Inside and Outside of Prison: Partnering with Aboriginal Women to Break the Cycle of Homelessness and Incarceration

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Presentation Objectives

• To describe our journey of developing partnerships with women to address the issue of cycling in and out of homelessness and incarceration

• To show how arts-based research can be used as a tool for telling important stories that need to be heard
Background

• Women cycling between homelessness & incarceration

• Structural inequities – poverty, underemployment, affordable housing, lack of social support systems including affordable day care

• Personal challenges – addictions, mental health conditions, violence & abuse, intergenerational trauma
Making the Connections

• The Meaning of Home for Women who are Homeless – photovoice, digital-storytelling, creative writing
• The ‘so what’?
• Engaging with women – finding our way
• Enlarging the research network
• Seeking funding
Shirley

Somewhere along the way I became hopeless. I got lost in my soul. I lost hope and this is a way to being homeless. My eyes show this. Homeless people’s eyes also show this.

Look, look closely; open your eyes to my soul. Do you dare? I am right here, please don't look away. I was one of the homeless people out there and you walked right by me. Look, look, I am here. I just wanted to say to you "Have a nice day." but you just walked right by me, looked right through me because I was homeless. Was it the clothes I wore? Was it the backpack I carried? Why did you walk by me and look right through me? Interesting, when I was hopeless I was homeless. Funny how one simple letter can change one's whole worth. Where there is hope there is a home and that doesn't have to mean four walls because I lived in four walls. Home is where the heart is. Are you willing to look into a homeless person’s eyes and see their soul and give them hope.
Getting Started

• Bringing women together – finding the links
• What is readiness?
• How many to make it work?
• Ethical considerations
  – Benefit outweighing potential harm
  – Honorarium
  – Confidentiality & ground rules
  – Dealing with differences
  – Sharing leadership/power
Phase One – The Remand Study

- What are the underlying causes for women cycling in and out of incarceration?
- Arts-based research
- Located in the Calgary Remand Centre
- Weekly group meetings with 5 to 12 women August to November 2010
- Includes sharing poems, videos, ‘homework writing’, drawings, open discussion
Remand Environment

- Remand Centre – beds for 72 women – currently 91 women
- Out of cells 2 hours per day – divided into 4 groups
- Maximum security prison
- Short stays – waiting for trial, pending sentencing, serving warrants
Participants

• Informed consent from 25 women
• Number who have attended at least one meeting - 20
• Number of Aboriginal – 16
• History of homelessness – 17 (less than one year to over 20 years)
• History of Incarceration – 20 women had been incarcerated more than once
Confusion by Crystal

Here I sit in my house
With a lot of thoughts that confuse me
And leave me wondering
Am I safer here than I am out there?
Will I ever overcome my addiction?
I say I won’t ever use again
But is it cause of the situation I got myself into?
Now I have a clear mind
But still confused where will I go when I get out?
Who will I run to when I am in need of help?
Will who I run to be positive or negative?
Phase Two

• What are the issues faced by Aboriginal women who cycle between homelessness & incarceration and how can arts-based research be used to tell their stories?
• Two sites – Calgary, Alberta & Prince Albert, Saskatchewan
• Weekly meetings with groups of women
• Photovoice projects
• Digital storytelling workshop
bare

When you are out there alone, cultural identity is stripped in every way. You feel so empty, lost and forgotten.
I hit it
You hit that brick wall and there’s no where to turn. You are always waiting for that “spring break”.
I lost everything to my addiction.
I was just a baby

People don’t see you when you are on the corner. They don’t want to see you; they don’t want to know what is going on. 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 now I’m doing fine and don’t need you. In this moment I am ok. I was very hard and angry. I always figured go big or go home because the harder you are the less people can hurt you.
Even as a teenager, I had two choices. Either be on the street or shack up. Well I was too scared to be on the street so I shacked up. I’m not proud of it. What I did, I did, and that’s why now I tell my kids never look down on anybody. Cuz you don’t know why they’re there.
I was so hungry... I started eating grass to kill the pain in my stomach.
Being in jail I don’t like that either because um, I missed my children so much. It seemed like I was so depressed like when I was in jail. I don’t want to go back there, I hope I don’t. I don’t want to go back....
That was my turning point. My own kid had to tell me how she hated me cuz I’m an alcoholic, because of my drinking and what it did, the person I’d become when I drank. A little 6 year old told me this. That day I turned my life over and quit drinking.
Phase Three

Inside Out
Phase Three – The Inside Out Project

• What are the gaps in services for women pre-release and post-incarceration for Calgary women?
• Research planning done with co-researchers who will assist with data analysis and dissemination of findings
• Agency based advisory group
• Data collection to begin in May 2011
• Interview women prior to release and follow-up at frequent intervals after release
• Resource pamphlet
Contact Information

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