

Decarcerating a Nova Scotia Jail During COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

In May of 2020, just weeks after the COVID-19 pandemic hit the province of Nova Scotia and the premier declared a state of emergency, three community non-profit organizations came together to respond to the urgent needs of provincially incarcerated people for safe housing in the community. The tripartite project was established by the John Howard Society of Nova Scotia, which focuses on support for men experiencing criminalization, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia and Coverdale Courtwork Society, both of which serve women, trans and nonbinary people experiencing criminalization. The authors of this article, Ashley Avery and Sara Tessier, were staff of Coverdale during this project. From 1 May to 30 September 2020, “JEC”, an acronym of the first letter of each organization, supported persons exiting provincial jail who were also experiencing homelessness, ensuring a positive reintegration experience by providing release planning, justice system advocacy, and shelter with appropriate supports. This created a unique window of opportunity to support as many jail releases as possible while also demonstrating the possibility of decarceration more broadly and advocating for more effective and responsible reintegrative pathways.

BACKGROUND

Prior to spring 2020, Nova Scotia did not have any adequate processes in place to properly support community reintegration for people exiting incarceration. The province had one of the highest rates of remand in the country (Government of Nova Scotia, 2018), and the provincial jail already over-relied on local homelessness shelters for individuals released from incarceration with no housing. In the context of the pandemic, shelters were operating at reduced capacity and completely full, and other housing options were eliminated. Couch-surfing at a family or friends’ home was not a risk many were willing to take. It was very clear that without new housing options, prisoners would be trapped inside cramped jail cells, with very limited access to health services, personal protective equipment, cleaning,

and hygiene supplies. In addition to the housing challenges, there were disruptions in continuity of health care services between the prison and the community; prisoners did not have access to income assistance upon release, and mental health and addiction services were at times impossible to access. People being released from jail required every basic need imaginable: shelter, clothing, identification, prescription medication, bus fare, and cell phones. None of these things were readily available and few processes existed to coordinate all these supports, therefore JEC stepped in.

COVID-19 AND DECARCERATION

The danger COVID-19 posed for people in prisons and other congregate living environments was recognized early on, and the literature has shown that the virus went on to wreak havoc in these spaces internationally (Simpson and Butler, 2020). As a result of issues within prisons such as close living conditions and a lack of access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), prisoners are at an increased risk of contracting COVID-19. Prisoners were found to be infected with COVID-19 at approximately four times the rate of the general public (Vest, 2021). The negative implications of COVID-19 in overcrowded settings are not limited to the confines of prisons and congregate living environments as broader community transmission has been linked to COVID-19 clusters originating in prisons (Simpson and Butler, 2020). As the Executive Director (AA) and Peer Mentor (ST) of Coverdale Courtwork Society, we identified the need for urgent housing and reintegrative supports in Nova Scotia at the onset of the pandemic, as did local advocacy organizations such as the East Coast Prison Justice Society and Wellness Within: An Organization for Health and Justice, both of which encouraged leaders from within the justice system to take immediate action and release prisoners housed in high-risk facilities back into their communities (Pace, 2021). The extraordinary leadership and collaborative efforts that followed resulted in the greatest remand reduction effort in the history of the province, with a near 50% decrease in the provincial prisoner population during the first wave of COVID-19 (Ryan, 2020). Had it not been for the exhaustive work of under-funded, women-led, non-profit community agencies, the outcomes would have looked much differently. The unprecedented demands placed upon these agencies forced innovation,

determination, unrelenting dedication, and perseverance. The first step was expediting release for people on remand.

Over the course of a few short days in March of 2020, the Provincial Court, under the direction of Chief Judge Pam Williams, heard every non-contested bail application brought forward by Crown and Defense. The courts supported bail plans for over 100 people facing charges. Corrections staff, court workers, lawyers and community agencies worked vigilantly to develop appropriate release plans to assist people with reintegration. In the first weekend of this effort more than 40 people were released from remand on bail.

This crisis response was largely accomplished by people working from home and was nothing less than chaotic. Under the pressures of the state of emergency and a pandemic evolving by the minute, workers spent hours upon hours juggling different phone lines, huddled in make-shift home offices, trying to keep up. Between desperate cries for help from people incarcerated at the Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility unit designated for women, the lawyers desperate for bail, release planning, and advocacy work taking place on the side, we felt crushed under the weight of the severity of what we were facing. Everyone involved worked under unbelievable pressure as prisoners' health and safety hung in the balance.

THE JEC PROJECT

To ensure that incarcerated people could in fact exit jail and do so safely, three community organizations took on responsibility for the supportive emergency re-entry work. We combined efforts and expertise to design a comprehensive project proposal in just hours, aiming to safely house and support up to 20 people of all genders, and submitted it to the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia (AHANS), the community entity of the federal Reaching Home program for Halifax and rural Nova Scotia. In less than 24 hours, we heard back from the Executive Director of AHANS, Jim Graham, who notified us that the proposal was approved, and that we could begin the work immediately. It was no secret that there were significant gaps that needed to be filled immediately, and that time was of the essence. AHANS had already been working with community agencies to implement crisis shelters and emergency COVID-19 response services for the housing and homelessness sector. Hotels were an attractive site for shelter programs,

as they were mostly empty during pandemic lockdowns, and they were open to a business model that allowed them to retain their staff and operate their buildings. The marriage of community-based agencies and hotels allowed for dignified spaces to be made available, where people could isolate, socially distance, and comply with lock-down mandates. Also, there is something powerful about watching someone be liberated from a cage and put up in a 4-star hotel. It all made perfect sense.

Once funding was in place, the directors of the three agencies, including Ashley Avery, came together over a 7-day period and pulled together job descriptions, drafted policies, created a service delivery model, hired employees, trained them, and then launched the project. We released a strategic press release alerting the community to the work, hoping to garner further funding and support for the project (Nova Scotia Advocate, 2020). The JEC project utilized two hotels located in Halifax, the largest city in the Atlantic Provinces, and was staffed by an interdisciplinary team comprised of social workers and human services professionals, counsellors, lawyers, harm reduction specialists and peer support workers. The way in which the three organizations staffed the team was by redeploying existing staff and assigning them “Key-Worker” roles, complimenting their roles with frontline support workers who were brought on to fulfil temporary/contract positions. One agency took on the administrative role and was responsible for payroll and fund management. The other two agencies invoiced the administrative agency to cover any costs that they incurred related to the project. In addition to the core staff, a harm reduction consultant was hired to guide and oversee practices and to make linkages to safe supplies and overdose prevention services. It was at that time that we were connected to Sara Tessier, who was brought on as a Peer Support Worker. Just two months before the pandemic hit, Sara Tessier had exited a federal prison after completing a 5-year sentence. She was on day parole at a local halfway house and was very interested in supporting the JEC project in anyway that she could. She had worked as a prisoner advocate for the Elizabeth Fry Society at the Nova Institute for Women where she stood up for the human rights of her peers. She brought lived experience and unwavering commitment to building positive pathways for other women experiencing criminalization and imprisonment. She immediately became an integral part of the JEC project.

HOUSING FIRST

Adopting the evidence-based principles of the Housing First philosophy, JEC was housing-focused (Orgcode Consulting, 2019).

A Housing First approach aims to provide access to housing as quickly as possible as well as support services to people experiencing homelessness, despite factors such as mental illness, substance use and involvement in the legal system. Housing first approaches increase residential stability and have substantial cost offsets (Leclair et al., 2019). Community services that are Housing First have promising potential to implement strategies to reduce criminal justice involvement (Leclair et al., 2019).

The various types of support built into JEC initiative were meant to set a person up for success with obtaining and maintaining a longer-term housing arrangement appropriate to their circumstances (LeClair et al., 2019). Some JEC clients were not able to live independently beyond JEC due to their release conditions. Common conditions included: residential condition, curfew, house arrest, ankle monitoring, no substance use – which we eventually advocated to be removed for all female JEC clients – no contact orders, “keep the peace”, be “of good behaviour”, and attend for probation. Other participants needed a ‘landing pad’, and some support upon release to transition into independent housing. JEC supports spanned the social determinants of health to address a person’s long-term health, wellness, and personal goal achievement, assisting them to maintain the housing they moved onto after JEC. Evidence provided by Baxter and colleagues (2019) shows that individuals participating in Housing First programs are two and a half times more likely to be stably housed after 18-24 months. Additionally, individuals involved in Housing First programs showed a decrease in non-routine use of healthcare services such as emergency room visits, suggesting that Housing First models can reduce stress on our healthcare system and improve overall health and wellbeing.

JEC’s housing first approach also involved adapting a harm reductive lens to its policies and practices. Pauly (2013) makes key connections between a Housing First model and harm reductive approaches. Housing First approaches aim to house people regardless of their substance use status, and unlike other programs Housing First is not contingent on sobriety or participation in substance use treatment. JEC did not require that clients terminate their substance use to participate in the program and

offered clients with the ability to access safe substance use supplies along with services and information from experts in harm reduction such as the Canadian Association of People Who Use Drugs.

HARM REDUCTIVE, TRAUMA-INFORMED, FEMINIST ANTI-OPPRESSIVE LENS

We applied a lens framed by harm reductive, trauma informed, feminist and anti-oppressive theories and practices (Darlymple and Burke, 2019; Stone and Shirley-Beavan, 2018; Champine et al., 2019). Each of these theories and practices are interconnected and integral to JEC's model.

North America is home to approximately 17% of the total world population of people who use intravenous substances (Stone and Shirley-Beavan, 2018). Cities across North America that offer harm reductive services such as Needle Syringe Programs have seen the prevalence of HIV and other blood-borne diseases decrease within the population as less people are sharing used injection supplies (Wilson et al., 2015). In Canada, it is the responsibility of the provinces and territories to provide public health harm reduction services (Stone and Shirley-Beavan, 2018). As a result of the low costs and high effectiveness of Needle Syringe Programs, they are recognized as one of the most cost-effective public health interventions. JEC worked closely with community experts in harm reduction to offer clients with safe substance use supplies as well as information, assistance in obtaining opioid agonist therapy (OAT) and assistance in receiving other prescribed medications. Harm reductive approaches have shown to be globally effective, reduce the spread of blood-borne diseases, improve health outcomes for people who use substances and the broader population, and are overall cost saving (Wilson et al., 2015). Despite the health, social and economic benefits of harm reductive programs, there is still an insufficient number of harm reductive services in most regions (Stone and Shirley-Beavan, 2018). Specifically, prisons in Canada and the USA are severely lacking in harm reductive approaches and programs. People who are incarcerated are more likely to be exposed to blood-borne viruses within prisons as opposed to within the general population and suffer from disproportionate rates of infections (Wilson et al., 2015). The increased risk of contracting blood-borne diseases in prisons can be largely attributed to the lack of harm reductive programs and approaches in prisons combined with

other issues such as the criminalization of people who use drugs, inadequate healthcare in prisons, low-quality prison conditions and overcrowding in prisons. Moreover, harm reductive approaches are even more scarce in women's prisons (Wilson et al., 2015).

A large factor to JEC's success was our reliance on a trauma-informed lens to guide our operations. King (2017) defines trauma-informed interventions as promoting an awareness of the extent and influence that trauma has on individuals and groups as well as promoting recovery from trauma often through strength-based approaches. Additionally, it is noted that trauma-informed services recognize the impact that the treatment environment has on healing and that this environment should be welcoming and avoid authoritative and coercive methods as to not contribute to re-traumatization. JEC understood that the prison environment utilizes these exact authoritative and coercive methods that contribute to the re-traumatization of prisoners and that to help clients heal from trauma and succeed in the community, a trauma-informed approach was critical. Champine and colleagues (2019) lays out the key components of a trauma informed approach for organizations and programs, which is a realization and acknowledgement of the extensive impacts of trauma on every aspect of a person's life; a recognition of symptoms and signs of trauma in both individuals and groups, a response that completely integrates knowledge and understanding of trauma into practices and policies; and a commitment to preventing the re-traumatization of individuals and groups. JEC was dedicated to fulfilling all the components of a trauma-informed approach to best serve clients, as the majority of clients had encountered traumatic experiences both during and before their incarceration.

When utilizing a trauma informed approach at JEC it was critical to consider the implications of trauma from a feminist perspective. Prisons are known to both create trauma and exacerbate pre-existing traumas, especially for women and gender diverse folks. Moloney (2009) explains how incarcerated women are more likely to have certain histories of trauma compared to incarcerated men and discusses the complex ways in which incarcerated women's extensive histories of trauma directly and indirectly lead to their involvement in the legal system. There is a strong association between trauma and poor health outcomes which are both largely linked to women's incarceration. The operational procedures and structures of women's prisons are often based off a male model and do not consider

the unique traumas that incarcerated women have experienced or their specific needs, therefore further contribute to incarcerated women's re-traumatization. Furthermore, community-based preventative programs and services that utilize a restorative and therapeutic approach should be considered as a promising alternative to imprisonment as they address the root causes of issues leading to women's incarceration (Moloney, 2009).

It is not enough to simply apply a feminist lens to programs and organizations aimed at ending social injustices. Any feminist approaches must be intersectional and consider how gender intersects with other parts of a person's identity to create a unique and complex experience of oppression, discrimination, and trauma. Crenshaw (1989) famously coined the term intersectionality to describe how discrimination and disadvantage are conceptualized in society on a single-axis framework that erases the experiences of Black women and those who are "multiply-burdened", as focus is either solely put on either race or gender and never how oppression is experienced from multiple aspects of a person's identity occurring simultaneously. It is essential that Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality is considered when organizations such as JEC plan to work against the injustices that women and gender diverse folks involved in the legal system face, as Black and Indigenous women are disproportionately targeted and impacted by the legal system. Sudbury (2005) uses an intersectional approach to examine the global increase in Black and Indigenous women's incarceration rates in relation to the prison industrial complex to argue for new anti-racist feminist analysis that considers the complex intersections of gender, race, and class alongside global geo-political and economic domains. It is suggested that the absence of response to the global increase in Black and Indigenous women's incarceration rates is due to a lack of recognition of the connections between Black and Indigenous women's incarceration to the social, economic, and environmental issues fueled by our global economy. Through the privatization of prisons that occurs under neoliberal order, corporations capitalize off imprisonment as they gain profits from the building and operating of prisons as well as the labour produced by prisoners. In addition, Sudbury claims that racially targeted initiatives such as the war on drugs further fuels the prison industrial complex and increases Black women's incarceration rates. The USA's implementation of mandatory minimum sentences in the 1980's for cases involving drugs has especially impacted Black women as the length of sentences do not rely on

the involvement of an individual, rather the weight and purity of the drugs. Data collected from interviews with women involved in drug trade showed that women often became involved through three paths: economic need/poverty, coercion, and deception (Sudbury, 2005). These findings strongly suggest that the majority of women's involvement in drug trade was both low scale and a result of social inequity. The USA's war on drugs is not limited by borders and has influenced polices across the globe, resulting in global increases in Black women experiencing incarceration. As a result, new anti-racist feminism that seeks to understand Black women's incarceration must be womanist and transnational in scope while acknowledging Black women's economic and geopolitical inequity (Sudbury, 2005).

JEC valued working with clients in a non-authoritative and collaborative manner and rooted its policies and practices in an anti-oppressive framework. Anti-oppressive practice aims to deconstruct power imbalances and social division at an individual, organizational, and structural level (Adams et al., 1998). Furthermore, anti-oppressive practice recognizes how racial, economic, and gender discrimination intersect and fuel power abuse and oppression. A prime example of a power imbalance that occurs on a structural level is prisons as they abuse the unequal amount of power that they have over people who are incarcerated while benefiting powerful groups such as the owners of the labour produced by prisoners. JEC wanted their model to be as distant from reflecting prisons and legal system as possible, therefore an anti-oppressive lens was central to our operations.

The hotel provided a meal service to JEC clients for an added fee, so that three square meals were delivered to each guest's room daily. JEC staff assisted guests to acquire clothing and personal care products, obtain identification, apply for income assistance, and assisted with groceries and any other basic needs. A partnership with the local public library provided access to chrome books, allowing some guests to attend online programs such as Narcotics Anonymous/Alcoholics Anonymous (NA/AA). With two staff rooms, JEC staff and key workers were able to be on location and respond to the immediate needs of the guests as well as meet with them when necessary. The funding allowed for the project to be staffed from 9 am-11pm, 7 days a week. After hours, an on-call staff member was available to respond in emergency situations. The front desk hotel staff were on-site 24/7 and were able to assist with overnight guest requests where appropriate.

CULTURAL SAFETY

The pandemic caused clients to feel lonely and low. The JEC program provided culturally specific support to clients who identified as Indigenous or of African descent. An Indigenous peer support worker from the Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia was able to connect Indigenous women to their traditions and supports. The JEC program and her role provided emotional support individualized to the client's culture and needs. Those traditions were pivotal for healing and the peer support worker facilitated that. A key worker from the John Howard Society provided culturally safe support to clients of African descent, both on a personal level as well as connecting them with the culturally specific programs and services within the community. Having this cultural component allowed clients to see themselves in the workers and improved rapport between all parties involved in JEC. As a queer peer support worker, Sara offered peer support to 2SLGBTQ+ clients, worked with local sex resource bookstore and boutique Venus Envy to provide gender affirming garments, and made referrals to the Halifax Sexual Health Centre (formerly Planned Parenthood). Sara also provided support by offering knowledge, experience, emotional, social, and practical help from a place of experience.

FUNDING AND SUCCESS SHIFTS

By 30 June 2020, the AHANS funding was completely depleted (Tessier, 2020). For the remaining three months of JEC, the United Way provided funding to continue the work. With less funding, the scope of the project shifted. We could not have a staff hotel room at either of the hotels, so staff began working out of the Coverdale office, limiting on-site support. The funding source for the hotel rooms for individuals shifted from JEC to the Department of Community Services (DCS) through income assistance. This caused significant issues, as we received little notice as to when funding for the hotel rooms was going to change or be cut off. The workers for JEC would often find out the day of that a guest had to check-out, and were left to scramble with the guest to either keep them in the hotel or move them to a homeless shelter or elsewhere. Other problems began to arise. Without notice, the direction changed: We lost our operational funding, and the Department of Community Services moved to a model

where they directly funded clients to reside in hotels, without the support of our staff. Community Services also required clients to contact shelters as soon as possible and every day, to transition out of the hotel. If a shelter bed became available, they had to take it and check-out of the hotel. This created distress, as guests would be forced to leave what had been their home for many weeks. In some cases, the alternative would be sleeping outside or reincarceration, depending on their court conditions. This also caused problems for clients who were on house arrest as they needed to have court approval to move locations. We began to see more breaches of court-ordered conditions and reincarceration, whereas when the funding was secure in the beginning months, we saw very few breaches or recidivism. The chaotic change created a great deal of uncertainty and shifted staff and clients back into survival mode.

The experience of breaching is gendered due to the increased marginalization of women, trans and nonbinary folks. Approximately 1 in 5 women held in custody are on remand and many women are detained unnecessarily as prisons are utilized due to their easy accessibility as opposed to a suitability for the individual and circumstance (Player, 2007). As a result of the underfunding and high demand of services such as shelters that aim to address homelessness, prisons are often the most available option for women who otherwise would be released on bail. Russell and colleagues (2021) highlights how women's systemic disadvantages of housing insecurity and domestic violence correlate with their risk of long-term incarceration and inability to receive bail. Homelessness was identified as one of the leading barriers that women face when applying for bail, since most judges will not grant bail if an individual does not have a stable place to reside. Women face additional gendered conditions when applying for bail as judges often see women as having an increased vulnerability if they are released without stable housing compared to men. The lack of affordable housing options along with bail conditions that pose increased disadvantages for marginalized women often results in women's bail requests being denied. In addition, domestic violence further increases both women's likelihood of homelessness and breaching their bail terms. Incarcerated women seeking bail are often forced to either return to a violent household or face homelessness, both of which puts them in danger and increases their risk of breaching their conditions.

BREACHING COURT ORDERS

Most guests were released to JEC on bail and conditions of release. During the project, there were two breaches of court orders by clients living in the hotels, one of which was a no contact order that a woman had with her former partner. She left the hotel and went to her former partner's house. Police were called and she was taken into police custody for breaching her conditions. Her key worker attended court the following morning to advocate for her. Through this process, the client was then moved out of the hotel and into a residence for individuals experiencing domestic violence. The other breach occurred with a man who had a curfew of 10:00 pm and he breached by not being home by that time. The police went to perform a check on him and because he was not there, he was sent back to jail for breaching his conditions.

REASONS FOR ACCESSING SERVICES

The majority of JEC guests were on bail and awaiting trial. Because of the pandemic, many court services were delayed and this extended the time for which people were under restrictions imposed by the courts. The JEC project allowed individuals to have a safe space to live while determining their next steps. Some individuals who accessed services did not come directly from provincial or federal jails/prisons, but may have had a history of criminalization or poverty that had created barriers to finding stability. Because of this, the JEC project was able to provide space for those individuals to live at the hotels and access support to mitigate recidivism and provide resources and tools to move forward in a safe and positive way.

PROGRAM STATISTICS AND HOMELESSNESS

We collected basic demographic data about participants. Of the 42 individuals in JEC, 23 were women. Although women make up less than 10% of the prison population in Canada (Government of Canada, 2019), within the last ten years their numbers have increased by almost 40% (Government of Canada, 2020). The strong participation of women in JEC speaks not only to the importance of gender-responsive supports, but of the gendered experience of housing precarity and criminalization. Women

are severely underrepresented in homelessness counts as they make up a large portion of the “invisible” or “hidden” homeless population (Milaney et al., 2020). Women are considered to make up the majority of the hidden homeless population because many women experiencing homelessness will end up sleeping rough or couch surfing as opposed to accessing services such as shelters, therefore they are unknown to service providers and data collectors. Most often women do not access shelters out of a fear for their safety or a lack of available space. As a result of women’s underrepresentation in homelessness data, there are less services for women experiencing homelessness. Responses to homelessness must incorporate a gendered and trauma-informed approach to gain a stronger understanding of the prevalence of women’s homelessness as well as how to best address the issue (Milaney et al., 2020).

When examining women’s experiences of homelessness, it is critical to acknowledge that Black and Indigenous women face significant barriers due to structural racism that both directly and indirectly impacts Black and Indigenous women’s accessibility to housing while intersecting with other areas of oppression. Bullock (2020) critiques how the feminization of homelessness is often approached through a single-axis framework that centres on gender and ignores the intricate ways in which racial and economic inequity impact Black women’s experiences of homelessness. Systemic economic inequities such as low and unequal wages, insufficient social assistance benefits and a lack of affordable housing are just a few examples of structural failures with racist and classist undertones. Social assistance programs have been ridiculed by critical feminist scholars as being rooted in intersecting racist, classist, and sexist biases that utilize restrictive policies to “discipline” women, specifically Black single mothers (Bullock, 2020). In the USA, states with larger African American populations were found to have more restrictive social assistance policies combined with lower benefits (Bullock, 2020). The Vulnerable Index Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) which is used in Halifax as well as across Canada and the USA to determine people experiencing homelessness priority for services has also been critiqued for racial bias in determining housing and service priority. Cronley (2022) states that the origins of the VI-SPDAT are unclear, however many people believe it to have been based on a study of homeless adult’s mortality rates in Boston, where 86% of participants were males and 59% were white. Despite the intersections

of race and gender clearly posing a more significant risk for homelessness, white women were found to score consistently higher on vulnerability compared to Black women, even though Black women and white women reported similar odds of experiencing homelessness due to trauma and abuse. The similarities in data between the two groups does not consider the deeper layers of Black women's unique experiences of trauma and abuse that are specific to their intersecting racial and gender identities, which would undoubtedly place Black women higher on the vulnerability list compared to white women if adequately considered. As a result of scoring lower on the vulnerability assessment, Black women are therefore placed at the bottom of the priority list for housing and supports. Evidence examined from the VI-SPDAT strongly suggests that the assessment of vulnerability is racially biased and does not accurately capture Black women's risks of vulnerability as being homeless due to trauma and being white directly indicated higher vulnerability scores, likely due to the assessment tool being based off of white people's experiences (Cronley, 2022). Reproductive coercion, poverty, and economic inequity are a few examples of issues that place women at an increased risk of experiencing housing insecurity compared to men, which further intersects with race and puts Black women at an even greater risk of housing insecurity (Cronley, 2022). Policies and services targeted at ending women's homelessness must address co-existing inequities outside of gender as these should not be seen as separate issues (Bullock, 2020). It is critical that policies, services, and assessment tools used to address women's homelessness incorporate an intersectional feminist framework and shift away from a single-axis approach to address the needs of Black and Indigenous women experiencing homelessness.

Most women are incarcerated because of behaviour that is related to attempts to cope with trauma. Incarcerated women are likely to have experienced childhood abuse, domestic violence, mental illness, and economic marginalization (King, 2017). As a result of incarcerated women's adverse experiences, they often have histories of trauma, mental health struggles, and substance use which are all interrelated (King, 2017). Multiple studies have shown that incarcerated women have extremely high rates of childhood and lifetime sexual violence as well as increased rates of depressive mental health disorders and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Karlsson and Zielinski, 2020). Research regarding the severity and persistence of incarcerated women's experiences of sexual violence

is limited; however, available data suggests that incarcerated women's experiences of sexual victimization are significantly higher compared to incarcerated men's and non-incarcerated women's experiences (Karlsson and Zielinski, 2020). Factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and gender influence an individual's access to resources that are critical in preventing and reducing negative outcomes of trauma, and a lack of these resources often results in individuals utilizing unhealthy coping mechanisms associated with criminal behaviour (Fuentes, 2013). Many JEC guests had complex mental and physical limitations as well as histories of trauma, poverty, and addiction. Further, a large percentage of clients were racialized.

Indigenous people and people of African descent are more likely to be subjects of unfair treatment throughout the criminal justice system, from contact with police to sentencing and parole (John Howard Society of Canada, 2017). Examining data related to race and legal system involvement in Canada is difficult as this data is not made public in an effort to deter anti-racism research and awareness while still allowing police officers to access this data for racial profiling (Millar and Owusu-Bempah, 2011). In Ontario, Canada, Black men were found to be five times more likely to be incarcerated compared to white men, and Black women were approximately three times more likely to be incarcerated compared to white women (Owusu-Bempah et al., 2021). Black and Indigenous individuals are disproportionately represented in Canadian prison populations, yet Canada lacks data on these particular groups involvement within the legal system. Data that is specific to race and incarceration is essential to determine population health and wellbeing as well as to identify areas of concentrated incarceration (Owusu-Bempah et al., 2021). In 2016, Black individuals represented 7.2% of people under the supervision of the federal correctional system, while only accounting for 3.5% of the total Canadian population (Owusu-Bempah et al., 2021). Furthermore, between 2002-2010 the number of incarcerated Black women in Canada had dramatically increased by 54% and was followed by an additional 28% increase between 2010-2012 (Government of Canada, 2014).

JEC SUCCESS STORIES

JEC successfully transformed the lives of 42 participants. Below are a few examples.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Gender	Number of Participants
Trans	5
Female	23
Male	14

Age	Number of Participants
17-24	6
25-44	24
45-54	6
55+	5

Race/Culture	Number of Participants
African Nova Scotian	6
Indigenous	4
White	27
Other	3

Housing Outcome	Number of Participants
Relocated to shelter	10
Housed	16
Discharged/funding cut	14
Breached court conditions	2

A woman came to JEC after an incident of domestic violence that resulted in her spending the night in jail. Once she arrived at the hotel, JEC staff were able to provide immediate, consistent, and targeted support. This individual did not have an extensive history of criminalization, but was experiencing mental health concerns. She often experienced elevated emotions and JEC staff and her key workers were often able to respond to her needs in a timely manner and help her find some sense of calm. When she left the program and moved to a shelter, JEC staff and Coverdale staff

continued to provide support. Building rapport early allowed development of a meaningful relationship.

An African Nova Scotian man with an intellectual disability and an extensive history of criminal justice involvement came into the JEC program. His behaviours were difficult to manage in the hotel setting. His keyworker was patient and dedicated, and he was successfully housed in a supportive transition house where he had access to appropriate support services. He was provided with care, compassion and culturally sensitive support that ultimately allowed for him to reintegrate and not reoffend.

A woman came into the JEC hotel program from the Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility with an ankle monitor. She was on house arrest and JEC staff had to provide a lot of care for her to succeed in the community, including picking up her prescriptions, ensuring she had food, clothing and toiletries as well as working towards adequate housing. Through the JEC program, she was able to secure housing and continue living in the community without breaching her conditions. Coverdale continued to support this individual. She was one of the only individuals released with an ankle monitor during the first wave of COVID-19 who remained in the community. This is directly related to the extensive community supports that allowed her to comply with house arrest conditions.

A transgender youth was brought into JEC upon exiting Waterville Youth Correctional Facility. Although JEC was not intended for youth support, this individual did not have another option upon release. They were not able to access the youth shelter. This young person was incredibly vulnerable and was experiencing a mental health crisis. Because of this, JEC shifted to staff 24/7 for the few days she was in the program. Although in the end she had to leave as the program could not sustain this support, she was aided in accessing health care support and the community agencies were able to continue to support her in navigating the court process and establishing stability in the community.

CONCLUSION

In the fall of 2020, just five months following its launch, funding ran out, and the JEC project concluded. The three agencies parted ways and the project staff were deployed back to their positions. Due in large part to the homelessness-jail cycle (Urban Institute, 2021), at the end of JEC, many

clients returned to jail. The United Way created a promotional video that highlighted the project, marking a moment in time where a global pandemic prompted the largest decarceration effort in the province's history. In January of 2021, the JEC project won the Canadian Bar Association (Nova Scotia Branch) J. Michael MacDonald Access to Justice Award, which is awarded yearly to an organization or individual in acknowledgement of their efforts to enhance access to justice for Nova Scotians facing social, economic and systemic barriers. While it felt incredibly defeating to have JEC end far before the end of the pandemic, and at times we felt all hope to be lost, we hope the project was only the beginning of significant advancements to the reintegrative processes and services in Nova Scotia.

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