been supported by previous research, which suggests that providing scenarios shifts the focus of expert conversations from abstract problem identification to solution-focused approaches, including the seeking of advice and sharing of information (Agllias et al., 2021; Dewulf et al., 2007).

Clarifying Roles and Responsibilities Through Scenarios

The scenarios were beneficial in clarifying the complex roles and responsibilities that service providers navigate when assisting children of incarcerated mothers. The dynamic nature of these roles, coupled with the need for leadership and coordination, surfaced as a common topic of discussions about collaboration. Specifically, service providers aimed to clarify both the roles of other agencies and their own within the broader support system.

In discussing the complex roles and responsibilities involved in supporting the fictional mother Rosa and her child Bryce, participants considered who should lead specific support efforts and how to ensure that coordination among agencies is effective. This was evident in the following dialogue:

Service Provider: So, this is in relation to at the end of the day, Rosa being incarcerated; right? And Bryce is her child. So, I think the lead is Corrections in a sense that they have a responsibility of what happens to Rosa when she comes out. But it has to be a very close connection, if there's a child involved, to Child Safety. But also, this is where it comes with clarity; there has to be—I think in my wise wisdom, there should be a Child Safety, as you said, Housing, whatever, that are linked to the prison, that has a plan for each person when they come out and done by a needs basis in a sense of what housing do they have when they come out? What [is] to stop this from happening? If Bryce is really settled somewhere, is it best for him to stay there because he's enjoying his school? So, let's not put him in a different district so he has to move schools because all

his friends and his safe place is school. So, all these things should be taken into account, so you don't have the situation of Bryce running off and doing that kind of thing. There needs to be more of an "okay, Rosa has finished her thing, yeah, all cool, excellent Child Safety have got him in resi, excellent, right, tick, gone." These are people, not a tick and flick.

Prompted by the scenario, the dialogue above emphasises the service providers' desire for role clarity within collaborations to provide more holistic supports for the child and the incarcerated mother.

Further, the conversations about collaborations generated by the scenarios, touched upon the complexities faced by those relying on a collaborative approach to support the children of incarcerated mothers:

Service Provider 1: I'm not suggesting don't—you can't not do policing. I'm not suggesting that. However, if you get the right supports in place at that point and a coordinator walks with that family and ensures that all of these things happen along the way, the chances of the police being called to the house again significantly reduce. That's the missing piece of the puzzle.

Service Provider 2: Yeah. I think the lady [Rosa] was pulled over on the side of the road, is it? So, if we knew in advance we were going to a house and we were going to have to take action against mum, we would be thinking in advance. This is one of those scenarios where it's just happened. But I would like to think the officers would be prepping [child protection]. We are going to take action against a mum. She's likely to have her bail opposed. Because how do you manage it?

Service Provider 1: Yeah. Or have a coordinator that's continually updating things on the system. So, if something comes up and the police have to go, and I know they always have a look before they go. Then there is already a flag. But what I'm also thinking about is the reduction in police workload. Because the workload involved in all of that— and a lot of the police are like who do I ring? Oh my God, there is three kids sitting here now. Where am I going to take them? All that stuff. I'm suggesting that all of that work could be done by the right experienced non-police person. Also, that non-police person, if suitable and safe, could do home visits with police and coordinate all of that stuff. I think it's about—like schools. They need to think about what staff you have in a school. Just having teachers is not working.

This conversation reflects the complexities of navigating the boundary of roles, particularly in situations where the expertise or resources might not align perfectly with the immediate needs of the child or the family.

The discussions presented here highlight the effectiveness of the scenario method in initiating conversations that result in the clarification of roles and responsibilities. In our

research, the scenario method prompted discussions about each service agency's role within the broader collaborative landscape. Our findings, aligning with previous research (Przeperski & Taylor, 2022), indicate that the benefits of the scenario method extend to the service delivery system supporting children of incarcerated mothers.

Summary of the Findings

Using scenario-based workshops, our research reveals the benefit of this approach in mapping shared experiences among service providers supporting the children of incarcerated mothers. The scenarios, deemed highly plausible by the service providers, fostered empathy and revealed details of the often invisible infrastructure within the system. Emotional resonance played a pivotal role, enriching the exploration of shared experiences and stimulating discussions on broader systemic issues. Importantly, the scenarios effectively elicited conversations about collaboration, showcasing a genuine desire among service providers for collaborative efforts and clarifying roles and responsibilities within the complex system. These findings highlight the scenario method's effectiveness in navigating the complexities of the service system, fostering collaborative conversations, and offering crucial insights for improving the service delivery system supporting the children of incarcerated mothers.

Implications for Practice

The findings from our research provide insight into how conversations, initiated by the scenario method, may assist service providers in collaboratively meeting the needs of children with incarcerated mothers. We are unable to ascertain how and indeed whether these conversations continued beyond the workshops. We argue that to establish long-term, sustainable collaborations, embedding this method into a structured approach, such as a Community of Practice may provide more sustained collaborations and outcomes. Integrating the scenario method within a Community of Practice would combine its benefits with a clear plan for implementing system-based solutions to integrated service delivery. A Community of Practice is a common method for government and non-government agencies to bring together professionals with diverse working styles, striving to achieve common practice goals and enhance integrated service delivery (Pyrko et al., 2017; Wenger et al., 2002). Within a cohesive and well-organised Community of Practice, professionals effectively agree on how to 'share the load' in service provision (Akkerman et al., 2008; Hemmasi & Csanda, 2009). The scenario method supports service providers in identifying gaps in the system, and the structure of the Community of Practice enables the implementation of solutions generated through agreements on the roles and role boundaries of service providers within the Community of Practice.

Limitations of the Study

This study represents a first attempt to examine whether using scenarios as a basis for workshop conversations is effective in generating conversations about collaboration among service providers who support the children of incarcerated mothers. We identified two limitations. First, the findings are from a single workshop and thus may not generalise to other groups or contexts. The focus group participants were representative of the key agencies that support the children of incarcerated mothers within the jurisdiction where the study was conducted, however, these jurisdictional boundaries may impact on the generalisability of the findings. Despite this, the existing research in the area would lead us to believe that the challenges exposed as a result of the conversations are not unique to this jurisdiction. Second, although the planning, composition, and delivery of the workshop were comprehensively considered, there may have been power imbalances felt by some service providers within their discussion groups, due to the seniority of another participant within their own or other service agencies. This may have led to some participants disclosing less than others. Generally, however, the findings suggest that the use of the scenario method contributed to positive conversations among service providers and generated robust discussions about the system and the needs of children of incarcerated mothers.

Conclusion

The conversations generated by the scenario-based method indicate the potential for this method to benefit broader system-level means of meeting the needs of the children of incarcerated mothers, including the co-creation of new models of integrated service delivery. The findings indicate, when presented with relatable scenarios in workshops, there is a general tendency for service providers to work toward a solution. Therefore, using the scenario method to generate workshop conversations may help to bridge research and practice by allowing service providers to understand and overcome common barriers to collaborating to provide an integrated service to the children of incarcerated mothers. Although we applied this methodology to the service delivery system supporting the children of incarcerated mothers, its applicability to similar complex service systems

and supporting individuals warrants further investigation. Subsequent studies should explore whether integrating this method into a more structured approach, such as a Community of Practice, could result in measurable and sustained improvements in integrated service delivery across various complex systems.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Informed consent The research protocol for this project was approved by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (Ref No: 2020/777). Informed consent was sought and received in line with this approved protocol.

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