Kijibashik: Turn it Around

Stories About Motherhood from Previously Incarcerated Indigenous Mothers in Ontario

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Abstract

Over the last decade, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of incarcerated Indigenous women within Canada's federal prisons. More than half of these women also identify as single mothers of multiple children, extending the scope of incarceration's impact across generations. While maternal incarceration has been shown to contribute to a myriad of issues in children, including mental illness and increased mortality, there are few qualitative studies where previously incarcerated Indigenous women have been asked directly about the impact of incarceration on their wellbeing and mothering. This project will utilize a community-based research methodology that centers the voices of previously incarcerated Indigenous mothers by examining the commonalities and distinctions in their lived experiences. We will (1) identify the mental, emotional, spiritual, physical, and relational implications of incarceration for Indigenous mothers, (2) explore Indigenous concepts of motherhood and kinship, (3) identify the unique needs of this population in the criminal justice system, and (4) inform new and existing programs and services directed towards Indigenous mothers involved in the criminal justice system. Semi-structured individual interviews with previously incarcerated Indigenous mothers and Sharing Circles (focus groups) with key stakeholders, including Elders, Healers, and community partners involved in the criminal justice field will form the core knowledge for the project. This project will address a critical gap in public health research concerning the wellbeing of marginalized and incarcerated individuals and contribute significantly to our understanding of the experiences of Indigenous women in the criminal justice system. Through a collaborative partnership with several key Indigenous-centred organizations, the knowledge generated will be used to inform and develop decarceration programming and supports for previously incarcerated Indigenous mothers, establishing concrete measures to reduce the overrepresentation of Indigenous women in the Canadian criminal justice system, now and into the future.