

Aboriginal Women's Voices:  
Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness and Incarceration

a report prepared for the  
**Homeless Partnership Strategy**  
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## **Executive Summary**

This paper explores the cycling between incarceration and homelessness among women in Calgary, Alberta and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan employing community based research (CBR) and arts-based research (ABR). The drastic increases of the number of women being incarcerated in Canada has led to what is now being called a 'women's imprisonment boom'. The increased rates of incarceration among women can be correlated to the gendered, racialized, and classed systemic inequalities inherent in Western society. The systemic barriers including economic, social and political; personal struggles with addictions, mental health, and histories of abuse and trauma; as well as the social stigma of a criminal record all compound and negatively affect incarcerated women's ability to find safe, affordable housing post-incarceration.

This study is based on 18 participants (12 from Prince Albert, and six from Calgary). The women recounted the multiple and various stories of their lives as they related to poverty, homelessness and incarceration sharing with us the factors that contributed to their contact with the criminal justice system. The women whom participated in this study highlighted the personal obstacles and societal barriers they faced both pre and post incarceration as well as identified gaps in services in Calgary and Prince Albert.

Themes developed naturally through weekly meetings and were explored and expanded on during the development of art projects, including Photovoice and digital story telling. Primary themes that arose included: the criminalization of poverty and the correlation between the crimes committed by participants and their economic survival; the stigma and shame associated with having a criminal record and the subsequent feelings of isolation and loneliness; the lack of preventative supports and programs; the inability to find safe, stable and affordable housing once released, a prerequisite for finding the stability in other areas of the women's life including employment, self-identity, and community reintegration. Additional themes were highlighted as they related to the unique experiences of Aboriginal women involved with the criminal justice system and their experiences of homelessness and poverty. These themes are presented in two narratives and are contextualized in the loss of culture and inter-generational experiences of abuse and poverty.

Findings highlight the need for prevention and intervention supports for women living in poverty and the need to address the systemic and institutional racism and sexism that continue to deny women the right to a living income, safe and affordable housing and human dignity.

## Aboriginal Women's Voices: Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness and Incarceration

The rate of women's incarceration in industrialized countries has, in recent decades, increased to astronomical proportions, leading many researchers to refer to the phenomenon as a women's incarceration boom (Kim, 2002; Parsons & Warner-Robbins, 2002a). The increasing rate of incarceration has been correlated to processes of globalization, the effects of the transition to neoliberal social policies, including the demise of the welfare state, and the increasing criminalization of poverty. More specifically, the rate of female incarceration can be attributed to the gendered, racialized and classed systemic inequalities inherent in Western society. The systemic barriers, including economic, social and political; personal struggles including addictions, mental health and histories of abuse and trauma; as well as the societal barriers and stigmatization correlated with a criminal record compound and negatively effect incarcerated women's ability to find safe, affordable housing post-incarceration.

In this paper we explore the cycling between incarceration and homelessness among women in Calgary Alberta and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan using community based research (CBR) and arts-based research (ABR) methods. The objectives of the research were four-fold: (1) to more fully understand the issues of homelessness and incarceration as it impacts women; (2) to work with women with lived experiences of homelessness and incarceration and community partners and other collaborators to promote a greater understanding of these issues; (3) to provide recommendations and advocate for programming and policy changes to reduce the occurrence and harm associated with homelessness and incarceration for women; and (4) to effectively

disseminate the findings to diverse audiences aimed at both primary prevention strategies and to improve services to reduce homelessness, recidivism and other harms.

## **Literature Review**

### **Criminalization of Poverty**

The rate of women's incarceration has increased steadily despite decreasing crime rates. Between 1997 -2006 the rate of federally incarcerated women rose 22%; more concerning however is the rate at which Canada is incarcerating Aboriginal women, which increased 72.5% between 1996-2004 (Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, 2009; Pollack, 2009a); Yuen, 2011). The drastic increases of criminalized and incarcerated women in Canadian society can be correlated to neo-liberal shifts in social and public policy. Allspach (2010) connects poverty and racism to neo-liberal trends arguing the state's response to "solving social problems through criminalization and incapacitation" has resulted in a widening of state control in the lives of women as the forms of resistance to poverty and racism have increasingly become socially controlled and criminalized through harsher prison sentences as a result of "tough on crime" legislative changes (p. 704). Such "tough on crime" legislative changes fails to consider the context in which women commit crimes and neglects the extenuating circumstances of the lives of women (Lawston, 2008).

The gendered impact of poverty is largely ignored in the Canadian justice system effectively disregarding the reality of women's lives whereby they are disproportionately represented in unpaid, low-wage and precarious employment, have less access to social and community resources and supports including welfare and affordable day care and have much higher rates of physical, sexual and emotional abuse throughout both their

adolescent and adult lives (Lawston, 2008; Pollack, 2009b; Status of Women Canada, 2005). The structures of oppression and inequality pertinent to the reality of women's lives that brings them into contact with the criminal justice system are routinely overlooked and women are increasingly falling victim to a system that not only maintains and reinforces, but contributes to their marginal and disenfranchised place in society by failing to provide the proper support to lead not only an appropriate human standard of living, but allow women to contribute in a meaningful way to their community. Rather, this system increasingly criminalizes and causes further harm to the women who continue to fall through the cracks of a dysfunctional system.

### **Incarcerated Women: Who Are They?**

Incarcerated women disproportionately come from marginalized and racialized communities; 75% of federally sentenced women have basic education (junior high or less); 40% are functionally illiterate; 80% were unemployed at their time of arrest; 72% of provincially sentenced women, 82% of federally sentenced women and 90% of incarcerated Aboriginal women have histories of physical and/or sexual abuse; and 32% of federal inmates are Aboriginal, despite the fact the Aboriginal peoples only constitute 1-2% of the Canadian population (Allspach, 2010; Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies; Balfour & Comack, 2006; Pollack, 2009). As the erosion of the social safety net, including access and availability to addictions treatment, mental health services, income assistance and childcare, effect those most marginalized and vulnerable within our communities, the demographics of the Canadian prison system are reflective of this. Consequently federal inmates are largely women who are the most economically, socially, politically and geographically marginalized in our society. Lawston (2008) puts

forth, the “prison system has become a microcosm of society at large” revealing “forms of oppression that originated in the historical and contemporary processes of social, racial, economic and political injustices” (p. 7).

Incarcerating women who largely commit criminal offences related to their economic survival, including drug charges, prostitution, theft and fraud has become the state mechanism for exerting social control over a segment of our population who are considered to violate and contradict traditional gender roles and expectations (Kong & AuCoin, 2008). The discourses surrounding women’s criminality has largely attributed women’s law breaking to “individual deficiencies”, “behavioral inadequacies”, and personal failings as a result of poor decision making, which, Allspach (2010) argues de-contextualizes women’s involvement with the criminal justice system from the forms of structural oppression that effect women’s everyday lives. Efforts towards rehabilitation and reintegration put forth by Correctional Services Canada (CSC), and its varying agencies and institutions are directed at modifying and correcting the inherent deviant nature of individualized women. Penal discourse and narratives sponsored by CSC promote self-responsibilizing of women through the adoption of rhetoric of “regret and individual responsibility” (Allspach, 2010, p. 716). These efforts, however, are fostered and facilitated through ‘rehabilitation’ programs designed for men and demonstrate little understanding of the unique experiences of women both pre and post-incarceration.

A particularly revealing example of the gender indifference exercised by CSC is the methods utilized in determining security classification among inmates. In assigning security classification CSC assess and determines classifications using the same tool designed for men (McGill, 2008). Factors taken into consideration include the following:

an inmate's social history, which considers factors related to education, employment, social interaction, marital or family status, history as a victim of violence, sexual habits or preferences, addictions, physical or mental health, disabilities and attitudes (McGill, 2008). McGill (2008) is highly critical of the effectiveness of such "needs assessments" as they further victimize and cause harm to women, such as more restrictive conditions, including segregation as those considered to have "high needs" are classified as high security. The "one size fits all" method of classification not only neglects gender specific differences in the lives of women; but cultural differences as well; and as a result Aboriginal women are disproportionately negatively affected by such standardized tools of assessment. One stark example of this is the over-classification of Aboriginal women as maximum security, 50% of maximum security female inmates are Aboriginal.

### **Aboriginal Women and the Criminal Justice System**

The overrepresentation of Aboriginal women in Canadian prisons has been attributed to a number of interrelated factors including entrenched and systemic societal racism that has resulted in the over-policing and overcharging of Aboriginal peoples; uninformed and inadequate legal representation; as well as a history of social, economic, spiritual and political injustices inflicted on Aboriginal peoples through varying attempts at colonization and assimilation, including the residential school system and the Indian Act, with the result of what has now been described as intergenerational trauma (McGill, 2008; Yuen, 2011). The generational trauma that was a result of historical and contemporary colonial practices must be considered when examining Aboriginal peoples contact with the criminal justice system; and furthermore, we must situate and correlate the high prevalence of substance abuse, family violence, suicide, and physical and mental

health rates among Aboriginal peoples in Canada, both on the reserve and living in urban areas.

While the effects of colonialism on Canada's Aboriginal peoples was acknowledged by the Canadian government in 1996 with the introduction of Bill C-41, which was promoted as a progressive reform to sentencing law premised on curtailing the increasing rate Aboriginal people were incarcerated. This law advised sentencing judges to give special consideration to Aboriginal offenders due to the legacy of colonialism. Judges were to consider the conditions of Aboriginal offenders lives, including poverty, substance abuse, family break down and the effects of residential school and to "take into account all the possible alternatives to incarceration...focusing on the least restrictive measure and community integration of offenders" (Balfour, 2011, p. 101). Bill C-41 was intended to marry the principles of retributive and restorative justice to slow down the rate of incarceration among Aboriginal peoples, but since its induction, the rate of incarceration has doubled among Canadian Aboriginals. The continued increase in incarceration rates can be attributed to uninformed legal representation available, as many lawyers do not rely on Bill C-41 to avoid prison sentences for their clients, or even use the legislation for appeals (Balfour, 2011).

Activists and scholars have pointed to the creation of a victimization-criminalization continuum that is a result of the lack of understanding regarding the reality of Aboriginal women's lives. For instance, Bill C-41, which was intended to reduce the rate of incarceration, clashed with an existing law that was intended to reduce incidences of gendered violence through mandatory charging. However, as Balfour (2011) points out, Aboriginal women have "fallen between the cracks of zero tolerance

and restorative justice in that they are likely to be both severely victimized by gendered violence, and coercively punished” (p. 102). Aboriginal women are now being punished more severely by a law intended to protect them, as women are increasingly being countercharged by police for using defensive violence against their abusers (Balfour, 2011).

### **Methods**

The point of entry for this research was a call to action from Aboriginal women experiencing poverty, homelessness and incarceration from both Calgary and Prince Albert. This project was developed based on the principles of CBR and ABR. CBR aims to empower communities to create knowledge that represents community issues and concerns. In advancing local knowledge, CBR embraces creative forms of inquiry such as art, photography, and storytelling; and the emphasis is on process, which must be inclusive of action, reflection and education (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). ABR was also used as a means of investigation to “probe into areas of society that are typically obscured or invisible within mainstream discourse” (Estrella & Forinash, 2007, p. 378). Community and arts based research methods are an effective way to engage participants for a more direct involvement in the research process, as the participants use their voice as well as a number of artistic mediums to express both themselves and their experiences with the effect of creating research that is more inclusive and empowering (Huss, 2009; Rutherford, 2011).

Having the women involved with the research process was important for a number of reasons. Missing in available research regarding best practices to disrupt the cycling between incarceration and homelessness, are the voices of the women who have

had those experiences (Walsh et al., 2010; Walsh, MacDonald, Rutherford, Moore & Krieg, 2012). Participatory research is important for promoting, and placing in the forefront the voices of our participants (Parsons, & Warner-Robbins, 2002b). Walsh, Rutherford & Kuzmak, 2010). Women need their voices, views and experiences heard, respected and directed at change that could lead to different conditions, services, opportunities and options for women, specifically Aboriginal women. The intent for the research team in collaborating with women who had experienced incarceration and homelessness was to assist the women to find ways to use their knowledge, skills and experience to make a difference for themselves and others. Engaging with women who have lived experiences of incarceration and homelessness to assist in the development of the research project was crucial to better understand the trajectories and underlying causes that bring women into contact with the criminal justice system in order to identify effective solutions through changes to policy, services, and practices.

### *Recruitment*

The women were approached and asked to participate in the project by a community leader with strong ties to the Indigenous women in Prince Albert and by women with lived experience of incarceration (peer-researchers) in Calgary. Due to the sensitive nature of the topics being discussed we felt it best that potential participants had an established and trusting relationship with the individuals who were recruiting potential participants. After initial meetings regarding the project and expectations, the women were asked to invite other women who they felt may benefit from being part of the project.

The organization required to successfully coordinate this type of project is similar to any other task involving management of people, place and time. We were also concerned about potential barriers to recruitment and retention issues such as transportation and childcare. For this reason, through brainstorming a list was created identifying all possible issues that may limit involvement in the project. Then the research team developed solutions to eliminate these barriers. For example, women were provided a \$25 honorarium for participating and were reimbursed for related expenses such as transportation and child-care.

#### *Ethical considerations*

The study received institutional approval from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. All participants were volunteers who were able to provide informed consent. Participants were made aware of the purpose of the study and were free to discontinue their involvement in the study at any time without repercussions. As the study progressed women themselves individually determined their level of involvement and how they wished to be identified, by their name, pseudonym or as anonymous. In addition, as we were concerned with developing and following practices congruent with research in Aboriginal communities, each of the sites had an Elder who served as a consultant and advisor to the process. Also in the Calgary site we had access to a consulting psychologist whose clinical practice was with federally incarcerated women. As we moved through challenging issues we discussed how best to proceed with the Elder, the research team and most importantly women themselves as is consistent with participatory research.

#### *Setting*

The project developed in two locations: Calgary, Alberta and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Each site involved building relationships with women who have experienced homelessness and incarceration and were now residing in the community. In Calgary, we met with women recently released from the Federal and Provincial prison at Berkana house, the only transitional house for paroled women in Calgary. In Prince Albert we met with women at P.A. Women of the Earth. In each site meetings lasting three to four hours were held weekly for 12 to 16 weeks.

The goal of this project was to ensure participation was equally accessible to all potential candidates. As such, attention was first drawn to the location of weekly meetings. P.A. Women of the Earth was chosen as the ideal location for the meetings in Prince Albert and Berkana House in Calgary for several reasons. First and foremost, each of the chosen settings was centrally located on a main bus route making access more convenient for people who relied on public transportation to get to and from the meetings. Second, the space was large, and it included the use of a kitchen. This provided an excellent opportunity for everyone to gather for a meal prior to the meetings. Furthermore, the cost associated with this meeting location 'in kind' in Calgary was affordable and within the initial budget of project in Prince Albert. Finally, since there were no conflicting programs running at the organization on the days of our scheduled meetings in Prince Albert, we were provided the use of a separate room where children who attended could draw and play while the women met.

In order to accommodate the schedules of the participants, the meetings were held on Sunday afternoons in Prince Albert and Wednesday evenings in Calgary. We wanted the meetings not only to be a place where we could grow and learn together, but also to

provide an opportunity for social interaction and personal support. The meetings began with a shared meal and personal discussion about the events of the week. Following our meal, we would launch into our discussions around the project.

### *Participants*

Individuals who were interested in participating in the project had to meet specific criteria: they were previously incarcerated women over the age of 18 years; currently residing in the site of the project. In Prince Albert women had to self-identify as Indigenous, where Indigenous was defined as those individuals who identify as being First Nations, Non-Status or Métis. In Calgary we were unable to recruit all Aboriginal women and thus the group consisted of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women. In Prince Albert we began with 18 women, but due to the time commitment required to complete the project, many participants withdrew before the cameras were distributed. In the end, there was a core group of 12 women who completed the project and were dedicated not only to the creation of the project, but were active in sharing their photos. In Calgary we met with 12 women, six of whom were able to complete all of the project,

The women who continued in the project were between the ages of 18 and 73 years. Of these twelve women who continued with the project in Prince Albert, nine were identified as First Nations and three were Métis; in Calgary two women were Aboriginal, others were Caucasian. In Prince Albert, three participants were employed in a full time, permanent position; eight were on social assistance; one relied on pension benefits from her deceased husband. In Prince Albert, two women relied on social assistance, two had part-time work, one worked full time and one woman was a homemaker. In Calgary, four women relied on social assistance and two worked, one part-time and one full-time. One

photographer in Prince Albert was a home-owner, and the remaining participants in both sites lived in subsidized housing, rented houses or apartments. All participants in the study were mothers. In Prince Albert nine women had children living at home; of these, seven were single-parents. In Calgary, two women retained custody of their children, and one shared custody with her mother.

### *Data collection*

Data for the research study was collected in three ways: (1) through discussions during weekly meetings (2) through Photovoice; and (3) through digital stories in the Calgary site only, each of which is explained in the following section.

Weekly meeting held at each site women discussed issues relating to their involvement with the criminal justice system, their experiences of being homeless and living in poverty, as well as their interactions with service providers in Calgary and Prince Albert to identify best practices and gaps relating to service delivery. In both settings we continued to meet weekly throughout the project, for both social and project-related reasons. As a group, we had come to enjoy one another's company and appreciated the time we had to meet on a social level. Every meeting was both business and pleasure, beginning with film exchange and discussion around the Photovoice project.

One of the arts-based methods used in both Calgary and Prince Albert was Photovoice, which is a recent development in action research. It is a grassroots, community assessment tool that enables local people to identify, represent and enhance their community through the use of photography as the medium for communication (Strack et al., 2004; Wang & Burris, 1997). It is a tool for investigation that assists people

in critically reflecting on the everyday social and political realities of their lives, enriching their understanding of their communities and the issues that are pertinent to them, while at the same time, giving them a voice from which to educate others on these issues (Wang, 1999). When the group of photographers was solidified, the researcher/facilitator presented an initial theme for taking pictures. Discussions around the initial theme were undertaken as a group, to stimulate ideas and provide examples of potential photos.

The Photovoice process involved discussion around the group-identified themes on key issues, as well as on how these issues were personally defined for each photographer and how they could be represented on film. Discussions involved both strengths and weaknesses, along with brainstorming on possible solutions and the role photographers could play in igniting change at a local level (Wang & Burris, 1997). Women were asked to take images that represent a particular issue, story or time in their life. The photographers were also given a journal in which to write down their ideas around the central theme and possible photographs to accompany them.

Photographers then were given instruction on the use of digital cameras, and they were asked to take photographs in the community, representing how they felt about the issues that were discussed. All photographs were then presented by the photographer to the rest of the group and given the opportunity to discuss each photograph: what is represented, how they felt taking the picture and what they wanted people to know from the picture. All conversations were audio taped and transcribed. Participants then selected photos, assigned captions to them and organized photo's into a story line to visually

represent the message they wanted to present regarding their experiences of poverty, homelessness, incarceration, prostitution and exclusion.

Sharing of initial images not only stimulated discussion on visual representation and issues related to incarceration it also allowed the women to share their experiences with the cameras and teach one another about different techniques that can be done with the cameras.

Following the initial discussions the participants went into the community to take the remainder of their pictures. It was recommended that the facilitator give a date for film return in order to maintain motivation toward the project. More importantly, continuing to meet throughout the picture-taking process stimulated motivation and gave examples to those who were having difficulty finding visual representations of their thoughts and ideas (Wang, 2003).

The third method of data collection used to convey women's ideas was the creation of digital stories (Calgary site, only). Digital storytelling is a multimedia art form combining both visual and auditory elements. Digital story authors write a brief autobiographical script, which they then narrate as voiceover paired with a series of still images to relate a personal story (Gubrium, 2009; Tucker 2006). Though each story is unique to the individual, the process of creating a digital story also emphasizes connections to community through workshops where participants learn to use the necessary technology and which function as a means of group bonding and growth as individuals share their stories with one another. Digital stories are thus both a catharsis for the individual and a vehicle to deliver a message to the audience, be they fellow participants or society at large (Gubrium; 2009). Though there is not an extensive body of

writing on digital storytelling as a research method, emerging literature suggests that this art form has notable potential to facilitate participant self-exploration, expression and empowerment in research practice (Benmayor, 2008; Hull & Katz, 2006).

A distinctive aspect of digital storytelling is its use of mixed media forms. Common themes in the literature are the importance of the story, authors narrating in the unique rhythm of their own voice, which allows for authoritative self-representation and the authors' choice in images, activities that function as a connection point between the individual's story and cultural context (Brushwood Rose, 2009). Hull and Katz's (2006) study of digital storytelling with underprivileged youth, for example, reveals that the process of constructing a digital story facilitates the author's self-reflection, while the performative aspect of this method allows for personal reconstruction and the growth of the agentive self with the power to envision and direct their own identity and life story.

The five women in our study who participated in the digital story creation collected photographs, poetry, important documents such as birth certificates or achievements, and music organizing them again into a story they wanted to share. The visual imagery was sequenced and narrated with the women's own voices to tell their own story. The digital storytelling workshop consisted of a three day immersion process, and allowed women to reflect more deeply upon their stories and the issues that they had engaged in with the Photovoice process (Walsh, Shier, Sitter & Sieppert, 2010).

#### *Data analysis*

The compilation of images into the PowerPoint photo display (Prince Albert) or storyboards (Calgary), group discussions and journaling provided the data for analysis. Each meeting was audiotaped, with the permission of the group members, transcribed and

analyzed using Atlas ti software. Themes developed naturally over the course of the study and the women involved in the study were active in determining the direction of the project including how findings were to be presented.

In Calgary, photographs were displayed on poster boards and digital stories, women chose to use their real names except for Marcy, which is a pseudonym. In Prince Albert women chose not to be identified by name and their photographs were presented in PowerPoint. As well as suggesting locations for community presentations and assisting to organize such events, each woman was in charge of the message she wanted to deliver relating to her own experience of poverty and incarceration. That is, each woman captured the images that were important to her, chose which images were to represent her own life and unique circumstances and wrote the story to accompany the images.

#### *Dissemination*

The Prince Albert Photovoice group decided on PowerPoint slideshow to display their photographs. As a group, they decided that a slideshow kept the message of the project relatively informal, which increased opportunity for audience members to interact with the photographers and gave equal opportunity for all photographers to contribute to the final project. The Calgary group determined photographic storyboards and digital stories would best capture their ideas and be an effective way to inform, promote discussion and facilitate active engagement of key stakeholders and other audiences.

Both the Photovoice projects and digital stories were presented at a number of events in the local community and at national and international conference. During the dissemination activities women themselves had the opportunity to share and answer questions to a variety of community stakeholders including service agencies, policy

makers, police officers, students, advocates and community members. The women were also given copies of the products they had completed and were able to use them in their personal lives, which for many included sharing with family and friends, and even posting online to sites including Facebook and YouTube.

The products we have created for dissemination include six storyboards and five digital stories from the Calgary site and a Powerpoint of pictures and captions and a book with stories and pictures to walk people through the experience of homelessness and incarceration from the Prince Albert site.

## **Results**

Findings reported here come from weekly conversations held at Berkana house in Calgary and P. A. Women of the Earth in Prince Albert during which the women discussed issues related to their experiences of poverty, homelessness, incarceration and addiction. The women recounted the multiple and various stories of their lives, particularly relating to poverty, homelessness and incarceration sharing the factors that contributed to their contact with the criminal justice system and how this impacted their sense of self. The women identified the obstacles they faced in their own lives and how societal barriers contributed to their cycling between homelessness and incarceration as well as identifying gaps in services relating to their success post-incarceration. Themes developed through the weekly meeting were then expanded on and developed through the art projects, Photovoice and digital story telling. Data includes quotations from weekly meetings, photographs taken from the women, written captions by the women describing their photographs and quotations from the digital stories, made by the women themselves.

Major themes identified in Calgary included: (1) criminality related to economic survival; (2) loneliness while living on the streets and the re-creation of family; (3) the cycle of homelessness and incarceration; (4) closed doors.- lack of prevention and intervention services to interrupt or prevent the cycle of homelessness and incarceration; (5) shame and stigma related to women's experience of homelessness and incarceration; and finally (6) their desire to work towards social justice for their forgotten sisters, those who are still caught in the cycle of homelessness and incarceration.

In Prince Albert, women told two circular stories. In the first story the circle begins with women's common experiences of early life consisting of family dysfunction and abuse. This story leads to poverty, homelessness and criminal behaviour culminating in incarceration. In the second telling of the story the circle deviated from the earlier narrative in that women receive various supports from friends, family and workers. It is through this process that the women are able to connect to their traditional culture and come 'full circle'. This circle culminates in women who are balanced and living according to the principles of the medicine wheel. In this second circle through meeting their mental, emotional, physical and spiritual needs women have broken the cycle of poverty, homelessness and incarceration. In the following section we present the themes from the Calgary site and the two narratives from the Prince Albert site with illustrative quotes.

### ***Calgary Themes***

#### *Surviving*

Findings support the dominant discourse in the literature that overwhelmingly women's criminality is related to economic survival. Five of the participants had

experienced episodes of homelessness during their childhood and reported early involvement with the criminal justice system including spending time in Young Offender Centre's. Two of these women spoke in depth about the painful memories of being on the streets at a very young age and the confusion they experienced regarding the perceived indifference of the general public to their situation. Stacie, who had spent 26 years of her life living on the streets, recalled wondering why no one ever asked her where she was supposed to be. She told us painfully, "I was only 12, I was just a little girl and no one ever came and asked me, 'little girl where are you supposed to be'... I stopped going to school in grade 5, I ran away from the group home and no one ever came looking for me... I got lost in the system I guess". Jen, another woman who became homeless at the age of 13, as a child prostitute, spoke about her experiences at a young age forced her to grow up quickly and develop a "hard shell". During the Photovoice project Jen captured a photograph of an old corner she used to stand on, she shares:

This is the corner that I stood on...my friend's father was my pimp and I didn't know any better, my mamma kicked me out, and my father was in the hospital and no group home would take me, and so I accepted it. I was like it's OK, but it's not OK! I thought I was doing what I had to in order to survive. People don't see you when you are on the corner. But it's a very shameful experience. When you stand out there you are ashamed of yourself and so you become overly hard, and you don't need anyone now because not I'm doing fine and don't need you. In this moment I am ok. I was very hard and angry...the harder you are the less people can hurt you.

The women who participated in the study who had come onto the streets at an early age discussed the need to do whatever necessary to survive, for them, that meant selling drugs to earn an income and protection in their new, dangerous lives, breaking into cars for warmth, and shoplifting. A new identity had to be established based on the availability of qualifying characters. Stacie tells us, “I had to be meaner, tougher... selling myself was not an option so I had to prove that I was tough like a man”.

### *Loneliness and re-creation*

Women spoke of their isolation and loneliness and sense of being abandoned while living on the streets and their need to re-create family. For example, Loretta, established her identity based on being a care-giver and became known on the streets as “mom” as she would shoplift clothes, food and hygiene products for many of the working girls for whom she provided care.. Many of the women spoke of the surrogate families that were created on the streets; the necessity of building relationships not only for physical protection, but for the sharing of resources, as well as for emotional and psychological support. One of the photographs Yvonne captured was of an empty cul-de-sac that was a frequent hang out prior to gentrification efforts in the East Village in Calgary. She writes of the picture:

I walked through there so many times. I can sit there and look around. I could see and sense the lost tears. I would sit there and get high. I could picture all the people who passed away. But it wasn't all bad that happened there, we used to have fun. It was like a family, and now there is nothing left.

Another woman references a now closed bar that she used to frequent when she was 13 saying, “it has been so long since I have been down there. It brings up a lot of bad

memories from my childhood, but also reminds me how nice some people were down there”.

*Cycle of homelessness and incarceration*

Early involvement in “street life” brought many of these women into contact with the criminal justice system at an early age and many had frequent experiences in the Calgary Remand Centre as well as Provincial jail before becoming federally sentenced. The women made the explicit connection between their poverty, and for many their homelessness, and their involvement in the criminal justice system. Toni, who had entered homelessness as a child in Edmonton suggested, “a lot of homeless people will find themselves locked up because they have nowhere else to go”. The challenge of not “loitering”, as a homeless person in Calgary, was made worse by being a homeless woman. Many of our participants reported the lack of services available for homeless woman, specifically related to addictions treatment compared to services offered to men. Stacie found it particularly challenging because she was not a domestic violence victim and did not have children in her care therefore could not access women’s shelters whose mandates were to serve either families or victims of violence. Furthermore, Stacie has begun selling drugs to support herself financially, as well as to support her addiction and was barred from many of the homeless serving agencies for being a “known drug dealer”. She says:

Every single homeless organization would not allow me in their facility...selling crack cocaine is a schedule 1. So I mean banning me from every facility in the city isn’t gonna’ say “I better not sell crack”, all it’s gonna’ make me wanna’ do

is sell double so that I can go down the street and get a hotel. Which means I'm gonna' really put my hustle on.

Many of the women also described being “stuck” in their addiction and feeling ashamed and misunderstood in terms of their addiction. Yvonne states:

You see so much out there that you can't speak of, because it's sad a lot out here. You can't control it because of addiction. Silence can't appreciate the good. It's a hush, hush lifestyle. They don't know what's behind the addiction. No one listen's and you're stuck.

Stacie describes the impact of her addiction during one period of time when she was not banned from one of the shelter:

I am surrounded by a 100 people, but I am alone. That is my life... addiction is so powerful, it's a disease. When I was sleeping in intox [a unit in the shelter for residents under the influence of drugs and alcohol] I was so messed up I didn't even feel that pain – that concrete floor wasn't cold, my loneliness wasn't killing me, as long as I woke up with my fix it was ok to me. Living like that was ok to me because I wasn't 'dope sick', that's how sick addiction is. That's how blind and covered you get. You get so fucking numb that you don't feel that pain.

Toni describes her feelings of powerlessness over her own life through a poem she entitled “the unheard voice”:

I feel so alone and cold/ I'm lost and blind/ a childless mother, also the motherless child/ I walk aimless around and around/ what I am looking for, never finding/ I am scarred from the inside out/ never to heal my wounds, lost, forgotten/ who am

I? I am any and every women you have judged on the street corner/ I have died alone in a shallow grave/ never to be found/ and if found, never to be identified/ I AM your mother, your sister, your daughter. I am that voice crying for help that falls upon deaf ears.

### *Closed doors*

One's capacity to make choices is severely restricted when living in poverty; and even more so when homeless and battling with addictions, addictions that are often a result of childhood and adult experiences of abuse and trauma. It was important for the women to firmly identify, "no one grows up saying I am going to be a criminal, or homeless, or a drug addict... it just happens". All of the women involved in this study committed income-generating offences, and for some women those offences were related to issues of addiction. One of the participants, who had never battled with addictions, grew up middle class, and was university educated, admitted that prior to her incarceration she shared many of the social, neo-liberal beliefs that would blame people for their circumstances, such as being unemployed or homeless. During the Photovoice project, Marcy described how poverty and the lack of services led to her criminal behaviour and incarceration and challenged her ability to move forward post incarceration:

- 1) Obtained an education
- 2) Made \$1,000 a year over the poverty line
  - a) no subsidy for rent or day care
  - b) did not qualify for legal aid to obtain child support after my divorce
- 3) All avenues expended for help and doors closed

- a) found myself using illegal means to pay for living expenses – to feed, house, and cloth myself and my children
- 4) Went to jail – lost my family, friends, reputation and self-esteem
  - a) no programs to accommodate my needs as I did not fall into the Justice Systems rehabilitation program
- 5) Criminal record upon release – closed doors for employment and further education
  - a) I was rejected for further education and sent over 600 resumes before I was able to obtain employment – after I changed my name
- 6) I had a hard time finding affordable housing
  - a) I was turned down to a Restitution Order which gave me bad credit
  - b) no longer have my children due to my jail sentence and former spouse obtaining full custody during my sentence, so was put on non-urgent lit for housing
- 7) After I found employment:
  - a) lived in fear that my record would be revealed, so I lived two different lives
  - b) fear realized as employer found out about my record – bye bye employment
- 8) Back to same cycle...

Where is the help where help is needed? We are expected to rehabilitate and move forward in life and be productive after our crime; however, the holes in the system are still.

The feelings expressed by Marcy were collectively shared and experienced by the other women in our group.

### *Stigma and shame*

Women expressed frustration that many of the barriers they faced prior to their incarceration remained upon their release; however these barriers now seemed insurmountable as the stigma of a record was added to their plight. The constant fear of being “found out” added enormous stress to the lives of these women and resulted in reported feelings of “in-authenticity” as they struggles to develop new relationships and friendships but had to constantly monitor how much they revealed. One woman, Tracy, shared a story illustrating this fear. Shortly after being released Tracy had gotten a job at a nearby grocery store. One day Tracy had caught someone shoplifting, telling the group she knew what signs to look for as she had shoplifted many times before. The staff and management at the grocery store were surprised she said, and curiously wondered how she knew the woman was shoplifting. Tracy explained to us how uncomfortable the, what felt like an interrogation for her was, and said she wished she never had said anything.

One of the other women was not as lucky, and her employer did discover she had a record and was let go. A number of additional barriers were identified by the women and included regaining custody of their children; addictions support; educational training/upgrading; meaningful employment opportunities; and regaining proper identification, which can be very challenging as many women leave prison with outstanding tickets, for one woman ranging in the thousands and unable to regain identification cards until fines were paid. Obstacles to employment were a significant barrier for one woman in particular. Upon release Stacie enrolled at a local college to

obtain her high school diploma and finished with the highest of hopes to attain a career working with people who have battled with addictions and homelessness, her way of paying it forward. She applied for numerous positions but was unable to secure employment with a social agency. She now works for temporary agencies doing manual labour and hopes for better.

*The forgotten sisters: Working towards justice*

While the women recognized that progress had been made in terms of services available for women experiencing homelessness and incarceration, specifically for youth there were a number of concerns the woman still had for their sisters still on the streets. In particular, was the gentrification of the East Village in Calgary and loss of available, safe space for women to use as a respite, a sort of safe haven. The loss of physical space also correlated with the breakdown of community and family structure the women had found. Jen captured a photograph of an old church many of the working girls used to hang around at to seek shelter from the cold and find safety in numbers. For her caption, she writes:

A lot of working girls used to come here. Before they put up the gates we would go in behind the garbage cans, or tuck ourselves in around the corner to shelter ourselves from the wind and cold. Lots of women have used this place as shelter. They have put up these gates to lock the women out and now I feel bad for all the women who can't use it because it's not there anymore. It meant a lot when it was there. It wasn't only a place to get high, it was a shelter from the cold, and there was a kinship because we were all there for the same reasons. I was so young when I was out there, and it's just sad that it's not there to give comfort to

someone else... I think it's a pretty big fence to keep out women. People think to solve the problem you need to lock it out, to put blinders on and pretend it's not happening. This used to be a safe spot for us...we could duck into those corners and feel safe.

In both of the Calgary and Prince Albert sites our weekly meetings may have begun as a collective space to identify gaps in services for women who experience incarceration and homelessness, but what it became was a space for empowerment. The women courageously shared the stories of their lives with the hope that it would help the women still out there and the women yet to come – to prevent them from coming. The women came together to find inspiration and healing and offer solutions and ways of fostering belonging and inclusion for women in the community. Lorretta speaks to the importance of hope upon release and the need for women to know they can succeed. During one of our creative exercises a group of women from the Calgary site traveled to Banff for the day, this is what Lorretta wrote of that experience:

Show people what is out there to do. When you go downtown, what do you see? Addicts, drug dealers, prostitution, negative shit. But you know what? It's been 20 years since I've drove out [to Banff] and seen the mountains or lakes because I've been so busy in this rut. Nobody's offered, nobody said, "hey do you want to go camping?" or "do you want to go swimming?" Nobody does because you're an addict and nobody wants to spend time with you. I think things like that, showing people when they are getting out of jail, where they can go is more significant than showing them what they did because we all know what we did time for. We all know what are crimes were. What we don't know anymore us "are we able to

get back to that ever?" Because no one has reached out a hand to show us that they want to allow us back on the normal side of life...

Women coming out of incarceration or out of the shelter systems need to have safe places to access. Not only safe physical spaces, but emotionally and socially as well. Women need support to rebuild their sense of identity, self-esteem and worth. Women coming out of prison often return to their communities marginalized and isolated, which can have a profoundly negative impact on their ability to reintegrate. For many of the women in this study they just wanted to someone to talk to, someone to share their experiences with in a non-judgmental way. For Yvonne, that sense of acceptance was found in her Creator and her dog, Bear, who she describes as her best friend. She tells us:

He is my best friend, I take him for walks two or three times a day because when I am feeling sad and I'm at home all day and I have no one to talk to, he listens. He knows when I am sad, or bored and he will go get his lease. Because he knows when I go for a walk, I pray to my Creator. He's helped me in my recovery, this is the longest I've ever been sober in my life.

### ***Prince Albert Stories***

Women in the study told two stories. The first narrative tells the cycle of loss of Aboriginal cultural and traditions, family dysfunction childhood adversity, poverty, homelessness, addictions which comes full circle to incarceration. In the second cycle the women share how they were able to overcome these obstacles and break the cycle through support from family and friends and connections with their traditional culture and beliefs. In this second narrative women do not end up back in the correctional system, instead they come full circle where there are balanced and living according to the medicine

wheel. In this circle they are able to meet their mental, emotional, physical and spiritual needs. The following section shares each of these cycles.

*Cycles of despair*

Aboriginal women identified that their adult contexts of poverty, homelessness and incarceration as deeply rooted in early experiences related to the disruption of traditional culture and values, conditions of poverty while living on the reserve and child abuse as the following stories illustrate:

I guess if I was to look back at my life I would have to start before I was born. Both of my parents went to Residential School. Women went from being really important people in the community to being ashamed of our bodies and being women. At Residential School they didn't have those lessons and those ceremonies that teach young girls about the importance of being a woman and all of that power that that holds, and as a result of that, I had a really screwed up childhood. I didn't really get to learn our culture, and definitely didn't learn our language.

Since I was little I was taught by the white society that we were all born equal. So how come they treat us differently? I remember thinking these thoughts at a young age when I was taken away from my family. People have no idea what it is like to be taken away from your own families and have people try to make you little red white people.

I remember when I was small my family was just shuffled all over the place. People were saying, 'oh well you can't have our house, you guys have to move out. You know how it is in the reserve. So that's where homelessness started for me, when I was a little kid right till, well I don't know.

I was molested by my dad, and you know what, my mom blamed me. She was evil. Not to be mean or anything. I'd even get a slap across the face for doing nothing, or for not picking up the garbage or not changing my brother. Like that's the reason why I don't like my mom because my mom was evil. When my dad wasn't home, that's the time I got shit.

And then there was foster care. I never ever want my kids to ever be in foster care, especially because of all the things that happened to my sisters and my brothers... They pretended to care but they didn't. It was here's your food here's your clothes go to bed, that's it. Kids are placed in Social Services or with unhealthy relatives then they feel their emptiness and the low self esteem. They begin to do drugs, alcohol, prostitution whatever. It begins to be an out of control cycle. It is just awful.

The challenges women faced in childhood continued to negatively impact their lives and those of their families in adolescence in the form of violence and addictions.

When I was sixteen, I ran away from home, went to live in Edmonton with mother who was an alcoholic, my dad, my stepfather, and learned the life of an

alcoholic and how they live. I was really scared watching people drink and party. I never grew up around that so it was scary. It was scary to watch people being straight and then watch them get drunk and fight and slobber all over and piss themselves and pass out on the floor. I had never seen that in my life. My mom and dad would be gone for the whole weekend and us kids would be alone, me with my three little brothers. That was scary. That's where I learned about alcohol and what it did to people just by watching, observing.

I remember watching my mom's friend "get beat up really bad by a guy for 20 bucks. Everyone just sat there and watched. I remember thinking, 'those are your friends? Friends don't do that'.

One woman summed up her early experience, "my life hasn't been easy". She further explains, "so between my family and foster care, life hasn't been easy. I can't say I had that loving feeling or somebody to teach me. Nobody taught me anything".

Women shared how they were blamed for their situation, not believed and were unable to access services that would have disrupted the cycle of poverty, homelessness and incarceration. All of which had serious consequences for their self-esteem, self-worth, emotional well-being and safety as depicted in these stories:

There were times I tried to speak up to find that support and that loving feeling I wasn't getting at home. But every time I spoke up I wasn't believed and so you get, you know, you feel ashamed I guess and so I think with not being believed you have a low self esteem. You feel like no one cares about you so I began not to care about myself.

You begin to feel powerless. People look down on you. My worker looks down on me. She doesn't understand it's not my fault you know.

I try to speak out and people continue to not believe me. I've seen it so many times. Aboriginal women are not taken seriously charging our abusers. 'Cuz even like when it's physical, emotional, sexual whatever, like when we go into charge somebody a lot of times like they make us feel like we're sort of feeling like the victim.' But no one understands that I don't have safety. It's scary.

When you are never believed, you lose trust in people. I didn't share with nobody – nothing. I walked by myself. 'Cuz you can't trust anybody. I trust no one.

In the midst of all that I began to doubt myself. My whole life no one believed me and so I started to think that maybe those people were right. I began thinking that maybe it was something that I did, that I deserved what happened.

I was angry. And all around me was anger and violence in my community.

It made me feel like I wasn't a person. That I wasn't valuable enough to be listened to and cared for. That's why I turned to drugs or alcohol.

And so here I am. I have a bad drug and alcohol problem, I've never had a job, I don't have proper education and basically I've had a rough upbringing. And it's easy for people to look at me and say just go get help – but from where?

Women in the study shared their pathways of alcohol and drugs addictions were used as a means of coping:

I am ashamed of myself. I really don't wanna' feel this way. My addiction progressed quickly. I didn't have one before. I never drank when I was young. My addiction started three years ago, started out with alcohol and then I went to weed and then I went to cocaine and then I went to needles. It progressed pretty fast.

I remember the day it hit me. I never wanted to be like my mom, she's a drunk she's got ten kids with different men. I remember thinking, 'I'll never be like her.' Then all of a sudden one day I realized, 'Holy shit here I am just a drug addict. I'm even worse than her 'cuz she was just a drunk'.

As mothers the women in the study tried to change things for their own children, but were faced with further difficulties in accessing the necessary services and supports.

I remember this time I wanted from my Band, to pay for my power bill 'cuz I had no power and I was eight months pregnant and had another little baby with me already. I tried phoning my band, 'cuz they were supposed to oversee that for me. But then they told me they only work with kids. And so I didn't know where else to go. I didn't know there were other supports out there; I didn't know that there was other resources. I felt I had two choices. Either be on the street or shack up.

Well I was too scared to be on the street so I shackled up. I'm not proud of it. And shackling up isn't all good either there's a lot of domestic abuse out there. He said he loved me, but he didn't.

But what would you do? "If you're a single parent you get \$300 Social Services. That is not enough. Like where the hell are you gonna' live for 300 bucks?"

There are people out there that should help you, but instead it feels like they make life harder. One night my daughter had run away. We found her, but I was worried she would run again. I took her to Social Services and the supervisor came out right away and she said, 'come into the room I've gotta' talk to you'. I said, 'well I don't want to leave my daughter here 'cuz the cops just finished helping me pick her up'. He says, 'well no, I need to talk to you by yourself'. I said 'no I don't want to leave my daughter out in the hallway. Because if she runs again where am I going to find her'. Eventually, someone else came to talk to me and said, 'We are not gonna' put her in emergency care, we are not helping you because you yelled at our worker'. I had not yelled at the worker, and for a while we argued. Finally said, 'I find that really astonishing that you're not gonna' help me with a 13 year old high risk'. I'm trying to protect my daughter but no one's helping me do that.

Failure to receive appropriate and adequate services for their families renewed the feelings of pain women had experienced in their childhood as one woman explained:

It reminds me of when I was young and no one believed me. It's the same today. As the victim I was ashamed and began to have low self esteem, due to the fact that my story was never believed. Or made to believe that it was my fault. That's why people they don't want to seek out help because, 'oh it's an Aboriginal mom, oh they...', nobody wants to believe us and I think that's the biggest problem, especially when we go into the police station.

The consequence of these multiple and overlapping challenges including racism, Aboriginal women in the study once again faced family disruption, poverty, and homelessness.

And so this is where I am now. Separated from my children. Hungry. No where to stay.

I've been homeless for seven months now. It's hard emotionally. Just so many things happening, sleeping on the floor, in doorways of buildings, I've woken up in lots of places. Just wherever I happen to be when I get sleepy. My belongings are in a garbage bag, and I can't keep clean. I've tried to get a place but there is nothing out there I can afford, because rent's doubled or tripled but the basic amount for Social Services hasn't gone up with the rise in the rent.

I've tried to get a place but it's hard. I had a place, when I used to have my kids. I was pretty excited for our new home, and then I walked in. It was horrible, you wouldn't believe the rug. It was just all black and ewwww. I hated to see my kids

living there. So my friend phoned the landlord and said, 'wow, you're charging this lady you know can't you do anything? She's got small children. He said, 'well to tell you the truth I don't even like renting to those people'. She said, 'I beg your pardon?' She made him repeat it and he said it again. She said, 'do you know you're talking to one of them'. 'Ah no', he said. She said, yes, and I'm gonna' be down very shortly. Within a week he had a brand new rug delivered, because he figured she was gonna' report him. But it's not just about available housing, and money, it's that people see and Aboriginal women with children looking for a place and they don't want to rent to her. It's racism.

Again women coped with their pain through deepening addictions:

So I try not to think about my kids in care, or the house I used to have. I forget that I am hungry. Sometimes I won't eat for four days at a time, but it doesn't matter because the crack takes away my hunger pangs.

My addiction is so strong right now. Awhile ago I was in an accident. I had a broken my collarbone, three ribs, the big bone back here was broken. I was in really rough shape. I needed to go to the hospital, but you know what I did? I took off and went to go find crack. Could barely frickin' walk, my head was split open and everything else. I ended up in a coma for three days, by the time I got out of the hospital. That's how strong my crack addiction is. It is those moments, when you're laying in the hospital bed with your head split open, when you wake up in

another strange doorway that you begin to feel hopeless. That's when I start thinking 'I don't care about myself, I'm just gonna go do this and go do that'.

All of the women in the Prince Albert site had been incarcerated in Pine Grove, a Provincial Correctional Centre. They shared how this time was for some women detrimental and in conflict with their cultural values and practices, while for others it allowed them to time to be sober and plan for their future.

I was a clean kid you know, I was quiet; I wasn't the way like I am today. I came into Pine Grove for something small. But this place changed me, I'm little bit wilder than when I came in.

Life is not easy in here. It's uncertain. They talk about getting out and being prepared for home, when sometimes I don't even know when I'm going to get out. So how can I really be prepared? So right now I just focused on getting through my time.

But it's hard; it doesn't feel right to just sit here with nothing to do. The other day I heard somebody say our culture was not punishment oriented, it's more about healing. So that's where we run into problems. Because the other society it's all punishment. Our culture believes in healing all aspects of ourselves. So when we do something our Elders used to teach us, they talked to a person or helped them get well. But the other society, the dominant society throws everybody in jail if they do something.

Upon leaving the institution the cycle is however repeated, women again face family disruption, dire poverty, hunger, homelessness and lack of suitable services and supports.

I'm out now. I was clean in Pine Grove. It felt good. I came out with a plan. I wanted support, but when I called "I couldn't believe it. I said 'All I need is the support'. They said 'we can't we have no beds we're filled up'. That's what they kept telling me day after day.

I went to find a place to stay. I wanted a place for me and my kids. I wanted them back with me, their mom. It said in the paper that their places for rent but when I called, all of a sudden the housing wasn't available for us because people would rather have a dog, they'd rather have somebody with a pet than have somebody with a kid living in their house. So I found it really difficult to find a place that my kids and I could live.

I'm hungry. I make my way to the food bank. I stand in line and wait for my turn. The people that work there are so ignorant. They are rude. There I am really destitute, really down and out, I go there to ask for food and I get treated like shit.

I sit in my workers office. I begin talking about my kids. They are all I want. I thought about them every day I was in Pine Grove, and now I'm out. I want them back. I want to be a family. She tells me I need a home to bring my kids to, I need

food to feed them. I think of a place to live, I think of standing in line for food. I begin to cry. She tells me that I shouldn't be emotional, that I need to be stable for my children to be returned to me. I begin to think, if she was homeless and all her kids were taken, she wouldn't be emotional? How can you say that I am too emotional over my kids? I told her, 'You know what, I've been clean over a year of course I'm gonna have feelings 'cuz I'm sober and clean and I think it's completely healthy to show emotions. But it doesn't get me my kids. I need support but I don't know where to get it.

I need a place to stay for the night. But it's hard to find somewhere to warm to stay. Because at least when you're high or drunk you could say, 'can I sleep on your couch? Most people say, you're drunk use my couch, rather than if you're sober it's like, oh we're going to bed you gotta' leave now. I don't know where to go when people tell me I have to leave.

I have nowhere to sleep; nowhere to go. I'm on some waiting lists for affordable housing but the waiting lists are years, long, long waiting lists." So for now "I am forced to live with my unhealthy mother in a one bedroom small house. I can't get welfare 'cuz I don't have a home, can't get a home 'cuz I don't have any money." My mom's place isn't that great. We walk over to my brother's house and go take a bath 'cuz our landlord hasn't fixed out taps, every time we turn on our taps water just goes flying everywhere."

Women described the consequence of inability to receive supports is an complex interweaving of poverty, homelessness and a return to addictions and the criminal behaviours used to support their addictions.

I finally found a place to stay. I thought this would be a place that could help support me. But, it didn't have any structure to help us find jobs or anything. You go to a meeting and that was it. I can't stand this, every day is the same thing, I get up in the morning, I go to a meeting, I sit around, I eat supper, clean up, go to bed. Every day. It's boring. There was no one there to support me. And so I went to a meeting and the rest of the day was yours. What do you do? Go back to your old friends, your old using friends. And that's what I did. I went back to my friends 'cuz I didn't have any knowledge of anything else better to do when I got out of Pine Grove.

I started selling for different dealers. I am a really good hustler. Dealers fight over me just to sell a couple of pieces. They know I can hustle it. Like what they pay 50 bucks for I can make 100 bucks off of for them. You know what I mean, that's the kind of hustler I am. The people I hustle it to, they'd always come back and buy more you know. It works for me 'cause I have an addiction to support too.

My addiction is bad again.

I feel lost and alone, I have no answers. There's not much support out there. That's why a lot of women end up back on the street. Most of the time that's where we end up. Or, we get drunk again.

Life isn't easy. But it's not just me. My friends who stay by the river were kicked out again. The police officers go through all those bushes, they rip all the tents down or if you're in it, they'll tell you, 'you got one hour to clean this place up. We'll be back in an hour and take everything and it goes out into the fire, clothes, everything. If you're not there, they just take your stuff and they burn it all and you come back to nothing. My friends came home to nothing. And so now they are sleeping on my mom's floor too.

It hurts to think about my kids. To know that we are apart. Maybe it's better this way. My friend got her kids back. She met all the requirements, she's did everything they asked, she's this and that, 'here's your five kids.' I saw her downtown and she was so excited. She told me right away, but they didn't give her any supports. All of a sudden she's goin', 'oh my God, I haven't had them for so long' you know. What do I do? Nothing, there's nothing. No supports, none. So she had to give back her kids because she was so overwhelmed. Shit. At least I didn't have to give them back again. But it physically hurts my heart when I think of them. I wish I could see them.

The cycle is clearly identified as intergenerational by women in the study.

I wake up at night sometimes feeling ashamed of my life. I recall all the times I have not been believed. I have a low self esteem. With these feelings I have turned to drugs, alcohol even prostitution and then I begin to do crimes to cope with my misery of my abuse. I feel no one cares about me so I begin not to care either about myself. My kids have been placed in Social Services or with unhealthy relatives and now they too begin to feel emptiness and low self esteem. They have begun to do drugs, alcohol, prostitution whatever. It begins to be an out of control cycle.

Finally one woman asks when will the cycle stop for her, her community and Aboriginal people, "I guess what I'm saying it it's not just me that feels hopeless. It feels like a whole community, generation after generation. We get caught in this cycle, I don't know where it's starts and where it will stop".

#### *Return and renewal*

Her question is answered when women share the second circle of which deviates from the first narrative. In response to receiving various supports from friends, workers, and connecting back to their culture the full circle for women does not end up with incarceration, women live balanced and lives according to the medicine where and are able to meet their mental, emotional, physical and spiritual needs.

Women described reconnecting to their traditional wisdom as a way forward:

I call my grandma. She's my support and my advocate. She speaks Cree and that feels like home to me. People don't realize when my grandma tells a joke, it's like 50 times more funny than it is saying it in English. Laughing helps me heal as I

wait for my family to return. And she's wise too; she always says "there's no such thing as a mistake if you learn a lesson from it. It's just a life lesson there's no regrets if you learn a lesson from a mistake that you made".

I think of the old man and what he said to me, 'go back on your own road you'll never be lost'. My own road, the cultural road has helped me so much and now I want my kids to know their road.

Women also identified the importance of Aboriginal organizations that would provide the need services and that they could which they could trust.

A home. I need to find a home for my kids. I hear of this Aboriginal organization that is suppose to help people with getting a house. I walk in and they're so welcoming, I trust them, they understand me. They tell me about housing and then they helped me fill out forms for low income housing. They give me information on different areas like apartments and all that, and expected me to do the footwork. You know, like they believed I could do it.

It's times like that I wish I could have other single moms to talk to, or just have someplace to go where I could talk to an adult and not just be with my child. You know, like just that mental health piece a bit where you just kind of feel better when you leave. It's too bad they don't have a place like that or something. If I had enough money in the world, I would probably open a place that was run by Aboriginal moms for Aboriginal moms.

Women in the study noted that the importance of gaining the skills necessary to regain control of their lives

They told me about “Women’s Home Improvement. They show you how to drywall, they show you plumbing, how to use power tools and that way you could fix your own house. If there’s a hole in the drywall you can fix it. Because a lot of times the landlord he’ll charge you lots to fix it.” It’s so good to know I can fix my own house for cheap cause I want my kids to live in somewhere good.

My worker told me I could have my kids back. I’m so excited. All I can think of are my kids. I have a place to stay. I’m working really hard at making a home for them. And so they can come and live with me, we can be a family again.

Women also noted that reclaiming their Aboriginal identity and culture was, not only important to help them on their journey, but was also critical in providing the necessary tools to ensure stability and success for future generations.

I want them to know the historical part, to learn about the history of our people. Plus what happened to them when our ceremonies were banned, and the Residential Schools. Then the young ones you know about what the impact it had on our generation and then us passing it on down to our children, then their children passing it on down to their kids. Cause I want to teach them right from wrong. Me, I’m trying my best to teach my kids that they should be finishing school and going to university and that ‘cuz you don’t want to end up like how I was.

You know in Residential School they told us we were wrong and that being Indian was bad. But we're Indians. So no matter what anybody says, you're still gonna be an Indian. I want my kids to regain their sense of self. Find their self image and be proud of who they are again. Because I used to be really ashamed of who I was. But then I learned the cultural way. I started to care about myself; I was going to Pow Wow's and stuff like that. I started being proud of who I was because of the way these people were dancing, it made me feel good. And that's what I want for my kids. There's a lot of anger and violence in our communities and we need to start healing. So you know what I've taught my kids? I teach them love. I even tell them every two minutes and they're sick of hearing it. But you know what they also need to hear? 'You're beautiful' or 'you rock' you know, my kids got so much self confidence man you tell them they're beautiful and they'll tell you they know.

And so we are together now, and we laugh, and I teach my kids the cultural way as much as I can. But it's not easy. Some days it gets overwhelming and I begin to think about the old days. I remember this time I had my kids about two-three months and I lost it. I was like, 'I can't stand it, I can't f'in stand it'. Every day is the same thing, I get up in the morning, I go do my job, I come home, I take care of my kids, I eat supper, clean up, go to bed. Every day the same. Routine is not always easy for me. I remember the old days going and partying every night.

Staying wherever I wanted, not knowing where I was going to eat or where my next fix would come from – it's weird to say, but there was an excitement to it.

So when I start to feel this way, feel like I'm going to lose it I go for a walk, it's where I feel comfort. In my circles I learned that my people are connected with nature. You know some people from up north say that going into the bush is their religion. And I feel it too, that's where I get comfort if I'm all stressed out, I'll go for a walk.

The other day when I was walking I thought of, the Indian Nation, I think we've survived against all odds. I'm sure they all thought we'd be gone by now, or assimilated into the White society. But we've stuck to our guns. But how often do we ever get that opportunity to actually be that voice? You know, to take our stories and make them into knowledge about hope and courage? How often do we ever get that opportunity?" I thought about this for awhile and decided to go to university; I want to be that voice for our people.

Women who have come full circle described their aspects of their current lives as difficult. They also wish for better for their friends and family still on the streets struggling with addictions.

Life is still hard sometimes.

I live in a house. I have food in my cupboards. I'm going to university. My kids are with me every night, and we are a family. Sometimes, I think of myself strung

out on crack on the street and wonder how that girl got from there to here. I used to think being 'here' would be easy. It would feel like I have no problems, but that's not true.

I think of my friends on the street. I think of the people, that had my back for so long, that are cold and lonely as I am in my warm house. I know there's a van comes around every night and feeds them food and everything, and gives condoms and warm blankets, and they could go to the Salvation Army, they give you food, a drink and some juices or whatever, bandage you up, whenever you're in pain. But it doesn't seem like enough. It just doesn't seem right that I am in here and they are out there.

I'm trying to balance my kids and my school and that's hard. I'll be doing really well and then all of a sudden I'll get stressed and the urge to find drugs or alcohol will hit. So instead of running out and filling my urge "I'll just clean somebody's house, a crack house is spic and span. I did something positive and I didn't take my anger out the wrong way and I didn't beat the fire. That's just the way, that's what's kept me alive all these years – the Creator. I know he's saying yeah you can do it. That's why I'm still here I guess in once piece. I haven't been shot or stabbed or anything, cuz I handle my anger in a really positive way that works for me in that moment."

The other day I was picking my kids up from school, and I ran into one of my old street friends. She moves around lots and still has problems with alcohol and her kids have been in and out of care for years. She saw me and looked at me like Oh she's an apple [Aboriginal on the outside but White on the inside], she thinks she's so smart now'. I'm looking at her, 'what do you mean I'm still the same old me'. You know like I didn't change just because I cleaned up and went to university. I worked really hard to get my family together. Very, very, very hard and we've been kicked in the face so many times. It's hard to feel like I have to prove who I am.

I guess what I'm saying is that life is not easy. We need to support each other not be against each other. I mean, I shouldn't even be sitting here, I should have probably jumped off the bridge a long time ago, but I'm not 'cuz I'm really strong and I'm gonna make it. As long as I treat my children with love and respect and really care about them. I need to care about myself because I've got so much knowledge in my heart and in my brain.

One woman summarizes the learnings from the circle of her own journey and asks that women with similar experiences share their stories of survival and renewal so that others might create change in their own lives.

And so I wanted to end my time sitting in a circle. When I look around my circle I see a lot of people, who have learned a lot of lessons from the mistakes that they've made. I think that's how come everybody sitting in this circle has got so much to teach people. Because we've all been given the opportunity to live life.

You know, even if it wasn't our choices when we were younger. We've all learned from our lives, even if it wasn't our mistakes originally; we've learned from somebody else's mistakes so that we're not doing the same things. I used to cry to my Elders about the time I spent wasting my life in jail. They said, 'no you didn't waste your life in jail that was your lesson that you learned so that when you leave here you will be able to help people. And that's why I think it's really important for all of us to tell our stories because other women who are listening to your story will say, "I can really relate to that". Your stories help other people. And the more you tell your stories, the stronger you get and the more strength and power we have together to create change. Thanks for listening."

### **Discussion**

The cycling between poverty, homelessness and incarceration exists because, in part, social services are not either available, or inadequate to meet the needs of women prior to their coming into conflict with the criminal justice system. For many of the women involved in the study, the series of events that took place in their lives and traumas they were exposed beginning in childhood trapped them in poverty, which led them to commit criminal acts that eventually culminated in incarceration. The cycle of poverty, homelessness and incarceration was to be repeated many times for the women in our study. This cycle, which for most women in the study began in childhood, points to the necessity of preventative and interventive supports and services for children and youth. This needs to include the public education system and foster care systems both of which play critical roles in the lives of young people. Specific interventions to reduce exposure of children to physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect are required to

facilitate optimum well-being for children. In addition every effort needs to be enacted to address child poverty so as to ensure children and youth are not growing up with all the related disadvantages and barriers to achieving their potential. Further, these early intervention strategies need to be adopted and utilized so that children and youth are not involved with the criminal justice system at an early age.

Stronger supports are also needed for women living below (or barely above) the poverty line to ensure their basic needs are being met including access to safe and affordable housing, addictions and mental health treatment, affordable day care, access to legal aid, and meaningful employment opportunities that provide a living wage. When women are denied the ability to living independently and with autonomy to support themselves and their children they may be forced to commit illegal acts as a means of survival. This results, as we can see from the findings of the study in a cycle of hardship and dysfunction, which is difficult to break through. The discourse surrounding women's criminality then must be altered in such a way as to recognize women's crime as not a result of deviance and irresponsibility, but rather as what appears to be a last resort. The criminal justice system then needs to account for the lives of women, and the context and circumstances that brought them into contact with the law in the first place. Changes will not be made through the alteration and modification of individualized women's behavior and capacity for decision-making, but rather changes must take place on the larger structural level that continue to deny women the right to a living income, shelter and human dignity.

While the criminal justice system has, through the creation of Creating Choices, recognized the need to facilitate empowerment and opportunity for women; there has

been little effort to materialize these ideals (Task Force of Federally-sentenced Women, 1990). Programs that are women centered, that is, programs not modeled after those created for men, are still lacking and those that are available within the institution are often accompanied with long wait lists. Programs and services offered within the institution need to be premised in the unique experiences of the lives of women; such as gendered and racialized inequality, histories of physical and sexual violence, motherhood, and various and unique identities as women. In addition, programming that allows women to connect or reconnect with traditional Aboriginal culture is imperative to break the cycle and allow women to begin another journey (Walsh, MacDonald, Rutherford, Moore & Krieg, 2012).

A major concern to arise out of our group was the forced assimilation of female inmates to traditional roles of women including emotional management. Participants discussed their frustration of not being allowed a safe place to be angry, to do emotional work or cope with their frustrations and negative thoughts, despite the fact that many female inmates have abundant justification for their anger.

Motherhood is another facet of women's lives. While a source of stigma and shame it also serves to provide a purpose for women in moving towards healthier lives for themselves and their children (Walsh & Crough, in press). Providing the necessary supports for mothering pre- during and post incarceration has the potential to reduce rates of incarceration and the adverse consequences of incarceration for children and mothers.

The Aboriginal women in the project applied the teachings of the Medicine Wheel to lend understanding to the cycle of homelessness and incarceration. The medicine wheel is an Aboriginal concept that is used and understood by many

Aboriginal peoples on Turtle Island (Bopp, et al, 1989). The Elders state that the medicine wheel is comprised of four different areas, mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical. To have balance in all four areas is to live life to its fullest potential. When you are balanced in all areas, you are living life in a good way. If you are unbalanced in any or several areas, your body and spirit will be affected by that (Bopp, et al, 1989).

For many of the Aboriginal women, change was rooted in a spiritual reconnection to their cultural teachings. The incorporation of traditional teachings and ceremonies, as well as, access to Elders in the programming of the correctional facilities proved to be pivotal in their healing journeys. For many, there was a spiritual void that they were searching to fill and when they discovered or rediscovered their cultural traditions it marked a turning point in their lives. The cultural and spiritual practises provided ways and skills for coping with life that the women may not have had before. It also produced a sense of belonging and community that comes with participating in cultural ceremonies.

It is clear that the cycle of incarceration and homelessness affected the women in all areas of the medicine wheel. Developing culturally relevant services and support are crucial to breaking the cycle of incarceration and homelessness among the Aboriginal female population (McCallum & Isaac, 2011; NWAC, 2007; Ruttan et al., 2008).

Culturally relevant solutions should strive to nurture and develop the talents and abilities of Aboriginal women. Providing education to service providers and policy makers about the culture and experiences of Aboriginal women may develop more effective solutions to the cycle of incarceration and homelessness. Such solutions should involve key members of Aboriginal communities.

Support must be provided to enable Aboriginal women to gain safe, permanent housing and improve self-sufficiency. This can be facilitated through increased flexibility of social services and by building networks of support. Research suggests that because many homeless mothers tend to receive help from relatively few professional resources, helping agencies must be creative in fostering networks of community support (McCallum and Isaac, 2011). Policy makers should also consider the role of social support when developing shelter, health care, educational, and community development initiatives to improve the lives of homeless and economically disadvantaged families (Leticq et al., 1998).

The cycling between homelessness and incarceration does not have to exist. If doors were opened and cries for help were answered by social and government agencies, while every legal avenue is attempted, many of these women would have never walked through the gates of prison. Furthermore, if the criminal justice system and the government accepted part of the responsibility for the crimes committed by women, as they relate to addictions and poverty, and better prepared female inmates for reintegration through supportive and attainable discharge planning, many women would not ever return to prison. Presently, however, recidivism rates for women remain high, not for new offences, but for parole violations as many women return to their communities facing new, and previously existing obstacles and barriers including finding housing, employment and maintaining sobriety as wait lists for treatment centre's continue to grow.

During the course of this study it became readily apparent that peer support is a critical component of successful reintegration and well-being for women post

incarceration. The women involved in the study identified the need to develop relationships with women whom have had similar life experiences, had experienced incarceration and the trauma of the institution and had faced similar challenges in their community. Peer support has the potential to rebuild self-esteem and confidence, provide a space for healing, and facilitate empowerment through collective associations. These are all things the research team witnessed during the course of this study.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Rates of incarceration among Aboriginal women in Canada will continue to increase if policy changes are not made that ensure women the opportunity to an appropriate standard of living through their own autonomy and agency. To disrupt the cycling between incarceration and homelessness we must engage in primary intervention strategies that keep women out of poverty. Changes must also occur within a system that continues to criminalize women for being poor. It is essential that the justice system contextualizes crimes committed by women so as to understand the correlation between crime and survival; the responsibility will then be to initiate every alternative to prison and provide rehabilitation in the community as opposed to in the penal institutions. Further, developing culturally relevant services and support are crucial to breaking the cycle of incarceration and homelessness among the Aboriginal female population. These services must be developed and informed by Aboriginal women themselves.

For women currently caught in this cycle, it is imperative that secondary interventions are put in place that target the variables that brought them into contact with the criminal justice system to begin with; this includes poverty, histories of abuse and trauma, lack of education and employment opportunities, issues of substance abuse, and

access to treatment and counseling for both diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health. Program interventions then, directed towards these variables must begin inside the institution where women can have access to trauma counseling, education upgrading, employment training and vocational skills, including self esteem workshops. These programs will then allow for appropriate discharge planning whereby the women can be active in their release planning and feel prepared re-entering the community. It is imperative the partnerships and collaboration take place between Correctional Services Canada and Aboriginal community members so to ensure the success of women upon release. This means that women cannot be released into the community without safe, affordable and stable living and without a means to meaningfully contribute to the community whether through employment or education.

Overwhelmingly this research, both the process and the findings have disclosed the need for peer support and positive social relations as women are released into the community. While housing, employment and treatment are key factors determining success post-incarceration; the women have highlighted the importance of friendship, acceptance and support upon release. The emotional and psychological healing is just as important as the physical needs for women upon release. Efforts towards developing peer support programs and mentorship carry great potential to reduce recidivism rates, increase success chances of reintegration, provide the space for healing in a non-judgmental space and allow women with the lived experience of poverty/homelessness and incarceration to use those experiences for advocacy and social change.

It is the women themselves whom have been caught in this destructive cycle who hold the answers to where gaps and solutions are to be found. Allowing the women to

have their voices heard in terms of needs within the institutions, specifically related to the unique experiences of the lives of women, as well as their own discharge planning, supporting women to express what they want in their life, and providing the opportunity for engagement and advocacy post-incarceration can allow for real change both at the policy and community level. Research methods like CBR ensure the voices of those with lived experiences are heard and provide the means for the voices to effect change within the community. CBR is an effective tool for empowerment and invites participants to be an active part of the conversation towards finding effective and sustaining solutions to problems faced by themselves and their community members.

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