

Women Helping Women: Analyzing the Incorporation of Lived Experience in Peer Support for Women Experiencing Criminalization.

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Rationale and Literature Review

A review of the literature revealed how social support is critical for women reentering the community post-imprisonment (1). The collective strength of women can counter exclusionary forces, facilitate community reintegration, and increase their sense of acceptance (2).

Peer support is an empowering component that counters stigma and coercive prison dynamics by providing space for healing with collective associations (3 & 4).

- It underscores that women who have been criminalized have skills, the ability to take on responsibilities, and are trustworthy (3).
- Reduces isolation while improving the community re-entry process(5&6)
- Can benefit both mentee and mentors through a positive feedback loop of support and a sense of co-recovery (7 & 8).

Lived experience can

- Build rapport, credibility, and trust (4 & 9)
- Help address practical needs (4 & 9)
- Strengthen decision-making abilities and empathetic connections (4 & 9)
- Increase inclusivity and foster transformative programming (10).

Given the opportunity, women who have been criminalized thrive supporting other women to create better futures and desire to positively impact their communities (11). This type of support has the potential of breaking cycles entrapping women in marginalized positions (12). The goal of this research is to add to the growing body of literature that addresses the implications of peer support for women experiencing criminalization.

Research Questions

Although peer mentorship and peer support were highly supported in the literature, we became interested if these peer programs were actually being implemented in women-serving agencies across Canada, and if so, if they were successful. We also became interested to learn from peer mentors directly about how they conceptualize their role and their past experiences of criminalization.

We created two separate but interrelated research questions to better understand peer mentorship in Canadian agencies.

- 1. Do social service agencies that work with women who have been criminalized incorporate peer support in their service provision?**
 - a. If so, how, why, and what are the benefits and challenges?
 - b. What are the impacts of COVID-19 on this work?
- 2. What are the experiences of women who have lived experience in the criminal justice system who now work or volunteer as a peer mentor?**
 - a. How do they conceptualize how their past affects their role today?
 - b. What are the benefits of being a peer mentor?
 - c. What are some of the challenges or tensions?

Methodology

This project is grounded in a feminist, intersectional, and anti-oppressive/anti-privilege framework. This approach recognizes systematic barriers and does not place blame on the women for their criminalization experiences.

For this research, we are taking on a mixed-methods approach, conducting both quantitative and qualitative research. We are conducting a Canada-wide survey and a few in-depth interviews with women who are peer mentors. To recruit participants for our survey and interviews, we contacted 50 women-serving agencies that most likely work with those who have been criminalized. We sent them our information posters and asked if they could share the information with their contacts and post it to their social media channels. We also created a joint Instagram account and Linktree to have all our information and past research easily accessible and in one place.

Survey Question 19

19. Why did you choose to offer peer mentoring services?

Respondent 1: "Peer mentor services are so important when trying to connect with people who are struggling. The shared lived experience helps you to connect on a deeper level as you've been thru similar circumstances and understand what they are going through."

Respondent 2: "Its my passion and I wanted to be there for women in need. Just like someone was there when I needed."

Respondent 3: "Because I wanted to work for them. Somebody was here when I needed them so I am here for other people as well."

Respondent 4: "To make everything seem possible. Open new doors and encourage involvement."

Sample CMaps Survey Analysis

We are using the software CMaps to transfer data from our survey and interviews to identify themes and pull out any patterns. We will be using triangulation with each other and our research mentors for trustworthiness.

Our survey is hosted through the platform SurveyMonkey, our interviews through Zoom, and we are using the software Otter.ai to transcribe. We are envisioning 20 survey respondents and six interviewees.

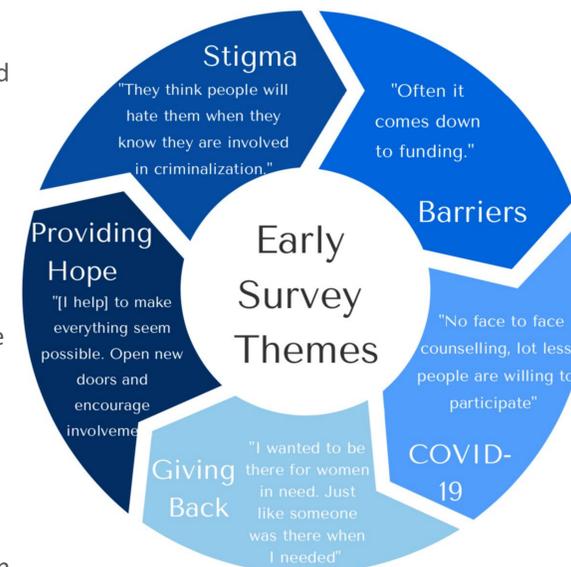
Limitations

- As undergraduate students, we can not ethically delve into interview participants' past criminalization experiences, which could provide a richer insight. We are limited in focusing on their present-day experiences.
- Restrained by the UREAP timeline of twelve weeks and operating budget of \$1000: The survey and interview are only offered in English and within Canada. The small sample size (maximum of six interview participants) means our findings will not be generalizable.
- Our participants can be a difficult to reach population. The COVID-19 pandemic has created additional barriers to reaching participants, as we are recruiting via email, and many people are experiencing email fatigue. The participants we reach may not be truly representative of this population in Canada.

Preliminary Findings

Survey

- We currently have received seven survey responses from our Canada-wide survey.
- 71% of responses have been from Ontario.
- 57% of agencies include a peer mentorship component in their service provision.
- Half of these responses have been from peer mentors themselves, and the other half from individuals working at agencies that serve women who have been criminalized.



- The major themes that have emerged so far are the challenges of stigma, funding barriers, the impacts of COVID-19, the importance of giving back to the community, and how peer mentors provide hope to women currently facing reintegration barriers.

Interview

We have conducted one semi-structured interview via Zoom with a woman who is currently working as a peer mentor. Provided on the right are some preliminary themes and supporting quotes.

INTERVIEW ONE THEMES

- GIVING BACK**
"I've never had any doubt about [peer mentorship] being my passion and wanting to give back and support other people going through what I went through."
- DISCLOSURE**
"I'm very open about my experience because there's so much benefit in sharing it. I choose what I want to share and what I don't want to share, and I just kind of go with what feels right in the moment"
- BENEFITS**
"At first, I was very nervous, didn't know if I had anything to offer. But then after my first time, mentoring someone, it was so empowering. And I think I got more out of it than the person actually did. It was so good for me, it just felt like a right fit."
- STIGMA**
"There's so much stigma, people are already prejudged by medical professionals, by healthcare, by a variety of services...it's really hard for people to trust and be open going into something simple, like the doctor or just getting some help...it's a real barrier for people"

Projected Implications and Future Research

- Centre the voices of women who have experienced criminalization and address a knowledge gap regarding the role of lived experience in peer support.
- Illuminate the greatest barriers identified by women with lived experience.
- Highlight a need to conduct further research into how to support women reintegrating into the community and the value of women's lived experience.

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