

“

A Pilot Study
Examining the
Connection between
Child Welfare and
Incarcerated Aboriginal
Parents and their
Children through
Narrative Inquiry

”

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Ka Ni Kanichichk Inc.
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Ka Ni Kanichihk Inc. is a registered, non-profit, community based Aboriginal human services organization governed by a council inclusive of First Nation and Métis peoples in Winnipeg. Ka Ni Kanichihk is committed to developing and delivering a range of programs and services that focus on wholeness and wellness and that builds on individual's assets (gifts) and resilience. Ka Ni Kanichihk's mandate is to provide a range of culturally relevant education, training and employment, leadership and community development, as well as healing and wellness programs and services that are rooted in the restoration and reclamation of Indigenous cultures. Ka Ni Kanichihk means "those who lead" in the Ininew (Cree) language.

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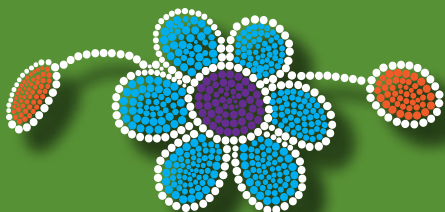
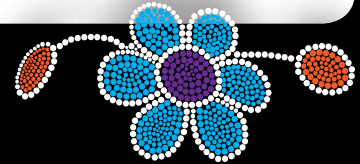


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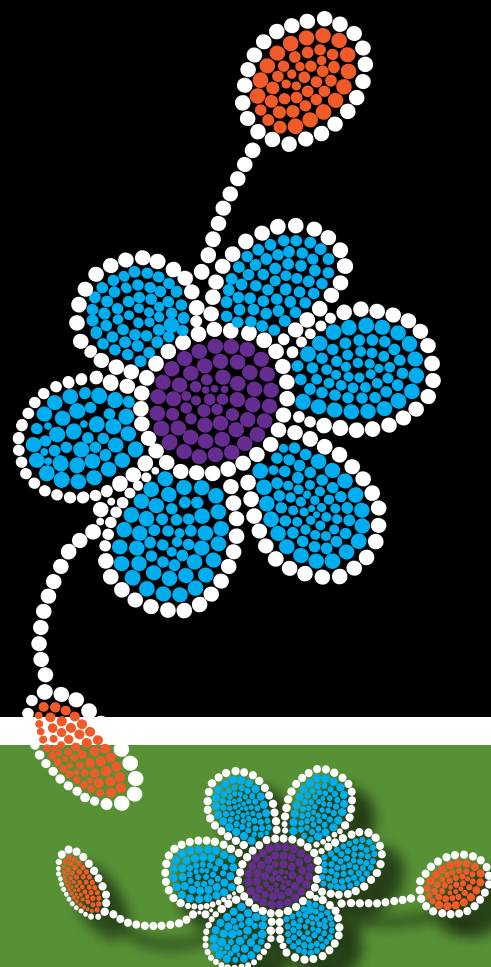
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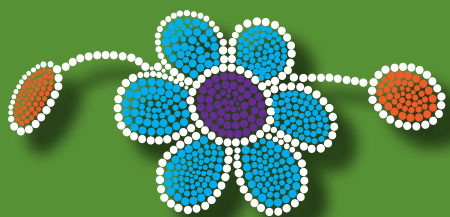
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Examining the Connection Between Child Welfare and Incarcerated Aboriginal Parents and their Children through Narrative Inquiry

Introduction and Background

This research report reflects on the connection between the corrections systems and the prior child welfare experiences of incarcerated Aboriginal people and their children who reside in the Prairie Regions of Canada. Acknowledging that many Aboriginal people currently incarcerated in both federal and provincial institutions are parents, Ka Ni Kanichihk Inc. (Ka Ni Kanichihk) embarked on conducting exploratory research that delved into the connections between child welfare and formerly incarcerated Aboriginal parents in the Prairie regions of Canada.

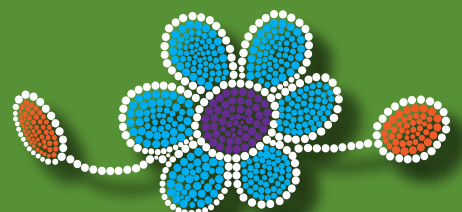
This research is based on narrative inquiry, which is a qualitative approach to understanding the connection between the child welfare and corrections service systems as it impacts on the intergenerational experiences of former Aboriginal inmates across the Prairie regions of Canada. Specifically, the focus of this research looked:

- Understanding what Aboriginal parent's experiences have been and how it has affected their ability to connect, maintain relationships and parent their children while in custody and after being released from prison.
- Understand the scope of the issue from the perspectives of child welfare and community advocacy organizations that work with Aboriginal people dealing with the corrections system across the prairies;
- Isolating and understanding the impact of these connections on Aboriginal children, the family unity and the intergenerational impacts on the Aboriginal community as a whole.

Methodology and Analysis of the Data

To understand the connection between child welfare and incarcerated Aboriginal parents and their children this research relied upon a qualitative approach. Narrative inquiry was applied to this research because of its congruency with the First Nations value of oral history and storytelling. Oral traditions are central and foundational to Aboriginal societies and Indigenous cultures for transmitting and preserving their knowledge, heritage and ways of being amongst generations (Hulan & Eigenbrod, 2008; Todd Ormiston, 2010). A narrative research methodology was selected for its function of including the participant in the research process. Andrews (2007) explains that although there is the possibility to create harm with a narrative research approach, there is also the opportunity for beneficial and positive outcomes for the participants:

[D]epending on the intention of the researcher, narrative can lead to illumination - activity that makes a just difference in the lives of people - or it can lead to parochialism. The challenge is to develop complementary approaches to indigenous narrative so that it is neither exclusive nor insular but instead inclusive and dynamic. The goal, then, of indigenous narrative is to invite participation of native people and their communities in the narrative process. This participation engages the researcher/scholar and native/indigenous people in building relationships that bring to the surface stories of experienced phenomena - concrete evidence - around pressing issues (e.g., historic hurt and pain). Making visible and loud what has been silent and invisible - transcending the



concrete - has the power to promote a generative learning process ... that might lead to community transformation. (p. 517)

Furthermore, Bakhtin (1986) points out that narrative opens “up a space for voice, where power, authority, and representation can be heard, in particular the voice and the voices of those most vulnerable, those most often not heard” (p.519 as cited in Benham, 2007). However, I also take into account what Kovach (2010) recommends: it is important to “transparently” acknowledge that a Western approach, narrative research methodology, is being used in conjunction with Indigenous research methodology” (p.35).

The elements of narrative research methodology have therefore been relied upon in writing up the findings of this report. This research project had a small sample size to meet the criteria of depth versus breadth, which aligns with narrative research methodology. As such, the study relied upon a sample size of twelve Aboriginal parents in order to capture in-depth narrative data. Six Aboriginal mothers and six Aboriginal fathers participated in this study. In addition we captured information from a small number of advocates (6 in total) and people working in the child welfare field (2 in total) to shed additional light on the issue of the connections between child welfare and corrections. Included among our interviews with advocates is a female Elder who was included among those who have worked with Aboriginal men and woman incarcerated in the Prairie institutions in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

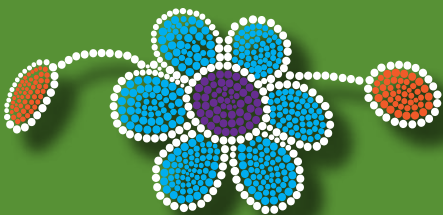
The research approach to this study underwent an ethics review. Upon approval, the data collection for this project spanned a 3-month period from January to March 2014. Twenty individuals participated in this study. Interviews were conducted in Edmonton, Saskatoon and Winnipeg. A number of interviews were also conducted by phone. Interview ranged from 25 to 90 minutes in length. All interviews were audio recorded. Participants were asked to formally consent to participating in the study prior to the start of the interview. Copies of the interview questions were made available to those to be interviewed in advance as much as where possible. The interview questions were provided to all participants at the beginning of the interviews so that they could follow along as the interview proceeded.

At the conclusion of the interviews, an honorarium and thank you card was provided to each Aboriginal parent that participants while the other research participants were provided with a gift certificate and a thank you card in appreciation for meeting and sharing their ideas on issues related to child welfare and formerly incarcerated Aboriginal parents and their children.

The transcripts from the interviews yielded approximately 300 pages of narrative content. The textual analyses of the narrative data involved multiple readings and interpretations that were generally inductive in nature. Inductive analysis is an approach that uses detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes or a model of interpretation made from the raw data by the researcher (Thomas, 2006). This way of analyzing the data provided a quick and convenient way of analyzing themes emerging from the narrative content. Organization of the data from the interviews was conducted using NVivo, a software program for organizing qualitative data.

Limitations

As with most research, there are limitations to research that uses primarily qualitative approaches, which must be acknowledged. Firstly, the individuals who participated in this study are small and their narrative stories and experiences with the child welfare and corrections systems in the Prairie Provinces cannot be generalized or replicated among other populations in Canada. Secondly, the analysis of the narrative content from the transcripts involved interpretative judgments on the part



of the researcher and therefore it should be noted that readers looking at the same data might arrive at different interpretations. With that said, the noted limitations should not be taken to devalue the approach taken or the findings reported herein. Most of these limitations are natural in qualitative based research.

There were some additional limitations noted. These briefly include:

- Research was not conducted among Aboriginal children who have had a lived experience of being in care and/or having the experience of having a parent incarcerated;
- Research was not undertaken with anyone employed within the Corrections or policing field and consequently excludes a perspective that might shed more light on the presented issues and themes;
- As the original proposal did not qualify or set out a specific length of incarceration served by Aboriginal parents, the individuals who participated in this study reported a range of judicial experiences and lengths of incarceration;
- The study focused primarily on Aboriginal parents who have had a former corrections experience and does not include the perspectives of Aboriginal parents who are currently incarcerated.
- The triple stigma associated with being an Aboriginal person, incarcerated and involved with the child welfare system, and or the corrections systems, might account for the low level of participation by the Aboriginal population targeted for this study.
- This pilot study did not interview Aboriginal parents who are currently incarcerated.
- The exploratory nature of the approach to understanding the issue on maintaining the connection between incarcerated parents and their children is not complete.

Organization of Report

This report represents the narrative findings from interviews that were conducted about the connection between child welfare and formerly incarcerated Aboriginal parents and their children. The following sections of this report are organized as follows:

Chapter 1: Literature Review

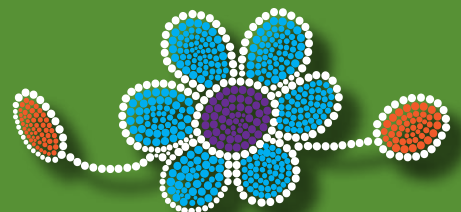
*Chapter 2: Narrative findings
– Perspectives of Formerly
Incarcerated Aboriginal Parents*

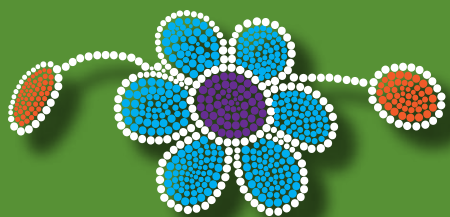
*Chapter 3: Narrative findings – Child
welfare Perspectives*

*Chapter 4: Narrative findings –
Advocates' Perspectives*

*Chapter 5: Summary and
Considerations for
Future Research*

References





Examining the Connection Between Child Welfare and Incarcerated Aboriginal Parents and their Children through Narrative Inquiry

Chapter 1: Literature Review

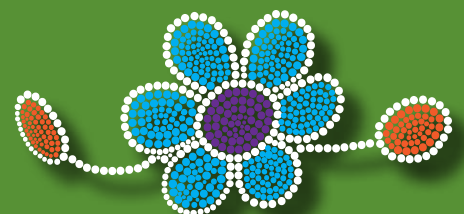
Indigenous Populations in Canada Definitions and Diversity

As part of understanding the connection between incarcerated Aboriginal parents and the role of child welfare in the lives of their children, it is important to be aware of who is “Indigenous or Aboriginal.” The use of terms to describe the Indigenous population of Canada is somewhat contested. The term ‘Indian’ is used in the Indian Act but has largely been replaced by the term First Nation to refer both to those who have ‘status’ under the Indian Act and those who do not. The term Aboriginal has largely replaced the term Native and is used in Canada to include three broad groups identified in the Canadian constitution: First Nation, Métis and Inuit. It has become more common recently to use the term Indigenous, which is also a preferred term in the international context. This term is also referenced in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to recognize the sovereignty characteristics that distinguish Indigenous people from other racial or ethnic minority groups, a factor that imposes particular obligations on government. In addition, it connotes the shared oppression caused by colonization. The term Aboriginal is widely used in Canada, and the terms Indigenous and Aboriginal are used interchangeably in this report. However, it is acknowledged that some (e.g., Alfred and Cornthassel, 2005) object to the term Aboriginal because it identifies people solely by their political-legal relationship to the state rather than by their own self-identified cultural and/or social ties to their communities.

More specifically, these terms do not reflect the diversity among Indigenous people. As Sinclair, Hart & Bruyere (2009) note, more selective tribal affiliations such as Cree, Ojibway and Huron are sometimes used, and self-identifying terms such as Mi’kmaq, Anishinaabe and Gitksan are increasingly common. Although diversity in Indigenous nations is recognized, it is also argued that there are a number of common aspects of knowledge and practices across Indigenous populations that permit recognition of an Aboriginal or Indigenous worldview that is distinctly different from that common to dominant Eurocentric society in Canada (Baikie, 2009; Saulis, 2012).

Of course, there is also diversity in location. Well over half of First Nations people live off reserve, and based on the 2006 census (although dated, this census includes more comprehensive data from reserves than later information, even if some reserves were not enumerated), more than half of all Indigenous people lived in urban areas (Statistics Canada, 2008). The distinction between Indigenous people living on and off reserve is important in that social indicator data on well-being suggests higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and health related problems, and inadequate housing for those living on reserves.

New data from the National Household Survey (NHS) show that 1,400,685 people had an Aboriginal identity in 2011, representing 4.3% of the total Canadian population. In 2011, 851,560 people identified as a First Nations person (representing 60.8% of the total Aboriginal population and 2.6% of the total Canadian population); 451,795 identified as Métis (representing 32.3% of the total Aboriginal population and 1.4% of the total Canadian population); In 2011, 59,445 reported Inuit identity (They represented 4.2% of the total Aboriginal population and 0.2% of the total Canadian



population). In 2011, First Nations people were younger than the non-Aboriginal population in every province and territory. The provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba had the youngest First Nation populations compared to the other provinces and territories. The highest proportion of Indigenous people lives in the three territories. Among provinces, Indigenous people make up a higher proportion of the population of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta (Statistics Canada, 2013).

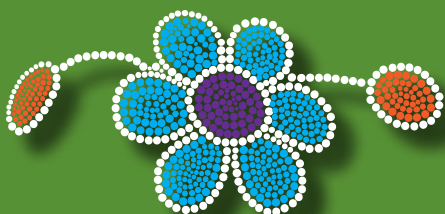
Aboriginal children aged 14 and under in Canada lived in a variety of arrangements, primarily in families with either both of their parents or with lone-parents. Other Aboriginal children in that age group were stepchildren, grandchildren living with grandparents with no parent present, foster children or children living with other relatives (Statistics Canada, 2011). One-half of Aboriginal children aged 14 and under (49.6%) were living in a family with both their parents, either biological or adoptive, compared with three-quarters (76.0%) of non-Aboriginal children. About one-third of Aboriginal children (34.4%) lived in a lone-parent family compared with 17.4% of non-Aboriginal children. Almost half (48.1%) of all children aged 14 and under in foster care were Aboriginal children. Nearly 4% of Aboriginal children were foster children compared to 0.3% of non-Aboriginal children (Statistics Canada, 2013).

Incarcerated Aboriginal People in Canada

The literature on Aboriginal peoples and the justice system is substantial. It is well established that Aboriginal people are over-represented in the Canadian criminal justice system (LaPrairie, 2002) and this has been the subject of numerous studies and commissions (Hamilton & Sinclair, 1991; Auditor General of Canada, 2002). In a recently published chapter in the Oxford Handbook on Ethnicity, Crime and Immigration, Owusu-Bempah and University of Toronto criminology professor, Scot Wortley, highlight that Aboriginal and black Canadians are grossly overrepresented in Canada's correctional institutions. Their evidence suggests that both Aboriginal and black populations are overrepresented with respect to violent offending and victimization. Social conditions in which Aboriginal and black Canadians live are at least partially to blame for their possibly elevated rates of violent offending (Owusu-Bempah & Wortley, 2014). This is a complex issue with a variety of sources and the general literature has addressed challenges that range from processing, police interactions, courts, corrections, and government legislation and policy.¹ However, significant to this work is the finding that the socio-economic status of Aboriginal people "is probably a more potent indicator of who is admitted to correctional institutions than is race" (La Prairie, 1992:1). Today, while Aboriginal people make up 4 per cent of the Canadian population, they comprise 23 per cent of the prisoners — more than 3,400 in all — in federal corrections institutions. While Aboriginal people make up about 4% of the Canadian population, as of February 2013, 23.2% of the federal inmate population is Aboriginal (First Nation, Métis or Inuit). There are approximately 3,400 Aboriginal offenders in federal penitentiaries, approximately 71% are First Nation, 24% Métis and 5% Inuit.

- Aboriginal peoples make up 4 per cent of the population yet comprise 23 per cent of the

¹ See generally Canada, *Consolidated Report of the Solicitor General of Canada: Towards a Just, Peaceful and Safe Society: The Corrections and Conditional Release Act Five Years Later* (Ottawa: Solicitor General, 1998); Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, *Adult Correctional Services in Canada 1995-96* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1997); Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: Bridging the Cultural Divide: 4 Report on Aboriginal People and Criminal Justice in Canada* (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1996) [hereinafter Report of the Royal Commission]; Canada, *Examining Aboriginal Corrections in Canada* (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1996); Manitoba, *Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba: The Justice System and Aboriginal People, vol. 1* (Winnipeg: Government of Manitoba, 1991); Alberta, *Justice on Trial Report of the Task Force on the Criminal Justice System and Its Impact on the Indian and Metis People of Alberta, vol. 1* (Edmonton: The Task Force, 1991); M. Jackson, *Locking Up Natives in Canada-A Report of the Committee of the Canadian Bar Association on Imprisonment and Release* (Ottawa: Canadian Bar Association, 1988); Canadian Corrections Association, *Report of the Law Reform Commission of Canada: The Native Offender and the Law* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1974); Canada, *Report of the Canadian Corrections Association: Indians and the Law* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1967).



prisoners — more than 3,400 in all — in federal corrections institutions.

- Since 2001, the federal Aboriginal inmate population has increased by 56 per cent.
- Aboriginal women represent 33 per cent of all women sent to federal institutions.
- 21 per cent of all Aboriginal offenders were 25 or younger.
- Aboriginal offenders make up almost half (47%) of the inmate population in the Prairies.

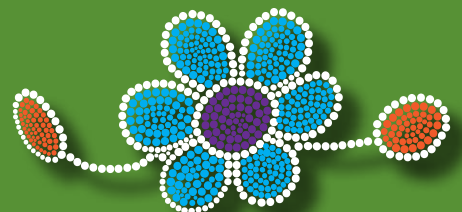
The high rate of incarceration for Aboriginal peoples has been linked to systemic discrimination and attitudes based on racial or cultural prejudice, as well as economic and social disadvantage, substance abuse and intergenerational loss, violence and trauma, and over-policing (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996). These well-documented social, economic and historical factors have been recognized by the Supreme Court of Canada, originally in *R. v. Gladue* (1999) and reaffirmed in *R. v. Ipeelee* (2012): “To be clear, courts must take judicial notice of such matters as the history of colonialism, displacement, and residential schools and how that history continues to translate into lower educational attainment, lower incomes, higher unemployment, higher rates of substance abuse and suicide, and of course, higher levels of incarceration for Aboriginal peoples.” (Justice LeBel for the majority in *R. v. Ipeelee*, 2012). Correctional decision-makers must take into account Aboriginal social history considerations when liberty interests of an Aboriginal offender are at stake (e.g. security classification, penitentiary placement, community release, disciplinary decisions). The Gladue factors include:

- Effects of the residential school system.
- Experience in the child welfare or adoption system.
- Effects of the dislocation and dispossession of Aboriginal peoples.
- Family or community history of suicide, substance abuse and/or victimization.
- Loss of, or struggle with, cultural/spiritual identity.
- Level or lack of formal education.
- Poverty and poor living conditions.
- Exposure to/membership in, Aboriginal street gangs

The following sections provide a brief glimpse into the presenting issues facing both Aboriginal mothers and fathers when they become involved with child welfare systems upon being incarcerated.

Aboriginal Mothers Facing Incarceration

Throughout the world, incarcerated women tend to be younger than the general population; they tend to be of childbearing age and poorly educated (Elwood-Martin, et al., 2012, p. 502). In Canada, Aboriginal women are overrepresented in both the provincial and federal correctional facilities (Ontario Law Commission, n.d.). Overrepresentation of Aboriginal adults was greater among females than males. For example, Aboriginal people accounted for 43% of female admissions to provincial/territorial sentenced custody and 37% of women admitted to remand, which compares to 27% and 23% for male admissions (Perreault, 2014). Aboriginal women account for the increased numbers of federally sentenced women in the Prairies (Addario, 2002). The Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies identified that during 2004-2005, Aboriginal women made up 30% of the women in federal prisons. In provincial jails and detention centers in Saskatchewan, women compose 87% of the female prison population, 83% in Manitoba, 54% in Alberta, and 29% in British



Columbia. The number of Aboriginal women who are locked behind bars in federal institutions grew a staggering 97% between 2002 and 2012 (Wesley, 2012).

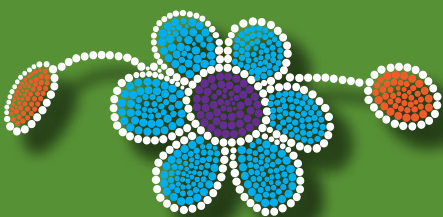
Wesley (2012) notes that the Aboriginal female offender's profiles in Canada identify that they are younger than their non-Aboriginal counterpart. She noted that Aboriginal women are "serving time for a serious offence, typically a violent offence. She has an extensive criminal history, a low level of employment experience and limited education and she presents with a high need for programming" (Wesley, 2012, p. 46). Various factors often contribute to an Aboriginal woman coming into conflict with the law. Aboriginal women often live in poverty, are single parents, are first time offenders, have been victims of prior abuse, and experience high rates of mental illness including depression and substance abuse problems (Addario, 2002; Native Women's Association of Canada [NWAC], 2007). The Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies cited Correction Services Canada's description of the average Aboriginal woman in a penitentiary as being:

27 years old, with a limited education (usually grade nine), is unemployed or under-employed, and the sole support mother to two or three children. She is usually unemployed at the time she is arrested. She has often left home at an early age to escape violence. She may be forced to sell her body because she needs money and is unable to obtain a job. She is likely to have been subjected to racism, stereotyping, and discrimination because of her race and colour. However, her experience on the streets becomes violent as she continues to experience sexual, emotional and physical abuse. She is likely to become involved in an abusive relationship. There are usually children born from this relationship and the social, emotional and economic struggle continues. The cycle of an unhealthy family continues. (Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies [CAEFS], n.d.).

According to Correctional Service Canada (CSC), "[t]wo thirds of incarcerated women are mothers of children who are under the age of five. They are often single parents and living apart from their children is an ordeal for the incarcerated mother and her children (Labrecque, 1995). The apprehension of children whose parents are incarcerated or being held in custody on remand is generally restricted to single parents since apprehension would be unnecessary if there were another competent parent available to look after the children (Vis-Dunbar, 2008). According to Vis-Dunbar (2008), in a position paper to the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association, this is particularly evident among single mothers of young children as mothers are "prevalent among female inmate populations, while single fathers are not known to be a statistically important group in prisons (p. 7). The Native Woman's Association of Canada (2007) note that Aboriginal women are often single parents and are disproportionately affected by the apprehension of their children because they tend to be overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

Women who are incarcerated for shorter periods of time, waiting in remand or provincial institutions, also face having their children apprehended by child welfare. According to the Elizabeth Fry Society of Toronto (2008), many women charged with an offence are spending time remanded in prison, either serving a sentence, on remand awaiting trial, or waiting to be transferred to another provincial institution or to federal prison to do federal time. It has been argued that women serving shorter sentences are often overlooked and have fewer resources and opportunities to maintain contact with their children while incarcerated provincially than their counterparts in federal prisons (Ontario Women's Justice Network, 2009). Poverty and limited social resources exacerbate the effects of geographic dislocation, as the high cost of travel and long-distance telephone calls further separates female inmates from their children. For many northern Aboriginal women who are sent to prisons in southern Canada, they become separated from their children and other family members, their first language, their culture and their food while they await trial and, potentially, for the entire duration of their sentence (Addario, 2002).

At the time of arrest, Aboriginal women are required to negotiate two complicated separate social



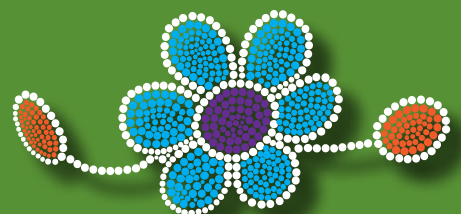
systems – the criminal justice system and the child apprehension system – whose processes have, to date, not been coordinated nor made comprehensible to her. Concern about care arrangements can be an overwhelming distraction that can seriously hamper a woman's ability to negotiate criminal legal processes (Lilburn, 2002). Many mothers had not heard of, or were not familiar with the child apprehension process, their rights or their responsibilities (MacDonald, 2002; Bennett, 2008).

Distance of the correctional facility from a mother's home community has also been identified as a significant concern for Aboriginal mothers wishing to maintain contact and interaction with her children while incarceration (NWAC, 2007). Being separated geographically from one's community is a big concern for Aboriginal mother's serving federal sentences, as it is likely they may be serving all or part of their sentence in another province and while Aboriginal women serving provincial sentences may be closer to their home communities, the distance is also considered concerning. The lack of appropriate facilities near their home communities means that many Aboriginal women offenders are faced with long-term geographic separation from their children, families and communities (NWAC, 2007). Elwood Martin and colleagues (2012) note that it is now recognized internationally that children need to maintain parental relationships with their incarcerated mothers. Indeed, a 1990 Task Force for Federally Sentenced Women recommended an expansion of infant and mother health initiatives in Canadian correctional facilities (Correctional Service Canada, 1990). Previous research has demonstrated that the relationship between a mother and her child is a positive predictor of a woman's successful transition into the community following incarceration (Cunningham & Baker, 2004). Messina, Burden, Hagopian, et al. (2006) note that women who experience traumatic separation from their children are significantly more likely to be re-incarcerated. The effects of parental imprisonment on children (specifically Aboriginal children) have also been virtually ignored in the Canadian context (Knudsen, 2011).

Aboriginal Fathers Facing Incarceration

Across Canada, Aboriginal men are overrepresented in youth and adult jails, with some staggering ratios that mirror those of black men in American jails (Owusu-Bempah & Wortley, 2014). Aboriginal men in particular have faced racism, poverty, and lack of opportunity, social isolation, as well as violence in their neighbourhoods, family challenges and unemployment. Colonization took away men's roles as providers and protectors, and racism often prevented men from getting jobs or developing businesses that would allow them to be self-supporting. For some, addictions and violence have resulted (Mussell, 2005, p. 36). Demographic data about Indigenous men (Statistics Canada 2001) indicate that they have lower education and employment, and higher poverty, mobility, homelessness, and incarceration than all other populations in Canada. Yet, Indigenous men's marginal living conditions and extensive health problems, combined with overwhelming negative social stigma, are undoubtedly obstacles to their continued and ongoing involvement as fathers. Compared to other men in Canada, Indigenous men are much more geographically mobile (Statistics Canada 2006), nine times more likely to be incarcerated (Government of Canada 2008), and three times more likely to commit suicide (Health Canada 2003; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1995). The large population of Indigenous men who are homeless, incarcerated, and have other circumstances that typically disrupt father-child relationships also needs to be considered in developing conceptual models, research, and interventions that address their experiences, needs, and goals in relation to their children. Research has found that the conditions that characterize many Indigenous men's lives create significant barriers to their positive and sustained involvement as fathers (Roopnarine, et al., 1995).

The available research suggests the role of Aboriginal fathers within the family, as well as in family-



centered activities, has been displaced through colonialism and assimilation processes (Manahan & Ball, 2007; Ball & Moselle, 2013). Indigenous fathers' elusiveness in their children's lives and in programs for families has been widely interpreted as indicating indifferent attitudes regarding their father roles (Claes & Clifton 1998; Mussell, 2005). The relative invisibility of Indigenous men in research is mirrored in the absence of policy aimed at encouraging Indigenous fathers' involvement (Ball, 2009). There is an assumption that Aboriginal fathers don't care about their children. As one of the only Canadian academics to have studied the phenomenon of missing Aboriginal fathers in the lives of their children, Jessica Ball notes that this assumption is far from the truth,

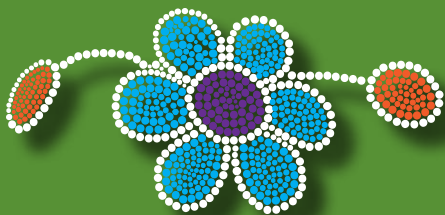
These fathers whether they were involved or not with their children, co-resident with their children or maybe had never met their children, they expressed a yearning and a real concern for their children.

Ball said her study showed residential school, foster homes and jail, have managed to rob First Nations men of the tools of being a father. Ball (2012) has noted that harnessing Aboriginal fathers' potential might be key to their children's well-being across a number of social determinants of health.

Indigenous fathers' accounts bring into focus systemic barriers to positive fathers' involvement, including socioeconomic exclusion due to failures of the educational system, ongoing colonization through Canada's Indian Act, and mother-centrism in parenting programs and child welfare practices (Ball, 2009). Indigenous fathers are arguably the most socially excluded population of fathers around the world. Colonial government interventions disrupted Indigenous families and communities and, along with ongoing social inequities, created unique challenges for Indigenous fathers. Removal of children from family care and of families from traditional territories, along with high rates of incarceration of Indigenous men, have produced a fissure in the sociocultural transmission of father roles across generations and created monumental challenges for Indigenous fathers' positive and sustained involvement with their children (Ball, 2009).

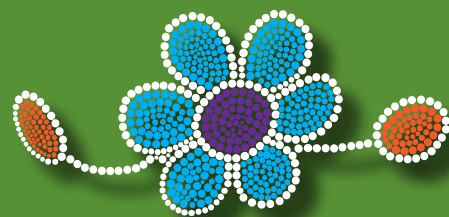
Indigenous fathers in Canada remain on the margins of mainstream society with no previous research or focused social advocacy dedicated to them. Indigenous children are greatly overrepresented in the child welfare system in Canada (Sinha, Trocmé, Fallon, MacLaurin, Fast, Thomas Prokop, et al., 2011; Sinha & Kozlowski, 2013), while Indigenous fathers are greatly underrepresented in family life and other normative social institutions in Canada (Ball, 2012). Indigenous fathers underscored the need for long-term investments in policy reform and programs to reduce structural, personal, and social barriers to Indigenous fathers' involvement. Extreme socioeconomic exclusion, oppression under Canada's Indian Act, and mother-centric biases in parenting and childcare programs and in child welfare and custody practices no doubt deter many Indigenous fathers from initiating and sustaining connections with their children (Ball & George, 2006).

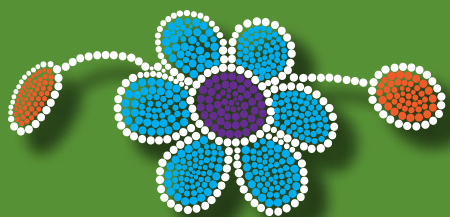
The review of the literature indicates that there is virtually no research that speaks specifically to the issue of incarcerated Aboriginal fathers and their connection to their children either when in prison or upon release from prison. One resource was found that focuses on the descriptive experiences of incarcerated fathers in Ontario however it fails to identify whether Aboriginal fathers were part of the study (Withers & Folsom, 2007). Comack (2008) has stressed that numerous publications have focused on prison studies that concentrate on "men as prisoners" and not enough on "prisoners as men", to which I would add that more studies need to focus on "prisoners as fathers" in addition to the need for further research that focuses specially on the role of incarcerated Aboriginal fathers in Canada.



Conclusion

For Aboriginal women, men, youth and adults who are involved with the corrections system, the factors include historical discrimination, a ruinous trickle-down legacy of residential schools that sees generations of parents with no parenting models, children in foster care, bouncing from home to home, and coping through alcohol and drugs (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004; RCAP, 1996). Just as Aboriginal children are overrepresented in the child welfare system, Aboriginal women and men (mothers and fathers) continue to be overrepresented among those incarcerated in the prison systems today. Foster and state homes, as well as jails, are the “new residential schools” and have been found to have long-lasting intergenerational impacts for subsequent generations (Trevathan, Auger, Moore, MacDonald, & Sinclair (2001); RCAP, 1996; Service Ontario, 2008). But consider the cost of crime, the justice system and incarceration on Canadian families, communities and Canadian taxpayers, study after study has shown that investing in families, education and mentally and physically healthy communities is less costly than the tab governments and societies are paying for sick, poor communities in terms of health costs, opportunities lost, policing, courts and jails.





Examining the Connection Between Child Welfare and Incarcerated Aboriginal Parents and their Children through Narrative Inquiry

Chapter 2: Narrative findings – Perspectives of Formerly Incarcerated Aboriginal Parents

Introduction

Interviews were conducted with twelve Aboriginal parents from the Prairie Provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Interviews were conducted in person and over the phone during the months of January to March 2014. This chapter focuses on what was learned from talking with these twelve Aboriginal parents. The voices, perspectives, emotions and experience of the Aboriginal parents in this study are the key focus of this report. As has been done in other research (i.e. Bennett, 2008), this chapter is organized in a way where the voices and the perspectives of the participants take center stage. It is important to note that the researcher did not validate the views as presented by the participants but simply accepted what they shared at face value.

Background on Participants

Twelve Aboriginal individuals with varying experiences with being incarcerated and involved with the child welfare system were interviewed about their experiences.

In addition to being interviewed the Aboriginal parents were asked to participate in completing a demographic survey. This report focuses on only some of the responses to the questionnaire survey as reported by the parents involved in this study. In particular focus is on the age, marital status, Aboriginal status (and strength of Aboriginality), and number of children and whether children had been removed from care and the participants explanation as to why child was removed.

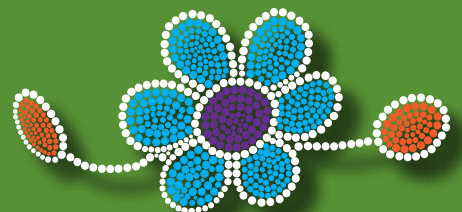
Number of Participants

The twelve participants were comprised of six fathers and six mothers. Each of them reported varying experiences of being incarcerated and the impact of their incarceration on their children. The majority of the participants in this study were from the Province of Manitoba. The twelve participants were from the following provinces:

- Alberta: two parents (1 mother and 1 father)
- Saskatoon: one parent (1 mother)
- Manitoba: 9 parents (5 fathers and 4 mothers)

Marital Status

The majority of the participants were either married or living common law at the time interviews were conducted. Four identified as being married and four indicated they were in a common law relationship. One participant identified as separated, while another identified as divorced. Two of the participants currently identified as being single.



Status and Strength of Aboriginal Identity

The majority of the participants identified as being of First Nations status (with connection to reserve communities in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta). Eight identified as First Nation and four participants identified as having a Metis background.

When asked to describe the strength of their Aboriginal identity, the participants responded in a variety of ways. Five felt that they feel fully connected to their Aboriginal culture and that it shaped their identity as an Aboriginal person. Three participants indicated that their identity was moderately shaped by their Aboriginal heritage; while two felt that the connection between their identity and being Aboriginal was low. Two had no opinions with regard to the importance of identity as an Aboriginal person.

Ages of the Participants

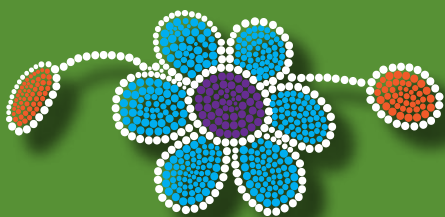
The majority of the participants (8) were in 31 to 40 years old during the time of participation in this study. The ages of the 12 participants involved in this study were between the following ranges: Two are between the ages of 18-25; Eight participants said they were between the ages of 31-40; and lastly, two of the participants reported being between the ages of 41-50.

Total Number of Children

There were 49 children associated with the 12 parents. The number of children identified by each participant is as follows:

Fathers	Mothers
# 1 = 3 children (all daughters)	# 1 = 5 children (4 daughters and 1 son)
# 2 = 2 children (daughter and son)	# 2 = 6 children (4 daughters and 2 sons)
# 3 = 3 children (all daughters)	# 3 = 5 children (2 son and 3 daughters)
# 4 = 6 children (2 sons and 4 daughters)	# 4 = 7 children (5 sons and 2 daughters)
# 5 = 4 children (2 sons and 2 daughters)	# 5 = 4 children (all daughters)
# 6 = 2 children (daughter and son)	# 6 = 2 children (daughter and son)
20 children in total	29 children in total

People of Aboriginal ancestry are a rapidly growing population in Canada. There are over 1.2 million Aboriginal people living in Canada, and the birth rate among Aboriginal people is 1.5 times that of the general population (Statistics Canada, 2008). Statistics on Aboriginal family structure are particularly difficult to interpret because definitions of family, and of what comprises a family unit, differ greatly from culture to culture. Canadian census-based data are naturally based on the dominant culture's sense of what comprises a family unit, a sense that may not be consistent with Aboriginal peoples' ideas of family, where extended family support systems are common. Thus, the figures for "single-parent families on reserves" may be misleading in terms of actual household



composition and how children and adults interact within these arrangements.

In 2011, the majority of Aboriginal children aged 14 and under (50 per cent) lived with both parents, while 28 per cent lived with a lone mother and 6 per cent with a lone father. In addition, 3 per cent of Aboriginal children lived with a grandparent (with no parent present) and 1 per cent lived with another relative. Aboriginal children are also twice as likely as non-Aboriginal children to live in multiple-family households, in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Reasons for Removal

A majority of the parents participating in this study reported that their children had been removed from their care at some point in their lives. Of those participants who indicated having a child removed from their care, the removal was reported as not being connected to their incarceration but rather stemmed from a number of personal reasons, which participants were courageously honest about admitting to and they included such things as: neglect, abuse (physical and/or emotional), alcohol/drug/solvent misuse, criminal and/or delinquent activity, domestic violence and/or developmental delay of child.

First Nations children in Canada were eight times more likely to be substantiated for neglect than non-Aboriginal children and the primary categories of maltreatment in substantiated investigations involving First Nations included neglect, exposure to intimate partner violence, emotional maltreatment, and physical and sexual abuse (Sinha et al., 2011, p. xvii). Compared to non-Aboriginal children, Aboriginal children have a well-documented higher likelihood to be present across all child welfare decision-making points including reports, substantiation, and out-of-home placement (Fallon, Chabot, Fluke, Blackstock, MacLaurin & Tonmyr, 2013).

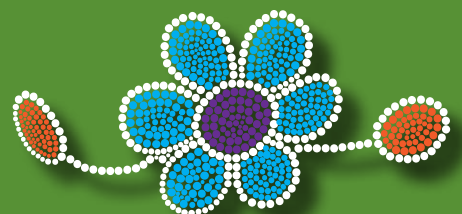
Previous Systems Experiences

The participants identified growing up in various family arrangements. Many of the participants openly shared about the experience of being in care and most noted that residential school was a common experience among many of their family members.

Child Welfare Experiences

Half of the participants noted that they grew up in a family situation where they lived with their birth parents but experienced care by relatives through extended family arrangements. The other half of the participants identified growing up living with their birth parents.

The majority of the participants report a mix of experiences and being impacted by the child welfare system at some point in their lives. They report experiences where their parents were neglectful or provided little guidance because they struggled with alcohol and other addictions themselves. This was evident in the narrative of one participant who recalled that his mom was an alcoholic and that “growing up around abuse, drugs and alcohol was normal.” In other situations, participants indicated that their experiences with the child welfare system came about as a result of the tumultuous adolescent years when parents and/or caregivers were unable to control them. Others indicated that they had no knowledge of having had child welfare experience until their children were involved with the system. As one mother noted, “I learned I had been in care as a child when they did a background check on me, they said I first went into care when I was a year old.” One participant noted that she went into care when her mother died, while another reported being returned to her mother at 12 after a significant period of time in care. Another participant noted that although he had



never been in care it was “like he was brought up in care because his mother and stepfather actually operated a level 4/5 group home.”

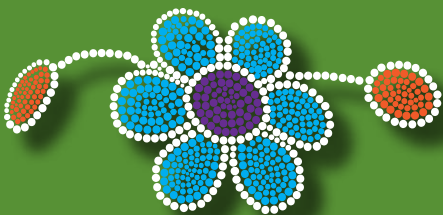
Many participants with child welfare experience shared unpleasant memories associated with their time in care. As one participant explained, “I was in just as many good foster homes as I was in bad foster homes.” In particular this participant remembered that in one of the foster homes, “they would hate on us a lot.” She recalled being subjected to a great deal of verbal abuse where she was told that her mom “was a squaw”, that “if your mom wasn’t like stupid, you guys wouldn’t be here, but no, she’s out partying” and, “I bet you guys are going to grow up like that too!”

Some of the participants indicated that their time in care was relatively short, while others noted that they had spent the majority of their childhood and adolescent years in care. Other participants noted being in and out of care regularly throughout their early lives up until they became adults. Two of the mothers noted that they had still been in care when they gave birth to their first child.

Residential School Experiences

Many of the participants indicated that they had parents and/or grandparents who were impacted by residential school experiences. Eight of the twelve Aboriginal participants indicated that this prior experience had impacted their families. They stated that residential school experiences within their families contributed to trauma, abuse (physical, emotional and sexual abuse), neglect, fear, loneliness, and loss of identity, language and culture. Three of the twelve participants indicated that their parents had, fortunately, never experienced residential school while one indicated “his father never shared about this life in residential school while other family members have been very open about their time in these schools.” Some of the participant identified a number of impacts that has affected subsequent generations of their family members. The impacts of residential school was described by the participants as being: a lack of or diminished parenting; having no parenting skills, knowledge or guidance; loss of language; loss of culture; addictions (alcoholism and use of drugs) and generally, dysfunctional and fractured relationships.

As can be discerned from the narratives shared by the participants in this study, all had children currently in foster care and includes the fact that many participants themselves had childhood experiences in care, suggesting that foster care placement, like residential school experiences, is a form of trauma that has inter-generational effects (Laforme, 2005). Parents with residential school experience did not learn how to love, they learned how to survive. Not knowing love is and was a traumatic experience for many Aboriginal children who emerged from these schools. Traumatic childhood events can lead to mental health and behavioral problems later in life, explained psychiatrist and traumatic stress expert Bessel van der Kolk (2014). van der Kolk explains that “Children’s brains are literally shaped by traumatic experiences, which can lead to problems with anger, addiction, and even criminal activity in adulthood. Childhood developmental disorders and other mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, personality disorders, etc. can be traced back to either negative childhood experiences or the absence of sufficiently positive ones (Maté, 2012), like love and attachment, which are vitally important in the development of healthy individuals. Addiction and adult mental health issues stem from the same source and loss of attachment to parents (Maté, 2012). In particular, the common experience of child welfare involvement among the participants suggests that this experience forms part of the risk factors faced by subsequent generations. Trevethan, Auger, and Moore (2001) found the majority of Aboriginal offenders compared to non-Aboriginal offenders in their study were involved in the child welfare system as children. Their study confirmed that many Aboriginal offenders had a more extensive criminal history and a less stable childhood compared to non-Aboriginal offenders. There is a significant relationship between disadvantaged families and the child protection system, which



is frequently maintained across generations (Hurley, Chiodo, Leschied, & Whitehead, 2003). For instance, many former First Nations young people also continue to be involved with child welfare as their own children are likely to be removed from their care and placed in foster care (Brown, Knol, Prevost-Derbecker, & Andrushko, 2007; National Youth in Care Network, 2004; and Rutman, Strega, Callahan, & Dominelli, 2001). This continued involvement during parenthood maintains an intergenerational contact across the generations with the child welfare system (de Leeuw, Greenwood & Cameron, 2009). While many young people have valued the experience of being looked after and felt that it helped them (Biehal & Wade, 1999), but for most Aboriginal people child welfare involvement has tended to compound their difficulties.

Parents' Involvement in Criminal Activity

Age When First in Trouble

All of the participants shared that their troubles with the law started early. The earliest onset of delinquent activity was mentioned as starting around the age of 12. The narratives below capture that 11 of the 12 participants identified getting into trouble at an early age:

The first time I got into trouble with the law is 13 years old I stole a car.

Since I was 15, I have been in trouble with the law.

When I turned 12 or 13, I went to the youth center.

I'm not even sure, maybe 15 or 16?

Yeah, I stole a VCR, so maybe around 16, even 17 years old.

It all started when I was around 12, 13 years old, I started getting out of control not listening.

When I was 13 or 14, I went into a boy's home and then into a group home and stayed there for a year.

Well when I was 15 or 16 I just kind of

Types of Criminal Activity Reported

We asked the participants to share what kind of criminal activities they had been involved with that had led to their incarceration. The types of criminal offences that each of the participants reported being involved in included the following:

Possession of drugs (marijuana, cocaine, crack, ecstasy, meth)

Possession of drugs for the purposes of trafficking drugs as part of gang activities

Selling drugs from inside prison

Fighting and Physical Violence (i.e. assault, aggravated assault, assault with a weapon)

Domestic violence and assault

Domestic assault in front of police responding to domestic assault

Driving while impaired and dangerous driving

Driving a stolen car

Driving with no insurance

Prostitution

Breaches (of releases, undertakings, conditional sentences)

Possession of loaded handgun and ammunition (weapon)

Possession of a stolen gun

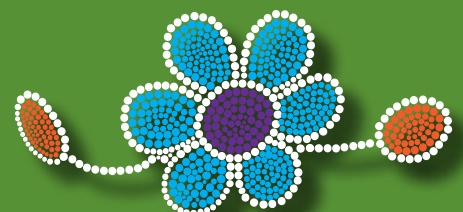
Stealing – Break and Enters (B n' Es)

Destruction of property

Lying to police

Flight from police

Some of the participants shared that they were charged with more than one offence over the course of a number of years.



ran away from home, and whatever, just doing my own thing. I basically ran the streets with my friends and got into trouble.

I was in the youth center when I was 15 years old right up until I was 21.

Well, I was 17 when I got caught for driving without a license.

I was in my teens.

For many of them, their behaviours got worse as they got older, especially if they got involved in gang related groups and were surrounded by people with addiction issues. As one Aboriginal father noted, "it all started when I was around 12, 13 years old, I started getting out of control and not listening, experimenting with drugs and alcohol and running with boys that were getting into trouble, and then next thing that became a way of life for me too because that is what I learned." One mother indicated that she had managed to stay out of trouble for a great deal of time but found herself in trouble with the law later as she matured into adulthood. As she noted, "I stole a car when I was 13 but in my adult age, I was 38, that was the first time I broke the law since I was 13."

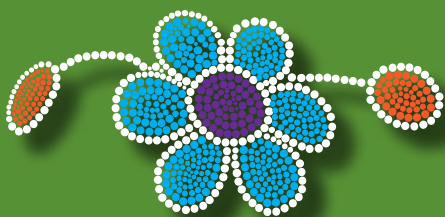
Length of Incarceration

The participants all reported a range of time for which they were incarcerated. One female participant said she spent 4 days in the remand for domestic violence while the highest length of time reported was around 7 years. Many of the participants indicated that they have been in and out of jail since they became an adult. As one participant noted: "Once I hit 18, right on my birthday, I started to get charged with assault, weapons, drugs. Once I hit 18, that's when I experienced prison." The most serious offences were reported by three of the female participants. One female participant indicated she was charged with second-degree murder, another indicated that she had been charged with robbery and forcible confinement and another said that she had been charged with dangerous operation of a vehicle where it was alleged that she had tried to "run down" her husband. Because of the seriousness of these crimes, two of the women report that Gladue reports were prepared as they faced a serious length of time in prison. Two of the woman reported that they has since successfully avoided a lengthy incarceration because of the Gladue report prepared on their behalf but the third woman is currently awaiting a determination of her case at the time she participated in this study. One of the fathers indicated that given his gang ties he had played a role in selling drugs from within prison, which netted him additional time in the Edmonton Max, a maximum-security facility in Edmonton, Alberta.

The women we spoke to talked of being incarcerated in places like the Women's Portage Correctional Centre, The Women's Prison in Headingley in Manitoba; Pine Grove in Saskatchewan and the Edmonton Institutional for Women in Alberta. The men on the other hand spoke of "doing time" in Stony Mountain, Headingley, and Milner Ridge in Manitoba and Edmonton Max in Alberta.

Experiences that Contributed to Incarceration

The participants felt that a number of things contributed to their involvement in crime and eventual incarceration experiences. Coming from a broken home marred by abuse, alcohol, drugs and neglect were some of the common themes that emerged from the narratives the participants shared. Some of the participants indicated that their parents' addictions and neglect left them without proper guidance and support. Other participants identified their own problems with drugs and alcohol that led them astray. A number of participants stated that drinking and using drugs often sabotaged their efforts to stay out of trouble. Gang activity was also a significant issue reported by some of the fathers that participated in this study. Some participants also noted the every day



presence of violence as a factor that contributed to the experiences that led to their incarceration. As this participant shared, “It was so normal for me that kind of behaviour, like shootings, stabbings, overdoses, they were really normal to me. I kind of just lived it. Somebody walking around with a gun, or somebody shooting up, but I was never afraid of that because that is what I’ve seen my whole life, is violence.”

Loss of important family members was a significant issue identified by a number of participants as being the precursor to their criminal woes. One woman shared that she was dealing with multiple stressors that related to her situation. Prior to her criminal troubles her son had committed suicide. On the day of his funeral, her father passed away. In the midst of all this loss she was also dealing with charges stemming from a domestic altercation with her husband, the demise of her marriage and apprehension of her children and the niece and nephew where she was the primary caregiver. This particular mother shared that she didn’t have time to mourn the loss of her son when she started fighting her husband and child welfare system. In addition to all these stressors is the fact that her mother has been missing since 2006. She explained that she did not have supports and with so much going on she started getting into drugs and alcohol to help her forget and that it got out of control. Another participant also shared that his baby daughter had died from SIDS along with the loss of two sisters, over the short span of time, one of who committed suicide.

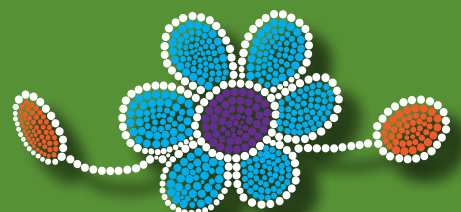
Things that could have prevented incarceration

One of the things participants identified as something that could have helped them stay out of trouble and which could have prevented them from being incarcerated were opportunities to deal with their substance abuse issues. Proper role modelling would have been ideal too. As one participant put it, “I never had any role models. My cousins, my uncles, they were all involved in the drug trade and they were all gang members. I can’t even remember my childhood when I first did drugs. I can’t remember and so I would never have started taking drugs. Like I would have never gone to prison if I had the proper role models. Drugs just made me a whole different person from everything about who I was.” Others on the other hand, are shaped by their experiences. As one participant explained, “actually, I’m glad I went through that, through that hell, because not a lot of people could do what I did and pulled themselves back up.”

Intergenerational Experience with Corrections

Some of the participants shared that members of their family had been in prison prior. One participant shared that her entire family, her mother, father, and the majority of her siblings (7 out of 8 siblings) have all experienced being in prison at some point in their lives. She recalled, “my brothers were in jail with my dad and my dad was so disappointed and my brother said that when I seen dad in jail it was like, why is he complaining, he’s in there too.” This particular participant remembers that her mother was often in and out of jail “a lot” and she remembers as a child visiting her mother in jail. As she shared, “as long as I got to see my mom, I was ok. That’s all that mattered. I didn’t care where my mom was. It was good to talk to her and know that she was ok.” Another participant mentioned the importance of supporting a brother who had been in prison for quite a lengthy time before he was released and passed away. As she noted, “even though my brother did a lot of wrong in his life, I was still there to support him cause that’s all people really need is support.”

Some of the participants also spoke of having spouses and partners in prison during the same time they were incarcerated. Some of these situations were as a result of domestic violence, whereas other instances of incarceration were tied to other violence issues.



Aboriginal people are over-represented in the criminal justice system as offenders and inmates, and under-represented as officials, officers, court workers or lawyers (RCAP, 1996). Research has evidenced that the high crime rate among the Aboriginal population is as a result of the effects of the residential school system, experience in the child welfare system, effects of the dislocation and dispossession of Aboriginal peoples, family or community history of suicide, substance abuse and/or victimization, lower educational attainment, poverty, poor living conditions, and exposure to/membership in street gangs (Allan & Smylie, 2015). As noted by Allan & Smylie (2015), “the discriminatory treatment of Indigenous peoples within these systems is evidenced on one hand in the egregious overrepresentation of Indigenous children and youth in the care of child welfare agencies and Indigenous youth and adults in the custody of detention centres and federal prisons, and on the other hand, in the lack of political and societal response to the ever growing number of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada” (p. 1).

Parents’ Contact With Children While Incarcerated

All of the participants were parents at the time they were incarcerated. The participants were asked whether they were aware of being or not being entitled to have visits with their children when they were incarcerated. For some of the participants due to the shortness of their incarceration, this was not an issue, however, for those who had been incarcerated for longer periods of time, this became an ongoing concern.

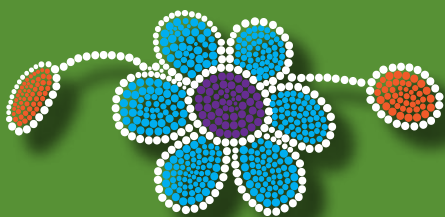
Visitations

Many of the participants whose children were in care with child and family services, were unaware that visits were possible. Often times they indicated not knowing if that was an option once they were incarcerated. As one mother noted, “they usually don’t tell you anything when you get in there. It’s up to you to ask the questions.” As one father noted, “no one told me I could have visits, When I was in there they denied me, they said no, we can’t allow you to see your kids. It wouldn’t be good for the kids.” Other participants indicated that they wouldn’t want their children to visit them given the fact there were incarcerated as one participated stated, “Like when I went to adult jail, they came to visit me once. Just once. I said, I don’t want to see you in here, I’ll see you when I get out.”

One participant noted that positive interactions when his daughter did visit with him in prison. His mother helped facilitate this visits by bringing his daughter in for these visits. As he recalled, “I don’t know if she remembers that too much as she was a young girl but when she did see me, she knew who I was and she came up to me and she was happy and more or less wanted my affection and just to be held. And that’s what I did, I was holding her and just enjoying that little bit of time just to be with her.”

One participant remarks CFS was not involved in his children’s life and that the decision to grant visits was made by his ex-wife. It was her choice whether their children would be exposed to visiting their father in prison. In the end she made the decision that she would rather they not be exposed to seeing their father in a prison environment. Another father noted that all opportunities to get visits with his children were dashed once his ex-partner found out, as he noted, “when my ex found out I was in jail, Like the first day she found out, she just cut me out completely.”

Two women reported the experience of being pregnant and giving birth while they were incarcerated. Both women noted opportunities to visit with their newborn babies on a regular basis at least three times a week within the facility where they were incarcerated. Both women shared that they had met and had positive relationships with the foster parents who were taking care of their



babies. Both mothers have since been released. One of the mothers explained that the child that she gave birth to is now a permanent ward of CFS. And while she is in care, she has regular visits with her daughter every two weeks. She stated, "She went into care and she is still in care. She is a permanent ward, I see her every two weeks, she was put into a foster home since she was a baby, so I leave her there and if she wants to come back home when she is older, that is her choice."

Impacts of the Incarceration on Children

We asked the participants to shed light on what they believe and understand to be some of the impacts of their incarceration on their children. The following quotes stand out in this regard:

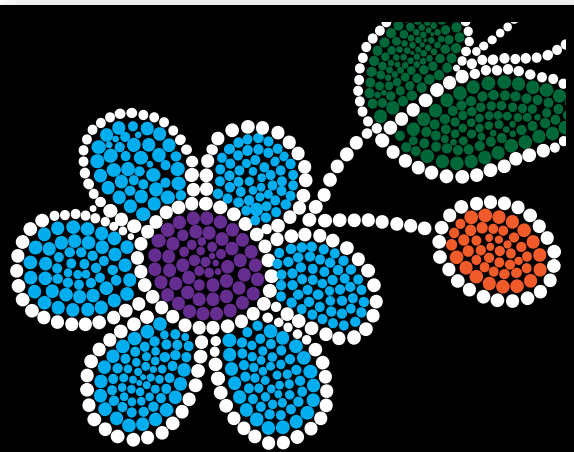
I really don't have that strong of a relationship with my daughter, she may be my daughter but it doesn't feel like she is mine, but she knows who I am and she calls me mom.

Well they are definitely impacted. Emotionally they were kind of shut down. They didn't want to talk to anyone about anything. A lot of anger issues in the younger ones. They do not know what not to do and ... they each see what the others were going through.

My kids are just a little more cautious of who they talk to, especially ... my daughter ... She said she is cautious now. She doesn't want to tell if she has a hard time cause she worries that her kids are going to get taken. Like she has a 3 year old.

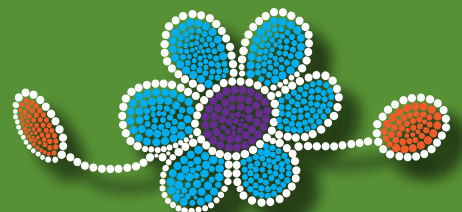
Well the being away from them staying ... now my older son, the 5 year old, he's having behavior problems in school and here at home. Like when I take him out, his behavior was pretty wild and he wasn't like that when I did have him.

I have been jailed for way too much of their lives. I hardly know my kids. But when the 7 year old when he was



Other Ways of Communicating

Other participants indicated that their children did not visit but they did talk with them regularly on the phone while they were incarcerated. Other parents noted that they received mail from time to time. Some participants shared that they did not receive mail or phone calls from their children while they were in prison. Some of the participants expressed concerned about this; however, others were not concerned because of the young age of their children at the time of their incarceration. Although one father was unable get visitation with his children, he tried to see if the social worker would provided him with pictures of his daughters. He explained "when I was in custody ... I was trying to see if I could get visits while I was incarcerated. They just looked at me and they said no. They [child welfare] said it wouldn't be a good time and it wouldn't be good for the children. They said they know what's best but I disagreed. So then I asked her [the social worker] if she could send me pictures of my daughters so at least I could see them and she promised me pictures but she never came through." Some of the participants shared that they believed that their children were not encouraged to write letters, send pictures or participate in phone contact with them.



born, he was only 8 days old, I got taken to jail and when I came out when he was 8 months old. My mom kept him and when I got out, I would try to keep him and then he was just crying, he wanted my mom. He was attached to her ... she practically raised him. Well she did raise him!

I know my kids were upset with me. Their mother was very upset with me. So whatever their mother would tell them that is what they heard. No matter what I told them. If I was on the phone and talking for a couple of minutes and told them how much I loved them and everything like that, they always have their mother 24 hours a day, being a man hater, being a hater on me, like hating me. And I don't blame her because I know what I was doing.

When I got out of prison and I final went back and my daughter was 4 or 5, my daughter forgot who I was. When I seen her, she as so shy of me, she didn't know who I was. And my wife was telling her, this is your father, and so I would never wish this on no one. It hurt me so bad. Having to introduce myself to my baby and having her not know who I was.

Oh, dramatic impact. My oldest daughter, I guess, there's abandonment issues. There's also, she must feel neglected, angry, a lot of unresolved answers for her. Like wondering, my dad doesn't love me. Those are the things that I thought of when I was a kid. Cause my dad was never there. I could also see her blaming me.

It was one of the hardest things that I ever had to do was to reintroduce myself back to my kids.

We still struggle up until this day (me and my children's relationship). They know everything I did in my life and sometimes I'm still affected by addictions. Sometimes I just want to go. Sometimes I just want to leave and that hurts me to say that. Sometimes I just want to walk out and never come back. I've been so affected by drugs my whole life, like for years and years. Yah sometimes I just want to walk out and not even look back and how could a father say that about his children. Like I love my children, I love my wife. My relationship, it's really affected with my family.

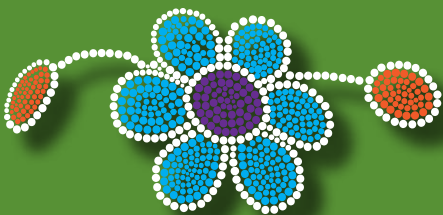
My oldest daughter and I haven't really had a relationship because of my incarceration and stuff but she knows that I was in there. We haven't talked about it but she knows.

Well right now because of some problems that me and her [daughter] are having, there hasn't been any contact. I need to mend that relationships but I can't force it. I'm more or less just giving her that space to more or less, forgive me and let that go because she is holding a grudge and having resent towards me.

That's kind of a hard question. It's kind of hard to tell my daughter. My daughter she's smart. ... She's still smart in school. But she's smart with her emotions. Like she'll say every thing is fine. She could be hiding something. For the most part, me not being there all those year when she grew up, I don't know how it impacted her. If you met her you would understand. She's so happy. She's really talkative and she's really polite. She really masks herself so I don't know ... like you said, she's teaching me. I'm scared to lay down the law with her because all those years I missed out; I feel I don't have any authority over her. So I don't know. It's weird.

Explaining Incarceration Experiences to Children

When asked, participants were forthright in sharing that when the time was right they would take the time to discuss the issue of their incarceration with their children. However there is trepidation expressed by some about sharing the experience of incarceration with their own children. As one father remarked, "My daughter asked me one night, so like Dad, how come you went to jail? I did not answer. I said, you know what, when you get older I'll tell you." Others state they are fearful to share this experience because they are protective and don't want to be seen as normalizing what they have been through as this father explained, "I don't think it is good to tell her right now. There's a few times in my life, I'm really thankful to be sitting here right now cause a couple of times I could have been killed. I got stabbed, I was beat half to death and I don't know how to tell her that. I don't

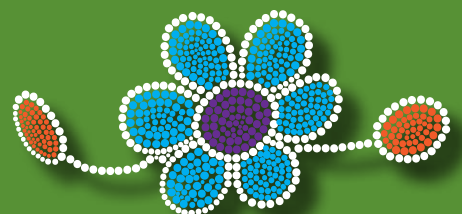


want that negativity to be passed onto her. I don't want to her to think that it's normal." Others have indicated that honesty with their children is important in their relationships with their children and families, as this father reasoned, "Yes. I've been honest with my kids, even my youngest because I kind of explained it for her ears. My 13 year old knows lots of stories. My 18 year old knows pretty much everything about why I was in prison. You know what, I don't want to lie to my kids. How I'm able to be honest and truthful with my kids is cause they know what I'm doing now, so now I talk about it and they know that I help people. Like my kids encourage me. My wife encourages me now."

Children of imprisoned parents are often described as the forgotten victims of imprisonment (Cunningham & Baker, 2003). When a mother or father goes to prison, their children are affected, usually adversely. Their relationships with the imprisoned parent and others around them frequently suffer. Children may have to move to a new area, a new home or a new school because of their parents' imprisonment. For instance, because of their mothers' incarceration, children can become secondary victims of crime, experiencing residential disruptions, school changes, separation from siblings, foster care, or periods of time spent with convenient but inappropriate caretakers. They feel shame, isolation, abandonment, confusion, grief, and loneliness. Moreover, Cunningham and Baker state that a mother's imprisonment often affects families already challenged by poverty, inadequate housing, abusive or exploitative partners, mental illness, substance abuse and the legacies of child abuse and the stigma of being in foster care. Even after a mother returns, simply knowing she could be gone again forever changes children. Few social services are designed to help mothers and their children navigate the period before, during and after a mother's absence due to incarceration. Cunningham and Baker (2003) note that mothers have recognized disturbing trends in their children as they become teenagers, seeing them re-live events from their own youth such as substance use, depression, survival crime, school drop-out, early emancipation from adult care, exploitation by others, and early child bearing. Mothers know this story better than most. Cunningham and Baker (2003) found that 40% of the women in their study had themselves been separated from their own mothers, fathers, or both, when they were children, because of parental incarceration. Now, as mothers raising the next generation, half of their own teenaged children have already been in youth custody (Cunningham & Baker, 2003). Yet these impacts are largely unacknowledged in criminal justice systems worldwide, many of which fail to record information about prisoners' children, or even whether there are any. Efforts to compensate for these failings have primarily been individual or local endeavours rather than changes in official procedures and structures, which put children's interests at the centre of issues that affect them within the prison context (Robertson, 2007).

Yet both anecdotal and academic evidence suggests that when children are considered many of the negative effects of parental imprisonment can be ameliorated. By helping children to understand what is happening to their parent and themselves, thereby reducing the fear and uncertainty; by enabling children to stay in contact with an imprisoned parent, through letters, telephone calls and visits; by supporting children in readjusting when a parent leaves prison, the adverse impact of parental imprisonment can be reduced.

Helping families to maintain close relationships may also help to prevent future antisocial or criminal behaviour by imprisoned parents (because having a supportive family environment to return to is a major disincentive to committing further crimes) and by the children themselves (recent studies have shown that having a parent imprisoned increases the likelihood of children committing criminal or antisocial behaviour in later life). Given that a key goal of any justice system should be to prevent future crime and ensure that there are as few victims as possible from any criminal act, considering the children of imprisoned parents should be a welcome addition to crime-fighting and crime-prevention toolkits (Robertson, 2007).

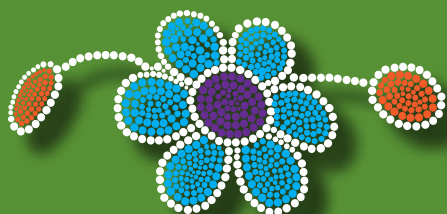


The Use of Advocacy Organizations

Many of the participants in this study shared the continued struggles that they've encountered trying to maintain contact with their children once they were released from being incarcerated. Connecting with community supports and advocacy agencies has been instrumental for many of the participants in gaining access to their children for visits and in the fight to have some presence in their children's lives. Many of the participants speak of Aboriginal advocacy organizations that have helped them get visitation rights or to get their children back. This has not been an easy task and many of the participants noting having to attend various parenting programs, addictions programming and many report having jumped through many hoops before being granted either access or custody of their children. As one mother shared, "my son is a temporary ward just because of how many times I messed up and abused alcohol. I finished my treatment and they wanted my son under a temporary ward ship from 6 months when he was born until this past December and my worker wanted me to be done with CFS but his bosses said, we want another 6 months. I wasn't going to fight it, so I have another 6 months, which will take me to July 2014." One mother noted that she never knew up until she was 8 months pregnant that she was going to keep her child. Before she was released from prison she noted that through the help of an advocacy organization she was able to go before a panel where she learned about redemption from one of the panel members who deciding upon her freedom and the ability to keep her child after birth, she shared, "when I first walked in, he said 'I believe in redemption'. I asked him what does redemption mean and he said, 'it's forgiving. We can't always look at somebody's life and judge him or her. We need to look at what they are doing right now.' I was like right on, it felt like somebody understands me. ... There's always going to be that one person in the community who's been there and understands, you know?"

Connection with resource organizations and advocates often took place once parents emerged from prison. Multiple organizations were often identified and acknowledged as being instrumental to participants in helping to them become educated about their rights as parents and about programming options that would be seen as examples of their efforts to educate themselves and

“ When I first walked in, he said ‘I believe in redemption’. I asked him what does redemption mean? He said, ‘it’s forgiving. We can’t always look at somebody’s life and judge him or her. We need to look at what they are doing right now.’ I was like right on, it felt like somebody understands me ... There’s always going to be that one person in the community who’s been there and understands, you know? ”



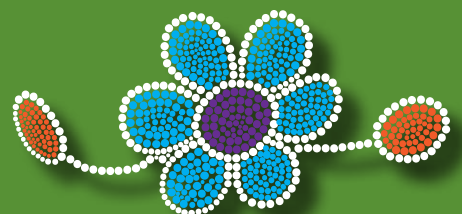
become better parents. One female participant emerged a strong advocate, not only for herself but for others as well. The following quote sums up the how one organization in Alberta helped her reconnect with her children and how she herself came to advocate for others in similar circumstances,

You know, if it weren't for Creating Hope, a lot of things wouldn't get looked at, especially when I was working to get my kids back. If Creating Hope didn't write a letter for me, children's services wouldn't have know that I was working on getting my kids ... children's services had way more stuff to do than the police would ask or the courts would ask. Like I have to do drug testing every two weeks, I have to find housing, I have to find employment if possible, I have to have some kind of income. I have to do parenting courses. There are just so many things I had to do and yah, like I've went to class at Elizabeth Fry. I helped a lot of the moms there too because I was helping myself in trying to help them too. One of the women that I went there with, she just got out of jail, she was in jail for a year and she wanted to get her kids back but children's services told her she couldn't get her kids back. When she got out of jail, she said, I have no where to live, she didn't have no family to even help her ... She said ... what am I going to do? She was so sad cause she couldn't even get to see her kids cause they said oh, you were in jail and she never even got a phone call, nothing about her kids. They were just telling her no, you're just going to be a bad influence on your kids, oh my goodness all the stuff that I heard. She was told she had to wait 5 years or something, that was her understanding but when you're not educated enough you don't know what to do, how to talk for yourself or others. I told her that's not true. I told her, yah, you can get her kids back and I bought her to Creating Hope. Now she has visits with her kids. If it weren't for Creating Hope she wouldn't have that.

A participant spoke of the positive interaction with child welfare organizations in helping him connect with his children once he emerged from his jail experience. All it took was the opportunity to connect with a social worker willing to listen and advocate for him as explained, "it wasn't until "I was involved with children's services. It took a couple of workers before one actually saw that I was determined and that I was real. So I just basically did the one, the parenting assessment. It was the truth and it set me free." Other participants however expressed negative perspectives about the ability of child welfare to advocate and help them reconnect with their children. As one father shared, "There should a third party that helps to work with the parents, so that its not one fight with CFS, because CFS is, basically they are the dictator, judge and jury, because they call all the shots and that's it. But if there is someone in there that can advocate for parents and support the parents. Cause a lot of time CFS takes advantage of these parents because they don't have the knowledge, the understanding, they don't have the right words to say ... CFS is very manipulative and they use tactics to threaten the parents with things so there needs a party that is just as equal to CFS."

Resources Needed for Maintaining Contact and Connection with Children

The participants were asked to reflect on what other similarly placed Aboriginal parents might need to ensure that they maintaining the connections and vitally important relationships with their children. A variety of ideas were offered and some of the salient ideas were offered. For instance, counseling for both the children and parents as well as parenting courses were identified as vitally important for Aboriginal parents both while in and out of prison. Many of the male participants noted that these kinds of opportunities were not offered to them as fathers when they were incarcerated or that not enough information circulated within the prison about such opportunities for learning and growth. In particular many fathers indicate the opportunity to learn how to be a healthy father was not offered during their time in prison whereas for women, the opportunity to attend parenting classes was offered but many of the women expressed concern about the ability to practice new found skills with



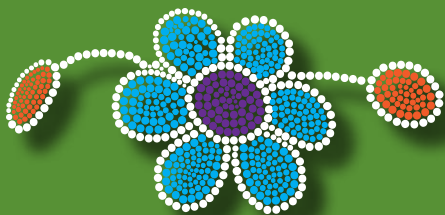
limited access to their children both when they were incarcerated and once outside of prison.

Culture was identified as being a key resource needed for Aboriginal parents and children in helping them maintain connections. One participant indicated that there needs to be more cultural and spiritual teachings as these are vitally important to maintaining healthy relationships between Aboriginal parents and their children. His answer to the question about what resources are needed to maintain these connections was explained in this way,

There needs to be cultural resources to get the parents into different ceremonies. It's not just native spirituality, different kinds of spirituality, like if they brought up catholic or Christian. There needs to be a cultural aspect to their lives. They need to be able to teach their kids to believe in something. There needs to be different kind of parenting courses. There needs to be ... all those resources need to be accessed by the parents. They need to know that there is going to be somebody that does care about them. And especially the culture, the native spirituality, it helps so many people. I've seen almost daily, I see people that are so proud of their heritage, their cultural identity. There needs to be so much parenting, drug and alcohol treatment and rehab. There needs to be more family centers where the parent can go there with their children and all get healing. When the parents are on drugs and alcohol, it affects the whole life, it affects ... you know it can bring violence. There needs to be more teaching, more programs, more teaching on violence in the home, having those resources to make a better life for their family, for their children's future. There needs to be so much. I could go on and on. I'm just trying to think of ... what would help parents, especially parents that are involved with drugs, who are involved in gangs, and involved in the prison system, and the child and family services system. There needs to be education on how to better parents and how to be loved. A lot of these kids that are in the system have been sexually abused; they've never been hugged. Their parents have never told them that they are loved. They need to know how to be better parents and to have that love in the home and have that home fire. Your home fire needs to burn. Your home fire is having that love, having all those teachings that you learn and pass onto your children. There is so much. I'm just trying to think about what would make a better parent especially if they're affected with all these negative things.

Maintaining current relationship with family and community was identified as a crucially important element in helping incarcerated parents stay connected with children. Maintaining relationships as well as identity are important factors for giving children as sense of belonging as this participant explained,

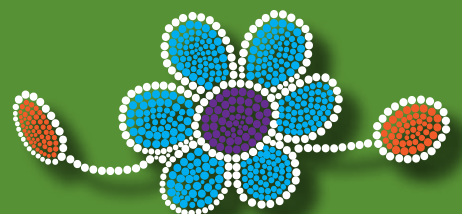
Say if the parents were both incarcerated for something and the kids were taken away. I think the services the agency needs to do whatever they can to make sure the kids still have that connection to their family, get an auntie, an uncle, get a grandma, a grandmother, get the younger siblings of the parents to watch the kids and maintain that relationships. Don't forget about the kids, oh they're at their auntie's. Ok, that's good. ... You need to follow these kids and not forget about them and make sure the kids are safe first and foremost. They need to have that relationship with their families. They can't lose their connection, their cultural identity or anything like that with their families, they need to ensure these kids are taken care of but they still need to have that sense of family and connection. Like even a kid going into a place like a new home and seeing the sweet grass, I know that smell, my auntie smudges, and can you smell that? And they'll feel way better. Some kids are going to Filipino homes; they're going into white homes when they are taken away. Just like residential school. Like that messes a kid up and if the kid has nothing, no connection, no sense of belonging, that will have traumatic effects and this kid will be a runaway, this kid will be in jail and this kid will bounce from home to home to home. These kids are so used to being dribbled all over the place to different homes. Going into home with strangers, that's just messed up.

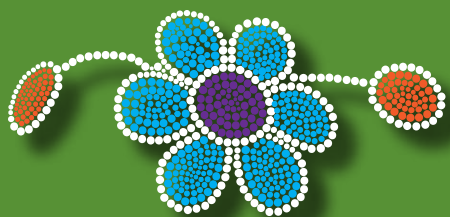


Importance of this Issue

This chapter ends with a reflection about the importance of examining the issue of maintaining the bonds and relationships between children and their parents by all of the parents who participated in this study. When asked specifically about their thoughts with respect to the issue of understanding the connections between child welfare and corrections for Aboriginal parents, they all agreed that this was an important issue that needed to be looked at and examined deeper. All expressed a keen interest in being involved in future research on this issue. The stories and experiences shared are deeply personal and filled with narratives of trauma and regrets but their voices and perspectives about their experiences with both child welfare and correction systems also attest to significant levels of resilience. Part of this resilience is reflected in the desire that each wished to help in some way. Each participant contemplated on the reasons why they chose to be involved in this research. The collective primary reason shared was because each participant wanted to help other Aboriginal parents who might find themselves similarly situated. As one participant simply stated, her reason for being involved in this research is that, “It’s ok, as long as I’m helping in some way, then it’s all good.”

Lastly, storytelling and hearing the Aboriginal offender’s voice can serve as a powerful learning tool because it provides an opportunity to listen to these participants and learn how they came to be incarcerated and involved with the criminal justice system. Personal storytelling changes the described experience from that of one expert opinion to many voices of expertise and accuracy. In the case of this research the Aboriginal participants are considered the —experts, as it is their stories and their voices that are reflected here and from which we hopefully learn (Gauthier, 2010). Listening to the participants’ stories, particularly what brought them to prison allows for the opportunity to learn from their situations and experiences. The use of story not only validates the participant’s experience, but also gives them authority over that experience, and provides space and a place where they are seen as knowledgeable and their stories become a means through which others can learn from them.





A Pilot Study Examining the Connection Between Child Welfare and Incarcerated Aboriginal Parents and their Children through Narrative Inquiry

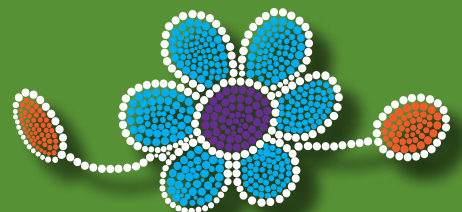
Chapter 3: Narrative findings – Advocates’ Perspectives

Introduction and Background on Participants

Six individuals working with various organizations in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba participated in this study. Two from Alberta, two from Saskatchewan and two from Manitoba responded to the study. All but one of the advocates identified as being an Aboriginal person working with various community organizations that provide a range of services to Aboriginal populations in Edmonton, Saskatoon and Winnipeg. One advocate is a female Elder who has worked with Aboriginal inmates in various correctional institutions also participated in this study. Two of the advocate participants involved in this study work for organizations that provide services specifically to women who have been involved with the justice and corrections systems. Another advocate has worked extensively in the child welfare field previously to working with Aboriginal women and families dealing with domestic violence matters. One of the advocates has also had experience as a corrections officer. One of the advocates revealed that she has had own previous experience of incarceration and stressed that she had a candid take on what it was like to be incarcerated and then to work from the other side as an advocate for those previously and/or currently incarcerated. Two of the advocates also shared having their own personal experiences growing up in the child welfare system both within and outside of prison. Some of the advocates indicate that they work exclusively with women however a few also indicated helping both men and women, who have previously been incarcerated, learn to navigate and negotiate with the corrections and child welfare systems. This chapter focuses on what was learned from talking with these six community advocates. As with the previous chapter, the voices, perspectives, and experiences of these advocates take centre stage as they reflect on the work they have done in helping formerly incarcerated Aboriginal parents connect to and/or maintain relationships with their children before, during and after incarceration. It is important to note that the researcher did not validate or dispute the views as presented by the advocates but simply accepted what they shared at face value. The following narratives attest to their experiences working with Aboriginal men and women with corrections experiences.

Complexities and Challenges of the Issue

Advocates noted that most parents who are incarcerated often have a lack of understanding when it comes to their rights as incarcerated parents. One advocate indicated that in 70% of the cases, Aboriginal parents question their rights around their children and whether they have any rights left once they become incarcerated. Once it is established that they do have rights, these rights also depend on the person’s past history with child and family services. For those working in advocacy organizations, the issue of helping Aboriginal parents deal with welfare systems tends to arise primarily on two fronts: at the onset of incarceration and after the person is released. At the onset when parents are incarcerated child welfare authorities often attend the institution and ask parents to sign papers placing their children into care. These arrangements are not always dissolved once the parent is released, as this one Saskatchewan advocate explained,



So on the onset, one of the major things that I would have to say, that I deal with them, is the question of where are the kids going to go? Do I have to sign a section 9? They are all under this impression that they have to sign a section 9, nobody has to sign a section 9 but they don't know their rights. None of these women have a clue what their rights are to their children so what happens to them is they get incarcerated and then children's services shows up at Pine Grove and they meet them in the visiting room and they're told, you must sign here and they do. By virtue of that, their child is gone, just like that underneath the section 9. I would like to say that they are dissolved upon release but that is not the case. After that it is supervised visits and access and all kinds of stuff and then people like me, who really have to step in as an advocate to remind the courts that the reason for apprehension was not neglect (or abuse) that it was not any of those things that it was for reasons, which this woman could not control. I mean sure she could control whether or not she committed the crime but she can't control whether or not she's going to be at home on the bracelet versus incarceration, that's out of her control. Arguably, I state that wasn't in her control. I mean any woman would choose to remain home with their child and I make that claim that the best needs of the child is to be with the family. So it goes from, I have to say, it goes right from onset right through because we have challenges right through until release.

Other advocates try to be more proactive by educating parents who face the possibility of becoming incarcerated to start galvanizing their family supports as soon as possible in advance of being incarcerated because they know the child welfare authorities will move swiftly to apprehend children. Building a repertoire with other family members is essential in order to build trust with them and in addition, given their experience working with the child welfare system they will work on communicating and building trust with caseworkers. Advocates, where possible, try to assist parents in obtaining legal representation. In addition, one advocate in Alberta explained that parents are encouraged to case plan for their children well in advance by looking for healthy family members willing to take guardianship of their children should they face the prospects of incarceration. This advocate referred to an example about a case where a young pregnant woman faced incarceration,

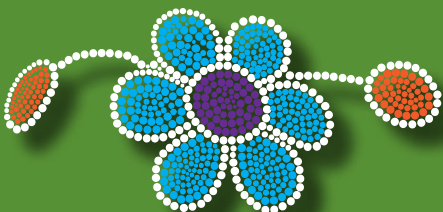
I said, start getting your ducks in a row, so when you have baby, get all your red tape done (i.e. guardianship consents), make sure they are done so that way when you're not incarcerated, you don't want to have baby in there, you don't want to have a baby inside. Make sure everything is all in a row, make sure your guardians step up to the plate, so if the child goes into care at least your guardian is notified and then that way, at least that way, maybe one of the guardians can step forward and take baby and the child won't have to go into care. It's all case planning but that parent has to be able and willing to take those steps.

One advocate reported a much more collaborative encounter with child welfare in helping a pregnant Aboriginal mother be a part of the planning process regarding the placement needs of her baby outside of the institution where she was incarcerated. Having had a previous experience in child welfare, this advocate was able to help in the case planning for the woman in question and that the collaborative approach was taken to reassure the mother and make her feel safe and relieved that her child would be ok, despite being placed in care.

Gender of Cases

For those facing incarceration, dealing with child welfare is viewed as a specific gendered issue as it was expressed that Aboriginal mothers tend to have to deal with child welfare more often than Aboriginal fathers who get incarcerated. One particular advocate stressed,

When an Aboriginal mother is sentenced to incarceration, you automatically sentence their children to separation. Yah I do think it is gender specific because often when you sentence a man to jail, the child goes to stay with their mom, when you sentence a woman to jail, the child



goes tends to into care, so I think there is a gender specific response that is experienced. I think we need a specific response genderly [sic] to mothers and not the same that we apply to fathers because they don't play the same role to the child, quite often; they are not the primary caregivers, whereas the mom is and that's huge.

Advocates in Alberta noted that they are beginning to work more and more with fathers who are coming forward expressing concerns and wishing to have access to their children in care. Many of the men who use their services have had some sort of corrections or justice involvement in their past lives. They note that often time men have three things that go against them: "They're male; they're young; and they're Aboriginal." The majority of the males that are incarcerated are fathers and they are "just as affected by what happens to their children as much as the mother is" but "often have no say." Advocates say that many of the Aboriginal fathers want to be heard, to tell their stories and share what they have experienced. Aboriginal fathers want access to resources and programs that address their fathering issues and they are asking the advocacy agencies "why do you have all these programs for women but not men?" They note that it is still predominantly women that they were working with, however they note the growing preponderance of fathers, who were formerly incarcerated, who now want contact with their children,

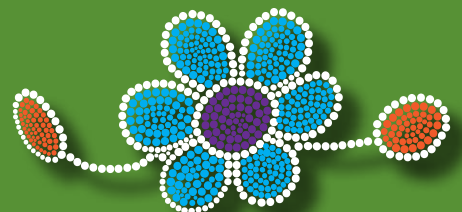
Some of the mothers that we're working with, we ask, where's the dad? Well he's in jail he's incarcerated. Now that we're working with fathers and grandfathers, we're seeing a lot more fathers coming forward. So right now at this point, we're just working with the mothers but when the father gets out and he comes forward and steps up to the plate and says, you know what, I want to parent my children. So we get that person to join our program as well too so we can all work together, so that we are all on the same page.

Visitation and Other Communication Issues

Advocates note that most incarcerated Aboriginal people can visit with their children if they can get access to their children. Often time visitation is determined through the institution where the person is incarcerated but it was also said by advocates to be determined by "whomever has the child in their custody." Quite often if it is child welfare, it will be the foster parents or the case manager in conjunction with a supervisor, who will make a determination as whether visitation will occur. Advocates stated that there are instances where child welfare caseworkers have been empathic and will allow visits to happen but advocates say that this is often times rare, as one advocate declared, "I would say 75% of caseworkers will not allow children to visit their parents" in a prison setting. On the other hand, advocates have also seen some caseworkers from within child welfare take upon themselves to drive children out to institutions to help facilitate contact between children and their incarcerated parents. Advocates working with incarcerated Aboriginal women conservatively say, "almost three-quarters of the mothers in prison who have children in care, are not getting access to their kids." The power to maintain connections through visits, phone calls and/or mail, is said to be in the hands of foster parents. As one advocated noted,

Many women find that the biggest challenge with their children being in care would be access to their children while they are incarcerated. Because many of the foster parents will not facilitate the visitation to the jail, and if they facilitate it, we often find that they don't further facilitate it because the children are crying and they miss their mom. Those are natural responses for leaving a mother but for whatever reason, they use those responses as justification for not facilitating additional visits. That's what I'm finding."

Visits were described as being essential not just for incarcerated mothers and fathers but essential to children. As one advocate strongly stated, "You're going to traumatize the child more by not allowing the child to not have contact with their parent and we know that. We know the outcomes ...



“ Whether they are incarcerated or not, children want to hear their mom’s voice and even though the mother can’t see her child, reading the audio-recorded story is evidence of the mother’s innate desire to comfort her child. ”

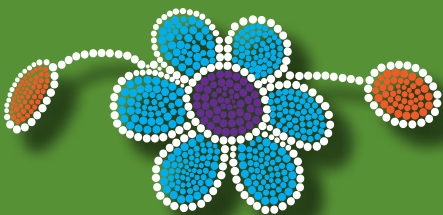
those are the outcomes of kids that don’t have that bond. They end up getting themselves in trouble, they go into multi foster homes, they’re not finishing high school, so there you go.” It was noted that often visits are part of the case plan decisions for a child going into care and visitation would be a part of the case planning just as it would be in situations where a mother or father is not facing incarceration. As one advocate stated, family visits should continue regardless but the child welfare and corrections systems need to collaborate and work together, which often is a “different entity” in itself. One advocate noted that corrections in Manitoba had recently reached out to collateral organization within the community about how to work together given that so many inmates in the corrections system are parents.

Visits were also said to be possible when children are placed in kinship placements or through kinship guardianship as family plays a crucial role in helping to maintain contact between children and their incarcerated parents. However the Elder noted that among many kinship placements, families could probably facilitate visits with parents and their children if they had transportation. She noted many Aboriginal families do not have vehicles to facilitate these visits. Moreover, she noted that many Aboriginal inmates go without visits from other family members, especially if they are from rural and/or northern remote communities. The cost of travel to a city and transportation within the city make it a cost prohibitive exercise for these families.

Some advocates state that they will assist parents with supervised visits with their children but this is usually after they have been released. As the following advocated noted,

That’s when they been released and they are in the community and the foster parent still has their child and they want to access them, quite often it will be supervised visits for like the first month or two and they need somebody to supervise the visits. I will go supervise the visits. I’ve also gone so far as to take the woman to North Battleford to see her kids.

It was noted by one advocate that the women incarcerated at Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge for Aboriginal women, a multi-level security correctional facility located in Maple Creek, Saskatchewan, “never” see their children. The lodge was described as a gorgeous healing lodge where Aboriginal teachings and ceremonies, contact with Elders, and culturally relevant programming are delivered. But the veracity of this culturally relevant environment has been called into question given the importance of children in the lives of the incarcerated Aboriginal women within this particular institution. The location of the lodge was described as being a big part of the difficulties behind



maintaining connections for the women and their children. One advocate observed, “Well there are never any kids up there. It’s 5 and half hours away so part of it is remote. Like you know, when you stick somebody out 5 and half hours away, and then again, no foster parent is going to drive 5 hours, spend a night in a motel and then drive back.”

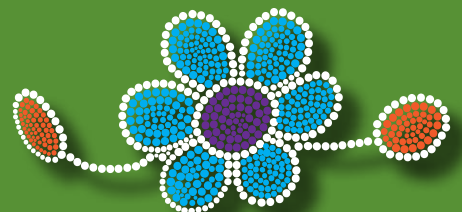
In some instances, advocates note that incarcerated parents won’t get visitations with their children especially when they are dealing with angry partners. Also it was noted that many incarcerated parents are humiliated and they can’t face their children. In these cases they become their own barrier. In some cases language was observed by one advocate to be a barrier for some Aboriginal parents who do not speak English and have little ability to advocate for themselves.

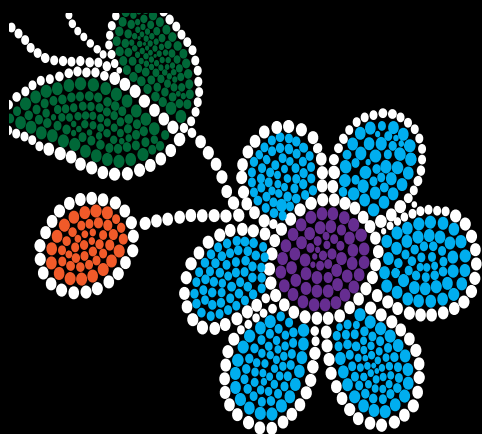
Advocates also described other communication means for maintaining connections between parents and their children as being “minimal.” For example it was shared that incarcerated women aren’t receiving mail from their children or getting the chance to talk with them by phone. Often times the phone system within the institution was cited by the advocates as preventing parents from maintaining phone contact. They stated that the parent is often waiting for the phone cards to be credited so that they can make calls out to their children. Waiting two and a half months for phone credits was not considered timely and often parents hear excuses as to why the credit hasn’t been applied. Furthermore, phone calls are free if the incarcerated parent wishes to call a community advocate but there are costs associated with making calls important for maintaining connections that are crucial to the continuity of relationships with their children.

Advocates indicate that they have played an important role in helping incarcerated parents advocate for other ways of communication if visits cannot take place as this Edmonton advocate shared:

When we do our advocacy role that’s one thing we ask, like if visits can’t happen, how about a phone call? Like 2 times a week during a certain time. But usually they’ll say, ‘we have to talk to the foster parents.’ Well you know what, you’re the caseworker, you’re the one who’s supposed to tell them what time the children are allowed to talk to their parents. So we have to always put it back to the caseworker’s court. It’s like sometimes they just want to brush it off the responsibility to somebody else. If the caseworker can’t provide the opportunity where the children can wait for a phone call from their incarcerated parent then usually you will find that the placement will go smoother, as long as the access is there. The parent who is incarcerated has that connection with their children, so they’re not flying off the handle or going into segregation or whatnot. It alleviates a lot of pressure off the parents, just to have that connection, even if it’s just a simple phone call or a letter. You know like I had that one family there, that one mother who, the caseworker wouldn’t even send pictures. The lawyer asked for those pictures and that caseworker, I had a really strong good connection with the manager, so I went above her head and I said, you know what, this is uncalled for. She’s not even providing phone calls, no visits; at least can we get some pictures of the little girl? Oh yah, no problem. So she emailed me pictures. I printed them off and when I went to visit the client there and I gave her the pictures. Oh the look on her face, just that picture alone of her daughter. It was priceless. That’s the kind of role that we play here.

Other positive and innovative ways of communication were mentioned briefly by a two advocates. The advocate from Manitoba spoke of Elizabeth Fry’s storytelling initiative between incarcerated mothers and their children where the mother would be audio recorded reading a story for their children. The audio recording is then shared with the child and it is an opportunity for children to get to hear their mothers’ voice. The advocate in Saskatchewan described a similar program where mothers read stories over the phone to their children. As one advocate exclaimed, “whether they are incarcerated or not, children want to hear their mom’s voice and even though the mother can’t see her child, reading the audio-recorded story is evidence of the mother’s innate desire to comfort her child” despite her incarcerated circumstances.





Helping Parents Cope without Children

We asked the advocates to reflect on how their organizations help incarcerated parents to cope with the idea of parenting without children. Teaching parents about their rights is a huge part of the efforts by the organizations that service Aboriginal women. Advocates indicate that they also work on educating incarcerated individuals about their responsibilities while they are incarcerated, not only to the institution but to themselves and their children. But often times the onus is entirely on the shoulders of incarcerated parents to ensure that they maintain contact with their children but doing this from inside a control environment is basically said to be near impossible. The Elder consulted for this study reiterated that it is often up to the individual to maintain their relationships. However, she noted, that "it depends if they have case managers and an inside parole officer, they start setting up their plan for when they're released. So there's probably something in there if they are going to maintain their relationship with their family cause they cover just about everything."

Concerns about Becoming Disconnected

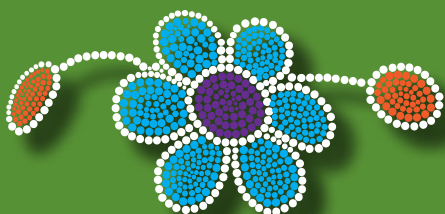
Advocates shared stories about the concerns that have been expressed to them by incarcerated parents about becoming disconnected from their children. These concerns center on the lack of opportunities for incarcerated parents to have visits and or alternative ways of maintaining contact with their children. For many parents, advocates know these visits and other ways of communicating with their children haven't happened so that upon release they basically do not have any relationship with their children, in those instances the advocate was only able to provide the following advice:

They're lost; they're distraught. They really want to reconnect with their children and that's all that is on their mind. I knew this one mother, she was incarcerated for about 6 years and she came to me, she wanted to be reunified with her children. I said how old are your children? And she said they were 15, 16 and the girl just turned 18. I said, well you're better off just to stand back and wait for your children to come to you.

Advocates also reported that encouraging parents, incarcerated or not, to consider registering at the post-adoption registry because,

If the children are adopted out once they turn 18, they themselves can register at post-adoption registry and it will be them that make that connection. Same if the child is PGO [Permanent Guardianship Order] all their life and when they turn 18 they can register with that post-adoption registry and if the parents are already registered then it's post-adoption registry that maintains that connection

Furthermore, it was noted that no amount of programming inside or outside of provincial or federal institutions prepares parents for how to parent once they are released from prison. Advocates note that men and women have many opportunities to learn while incarcerated but that doesn't mean these opportunities will teach



them about being a parent even if parenting courses are offered. As one advocate noted, all the incarcerated parent can do is research or perhaps attend regular parenting classes when they are released, but as another advocate noted, “how much are they going to get out of those classes is a whole different ball game” if they don’t have access to their children.

Observed Impacts on Children and Parents

Advocates have observed many impacts among incarcerated parents and parents who have been released and who have lost close relationships with their children. Shame was identified as one of the number one impacts experienced by parents who have been formerly incarcerated. As one advocate remarked, parents with the experience of incarceration shared feelings of loss and some have expressed being terrified of reconnecting with their children, even when they want to:

A sense of loss ... like with this mom, she's terrified to meet her kids but she wants to meet her kids. But at the same time she's scared, she's afraid of how the kids are going to see her. She feels guilty and she's ashamed and I heard this and I told her those words. When you release those chains, then you'll be free. I said it's up to you to release those chains. I can't release them for you. I can find you all the programming in the world but you have to release them and allow people to work with you, allow yourself to be disappointed if those kids are not going to welcome you in their lives with open arms and say I'm glad you're back. You are right to be angry but you have to take step back and accept that. When you can learn to accept that, then the transition might be a little bit easier. I don't know she's got to work on that because that bond is severed. It doesn't mean it's broken, it's just severed but it is going to take lots of work to un-sever it. Just being realistic.

One advocate also noted that children of incarcerated parents faced impacts too. The impact of shame experienced by children was conveyed the following way,

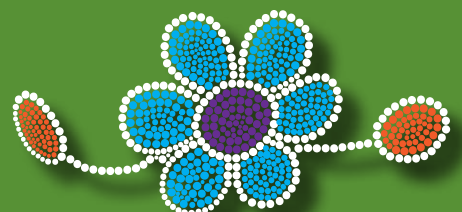
I would think depending on how old the children were when the parents were incarcerated because there's a lot shame for those children as well too that their parents are incarcerated. And so the older you are that the more ashamed you are. The exact opposite is, the younger you are the more you want to be with your parent.

Others advocate have noted other impacts on children where a parent has been incarcerated. For some parents, their children appear to be following in the same direction and getting into trouble with the law, or they're not going to school, getting involved in gangs. Many advocates state that some parents are dealing with adolescent children who are now incarcerated in a Youth detention center. As one advocated noted mothers experience guilt because they feel as “though they contributed to the child’s delinquent behaviour” given some of the things that the child may have been exposed to prior to the mother’s incarceration.

Knowledge of Intergenerational impacts

Advocates believe there are intergenerational impacts evident among the Aboriginal parents and children that they are mandated to work and advocate on behalf of. As one advocate put it, “its just like family violence, once your parents are exposed to the judicial and child welfare system, you’re probably more apt to follow that system.” Another advocate observed,

When you sit and really take a look back at the history, what I've noticed is that the ones who have been in care themselves, let's go further back, the ones where their parents' went to residential school, they're trying to parent their kids. There's a chance their kids are dealing with intergenerational trauma and then sometimes those kids end up in care. Then all you're doing is switching institutions. Then those ones end up in an institution at some point. So it is there. But



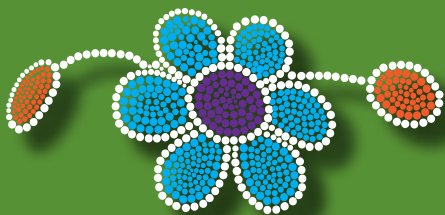
one of the questions we ask them is, have you ever experienced residential school or the child welfare system? I would say 99.9% that they would say yes.

One advocate referred to a case where the intergenerational impacts of prior correctional experiences were played out in the situation of an Aboriginal mother, of which she shared, “Yes! I can think of one right now. She’s incarcerated. Her father is going up for a dangerous offender and she says that the last time that she actually seen him, to touch him, to hold him, was when she was 7, and she will never have that in her life again. She calls that the living dead.” Another advocated shared, “I’ve actually heard of cases where a woman who had gone to prison actually met her mom in prison because her mom has already been in prison. And another woman I know her mom is in prison, her sister is in prison, her dad’s in prison, her brother’s in prison, like the whole family, the whole family is in prison and they are in different institutions across the prairies.”

Some of the factors that contribute to the intergenerational impacts include the fact that very little real and meaningful reintegration work is being done with Aboriginal people once they are released from prison. As the advocate from Saskatchewan stated, “There is no real reintegration work that is being done with these people. Our correctional plans, our correctional mandate is to reduce and manage the risk of the offender. It has nothing to do with reintegrating and ensuring they are successful in the community. They are not doing that.” Another noted that often times when individuals are released they are released early in the morning when the needed social services are not available. For instance advocates in Edmonton noted that a local emergency accommodation center was not open until the evening. Advocates have noted that many have all day to walk around with nowhere to go. In the meantime, many, they note, “fall back into their addictions or someone will coerce them back.” It’s a cycle and there are few programs that help formerly incarcerated parents reconnect with their role as a parent and help them to re-establish relationships with their children and or provide opportunities where they can maintain sobriety and an addiction free lifestyle outside of a controlled environment.

The correlation between child welfare and incarceration as an intergenerational impact was observed among one advocate from Winnipeg. Her observations on this issue have been gained from working with Aboriginal parents and children for well over twenty-five years. Her in-depth comments with regard to the intergenerational impacts between child welfare and corrections as she understands the issue, is reproduced below,

Well I do know that there is a correlation that’s been established between Aboriginal women, who have been involved with child welfare as a kid, and the youth, and some of the outcomes of these Aboriginal women, at the point where they’ve now aged out of care at 18, the correlation is high, that they end up somehow involved in the correctional system, meaning incarceration. They’ve been involved and from my understanding and my own knowledge, because of the past involvement in work that I’ve done with women in jail, 9 out of 10 have had involvement with child welfare and they are in now jail. So those outcomes, those are facts and it seems like a common denominator as an outcome for kids that are growing up. Aboriginal women, the chances of being in foster care, and they spend time in jail somewhere in their life. So it just seems like, for me as an outsider, we’re speaking with these women and talking with them and finding out what their background is, they’ve had a lot of hardship during their time when they’ve been in foster care. What I’ve been told, multi-foster homes, different placements, different foster homes, bouncing back and forth. Abuse in the foster homes but also abuse in their families of origin and their communities. There’s been abuse there as well because of residential schools. Abuse is huge. Abuse really messes up a person. They make wrong choices, they make wrong decisions, and they get involved in criminal activities. They’re making wrong choices and they’re getting caught and they are going to jail. And when they are in these situations, growing up in abuse and multi foster homes, I find they have a sense that what is being instilled in them, that they are just ... getting engrained with ... is lack of bonding, lack of a healthy bonding with an



adult, lack of love, lack of hope and lack of faith in themselves and the world around them. So they take that with them into their young adult years and get involved in different activities that are not conducive to their future or the future of their children.

She further elaborated that,

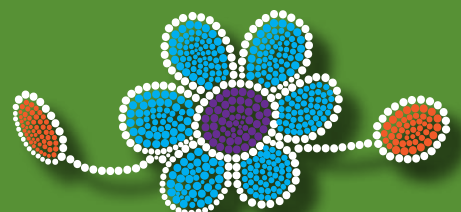
I think after you start out in ... in youth corrections, it's all about institutionalization. And just the gaps in the services, the gaps between the systems, how people fall through the gaps. Also addictions plays a big part because chances are, when they are a youth, they get involved in addictions. Drugs and booze, a lot of drugs, drugs and pills. So when you fall to an addiction and you're homeless and you're addicted, and you'll do anything to get that drug, I mean, you're in a merry go round. It's hard for people like that to get off of that merry go round. So ... And it's hard to get on ... waiting lists for treatment programs and accessing those treatment programs and detoxing from the drugs and the booze, it's a process and you know it is hard for those, I would imagine, who just have no hope and really nothing to fall back on so it is vicious cycle and it perpetuates itself. You're entrenched in this life of crime. The police know you're name and you don't know how to react to certain situations.

The Elder reiterated how the child welfare system has helped perpetuate a cycle of incarceration experienced by Aboriginal people. She feels that many Aboriginal children have experienced placement in multiple foster homes over a number of years such that they have never been able to establish bonds. She feels that many incarcerated individuals have been made to feel worthless in some of these homes and that message is “operating somewhere in the back of their minds when they get involved in crime.” Given her experience working in various institutions across the Prairies, she feels foster care has, “had a big impact on the people that are incarcerated. I would say 98.5% of the incarcerated Aboriginal people that I have worked with have gone through the child welfare system. They’ve been in and out of so many different homes that it does have an impact on their whole life.”

Lack of Resources

All of the advocates interviewed work for non-profit organizations that are dependent on mixture of public funding and private fundraising activities. They were asked to reflect upon some of the lack of resources that hindered their efforts to assist this particular demographic of individuals in maintaining contact with their children. Funding was most often cited as a major challenge by

“ *I would say 98.5% of the incarcerated Aboriginal people that I have worked with have gone through the child welfare system. They’ve been in and out of so many different homes that it does have an impact on their whole life.* ”



advocacy organizations that are working to help parents in or out of prison stay connected to their children. Advocates note that there have been huge cuts to many social and justice based program across Canada and for many, their organizations have suffered as a result of these reductions such that they are not able to do more for parent than the bare minimum. More funding is needed create programs to help reunify formerly incarcerated parents with their children upon release. There are innovative ways that have been proposed by advocacy organization to ensure connection but these ideas require funding and service agreements between justice, corrections and child welfare systems in order to execute an approach that will assist parents maintain the connection to their children using new innovative technologies. One innovative idea proposed by the Elizabeth Fry Society in Saskatchewan lies in the development of an opportunity where parents and children in care will maintain a relationship through the Internet similar to how Skype works. Their program "Child Link" is currently in the process of being developed. The advocate states that it holds promise and will encourage a way for all children and incarcerated parents to "visit" in a way that could transform and enhance their lives while at the same time, providing huge cost saving factors for both the corrections and child welfare systems.

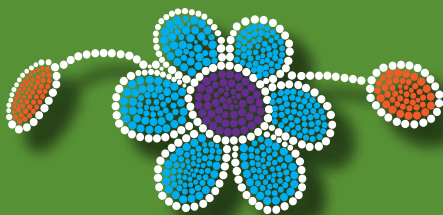
In addition to the funding aspects, developing professional relationships where there is better collaboration between child welfare and corrections services was cited as being needed. Currently the advocates all state the relationship between these two service sectors in most cases is non-existent or could be better developed across all the jurisdictions. The fact that these systems don't talk without one another was described as being a lack of foresight given the existing knowledge about the intergenerational issues evident among Aboriginal people involved in both the child welfare and corrections systems within Canada. The advocates also understand and acknowledge the difficulty of being able to do this given the legislative concerns about privacy and the sharing of information. As one advocate from Manitoba stated, "There has to be much improved collaboration among and between departments and different programs to work together and communicate, open those lines of communication, and collaboration, to ensure that people are all on the same knowledge base about the child and the parent." The advocates from Edmonton also added,

The relationship between CW and us, and this is where the social work practice needs to be improved, because 75% of the time now, caseworkers sit behind their computers so they don't make that connection with the families. And that's just the families outside the judicial system, let alone when you have families inside the judicial system, cause there is two different systems that are playing against each other as well too and boy, it's a headache, they will not release information because of the freedom to information, so they will not release any type of information unless there is a consent form signed. So that was a barrier, was getting inside corrections to get that family to sign a consent form to release information. It was a headache but we managed to find liaisons in the systems where we don't have to go in there, we can just scan an email and the forms and then start making that connection right there.

One of the advocates from Saskatoon also noted that efforts could be made by the corrections and child welfare systems in collaborating with them in helping families reunite. In particular she noted,

At our half way house for the provincial women and the federal half way house, corrections welcomes the children there. They are allowed there. We do see children there. So I will say corrections plays that role. On the other hand, I don't see family services in any way, shape or form, encouraging those relationships ever. I wish I could say that I do but I don't. In fact, I just see them put more hoops down for my clients to jump through.

Additionally, many of the advocates identified the need to develop programs that address the specific needs of parents who have been previously incarcerated in maintaining or re-establishing the relationships that are crucial to the well-being of their children and communities. There aren't any current resources out there that address these issues. Building such programs requires advocacy



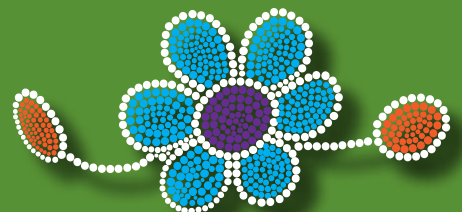
“*At our half way house for the provincial women and the federal half way house, corrections welcomes the children there. They are allowed there. We do see children there. So I will say corrections plays that role. On the other hand, I don't see family services in any way, shape or form, encouraging those relationships ever. I wish I could say that I do but I don't. In fact, I just see them put more hoops down for my clients to jump through.*”

organizations to consult with parents who face these kinds of barriers. Recruitment for support groups would need to be established where advocacy agencies could explore and build upon an understanding of the issues facing parents and children who are dealing with the loss of connections because of the parents' incarceration. These programs need to be developed both within institutions and be available to parents upon release. As one advocate in Edmonton stated, “Even if we had some sort of a support group like just to start off, so we can get evaluations and then we can get the participants' ideas on what kind program can we build. We would love to run a program something that right?” Another advocate similarly said, “there needs to be “someone working with parents and children to help them be a family again. Because when you've had a mother or a father and child separated for so long and once the kids are returned mom or dad often doesn't have any supports to help her or him reconcile with being a parent again right?”

One advocate identified that there needs to be programming for children who have a parent who is incarcerated. More support for children and adolescents were highlighted by this advocate as being vitally important to stopping the intergenerational impacts of the child welfare and corrections systems on subsequent generations of families,

I guess that's where you want more activities for kids and supports for children. I mean like child welfare, perhaps, if a child is in care and their biological parent ends up going into jail or even their foster parent that they've been with that is trauma on the child so there's going have to be some child play therapy, depending on the age. Teenagers. It's a whole different ball game. I just think more supports. The government needs to put more supportive programming in for children and youth who are in care overall.

One of the advocates from Edmonton added that future studies should consider the difficult question on how to break cycles to the dialogue about the connection between child welfare, corrections, incarcerated Aboriginal parents and their children. Aboriginal people need to be a critical part of the dialogue going forward was surmised from her comment on this:



I think one question you could ask is how do you break that cycle? How do you break that cycle because it will be my grandchildren's responsibility ... actually my son brought it up, it's not my idea. In his journey, he said, I want to break that cycle of the mentality of how people think and how disorganized our families are and when I become a father; I want to deal with my stuff first before I become a father. I do not want to destroy somebody else's life. And that's very power words for a mother listening to her son without trying to say anything. It's like you're right, you are so right! But how do you break that cycle whereas he said, so seven generations. So if you had a grandparent or great grandparent that went to residential school, then you have parent and then all of a sudden they are done, you didn't go but you still have the effects, then you go onto parent and then you parent this child. I guess the question of how do you break that cycle as an Aboriginal culture for them, if they are not in child welfare, how do you stop them from getting incarcerated for something that could be simple? Because the majority of people who are incarcerated are Aboriginal people, most are not there for violent crimes – victimless crimes, is what they call it. A lot of the victimless crimes are like drugs, fines, etc. The majority, that's why a lot of them are in there, the occasional assault but it is not like crimes against society as they call it. That's something you could ask. How do you break that vicious cycle because that is what it is? Get the young people and the Elders to come to consensus but coming to that full complete circle. I've heard Elders saying well, the young people don't listen to us. I've heard young people say the Elders don't listen to us. I've heard that comment too. Then you have people like me and [---] and we're in the middle of this. You have your young people, you have your Elders and you have us. It has to be a complete pie. There's a piece missing somewhere here and how do you fill in that piece of the pie that is missing? I know there is a solution; it's just a matter of how you get everyone to listen to fill in that portion that's missing in a person's life.

Lastly, one advocate added that future research into these issues should consider taking bolder steps. She challenged the future researchers to ask the people who are laying the charges against women if it is really warranted in going so far as to incarcerate mothers in particular.

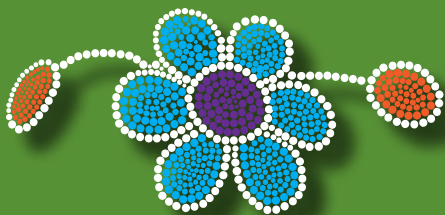
Why aren't we using the bracelet? Why aren't we sentencing women to community service to give back to their communities? So that they can be seen in their communities by our young people, doing and giving back? Why don't we sentence them to parenting? Put them on the bracelet so they can be with their kids. Many women have never been sober with their children and then wrap them with supports. That would be way more cost effective and beneficial to our community instead of throwing them in jail for \$100,000 or the costs to the child welfare system. Do you know what I mean? If you put them on the bracelet, put them in their home, with their children, wrap them with supports. The chances of their success are all that much greater than if you were to put them in jail.

Importance of the Issue

This chapter concludes with perspectives on the importance of raising the issue of the maintaining the connection between formerly incarcerated Aboriginal parents and their children who have been or are now involved in the child welfare system. As stressed by the Aboriginal parents in the previous chapter, the advocates all indicated a belief that this is an important topic, which needs further examination. The following remarks speak to some of the perspectives that advocates shared about why understanding this issue was important to them:

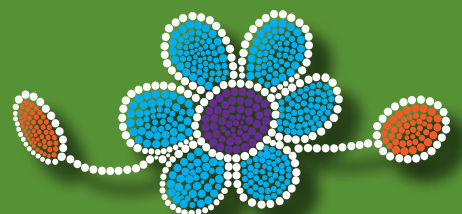
Well I feel with that kind of a background and then now working with the women who are trying to get their kids back and going through the system and dealing with that, know how it is to be in the system, work within the system and then be tried, it gives you a really healthy perspective of not only what they are going through, but what I foresee as possible challenges too in that respect.

I think it is crucial. If we do not do something about this now, I believe, that the residential schools, what we experienced there, it's going to be doubled what we are going to experience



with our children in the child welfare system today. And I say that with all due respect as someone who is trying to work within those ministries. I mean that with the utmost respect but I'm saying that in an educated manner. I see what's happening with these children and I worry. I feel that if we don't do something now, we're going to have more kids where their parents were in jail, and they're in jail. It's just going to be a cycle where it will be the jail families. I worry about that.

I think it is very important. I read a book that touched my heart because of my own experiences being raised in the foster care system. I always had that life long connection with being displaced but I'm working on myself as well too so I can identify where home is, like where my heart belongs. This book, it's called the Grieving Indian, and in that book the author was himself adopted away and then he went through the judicial system himself. Then he sobered up, went back to school and got his addiction counseling diploma and starting working in the jail systems in the states. When he was researching these inmates and it was by accident that he came across this research study, what he would do is that when inmates would come to him just to talk and they needed to share their story and he would sit there and listen and he started to noticing there was a common trend that these inmates, at least 85% of the inmates that came to him were raised in child welfare. So there is that, it's a never-ending cycle. Once you come out of child welfare, there's the judicial system that you also have to overcome as well too. And I know myself too, being raised in care. I've had that experience and my family has had that experience, but we're finding out that if you have one family member at home that is healthy enough, they will help bring the family back home together eventually. So that's what we are finding out.



A Pilot Study Examining the Connection Between Child Welfare and Incarcerated Aboriginal Parents and their Children through Narrative Inquiry

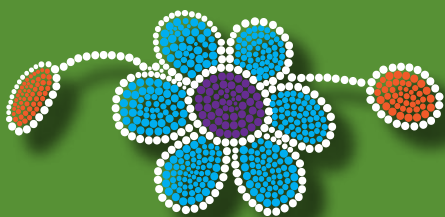
Chapter 4: Narrative findings – Child welfare Perspectives

Introduction and Background

We were able to interview two individuals working for children's services in from two Prairie Provinces. The male and female child welfare participants interviewed for this study were employed in frontline and supervisory positions. One of the participants was a case manager while the other identified as being a supervisor. Both child welfare participants self-identified as Aboriginal and both have had extensive experience working in the child welfare field. They are collectively referred to as child welfare participants (CW participants) throughout this section of the report. Readers are reminded that their views and opinions reflect unique perspectives and experiences that are only attributable to the experiences of these two individuals and not to the child welfare system as a whole within the respective jurisdictions of their employment. Given the low numbers of participants from the child welfare field there was not enough conclusive data and therefore readers are cautioned that this section of the report only draws upon general responses and to be mindful that the child welfare experiences in dealing with children and parents facing incarceration will be different based upon the unique case situation and across the provinces, as they all have separate child welfare legislation, standards and regulations for dealing with these issues. As with the previous chapters, the voices, perspectives, and experiences of these two individuals take centre stage as they reflect child welfare interventions in unique situations facing children who have had parents facing incarceration. It is important to note that the researcher did not validate or dispute the views as presented by the child welfare staff but simply accepted what they shared at face value.

Complexities and Challenges

Child welfare staff state that in instances where they have become involved with parents who are dealing with incarceration that they tend to be unique situations but they happen on a fairly frequent basis because of the populations they tend to serve. These populations are usually dealing with poverty, substance abuse, low education, unemployment, mixed with experiences where many of them have been former children in care, and where there may have been criminal involvement in their teens. Cases where they have dealt with incarcerated parents were characterized as "not happening all the time" but that "it's not uncommon" and often complex. As one child welfare participant noted, it is not the parents' incarceration that causes children to come into care; rather it is primarily the "issues" within the family that would cause child intervention concerns, not necessarily because one or the other parent was incarcerated. These issues often emerge before a parent would become incarcerated. Among Aboriginal parents, intervention is often linked to the addiction issues of the parents, which was characterized as being 90% of the reasons why parents are becoming involved with the law or incarceration.



Gender of Cases

The child welfare participants indicated that they tend to work with an equal mix of Aboriginal mothers and fathers however both agreed that it tends to be primarily fathers who are dealing with incarceration issues rather than women. As one worker noted,

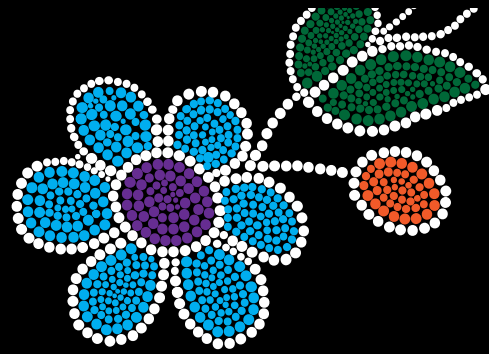
It's usually the dads that we see and so ... my experience is, we still have a parent, a mom or family that can still care for the child. So in a lot of ways it seems sort of not fair to the parent, whoever is incarcerated, because we really don't focus on them. We really don't. I have one on my unit now, he just got two years but we're still working with mom. So it's kind of like, well we'll push you aside and we can still focus on mom to return the kids to mom.

Incarceration among Aboriginal mothers was noted as usually being short term while the length of incarceration among fathers was considered to be “more significant.”

Visitation and Other Communication Issues

Visits

As the child welfare participants note that in working with incarcerated families they always work from a perspective that focuses foremost on the “child’s best interest.” In order to consider whether visitations can take place, both child welfare participants mentioned that the location needs to be looked at and the key question for determining whether it is in the child’s best interest to visit a parent who is incarcerated will depend on if and when a child is placed. One participant noted that if you are looking at having a visit in a Remand location, “you’re looking at a pretty scary place” for a child. As was noted, the age of the child would also have to be considered and whether or not those memories will be a part of that child’s life with the parent. In particular one social work participant noted that the child’s learning and understanding about

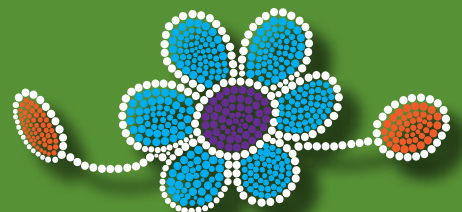


Maintaining Contact by Phone

The staff interviewed indicated that child and family service agencies do not play a role in facilitating contact between children in care and their incarcerated parents. As one child welfare participant noted, “we will encourage it but whether or not it works in translation, is the problem because then it becomes, wherever that child is housed and whether or not it’s foster care, group care, secure care and whether or not they will allow that to occur.” The other CW participant stated that she didn’t know any case where child welfare would be responsible for maintaining this contact. Often this would mean sharing foster parent’s personal information but that is unlikely to happen. There are situations where foster parents may facilitate these opportunities but for the most part it is more of a “hands off” approach.

Other Ways of Communication

Similarly with the responses to maintaining contact between children and their incarcerated parents, child welfare does not facilitate this and do not see this as their responsibility. Phone calls and mail exchange are not encouraged between children in care and their incarcerated parent.



incarceration are influenced by where they are placed and the messages that are given. The male social worker remembered a case where a child actually visited a parent who was incarcerated, and he noted “it wasn’t good because that stayed as a residual memory for that child for a very long time, so yah, it would be a little okay if the jail system was a little bit more forgiving when it comes to children, but they are not.” The other child welfare participants indicated that she struggles with the concept of lettering children visit parents who are incarcerated. If they send children into an institutional setting for visits, she struggles with questions like, “is it healthy, is it safe, and is it what children should be exposed to?”

On the other hand, the child welfare supervisor shared some of the positive aspects of the relationships that children have emerged for children when visiting with a parent in a locked facility.

Both child welfare interviewees also stated that they would never expect or ask foster parents to take on the responsibility of taking children to visits within prisons although there have been exceptional individuals known to have taken on such a responsibility.

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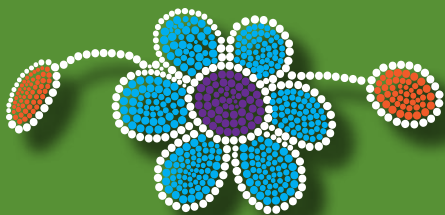
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Impacts on Children

The child welfare participants note that children grow up knowing that their parent was a criminal and that knowledge becomes a part of their identity as well. As one of the workers noted, “I’ve dealt with children who’ve had parents who were incarcerated. It’s a theme for them that they self-identify with because that is their parent.” The following response also reflects how children can become familiar with the process of visiting incarcerated parents as this one child welfare participant pointed out:

So, a couple of years ago, I had a really interesting case when I was still a caseworker and this was a family where dad was incarcerated and it was drug related charges, and I think he got four years. When I became involved he was on the tail end of his sentence, so the last year and half they had transferred him to an open facility for minimal offenders ... so he was sent there and I don’t remember the time frames exactly, but at that time, because we had no drivers, I would pick up the girls, there was three of them, I would take them out there for a visit for the day. So he was allowed to visit with his children. The girls knew that their dad was in jail. ... So I know for sure, it was process for us to get in ... there was sort of a big iron gate there and you



had to pass through this security point. They were already accustomed to dad being in and out of jail. So it wasn't even anything new for them really.

Knowledge of Intergenerational Impacts

Both child welfare participants believe that there is a high correlation of former children in care who have graduated into the adult corrections system. As one child welfare participant stated, these statistics might be as high as 80 percent. The other participant shared a specific example of a youth where this was evident:

In one case so many years ago, I worked with a young man, but his parents were in and out of jail and now he is in and out of jail and just involved in some not so good stuff. To the point where we are trying to get him out of the city because there are kids after him that are going to seriously hurt him if not kill him. He just got into trouble within the local youth center with a group of kids, so I've seen that for sure. And the other part to that is, that we have not only kids because I can think of our younger ones who have been affected with alcohol, so our fetal alcohol kids, and you can see them at younger ages getting in trouble with the law. They assault one of their group home staff and they get charged and it's like, well they are well on their way to being involved in our justice system.

Factors that Contribute to Intergenerational Patterns

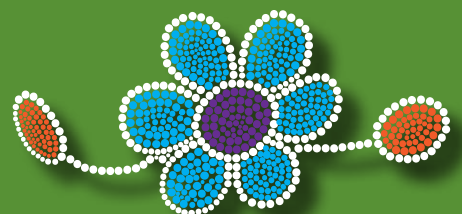
The CW participants in this study identified a number of issues that appear to contribute to the intergenerational patterns of incarceration common among the Aboriginal populations that they have worked with. As one of the participants shared, preparing children who have been in care for adulthood is one of the key issues that has contributed to the intergenerational patterns of incarceration:

Well we're looking at a societal ill where we have children in care, if they're within care as a permanent guardianship and it's over long term, we don't prepare them for adulthood. In the old system, it used to be that once they were 18 years old, you're off on your own. No parent in their right mind would not allow their children to come home after the age of 18, but we expect this of children in care? So we don't prepare them for being an adult. We don't prepare them, and especially with First Nations children, we don't prepare them for a return back to their home community or their family but 100% of them go home. But we don't prepare them for that. We don't give them an educational basis to be out on their own as adults and we don't provide adult support services to former children in care. Although in Alberta that's now changing where we can extend their length of time in care up until the age of 22, and if they are furthering their education, then we get them to apply for bursaries. So at least that way, we are understanding a little bit more about that, yah, just because you're 18 chronologically, it doesn't mean that you're prepared to go out into the world as an adult.

Maintaining Connections Between Children with Parents

The child welfare participants were asked to reflect on whether the child welfare or corrections systems helped Aboriginal families maintain connections with their children when incarcerated. This was characterized by one child welfare participant as an area of failure and in particular she noted "this was a real gap" while the other child welfare participant noted that this is not always possible even though helping family reunite is a legislative goal. As it was stated,

There's two ways of answering that question. The theoretical driven way which is what we're supposed to do and the real way. The policy driven way is our focus in the spirit of our legislation



is to reunite children and families wherever. If we cannot reunite children and families wherever possible, we try and maintain that familial contact. The reality is when it works out to the translation into the field, as the case manager, I don't have the time to facilitate that. So even though that is our intent, we don't have the resources for the facilitation of it.

One child welfare participant noted that reunification between children and parents are largely determined by the status of the children. If child welfare agencies are in the midst of court and still trying to work with a parent, then yes they will consider facilitating this reunification. However if a child becomes a permanent ward of the system, it was noted that this would “seldom happen.” The other CW participant noted that children’s services would play a role in helping parents establish visitation with children upon release but it is often the responsibility of the parent to make the effort to make this happen:

We would for sure play a role to set up those visits. We always put more of the onus onto the parents and so, if I knew, just for example, the dad of the baby that I was talking that was left at the hospital, when he gets out this time, I mean it would be his responsibility to come to us. I wouldn't go seeking him for any visits or reunification. I mean it would be his responsibility but we for sure accommodate that and set up those visits for him. Not just a visit but try to get him engaged again in his child's life and what needs to happen for that. It could be reunification and what does that need to look like. We could return the child to him. So we for sure would, that would be our responsibility to do that.

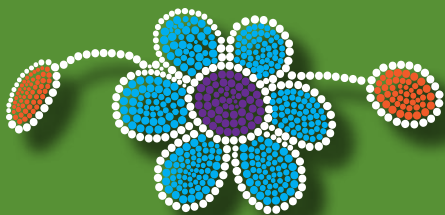
Working with Corrections

Both CW participants indicate that they are not aware of any working relationships between child welfare systems and corrections or even working relationships with Aboriginal advocacy organizations. In regard to the non-existing relationships between child welfare and corrections, one CW participant specifically shared that,

I don't think it is very good. I think there is a huge gap in services. I think the only real connection that we have is when we are following up with their POs, what are their conditions. We share information that way. I think that is the only way in my opinion, I don't think we have the greatest, I think we fail in that area for sure.

In terms of ideas for how the relationships between child welfare and corrections could be improved one child welfare participant was of the opinion that it can be hard to change the mindsets of those working within these two systems. While accommodation was noted as being possible, resource issues and logistics were seen as being a barrier for not working together. This participant shared further by stating that,

It's hard to change minds right? It's hard to change systems. If we were actually going to try and change systems it would have to be on the grand scale and I think that is where it is hard because I think most of our barriers are from within systems. A lot of people would say, it's not my job or we don't have to the manpower or there are many resource issues that go along with it. Like even, let's say I had a parent who was housed at the Edmonton Max Institution and I have a child who is placed in Spruce Grove, which is a community, half an hour west of Edmonton, so time wise you're looking at a 45 minute drive. So who's going to do the drive? Is the foster parent who does the drive? If it's the foster parent who does the drive, they have to be cleared through the corrections system. I would have to make an appointment with the correction system for a time that the parent could visit. Then it is a matter of logistics right? What time are the visits and will they allow a visit. So there are many different hoops to go through. And if we're talking for just conversation sake, it's ok to say yes, we should do this and yes,

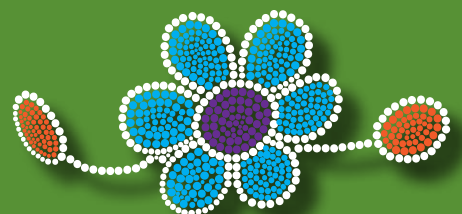


we should do that. But once you break it down, logistically are far as who does what, where, when and why, then it becomes a little more difficult to try and put your mind around as simply, "we have incarcerated parent, let's have the child visit." They have their process that we have to abide by, we have our process that we have to abide by, then there's the foster parent who has their process and whether or not they are willing to accommodate. If they are not willing to accommodate, does it become the worker's issue? Do we have an agency that could drive and then supervise what the cost is, that's going to go along with that?

Importance of the Issue

The child welfare participants were asked how important they think the issue of looking at the connection between incarcerated parents and children in care was whether more light needed to be shed on this issue. One participant responded, "It would depend on what sort of scale ... if it depended on the life of any children, it's absolutely important. If it's affecting my job directly, it's not really that important because I don't come across it that often. But when it does happen, it's absolutely important to a child." The other child welfare participant noted that these issues are complex and she was torn on whether it was important, she responded in more depth with the following comments:

I don't know because I guess for me, there'd be so many other things at play. Part of me says yah this is an issue. This is, especially if parents are incarcerated long time. Do we just say ethically, oh well, you got six years and so we're not doing visits, or do we still hold family connection, do we put value around that? Yes, it's not the best scenario but there's still some value there, and the child is old enough and remembers dad or mom and still needs that connection? For me there are so many different things that would have to be answered or accounted for before I would as a supervisor in this agency with child welfare before I could make that decision. For example, a couple of years ago, one of dads, maybe you didn't hear about it, but he actually took his boys, his families hostage, and he's a high risk offender but when he's sober he does so well but when he's drinking, he's so violent. And so they had to call in tactical police and this poor boy and he was a toddler, he was 2-3 when that happened. So mom and the other boy who was like 5 got out but she wasn't able to grab him because he had the baby. So he's gotten like 6 years for that. So like I said this was maybe a couple of years ago and so what do I do with that? Do I start those visits? I've been in court where he's had to come, and even for our child welfare matters, where he's just a broken man, and look at what I did, look at what alcohol did, like this not even ok. I get that; do I send those boys for visits? Do I? But that's also another one where the boys were returned to mom and then we closed. We don't even know is mom going to maintain that contact? Is mom going to take them for visits? I don't know. But if we would have stayed involved, yah for sure, that's a bit of dilemma like what do I do with that? Because by the time, like that one boy will be 11, by the time dad is ready to get out. What do you with that? Do you maintain that connection? So it deserves ... there does need to be more light shed there, it deserves that. It deserves the conversation. It deserves someone trying to sort out what that looks like or should look like but then, I don't know.



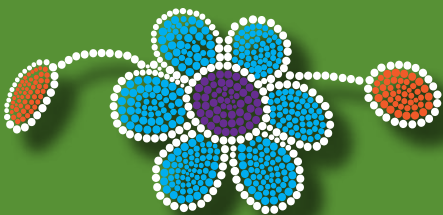
A Pilot Study Examining the Connection Between Child Welfare and Incarcerated Aboriginal Parents and their Children through Narrative Inquiry

Chapter 5: Summary and Considerations for Future Research

This study was exploratory in nature. Although it is not a complete review, it attempts to reflect on the narrative understanding of what Aboriginal parents have experienced from their perspectives of being incarcerated and their efforts in trying to maintain relationships and meaningful connection to children that have been placed in care through child welfare before, during and after periods of incarceration. It also presents narrative perspectives sought from advocates who have worked with current and formerly incarcerated Aboriginal parents. Added to these narratives are the limited perspectives and understandings of those employed in the child welfare field who have been tasked with ensuring the best interests and safety of children when a parent is incarcerated. A summary of the findings from each of the chapters is briefly presented below.

Narrative Findings from the Perspectives of Formerly Incarcerated Aboriginal Parents:

The interviews with twelve participants from the Prairie Provinces revealed common threads of experience with both the child welfare and correction systems, which started young and continued into adulthood. All of the parents noted an early onset of involvement with the law, which started during adolescents. A range of criminal charges were reported and all participants indicated spending some time being incarcerated in various correctional institutions across the Prairie Provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. All the twelve participants shared common experiences for which they feel contributed to their criminal activity and eventual incarceration. Some of these experiences were connected to coming from a broken homes marred by abuse, neglect, alcohol, drugs, poverty and violence and the prior incarceration experiences of family. Many cited the need for dealing with substance abuse issues and proper role modelling as some of the things that could have prevented their incarceration. The twelve participants shared their experiences with regard to the issues they faced trying to ensure visitation with their children while they were incarcerated. They also spoke of the communication methods through which they tried to maintain a connection with their children and the challenges they encountered in maintaining contact with their children through visits, phone calls and mail. The twelve participants also shared an understanding of how their incarceration impacted their children and the ways in which they have tried to talk to their children about why they came to be incarcerated. All of them were determined to be reunified with their children upon release from prison and they spoke of the advocacy organizations that they turned to for help and support as they learned to re-engage and become a part of their children's lives. They shared some of the struggles they had dealing with the child welfare system and the gaps. The parents in this study also provided suggestions for improving services and resources. Lastly the parents reflected on the importance of a study that looked at their experiences trying to maintain relationships with their children while incarcerated. All believed that further knowledge of these challenges needed further examination.

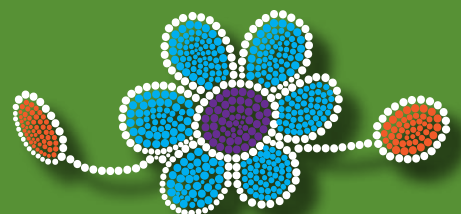


Narrative Findings from the Perspectives of Advocates who have worked with Aboriginal parents:

Six advocates from various organizations in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba provided extensive evidence of their experience working with formerly incarcerated Aboriginal men and women in their request to reconnect establish and continue maintaining a relationship with their children both inside and outside of prison. They spoke of the complexities and challenges they faced in advocating for this Aboriginal people facing these issues. Lack of knowledge about their parental rights as incarcerated parents was often noted. Many of the advocates noted the prior experience of being in care among the Aboriginal men and women they worked with. Advocates indicated that those incarcerated who deal with child welfare has traditionally be the gendered experience of Aboriginal mothers primarily but some of the advocates also note a growing preponderance of Aboriginal fathers who are now wanting assistance in obtaining visits and re-establishing connections with their children upon being released from correctional institutions. As with the Aboriginal parents, the advocate shared knowledge about the negative and positive things they have witnessed and the various roles they have played in trying to advocate for incarcerated parents' visitation rights both within and upon release from prison. Advocates also described challenges with ensuring communication through other methods if visits could not take place. The advocates spoke of the stories about concerns parents had about being disconnection from their children while incarcerated and how parents coped without their children. Shame and feelings of loss were mentioned as being two of the biggest impacts experienced by parents who have been incarcerated and lost connection and contact with their children. It was also acknowledge that children experience similar impacts. The advocates note that parents are concerned for youth who appear to following in the same footsteps as their parents and this is a significant concern for parents, which attests to the intergenerational patterns that advocates say is clearly evident among families embroiled in child welfare and correctional systems. Advocates note that funding cuts impacts their ability to effectively work and advocate for incarcerated Aboriginal parents who wish to maintain connections with and contact with their children. Suggestions for closing the gap between child welfare and corrections were noted. Development of services and programs are needed to help support Aboriginal parents and children dealing with these specific situations. Advocates were of the opinion that the challenges faced by incarcerated Aboriginal parents who are dealing with children involved with the child welfare system is an important issue and needs further examination. In particular they note that the voices of Aboriginal parents who have faced these issues needs to be a part of the dialogue.

Narrative Findings from Child Welfare Participants who have worked with children and parents facing incarceration:

The child welfare participants of this study reveal that the incarceration of a parent is not necessarily the reason why they become involved with families, rather there are residual issues that would produce a child intervention concerns and that these concerns often arise before a parent is incarcerated. They noted that they tend to work with an equal mix of Aboriginal mothers and fathers however both agreed that it tends to be primarily fathers who are dealing with incarceration issues rather than woman and the periods of incarceration tend to be shorter for Aboriginal woman than experienced by men. They spoke of the importance of children's best interests in determining when and whether visitations take place. They note that they do not facilitate visits, phone calls or other means of communication between incarcerated parents and their children. The status of the child



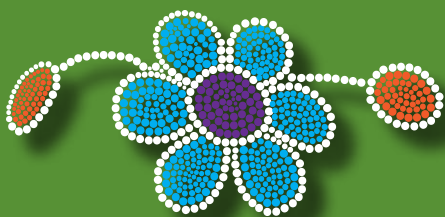
at the time a parent is from prison will determine whether reunification will take place and what their role is in facilitating those reunions. The child welfare participants noted that collaboration with corrections systems appears to be non-existent and discussed briefly the complexities in these two systems trying to work together. Lastly, despite concerns, the child welfare participants stated that the issue of maintaining the connection between children and their incarcerated parents deserved to be examined further.

The narrative stories reflected throughout this report represented an important lived experience for many Aboriginal people in Canada.

All of the participants interviewed for this study had different perspectives on the importance of this issue, collectively they agree that the issue of incarcerated Aboriginal parents and the connection with children in the child welfare system is an important issue, which needs further examination.

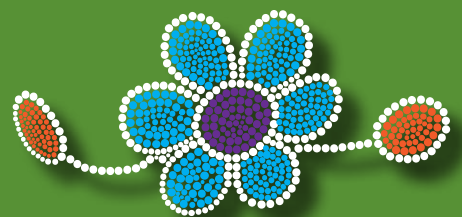
This was a pilot research project designed to get a understanding of the issues facing Aboriginal people with the experience of being in prison and the role of child welfare in the lives of their children. In reviewing these narratives additional areas require consideration for future research going forward. The following areas need to be considered and could benefit from more qualitative examination and dialogue:

- The gap between child welfare and corrections/justice systems in working together when it comes to the issue of maintaining familial connections between incarcerated parents and children in care. Both of the child welfare and advocacy participants mentioned the need to improve the working relationship between these two systems. What would this look like and is it possible are some of the key questions that participants have raised.
- The voices and perspectives from Aboriginal parents who are currently incarcerated in provincial and federal institutions across this country is missing and would need to be added to the discussion and understanding on how to maintain the connections between parents and their children.
- The role of fathers wanting to engage in the lives of their children was also noted. It has been stated that Aboriginal fathers are the greatest untapped resource for Aboriginal children. Their role is key to understanding this issue.
- The voices of Aboriginal children impacted by the incarceration experiences of their parents are also sadly missing in our knowledge about this experience.
- Also missing was the important role of foster parents as a way of bridging the divide between children and their parents when parents are incarcerated. Foster parents were often mentioned by all the participants in terms of what they did not do and that was trying to understand what role they might have in helping to maintain the relationships between children and their incarcerated parents through visitations and/or through other communication means.
- Given the knowledge of the intergenerational experiences observed by all the participants is the need to invite participation of Aboriginal parents with the lived experience of incarceration and involvement with child welfare in a dialogue about how to begin to address the concerns that were highlighted in this report.
- In-depth discussion on the role of culture appears to be missing from the narratives captured in this report. How can culture bridge the gaps for incarcerated parents and children in maintaining familial bonds.
- The child welfare participants referred to the “bests interests of children” in their responses to the question about determining whether or not children should visit with a parent in prison, yet



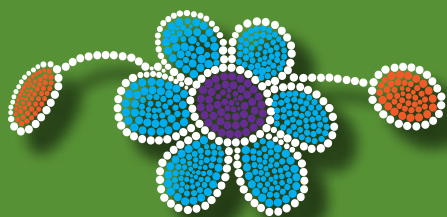
it appears this doctrine has not protected Aboriginal children specifically. As was observed by all of the participants, subsequent generations of Aboriginal children have and continue to graduate out of the child welfare systems into correctional systems. What seems to be missing is the Aboriginal perspective and understanding on what would be in the best interests of children from a cultural standpoint.

Parental imprisonment affects thousands of Aboriginal children in Canada. Aboriginal children come from the most disadvantaged and vulnerable sections of society. Successful integration into society can only happen when incarcerated Aboriginal parents have relationships with their children. Reading the narratives that emerged from interviews held with formerly incarcerated Aboriginal parents in the Prairie Provinces of Canada clearly suggest that continuity in familial relationships is not only vital to the health and wellbeing of children and incarcerated parents, but is equally and crucially important for strengthening bonds and ensuring healing for both parent and child, which can, in the long-term, protect subsequent generations of Aboriginal people from being incarcerated.

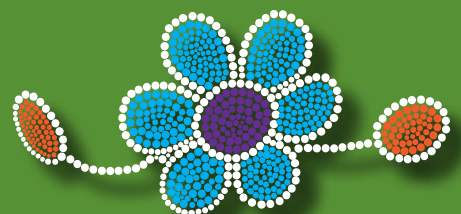


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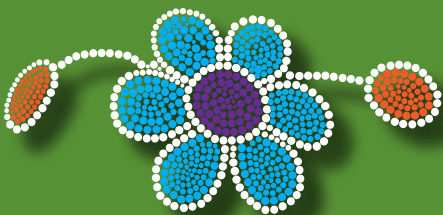
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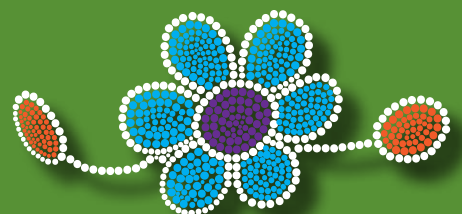
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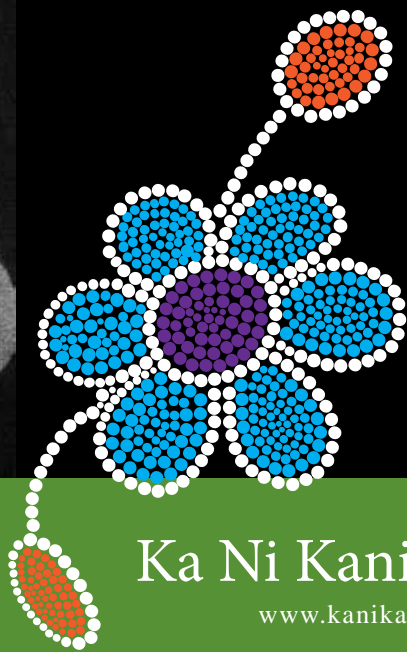


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