

Through the Eyes of Women: What a Co-operative Can Mean in Supporting Women during Confinement and integration

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This research study funded by the Centre for Forensic Behavioural Sciences & Justice Studies considers criminalized women's lived experiences. Particular attention is paid to their perceptions of institutional programming with the purpose of outlining service and other gaps and clarifying how co-operative initiatives might fill these gaps. The research designed collaboratively by the Community-University Institute for Social Research and the Elizabeth Fry Society of Saskatchewan explores how participation in a prison co-operative can impact the capacity of provincially sentenced women to negotiate incarceration and successfully reintegrate into the community upon release. The study provides women the opportunity to voice their needs and hopes, their stories and experience of imprisonment, and their capacity for social, economic, cultural, and civic integration. It explores how living under conditions of confinement may structure women's choices, their social, cultural, and civic identities, and shape their mental wellbeing and their capacity to manage their lives upon release—and what participating in a co-operative might mean for their capacities and choices.

Rationale

Women imprisoned in the Canadian Criminal Justice System (CCJS) have few opportunities to participate in effective training programs. An Office of the Auditor General report (2003) noted that the CCJS reintegration strategies for women in prison are seriously flawed in offender assessment tools that do not differentiate genders; delays in program delivery leading to delays in release; a dearth of substance abuse programs; few effective employment and work-release programs; a failure to address Aboriginal women's needs; and inconsistent post-release support. Indeed, criminalized women exiting institutional settings return to the challenges that they faced prior to incarceration, with the added anxiety of their prison experiences, and little reintegrative support (Maidment, 2006). For too many of the women encountered in research studies, criminality has become yet another layer of marginalization in a world of exclusion and oppression.

A May 2012 Public Safety Department report on the Correctional Service of Canada's Corcan work programs (Mackrael, 2013) concluded that demand exceeded access to programming and that programming was "a waste of scarce resources and counterproductive to public safety" because of a failure to match skills training with labour market needs and projections. Similarly, the Correctional Investigator Canada (2013) deplored the ten-year 85% increase of Aboriginal women's incarceration rates and the chronic underfunding and underuse of "Aboriginal-specific legislative provisions."

By contrast research has established that participants in prison co-operatives can significantly reduce recidivism and improve quality of life. The co-operatives' balancing of economic and

social objectives has responded creatively to critical social situations. The co-operative programs running in several Italian penitentiaries have recorded recidivism rates as low as one percent. The seven co-operative principles promote co-operatives as member-owned and controlled businesses where all are included so long as they accept the responsibilities of membership. People use their power to work together for a common purpose, and each has the same voice in decisions. Against this background, this study considers women's experience of confinement at Pine Grove Correctional Centre (PGCC), Saskatchewan, and the potential benefits of a co-operative model for training, development, and social inclusion.

Methodology and Research Questions

This research follows a qualitative methodology approved by the University's Behavioural Ethics Research Board and by the Ministry of Corrections, Public Safety and Policing (CPSP). A small sample of 16 of 100 provincially sentenced women in PGCC accepted the invitation to participate in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. If women chose, they had the opportunity to review the transcripts or listen to an audio recording. The recruitment process and protocols to ensure confidentiality ensured that their participation was voluntary, and no one forced them to participate, or penalized them for doing so. Only those who agreed to participate were contacted by the researcher for the interview at a later date.

Interviews were designed to develop knowledge around three key research questions:

- What are the lived experiences of confined women?
- Do confined women feel that rehabilitative and skills development programs offered through provincial custodial institutions prepare them for reintegration into the community post-release?
- How might the use of social economy principles in forming a co-operative improve institutional programming to benefit the post-release quality of life for criminalized women (i.e. by improving social inclusion and developing sustainable life and career skills)?

Findings

The interviewed women demonstrate that criminality is often the by-product of adverse life experiences, trauma, grief, and impoverished living environments that remain largely unaddressed by current correctional policies. The study's interviews confirm that individuals who come from impoverished environments are disproportionately overrepresented amongst those who offend and that education and work-related skills generally deteriorate as a result of incarceration, exacerbating their difficulties and adding new social stigma as criminals.

Educational programming at PGCC was perceived as inadequate and often inaccessible because of long and overlapping waiting lists. In addition, individuals with short sentences were not even eligible. Likewise, the expressed life experiences and stressors which culminated in these women's incarceration were also often unaddressed by the available programming at PGCC. Overcrowding added to health risks and general levels of anxiety and stress, while dietary issues for those with diabetes were concerns. Women were also troubled by the absence of cultural and spiritual programs including morning smudging and adequate elder support.

More than half of the interviewed women felt that their connectedness to their families and communities had been compromised at PGCC. Phone service and visitation costs left many inmates isolated and hopelessly tormented by their inability to connect with family members they felt they had let down. Overall, the theme of connectedness was important to short-term inmates who would soon return to their families and communities.

Many of the women considered a co-operative an opportunity to work together on something that put wellbeing before profits and that included everybody in the decision making as a valuable way to help them succeed outside of prison. In a co-operative, there would be no losers, no one left out of decisions. Being heard, doing what they chose, and being supported were critical factors in feeling empowered and acting constructively to change life patterns and build work and social skills to increase success.

Despite difficult prison experience, women also found comfort and support within the bonds they formed with other inmates to whose life experiences they could easily relate. Building on this strength of PGCC's prison environment, a prison-based co-operative would include opportunities for women to overcome their issues alongside other members with similar life experiences and goals. And the women celebrated the range of talents and gifts they could contribute to a co-operative. The possibilities of voice and choice and a measure of self-determination, self-worth, and support were especially attractive to the women.

Conclusions

Despite unique obstacles and opportunities that incarcerated women encounter, the majority of interview participants at PGCC believed that a prison-based co-operative would maximize personal and social gains during incarceration and reintegration into the community. Alongside worrying reports of increasing recidivism and overburdened justice systems, the study's findings highlight the important role prison-based co-operatives could play.

For the women, the benefits of co-operatives reside not only in work-related skills and income but also in the way such co-operative business entities in prison provide a sense of self-efficacy and the opportunity to form strong social bonds with other co-operative members in an empowering and legitimate business entity.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The conclusions drawn from the present study are similar to those of studies of prison-based co-operatives in Europe: incarcerated individuals are more likely to succeed upon their release when they feel empowered by their capabilities and supported by quality social bonds and effective coping strategies. The findings identify gaps in the current programming regime and raise serious questions about current services and policy emphasis on education, training, and income support as insufficient to empower full citizens. The findings should serve as the impetus for developing prison-based co-operatives with the potential to improve the quality of pre- and post-release life for criminalized women by offering meaningful and responsible choices and a supportive environment promoting respect, dignity, and independence.