

Services for Women Leaving Prison in Canada: Results of a Brief Environmental Scan

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ABSTRACT

Women are a growing population in prisons in Canada. When women leave prison, community-based organizations (CBOs) can provide immediate material resources, and facilitate connection to healthcare and other services. We conducted an environmental scan of CBOs that support women leaving prison in order to identify potential gaps in service delivery, and identified 86 CBOs distributed across ten provinces, with a lack of services in rural areas and a general lack of housing. The rapid growth in the incarceration of women has not been met with an investment in CBOs. We call for an investment in, and increased attention towards, community-based housing as both a reentry service and an alternative to incarceration.

RÉSUMÉ

Les femmes représentent une population croissante dans les prisons canadiennes. Lorsque les femmes sortent de prison, les organisations communautaires peuvent leur fournir immédiatement des ressources matérielles et faciliter leur accès aux soins de santé et à d'autres services. Nous avons enquêté sur les organisations communautaires qui soutiennent les femmes sortant de prison afin d'identifier les lacunes potentielles dans la prestation de services, et avons recensé 86 organisations réparties dans dix provinces, avec un manque de services dans les zones rurales et un manque général de logements. La croissance rapide du nombre de femmes incarcérées n'a pas été accompagnée d'investissements dans les organisations communautaires. Nous appelons à investir dans les logements communautaires et à leur accorder une attention accrue, à la fois comme service de réinsertion et comme alternative à l'incarcération.

Keywords / Mots clés : women, prison, criminalization, community housing, community organization / femmes, prison, criminalisation, logements communautaires, organisation communautaire

INTRODUCTION

Although women make up a small percentage of the overall prison population in Canada, their rate of incarceration is fast growing. The incarceration rate of women in federal prisons increased by 50 percent between 2000 and 2020 (Department of Justice Canada, 2024). On a given day, there are approximately 800 women in federal prisons and 3,000 in provincial prisons (Correctional Service Canada, 2025; Statistics Canada, 2024). Most provincial prisons are co-located with men. Despite this rapid growth, incarcerated women remain an under-served population.

There is a lack of systematically collected and publicly available data on the experiences of women in prison, including access to healthcare, health outcomes, and the number of children affected by maternal incarceration. This data gap is especially acute for Indigenous women, who are severely overrepresented in the Canadian prison system (Public Safety Canada, 2023). The absence of this information impedes service delivery and advocacy efforts and intentionally obscures the realities faced by incarcerated women and gender-diverse people.¹

Mapping the incarceration of women in Canada

Our team had previously conducted an environmental scan of all facilities designated to detain women and girls in Canada, including provincial and federal prisons, youth detention centres, immigration detention centres, and secure forensic hospitals (Paynter, Bagg, & Heggie, 2020). We created this inventory to respond to a practical knowledge gap regarding where women are incarcerated in Canada and to counter the pervasive invisibilization of women and girls in prison, subsequently using it to analyze distances required to access essential health services, including maternity care and procedural abortion (Paynter & Heggie, 2023).

We are also committed to collecting evidence about the health outcomes of women in prison, which we have done through surveys and community-based qualitative research (Paynter et al., 2022, 2023, 2025a, 2025b). This evidence highlights the significant threats to health equity created by carceral systems. To counter these threats and support individuals after incarceration, services must operate with a fundamentally different approach. Our qualitative research—and that of others—underscores the importance of judgment-free, accessible, community-based services in supporting reintegration after incarceration. These organizations operate outside of carceral systems, allowing them to advocate for clients from a trauma-informed, non-punitive standpoint.

Such services are especially critical post-release, a time when women often struggle to access essential supports in their home communities (McLeod et al., 2020; Sheppard & Ricciardelli, 2020; To et al., 2017). Access to safe and stable housing is arguably the most foundational need for successful reintegration (Doyle et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2020; Jacobs & Gottlieb, 2020). Other immediate needs include connection with children, income, employment support, and healthcare access. While health concerns may be deprioritized in the face of more urgent material needs, timely healthcare linkage during this period can reduce reincarceration as well as lower emergency and acute care visits (Wang et al., 2012, 2019).

Organizations specifically designed to support people leaving prison are uniquely positioned to navigate the complexities of bail, parole, and community supervision. Services tailored to women

and gender-diverse people are especially crucial, as they address gendered challenges like safety from gender-based violence, reconnection with children, and access to reproductive healthcare.

Services for women leaving prison: Environmental scan results

Prior to our environmental scan, there was no comprehensive national inventory of organizations designated to support women and gender-diverse people leaving prison in Canada. This gap makes it difficult to assess which populations are underserved by existing support networks. Building on our previous inventory of facilities that detain women and girls, we conducted a brief environmental scan of community-based organizations (CBOs) that support women and gender-diverse people leaving provincial, territorial, or federal prisons. We defined *community-based* as existing outside of prison and not operated by any government body responsible for the administration of justice. Our inclusion criteria required that a CBO's public website explicitly state that they provided services for women and/or gender-diverse people exiting the carceral system.

We developed a list of information sources by province and territory, drawing on our team's experience, partner consultations, and social services directories. These sources were then validated, followed by a thorough scan augmented by Google searches to identify additional services, including those for trans and gender-diverse people. We also translated key terms to conduct French-language searches. We did not contact any organizations directly as part of this initial scan. Our methodology identified 86 CBOs across Canada serving women and gender-diverse people exiting the carceral system. British Columbia, Ontario, and Nova Scotia reported the highest numbers of CBOs. Conversely, we only identified five in Québec, Canada's second-most populous province. We did not identify any CBOs providing housing in Newfoundland and Labrador or Prince Edward Island. Notably, no CBOs specifically designated to support women and gender-diverse people leaving prison were found in Yukon, Nunavut, or the Northwest Territories, despite each having a territorial prison designated for women.

Identified CBOs included Elizabeth Fry Societies, faith-based organizations, and other non-profits or registered charities. These organizations provided a range of services including housing, criminal-legal system navigation, material supports (e.g., rent funds, food banks), parenting supports, and healthcare navigation and clinical services. Of the CBOs identified:

- 65 percent were in large population centres
- 9 percent provided rural and remote outreach (none were physically located in rural areas)
- 54 percent offered housing, ranging from four-bed homes to buildings with 128 individual units
- 37 percent of housing services allowed children
- 4 percent of housing services required abstinence from drugs and alcohol
- 4 percent of housing services explicitly practiced harm reduction

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusions we can draw from this scan are necessarily limited. We excluded organizations

that do not explicitly state support for women and/or gender-diverse people leaving prison, even though many—for example, women's centres or male-focused re-entry programs—may offer them support regardless. This is especially likely in rural or remote areas, where a single community organization often serves multiple roles. We also excluded government programs, including those run by Correctional Service Canada or First Nations band councils. Furthermore, despite using French search terms, we may have missed certain Québec-based services. Since we did not contact any CBOs directly, we lack detailed knowledge of their specific programs, housing capacity or policies. The goal of this scan is not to claim that no such support exists in a given community, but rather to highlight where service availability and accessibility appear limited.

Unsurprisingly, CBOs are concentrated in urban centres, indicating a potential service gap for women and gender diverse people returning to rural communities, or incarcerated in a rural prison. Consider an example from Saskatchewan, where the largest housing service for women leaving prison is in Saskatoon, the province's largest city by population and a considerable distance from the two prisons designated for women in the province. The provincial Pine Grove Correctional Centre is in Prince Albert, 143 km north of Saskatoon; and the federal Okimaw Ochi Healing Lodge is in Maple Creek, 423 km southwest of the city. Given that approximately 32 percent of people in Saskatchewan live in a rural area (Statistics Canada, 2022), the geographic dispersal of both prisons and CBOs presents challenges, and advocates have called attention to lack of transportation to home communities and/or housing organizations for women leaving prison (Larson, 2021; Maxwell, 2021). Similarly, in New Brunswick, the province's only prison designated for women is in Miramichi, 267 km northeast of the province's only designated housing service in Saint John.

Beyond the issue of uneven geographical distribution, the specific nature of some identified CBOs highlights potential gaps. In Atlantic Canada, which has Canada's highest rural population (Statistics Canada, 2022), half of the 10 identified CBOs are faith-based. While these programs may offer secular services, reliance on these organizations raises concerns. For instance, one such group listed "crisis pregnancy centres"—anti-abortion organizations that misrepresent themselves as healthcare providers—as a resource (Montoya et al., 2022). Given the known barriers to post-incarceration healthcare in rural areas (Heggie et al., 2025), it is troubling that women and gender-diverse individuals may be left dependent on organizations that actively discourage abortion access. The findings of this exploratory environmental scan also show that the rapid growth in the incarceration of women has not been met with corresponding investments in CBO-led housing. Advocates and CBO leaders have long called for expanded housing support for women post-release or seeking bail (CBC News, 2024; Grant, 2020; Latimer, 2023; Sciarpelletti, 2023).

The gaps revealed by this brief environmental scan reinforce the need for prison abolitionist approaches. As researchers and practitioners, we argue that redirecting resources toward CBOs also makes practical sense, especially amid increasing reports of overcrowding in women's prisons (OCI, 2024; Thayaparan, 2025; Warick, 2024). We fundamentally reject the notion that the growing number of incarcerated women justifies the construction of new prisons. The systemic inequalities exacerbated by incarceration—including housing insecurity, poverty, and limited access to healthcare—are at the root of the barriers faced by women and gender-diverse people after release. Seen through this lens, CBO-led housing and support becomes not just a re-entry service, but a potential

alternative to incarceration. Prison abolition calls for us to question the inevitability of prisons in society. We therefore call on researchers and nonprofit practitioners to de-centre the prison and reorient efforts away from carceral expansion and toward non-punitive models that promote reintegration and health equity.

NOTE

1. As this article focuses on the population in prisons designated for females—a group that includes not only cisgender women but also transgender women and other gender-diverse individuals who are detained in female-designated facilities—we use the term ‘women and gender-diverse people’ to accurately reflect this community.

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