Defining Post-Release Success: Perspectives of Formerly Incarcerated Women

by

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Abstract

The number of incarcerated women continues to rise at alarming rates, increasing the pressure on an already overcrowded prison system. Although re-integrating women back into the community post-release should be of utmost importance, literature continues to document the many needs of women exiting prison and the difficulties faced in securing support while attending to competing priorities and demands. While understanding the realities women face post-release are essential to supporting women's transition into the community, literature seeking to understand how formerly incarcerated women define success in life after prison is limited. In its absence, recidivism remains the primary if not only measure of post-release success. Although not returning to prison is an aspect of success, it is a limited measure that does not consider definitions of success that have importance to those with lived experiences nor take into account the complex and challenging process that is community re-integration. Therefore, this thesis explores how formerly incarcerated women define success in life after prison and describes the factors that support and inhibit women from realizing their goals. In partnership with a local not-for-profit organization, a community-based participatory research approach was utilized and engaged women throughout different stages of the research. A qualitative description methodology grounded in feminist standpoint theory and intersectionality was employed. When considering community re-integration as a journey, 16 interviews were conducted with formerly incarcerated women that explored their definitions of success. While achieving post-release goals were successes described by participants, this study points to the significance of personal transformation as a key definition of success critical to leading a life characterized by new values and priorities. Success was described in the day to day as women continued to engage in life in ways that moved them forward and attended to their health holistically. The importance of robust

support networks, being engaged in the community, and receiving mental and emotional health support, among others, are identified as crucial supporting factors. The barriers, the lack of available mental health support, limiting parole conditions and staff, and the lifetime impacts of incarceration are described. While women continue to define their lives outside of prison walls that reflect their current conceptualizations of success, their understandings have yet to be adopted as true indicators of success by authorities mandated with facilitating their transition post-release. Therefore, implications to practice, programming, and policies are examined that take into account women's experiences and perspectives. In particular, the provision of mental health support, recognizing measures of success beyond outcomes, removing systemic barriers, and mobilizing the community are outlined.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Jessica DeVries. Research ethics approval was obtained from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board 1, No 00096487, May 14, 2020.

Dedication

This research is dedicated to the 16 women who so generously shared their stories of success with me and to the Open Door community for their continued friendship, guidance, and support. Thank you for taking the time to invest in me and in this research. I hope this work is simply a starting point of bringing forward the many successes you have achieved and continue to achieve daily.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

Throughout the last several decades, an unprecedented increase in the number of incarcerated females continues to be observed globally (Pedlar et al., 2018; Sheehan & Trotter, 2018). Despite the fact that women represent a small portion of the total prison population, it is "suffice to say that in recent decades, women have been a fast-growing group of prisoners around the world, growing at a consistently faster rate than men" (Sheehan & Trotter, 2018, p.5). Canada is not immune to this trend, with nearly a 30% increase in the number of females incarcerated in the last ten years despite a corresponding decrease (4%) in male incarceration (Office of the Correctional Investigator [OCI], 2018). In order to understand why female incarceration continues to be on the rise, it is essential to understand women's involvement with the criminal justice system and their experiences surrounding community re-entry.

Although incarcerated female and male populations share certain characteristics, it is important to acknowledge that female entrance into crime is distinctly different from that of their male counterparts (Hannah-Moffat & Innocente, 2013; Maidment, 2006; Sheehan & Trotter, 2018). As described by an incarcerated woman in Comack's (1996) seminal work, women entering prison are 'women in trouble,' as many are repeat victims of violent crime, suffering from trauma and substance abuse addictions (often used as a coping mechanism to address trauma), and are often living in poverty before incarceration. These social realities are reflected in the types of crimes most often committed by women, such as property crimes (e.g., theft, fraud, possession of stolen property) (Barker, 2009), which are often labelled 'survival crimes' as "criminal activity is directly related to their disenfranchised socio-economic status in society" (Maidment, 2006, p. 38). Although it is essential to recognize the diverse, nuanced, and complex factors that shape the lives of women entering prison, "the centrality of abuse in the women's

lives" (Comack, 1996, p. 12) and commonalities concerning socio-economic status cannot be ignored.

As the line between victim and offender is often blurred (Comack, 2018; Moe, 2004), women entering prison require diverse supports to address the factors that contributed to their imprisonment. However, a lack of access to relevant addictions/trauma programming, sufficient vocational training, and post-release planning to support their transition back into community continues to be reported concerning federal institutions (Barrett et al., 2010; Doherty et al., 2014; OCI, 2018; Pollack, 2009b). Provincial jails have also been critiqued as being little more than holding cells (Maidment, 2006) due to either a complete absence of resources or limited program availability (Comack, 2018; Maidment, 2006; Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women [TFFSW], 1990). As provincial institutions are responsible for women serving sentences of less than two years, providing meaningful support and programming has often been perceived as impractical, leaving women little to do but wait for release.

Further compounding the difficulties faced by incarcerated women are the human rights abuses that occur with the management of imprisoned women. Some examples reported by advocates and researchers within Canada include the pronounced over-prescription of psychotropic medications without adequate consultation and follow-up care (Kilty, 2012), the use of excess force such as in strip searches of women (OCI, 2019; Todd, 2017), and the use of segregation cells as a way to manage those requiring mental health care or to address the constraints of overcrowding (Balfour & Comack, 2014; Comack, 2018; Wakefield, 2017). In this respect, prison continues to contribute to the trauma experienced by women, who then exit prison and are expected to overcome these obstacles while returning to the same material and social conditions that contributed to their entry into crime in the first place (Comack, 2018).

It is not surprising that Canada's Correctional Investigator, Ivan Zinger, stated in a media interview that women's institutions "serve no underlying correctional, rehabilitative or public safety purpose" (Wakefield, 2017, para. 3) and consequently, provide little return on investment (Wakefield, 2017). This is particularly concerning when considering the annual cost to federally incarcerate one woman is $190,000 (Parliamentary Budget Officer, 2018) and is only projected to increase exponentially as correctional resources are siphoned off to meet the demand of an ever-expanding prison system.

The needs of women leaving prison are well documented in the literature. They include treatment for substance abuse, continuity of health care, mental health support, violence prevention and trauma support, educational and employment services, to name but a few (O'Brien, 2001; Richie, 2001). Similarly, the barriers faced by women as they look to re-build their lives have also been outlined. Examples include the difficulty of securing basic supports such as safe and affordable housing, employment that provides a livable wage, and enduring the ongoing stigma and social isolation that results from imprisonment (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Pedlar et al., 2018; Richie, 2001). While the needs and barriers faced by women are well understood, little research has sought to know how formerly incarcerated women (FIW) define success in life after prison.

The purpose of my thesis is to engage FIW to explore their experiences and perspectives on success in life after leaving prison and transitioning back into the community. The overarching research questions that guided this study are: How do women define success in life after prison? And what do FIW need from themselves and from others to achieve their re-entry goals and aspirations? A community-based participatory research approach (Israel et al., 1998) was used to answer these questions in partnership with a local not-for-profit organization that

provides transitional support to women leaving federal incarceration.

There are three objectives of this study. The first is to contribute to the limited knowledge concerning post-release success. The second objective is to contribute practically to the community partner in this research initiative by enhancing their understanding of what success means to those women they serve who have and are currently walking the journey that is community re-integration. By increasing their understanding, meaningful measures and experiences can be shared to further support women as they transition back into the community from federal incarceration. The final objective of this study, one that was often emphasized by research participants, is to bring more public awareness concerning the lived realities of FIW as they re-define their lives outside prison walls.

Overview of the following Chapters

In the following chapter, contextual information such as criminal activity typically associated with women, a historical background of female incarceration in Canada, and factors impacting FIW post-release are discussed. Chapter 2 concludes with a description of the research partnership and a reflection on researcher positionality. Chapter 3 describes the community-based participatory research approach and qualitative descriptive methodology employed including a discussion of the theoretical grounding of this study, feminist standpoint theory and intersectionality. The methods employed for recruitment, data collection, and data analysis are also described followed by a discussion of ethical considerations, the impacts of COVID-19 to the research, and strategies employed to promote rigour. The findings of the study are presented in Chapter 4 and a discussion of the results are included in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 explores the significance/implications of the study in practice for FIW and the organizations that work

alongside them. It also considers policy recommendations and directions for further research. To conclude, research limitations and final remarks are also provided.

Chapter 2: Background and Literature Review

In the following Chapter, contextual information concerning female incarceration, such as typical types of criminal activity and pertinent socio-demographic information, are provided. A brief background regarding the history of female incarceration in Canada is also outlined in addition to a description of Correctional protocols associated with the transition of incarcerated women into the community. This relevant contextual and background information help provide a valuable perspective when considering the factors that impact women post-release. These factors, predominately barriers, are explored in this Chapter along with factors that facilitate re-integration efforts. The little that is known about how FIW define post-release success is also discussed. The Chapter concludes with a discussion of the research partnership and researcher positionality.

Women and Criminal Charges

As described by Comack (1996), categorizing women by their most recent criminal activity is problematic for several reasons. On one hand, considering only the last crime committed ignores women's past encounters with the criminal justice system, which provides vital context to the ongoing imprisonment and criminalization of women. Comack (1996) also reminds us that the official descriptions do not always reflect the actual reality of the situation, but once enacted and given authority by law, serve to discredit any counter-narratives (Comack, 1996). Lastly, categorizing women by criminal charges creates a false dichotomy, separating those who break the law from those who have not, which only serves to further distance “law abiding citizens” from criminal “others” (Comack, 1996). Despite this well-placed caution, the descriptions below serve to provide contextual information that should be considered when reflecting on women’s involvement with the criminal justice system. Primarily, it draws on the

most recent Statistics Canada data (Savage, 2019) that outlines females accused of offences in 2017 and provides comparative data to the male population.

When considering the crimes most often associated with women, crimes against property continue to constitute the greatest portion of charges (35%) (Barker, 2009; Savage, 2019). Crimes against property include charges such as breaking and entering, possession of stolen property, theft, shoplifting, mischief, and fraud (Savage, 2019). Among these crimes, shoplifting is by far the most frequent for females, constituting 37% of crimes against property in 2017 and is followed by mischief, theft of $5,000 or under, and fraud (Savage, 2019). Compared to male populations, the greatest discrepancy is observed between the portion of shoplifting charges. Whereas shoplifting represented 37% of crimes against property for females in 2017, shoplifting constituted only 20% for males (Savage, 2019). The most notable charges associated with male property crimes are mischief followed by shoplifting, theft of $5,000 or under, and breaking and entering. Due to the violation of a physical space, break and enter charges are considered more violent among property crime charges and continue to be committed more often by males (Barker, 2009; Savage, 2019). As described by Barker (2009), “women are more likely to engage in the writing of bad cheques or credit card fraud (which results in a fraud charge) or shoplifting (which results in a theft charge) than breaking into a home or office” (p. 68).

Crimes against the person, which “involve the use or threatened use of violence against a person” (Savage, 2019, p. 4), represent 25% of all female charges in 2017 (Savage, 2019). Assault consists of the majority of violent crimes charged against women where level 1 assault, the least serious type, is the most frequently cited offence (Savage, 2019). When homicides are committed by women, they are more likely to involve a family member (54%) than those committed by men (30%) (Savage, 2019) who as Balfour (2014) asserts they are more likely to

have been victimized by in the past. When it comes to crimes against the person, such as assault, robbery, sexual assault, attempted murder and homicide, "overall males are clearly represented at a disproportionately higher rate than women" (Barker, 2009, p.67; Savage, 2019). Crimes associated with drug use and prostitution are also noted as significant contributors to the incarcerated female population (Barker, 2009).

Lastly, 30% of all female charges in 2017 related to other criminal code offences. These offences were primarily comprised of administration of justice charges and disturbing the peace (Savage, 2019). Administration of justice offences include charges such as failure to appear, breach of probation or other administration of law and justice offences. The same proportion of males in 2017 also received administration of justice offences followed by disturbing the peace (Savage, 2019). Weapons and other violations were also comparatively higher for the male population (Savage, 2019).

Socio-demographic Considerations

Research within Canada continues to affirm that most women who commit crimes tend to be young, under the age of 34 (Savage, 2019) who are often undereducated, unemployed or underemployed (Barker, 2009). In 2015, the proportion of women in Canada who had not completed any formal education was 9% (Ferguson, 2016). In contrast, surveys with incarcerated women indicated that nearly 60 percent had not completed high school (Barrett et al., 2010; Shaw et al. 1991). Concerning employment histories, the most notable employment types reported by women prior to their incarceration were stay at home mothers/childcare providers (47.1%) and other low wage employment such as sales representatives/servers (41.8%), domestic jobs (e.g., housekeeping) (30%), and clerical work (22.9%) (Barrett et al., 2010). When considering employment just prior to incarceration, the majority of women were unemployed

and nearly half relied on welfare or social assistance (Barrett et al., 2010; Shaw et al., 1991).

These employment histories are best understood when considering that a significant portion of incarcerated women, ranging from two thirds (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003) to three quarters (Barrett et al., 2010), are mothers who are often sole providers for their families. Therefore, it is not surprising that “many incarcerated women have a history of poverty and financial strain” (Barker, 2009, p. 96). When considering the wage disparity between females and males, a recent Statistics Canada publication on *Women and Education* (2016) identified the greatest discrepancy in pay existed among lower education levels. Where both women and men had less than high school education, women earned seventy cents to the dollar that men earned (Ferguson, 2016). As others have observed (Barker, 2009; Comack, 1996; Maidment, 2006), this makes sense in the context of female crimes which are often economic in nature such as theft and fraud. Due to the nature of this criminal activity, Maidment (2006) asserts that these types of offences are often the result of "stresses associated with poverty" (Maidment, 2006, p. 39).

When it comes to experiences shared among incarcerated women, histories of abuse are common and are well documented (Balfour & Comack, 2014; Barker, 2009; Barrett et al., 2010; Comack, 1996; Shaw et al., 1991). When conducting interviews with federally imprisoned women, a significant portion of women described experiences of physical (68%) and/or sexual abuse (53%) throughout their childhood, adolescence and/or as adults (Shaw et al., 1991). This finding continues to be replicated by others (Barrett et al., 2010; Bloom et al., 2003; OCI, 2018) where abuse from a spouse or partner was noted as the most common perpetrator of physical abuse (Barrett et al., 2010; Shaw et al., 1994). Most incarcerated women who reported histories of abuse noted that abuse experience occurred at multiple times over their lives (Barrett et al.,

2010; Comack, 1996; Shaw et al., 1994).

With this in mind, it is understandable that the mental health needs of incarcerated women are significant. When assessing the mental health needs of women in federal incarceration, nearly four out of every five women (79.2%) interviewed indicated symptoms consistent with a mental disorder with the highest rates related to lifetime alcohol and substance use disorders (76%) (Derkzen et al., 2017). High rates of mental health concerns among Canadian women have consistently been found by others over the last thirty years (Barrett et al., 2010; Comack, 1996; Derkzen et al., 2012; Shaw et al., 1991) and are significantly higher than reported among federally incarcerated men (Beaudette, 2015). These findings continue to point to the importance of sufficient resources within prison and in the community to address the trauma experienced by incarcerated women. However, as Comack (2018) points out, trauma should be understood as not simply a "response", which is often attributed to individual deficits, "but as a lived experience…located within the particular historical and social conditions in which individuals live their lives" (p.33). In order to understand the complexity of trauma it requires "situate(ing) personal experiences within the context of a wider society" (Comack, 2018, p.33) which involves the interaction of factors beyond simply the individual, such as at the institutional and structural levels (Comack, 2018).

Furthermore, when considering notable factors concerning incarcerated women, there is significant over-representation of Indigenous women incarcerated in Canada (OCI, 2020). Although overall, Indigenous peoples represent 30% of federally incarcerated people in Canada, which has been appropriately described as "nothing short of a national travesty" (OCI, 2020, par. 5) by Canada's Correctional Investigator, incarcerated Indigenous women are even more so disproportionately represented. Although Indigenous women "represent just 4% of the female

Canadian population, … Indigenous women now represent 41.4% of federally incarcerated women" (OCI, 2019, p. 106). Furthermore, within prison, Indigenous women are also more likely to be assessed as high risk and are over-represented in maximum-security units, which imposes further restrictions to accessing programs and services within the institution and in the community (OCI, 2019).

Due to this over-representation, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) points to a systemic bias in the Canadian Justice System, which is also reflected in the fact that Indigenous persons are more likely to be sentenced to prison than non-Indigenous peoples when convicted and are less likely to be released on conditional sentences in the community. Although there are many complex and inter-related factors at play that impact the over-representation, the inter-generational impacts of residential schools continue to be a significant factor (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Not only are Indigenous women over-represented in prison but they also experience greater levels of violence in comparison to Indigenous males and non-Indigenous women (Boyce, 2016). For example, Indigenous women are nearly three times more likely to be the victim of violent crime than non-Indigenous females and two times as likely as Indigenous males (Boyce, 2016). This violence is clearly exemplified in the significant numbers of murdered and missing Indigenous women in Canada (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, 2019).

Although the above mentioned socio-demographic factors are important to consider, "we must be cognizant that the uniqueness of individuals is not lost when we search for commonalities in our attempts to better understand why some women become criminalized and others do not" (Barker, 2009, p. 109). Barker (2009) rightly posits that a person is not defined by their experiences but is impacted by a multitude of factors such as interpersonal interactions,

personal abilities, experiences, thoughts and feelings among others (Barker, 2009). Although it is important to understand commonalities among incarcerated women and how these experiences shape the needs of women while in prison and through their transition into the community, it is important to recognize the diversity among women. Moreover, it becomes important to consider how different factors such as class, race, and gender intersect to provide differential experiences among women. These differential experiences must also include examining how differential treatment of women by the criminal justice system due to factors such as systemic racism further shape women's trajectories. These intersections and the importance of their consideration is described further in Chapter 3 under the theoretical grounding of intersectionality.

A Brief History of Female Incarceration in Canada

Within Canada, the criminal justice system is composed of the police, courts and correctional system. Although women involved with the criminal justice system will have experiences with multiple members of each agency, the correctional system in Canada is separated into two services, regional (12 provincial and territorial services) and one national federal service, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) (Barker, 2009). Women who receive criminal sentences of two years or more are under the mandate of CSC and are housed at one of the five regional women's institutions or at the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge.

Prior to the establishment of these regional facilities, the majority of federally sentenced women were housed within the Prison for Women (P4W) located in Kingston Ontario between 1934 and 2000. Despite the fact that numerous commissions and reports were submitted throughout the decades recommending the closure of the P4W, most memorably the MacGuigan Report published for the parliamentary sub-committee on the penitentiary system stated that it was "unfit for bears, much less women" (MacGuigan, 1977, p. 135), the P4W remained open

until 2000 (Balfour, 2014; Barker, 2009). Reforms were advocated throughout the years, such as enabling some federally sentenced women to serve their time at provincial jails to remain closer to their homes to facilitate their community re-integration efforts and to provide similar correctional programming for incarcerated women as for incarcerated men (Balfour, 2014). However, these attempts failed to provide gender appropriate supports concerning education and employment training, support for trauma, and addictions treatment (Balfour, 2014).

It wasn't until 1988 as the number of incidents of self-harm and suicide increased in the P4W, a coroner's inquest was undertaken to investigate the suicide of Marlene Moore. The inquest examined whether the prison protocols for addressing self-harming behaviour facilitated Marlene's death (Balfour, 2014). Marlene Moore was deemed the first woman in Canada to be considered a "dangerous offender" as she was a repeat offender who was deemed untreatable despite the fact that she had not committed murder (Balfour, 2014; Barker 2009). In fact, "those who knew her best often commented that she was really more of a danger to herself (because of her extreme self-injurious behaviours) than she was to anyone else" (Barker, 2009, p. 89). Marlene was a survivor of emotional, physical and sexual childhood abuse, grew up in poverty and experienced further sexual assaults throughout adolescence (Balfour, 2014; Barker, 2009). These factors in addition to a low education level, sparse work history, and criminal record made adjusting to life outside of prison difficult (Barker, 2009). Marlene, like many incarcerated women, use self-harm as a coping strategy to address the extreme emotional turmoil in situations of powerlessness (Balfour, 2014; Barker, 2009; OCI, 2019). However, self-harm incidents were treated by prison officials as "threats to institutional security and attempted to control women by placing them in segregation" (Balfour, 2014, p. 161), which critics such as the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) claimed failed Marlene by not providing the

therapeutic care she needed (Balfour, 2014).

As a result of the inquest, CSC convened a national Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women (TFFSW) to explore the experiences and conditions of women at the P4W and to better understand their programming needs (Balfour, 2014). The TFFSW included wide engagement from advocates, government personnel, incarcerated women, and women from Indigenous communities. In order to ascertain the perspectives and experiences of incarcerated women, Shaw et al. (1991) conducted a survey with federally incarcerated women in 1989 that sought to bring forward the standpoints of incarcerated women. The results of this study led to the TFFSW report, *Creating Choices* (TFFSW, 1990), where incarcerated women articulated the damaging impacts of imposing male correctional models and made visible the prevalence of physical and sexual abuse experienced by incarcerated women. It also considered how abuse related to other factors such as substance abuse, mental disorders and violence, which were further compounded by experiences of poverty and racism (TFFSW, 1990). The report emphasized the programming and therapeutic needs of women while underlining the importance of community partnerships in creating a "women-centred correctional model" (Balfour, 2014, pg. 163).

In 1990, the recommendations of *Creating Choices* called for a closure to the P4W by 1994 and recommended building four regional facilities to house federally sentenced women across Canada and a healing lodge for Indigenous women (TFFSW, 1990). Five foundational principles were developed to guide CSC's management of federally incarcerated women. These principles include: empowerment, meaningful and responsible choices, respect and dignity, supportive environment, and shared responsibility (TFFSW, 1990). These principles acknowledge that social inequity has resulted in limited choices for women, especially those in federal incarceration, and has resulted in feelings of low self-esteem and feelings of dis-

empowerment among imprisoned women (TFFSW, 1990). Furthermore, it suggests that women will be better prepared to make meaningful and responsible choices if provided a supportive environment and access to appropriate resources and information that will allow better comprehension of the consequences of their decisions. Respect and dignity are seen as an essential element "if women are to gain the self-respect and respect for others necessary to take responsibility for their futures" (TFFSW, 1990, p. 129). Finally, the principle of shared responsibility identified the need for wide engagement by government, public and private sectors, and community members in providing comprehensive and holistic support to women (TFFSW, 1990). It is important to note that the recommended plan “must be seen within the context of a long-term goal where incarceration will not be the intervention of choice” (TFFSW, 1990, p.2) but where prevention would be key requiring significant changes to the justice system and society as a whole (TFFSW, 1990).

In waiting for the regional institutions to open, resources and experienced staff continued to be pulled from the P4W (Balfour, 2014). The lack of services and transparency concerning when women would be transferred from the P4W came to a head in 1996 where an altercation between six incarcerated women and correctional staff occurred (Balfour, 2014; Barker 2009). Due to the altercation, an Institutional Emergency Response Team composed of all males entered the segregation unit to perform strip searches and cell extractions (Balfour, 2014; Barker 2009). The reports that followed omitted many details of the inhumane treatment of women during this time. However, it wasn’t until the release of a *Fifth Estate* documentary which had obtained a copy of the videotape of the event, that the brutal reality of women’s imprisonment was revealed to the public (Barker, 2009; Pedlar et al., 2018). This event instigated a government commission led by Madam Justice Louise Arbour of the Supreme Court of Canada that investigated the

events at the P4W. The Arbour report (1996) criticized both the inhumane treatment of women by the all-male Institutional Emergency Response Team and the way in which CSC handled the aftermath of the event, which lacked transparency and an accurate representation of the truth. The report characterized the imprisoned women as "high needs/low risk," similarly as identified in *Creating Choices*, and made nearly one hundred recommendations (Arbour Report, 1996).

Despite the fact that the regional facilities were built, and the principles of *Creating Choices* were adopted in theory, many of the recommendations of the report did not materialize. For example, CSC implemented "a hierarchal top-down model as opposed to a tripartite consensus-building model involving the community stakeholders, Aboriginal groups, and the government" (Balfour, 2014, p. 163) and imposed a male security classification system to categorize inmates in direct contrast to recommendations of *Creating Choices* (Balfour, 2014). Furthermore, as the Federal government had to develop exchange of service agreements with provinces to build the regional facilities, the municipalities and provinces were under pressure from the public who did not want women's prisons built in their communities especially if they were to be "without a perimeter wall, uniformed staff, or a traditional static security design" (Balfour, 2014, p. 163). The political context of the time was also focused on restraining public spending, which was informed by a neo-liberal government that focused on individual deficits rather than considering how the systems and structures of society contribute to the marginalization and subsequent criminalization of women (Balfour, 2014).

Although these examples are not exhaustive, they point to the concerns that continue to be raised by advocates, researchers, and scholars who question the disconnect between the stated mission of the CSC and their neo-liberal management of federally incarcerated women. (Hannah-Moffat, 2009; Maidment, 2006; Pollack, 2007; Pollack, 2009a; Turnbull & Hannah-

Moffat, 2009). This disconnect is well put by the Correctional Investigator, Dr. Ivan Zinger, in the Office of the Correctional Investigator's (2018) annual report, which outlined a number of concerns with federal women's prisons, including a lack of trauma-informed care, security over-classification of women, questionable strip search protocols among others. Dr. Ivan Zinger (OCI, 2018) stated:

> All of these issues, and what gives rise to them, are reminders of the continuing drift from the philosophy and operational principles that were intended to ground women's corrections in Canada… Many of the ideas and concepts from a more promising era in women's corrections – presumption of minimum-security classification at admission for women; no perimeter fencing at the regional women's facilities; no maximum security (Secure Units); no segregation for women offenders – have long since been abandoned. As compromises were made, the management of women behind bars has become less distinguishable from the rest of CSC operations (p.80).

This history is essential in understanding the situations in which federally incarcerated women find themselves. Although much is known concerning the needs of incarcerated women and the situations that contribute to criminal activity, the governing principles of CSC informing the management of incarcerated women, although initially well-intentioned, for the most part have remained un-acted on or have been enacted in ways that impose further hardship. Before addressing the factors that impact women's post-release transition, the re-integration process as implemented by CSC is detailed to provide context as to the conditions of women's re-entry into the community.

Returning to the Community

Within Canada, parole along with other forms of conditional community release, are a

part of Canada's rehabilitation philosophy that "offenders are more likely to become law-abiding citizens if they participate in a program of gradual, supervised release" (CSC, 2014, para. 23). In order to support a gradual re-entry into the community, incarcerated women (or men) can apply for a temporary absence from prison provided the activities “fit within the framework of the inmate’s correctional plan” (CSC, 2019, para. 9). Additionally, incarcerated women (or men) can apply for parole with the Parole Board of Canada. There are two types of parole, day and full parole. Day parole precedes full parole and enables incarcerated women to take part in community-based activities provided they reside at a correctional institution or community-based facilities (CSC, 2014). Full parole can be sought after serving one third of a criminal sentence in prison and allows individuals to serve the remainder of their sentence in the community. If granted full parole, they must report to a parole officer as they are subject to conditions "designed to reduce the risk of re-offending, and to foster re-integration of the offender into the community" (CSC, 2019, para. 17). Additionally, individuals who don't receive parole are granted statutory release once they have served two-thirds of their sentence in custody. Although no application for statutory release is required, individuals are placed under community supervision and must adhere to similar conditions as those granted parole (CSC, 2012). As described by Turnbull & Hannah-Moffat (2009) common conditions applied to parolees are: "avoiding certain people and places, residing at a particular place, abstaining from drugs, alcohol or all other intoxicants, and attending treatment programmes or counselling" (p. 535). When considering the entire population of incarcerated women, more than half of women under CSC's management are serving their sentences in Canadian communities under supervision rather than being held in custody (OCI, 2018). Annually, community supervision costs substantially less (78%) than housing a woman within federal custody (Public Safety Canada, 2018).

Factors Impacting Post-Release Transition

Canadian criminologists such as Maidment (2006) and Pollack (2009a) have pointed out that a significant amount of research has been conducted regarding the "conditions and experiences of women in federal prisons in Canada (while)… relatively little research has been conducted on the post-prison experiences of women" (Pollack, 2009a, p. 83). As the number of incarcerated females has risen over the years, there has been an increased emphasis on outcomes-based research that seeks to understand what factors impact recidivism or desistance from crime (Carlton & Segrave, 2016). Studies have focused on the impact of individual demographic or psychological characteristics to predict post-release failure (O'Brien, 2001), in addition to the evaluation of programs or treatments that seek to understand 'what works' and for whom (Carlton & Segrave, 2013). For the most part, these studies have relied on quantitative methods and measures that utilize discrete variables in predictive models or statistical comparisons (Carlton & Segrave, 2016) using data obtained primarily on male populations (Sheehan-Trotter, 2018). While this type of research is consistent in demonstrating what does not work (i.e., punitive approaches) regarding recidivism, there is less consensus on what works and for whom (Sheehan-Trotter, 2018). A criticism of these quantitative models and/or approaches is that "gender unconsciously becomes a uniform category of difference that applies narrowly to how women respond to various styles and delivery modes of treatment" (Hannah-Moffat, 2009, p. 211), which fails to consider the diversity among incarcerated women and the complex realities that criminalize and imprison women (Carlton & Segrave, 2013; Hannah-Moffat, 2009).

In contrast to such research approaches, feminist scholarship has explored the post-release experiences of criminalized women through a gendered critique (Carlton & Segrave, 2013) utilizing primarily qualitative designs. These studies, among others, have overwhelmingly

highlighted a number of systemic and societal barriers faced by this population as they sought to return home. In addition to discussing their experiences after incarceration, women's perceptions and experiences of prison programming and planning for release were often explored, as these experiences are inextricably linked to the post-prison realities of women.

The post-release needs of women are well documented within the literature and include treatment for substance abuse problems, continuity of health care, mental health support, violence prevention and trauma support, educational and employment services, housing, child advocacy and family reunification assistance, in addition to other relevant social supports (O'Brien, 2001; Richie, 2001). Recent literature reinforces that these needs still exist, and the literature exploring the post-release experiences of women examines how correctional ideologies and/or policies continue to compound the difficulties experienced by women as they seek community re-entry.

It is important to note that although Indigenous women are included in post-release studies (e.g., Doherty et al., 2014; e.g., Pollack 2009a), they are not included in significant proportions despite their over-representation among incarcerated women. These under-representations are likely due to a number of factors. One being that as Indigenous women are less likely to be granted forms of early release, many Indigenous women return to their home communities upon the expiry of their warrant and are not included in community research that often occurs in urban centres (Pedlar et al., 2018). Another contributing factor may relate to studies that receive recruitment assistance from CSC. As incarcerated women have often experienced government intervention throughout their lives in a multitude of ways (Maidment, 2006), participant recruitment supported by CSC may be received critically by Indigenous women who desire to be free of government intervention. There are likely additional barriers not

articulated here but continue to hinder the engagement of Indigenous women in research. Therefore, when considering the following review of post-release impacts, while Indigenous women may be represented within the study, studies focusing explicitly on the post-release context/experiences of Indigenous women were not found.

The literature points to continued needs as experienced by FIW as well as factors that support re-integration efforts. The next sections will explore these needs and factors, which include: The Revolving Door, Inadequate Post-release Planning and Access to Support, Conflicting roles of Transitional Support Workers, Parole Restrictions that Inhibit Progress and, Re-establishing Social Identities. Following this, two preliminary studies that focus on how FIW define post-release success are reviewed.

The Revolving Door

A common assumption with community re-integration is that exiting prison is one discrete event in a women's life and release from prison denotes a fresh start (Carlton & Segrave, 2016). However, it has been noted that incarceration and other forms of state intervention are often reoccurring events within the lives of criminalized women (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Maidment, 2006; Pollack, 2009a). These ongoing experiences have a cumulative effect that "may exacerbate pre-existing disadvantage while also sustaining, producing, or reinforcing past experiences of trauma arising from cross-institutional experiences" (Carlton & Segrave, 2016, p. 282). In some cases, FIW reported that their lives were over-run by different forms of state intervention, and they attributed cycles of re-incarceration to structural inequalities, such as obtaining housing or employment, in addition to returning to traumatic environments (Carlton & Segrave, 2016). In fact, the findings of a study conducted by Maidment (2006) further supports this understanding as she found that "the more layers of social control that a woman has

encountered throughout her life, the less likely it is that she will stay out of prison" (p. 146). When faced with these post-prison realities, for some women, prison became a preferred alternative to ensure their personal safety and receive basic needs (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Maidment, 2006; Pollack 2009a).

Inadequate Post-Release Planning and Access to Support

It is important to acknowledge that women who have struggled with substance abuse and addictions have reported viewing prison as an opportunity to receive treatment that they were unable to access in the community (Comack, 2018; Pollack, 2009b). Studies have reported that women have negotiated longer sentences (at least two years) so that they would receive federal incarceration where access to addictions programming is perceived to be more readily available (Maidment, 2006; Pollack, 2009b). As noted by Pollack (2009b), not only does this increase the population of federally incarcerated women but "longer prison sentences compound women's circumstances when they are released" (p. 119). Although the *Creating Choices* (TFFSW, 1990) guiding principles, that re-defined the federal correctional mandate in the early 90's identified the importance of a supportive environment during women's incarceration that includes mutual respect and dignity, women's experiences "confirm that the purpose and mandate of imprisonment is to punish and control" (Pollack, 2009b, p. 119).

The correctional focus on punishment and control is emphasized in the availability of women's programming during incarceration. As described by CSC (2014), the majority of programs emphasize self-awareness regarding the impact of their behaviour in relationships and in various situations (CSC, 2014). Maidment (2006) criticizes the reliance of Canadian correctional programs on cognitive behavioural therapies. These therapies essentially posit that criminal activity is due to deficient thinking that can be rectified through programs that

encourage individuals to take on pro-social thinking. Although some incarcerated women report the importance of cognitive behavioural therapy within prison (e.g., Doherty et al., 2014; Pedlar et al., 2018), critical criminologists claim that the over-reliance on these programs that focus on individual choice and responsibility (Hannah-Moffat, 2009; Maidment, 2006; Pollack, 2007), disregard the structural barriers and systemic biases that limit the choices available to women (Balfour, 2014).

Despite the focus on programs intending to increase behavioural self-awareness, opportunities for women to expand their education and employable skillset continue to remain limited, which will only continue to compound difficulties in obtaining employment after prison (Barrett et al., 2010; OCI, 2018; Pollack, 2009b). The availability for women to expand their work training and experience through work placement programs consist of gendered opportunities such as cooking, cleaning, and sewing that do little to provide employment readiness (OCI, 2018; Pedlar et al., 2018; Pollack, 2009b; Shaw et al., 1991).

Carlton and Segrave (2016) discuss how women within Australian Corrections were often provided little assistance in preparing for their transition from prison to the community. Even those women who were aware of their release dates struggled to address basic needs such as housing and financing (Carlton & Segrave, 2016). Being able to coordinate and address practical needs for life after prison in addition to meeting parole requirements is reported as a continuous struggle (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Cobbina, 2010; Doherty et al., 2014; O'Brien, 2001; Richie, 2001).

Carlton & Segrave (2016) also illustrated a compounding factor that further complicates Australian women's attempts to coordinate resources:

The contracting out of programs and services to private and community sector

> agencies has led to a siloed approach to managing women's post-release support needs. This has effectively created a complex support system where women's support needs are managed simultaneously through a range of services, programs and support workers rather than a 'one stop shop' model (p. 291).

Within the Canadian context, Doherty et al. (2014) also noted the need for coordinated services upon release in addition to providing more tangible information on what to expect once released and better information sharing and communication between staff within corrections and the community. Where a lack of continuity of care exists, such as in the case of absent or untimely treatment support for addictions, further difficulty is imposed on women during an already stressful time (Doherty et al., 2014), as it becomes their sole responsibility to seek out the various supports they need. Not only is transitional support essential to ensure basic needs are being met, but to also ease feelings of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety that women report experiencing as their release dates approached (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Doherty et al., 2014).

In addition to post-release planning and needs for continuity of care, research has considered the practical obstacles faced by women in accessing post-release programs and supports upon community re-entry. Incarcerated women in Wolfer's (2019) study anticipated that a lack of childcare and transportation to locations where programs were being held as significant obstacles to attendance. Transportation has also been noted by others as a significant factor that hindered women's ability to meet the many demands of parole, maintaining relationships with children, and accessing support services (Northcutt Bohmert, 2016; Opsal, 2015; Pedlar et al., 2018). Finally, in addition to requiring logistical support in physically reaching support providers, women also need assistance accessing material resources (computer, phones) to aide in the search for employment (Pedlar et al., 2018). Understanding the multiple

factors, such as a lack of post-release planning support, continuity of care in the community, and simply a lack of means to physically access services further compounds the difficulties women face as they return to the community.

Conflicting Roles of Transitional Support Workers

Studies have also found that parole officers, half way housing staff, counsellors, as well other post-release support workers are expected to play two conflicting roles of both providing transitional support for women re-entering community in addition to monitoring women's risk to re-offend (Opsal, 2015; Pollack, 2009b; Turnbull & Hannah-Moffat, 2009). It is important to note that most third-party organizations providing post-release services also navigate this difficult position as they are often reliant on Correctional funding and must also adhere to monitoring and surveillance requirements to retain funds (Maidment, 2006; Pollack, 2009a).

This tension between assistance and surveillance is exemplified by FIW with histories of substance abuse. Although women are encouraged to be honest and transparent with their parole officer, admissions of relapse often resulted in re-incarceration instead of placement within a community addictions facility (Pollack 2009a; Turnbull & Hannah-Moffat, 2009). Therefore, women who are actively seeking assistance are pulled out of the community and placed back into prison, which not only reinforces feelings of failure but ignores the reality women face when their warrant is expired. Much of the literature advocates for a harm reduction approach, recognizing that addictions are a lifetime issue, however little has been done to rectify these concerns (Pedlar et al., 2018; Pollack, 2009a; Turnbull & Hannah-Moffat, 2009). Unsurprisingly, many women report anxiety when released due to "the demands for immediate 'perfection' placed upon them in terms of their parole conditions" (Pedlar et al., 2018, p. 128) and live under the consistent threat of having their parole revoked.

In a study conducted with formerly incarcerated Canadian women, Pollack (2009a) discovered that conflating the roles of "social control and support undermine(d) confidentiality and trust, and thus the supervision was experienced predominantly as punitive rather than helpful" (Pollack, 2009a, p. 87). This is problematic as research continues to affirm the importance of the relationships between women and their parole officers in facilitating or inhibiting re-integration efforts (Cobbina, 2010; O'Brien, 2001; Opsal, 2015; Stone et al., 2018). In fact, FIW in Cobbina's (2010) study claimed that supportive parole officers were instrumental to women's re-integration success in their "ability to listen, encourage, and provide support" (p. 219). Although women are encouraged to be honest and straightforward with support providers, any admissions may result in re-incarceration and end up in their institutional 'files' that follow women in the years to come (Pollack, 2009a).

Parole Restrictions that Inhibit Progress

Studies have illuminated how parole non-association conditions can be challenging as they prevent women from leveraging their existing social networks to meet the practical demands of re-integration and accessing much needed emotional support (Opsal, 2015; Pollack, 2009a; Turnbull & Hannah-Moffat, 2009). For example, FIW in Opsal's (2015) study describe how parole officers routinely disapproved of post-release housing solutions proposed by the women due to the presence of some unfavourable factors (e.g., the owner of the home had a gun). Consequently, women were placed in halfway homes or shelters that ironically contained a whole host of other criminogenic influences, which they were instructed to stay away from outside of residing in shared housing (Opsal, 2015). This concern is also echoed by the Canadian Human Rights Commission (2003), which determined that current housing options are not sufficient places for FIW as many of the women are "…released to shelters for the homeless, co-

ed facilities and halfway houses located in neighbourhoods where they were formerly drug users or sex trade workers" (p. 55). These examples demonstrate how non-association conditions enforced by parole officers often fail to consider how the limitations imposed place women in situations where criminogenic influences abound (Opsal, 2015; Richie, 2001).

FIW have described how parole conditions placed on them further limited the type of employment they could obtain, which was already considerably constrained due to their time in prison (Opsal, 2015). For example, women are required to submit to either drug testing, a routine check in with a parole officer, attendance at a group or individual program, or to report to their case manager during any day they may be working (Opsal, 2015). As the women in Opsal's (2015) study "attempted to mitigate the conflicting demands set forth in their parole conditions with her attempts to become workers, they simultaneously funnelled themselves into low-wage labour" (p. 195) where meeting parole conditions was perceived to be in less conflict with job requirements. In this way, parole officers who did not attempt to accommodate women further harmed their employability which is often heralded "as a sign of competent re-integration" (Opsal, 2015, p. 194).

Social connections with those who have a shared history of incarceration have also been identified as crucial in providing essential emotional support and encouragement as women exit prison and transition into the community (Heidemann et al., 2016; Opsal, 2015; Pollack, 2009a; Turnbull & Hannah-Moffat, 2009). Therefore, it is not surprising that volunteering and being able to give back to those recently released from prison is also noted as a positive factor contributing to favorable community re-entry (Heidemann et al., 2016b; O'Brien, 2000; Opsal, 2015; Pedlar et al., 2018; Pollack, 2009a). FIW report that giving back to others contributes towards feelings of personal success (Heidemann et al., 2016a; Heidemann et al., 2016b) and has

been shown to contribute to the development of new identities (Pedlar et al., 2018). As such, women identify giving back as an "important marker that … (was) reflective of their citizenship in the communities in which they had returned" (Pedlar et al., 2018, p. 293). However, many of these relationships are restricted by parole conditions or by simply having a criminal past. Therefore, women's conditions "stipulated what appropriate relationships looked like mean(ing) that (these women) established no bonds at all, thus isolating themselves from people, relationships, and sources of emotional support" (Opsal, 2015, p. 200).

One of the most anticipated events that women experience once they are released from prison is resuming the responsibilities for parenting and caring for their children (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Pedlar et al., 2018; Severance, 2004). Concerning parole conditions, resuming the role of motherhood was a difficult experience for some women due to the "unpredictability of parole supervision and PO decision making" (Opsal, 2015, p. 197) which limited their contact with children. Women faced the dilemma of breaking their parole conditions to resume their relationship with their children or to wait until their parole had been completed (Opsal, 2015).

Finally, the overemphasis on relational theory (Hannah-Moffat, 2009; Maidment, 2006; Pollack, 2007) has been criticized by researchers who posit that Canadian penal policy has resulted in increased surveillance on women's intimate and familial relationships through risk narratives (Hannah-Moffat, 2009). As aptly described by Pollack (2011), "correctional discourses… link abused women's victimization with a propensity for violence" (p. 120), which leads to the over-regulation of women's relationships as they are viewed as a risk to re-offending. It is also concerning that women's "lawbreaking is understood not in relation to larger social and material conditions, but as a consequence of her personal failures, which are considered to be her gendered 'risk factors'" (Turnbull & Hannah-Moffat, 2009, p. 536). Differences women

demonstrate that counter normative understandings of relationships (i.e., heterosexual, monogamous, co-habiting) or idealized lifestyles are considered potential risk factors that should be monitored through parole conditions (Turnbull & Hannah-Moffat, 2009). Despite the fact that parole conditions are thought to provide women a better chance to re-integrate back into society, studies highlight the further hardship imposed on women by parole interventions.

Re-establishing Social Identities

As illustrated by Pedlar et al. (2018) FIW "receives a punishment not merely of being incarcerated and removed from society for a period, but also of being stigmatized well past their release" (p. 114). Many authors note that the label of being a criminal, inmate, or offender continues to linger far past the re-integration phase and provides an everyday struggle for women attempting to move past these labels (Barker, 2009; Fortune & Arai, 2014; Maidment, 2006, Pedlar et al., 2018). The stigma internalized by incarcerated women is thoroughly documented, resulting in feelings of depression, anger, and helplessness (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; O'Brien, 2001; Richie, 2001). Women described experiencing this internal stigma daily, as women believe that people can tell just from looking at them that they had served time (Fortune & Arai, 2014; Pollack, 2009a; Severance, 2004). Stigma was also experienced externally by other FIW when attempting to apply for employment, secure housing, and interact with others through mutual events such as children's schooling and religious institutions (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; O'Brien, 2001; Richie, 2001).

In contrast, areas where women felt accepted and free from judgment have been identified as instrumental in supporting community inclusion (Fortune & Arai, 2014). Participants in Fortune & Arai's (2014) study experienced certain resource support centres and libraries as judgement free areas where they felt free to be themselves. Through finding these

judgment free areas and supports, women found stabilizing supports among volunteers, family members, and support groups, and were provided practical aide to re-integration and reported feeling pulled into the community (Fortune & Arai, 2014). A study conducted by Stone et al., (2018) further affirmed that receiving positive identity verification from parole officers and others support FIW self-esteem and confidence to overcome re-entry barriers.

In addition to the stigma that comes from incarceration, re-establishing connections with children and resuming their role as a mother and caregiver is also experienced with great difficulty (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; O'Brien, 2001; Pedlar et al., 2018; Richie, 2001; Stone et al., 2017). When incarcerated, women identified separation from their children as particularly difficult and isolating, and they frequently articulated concerns about the welfare of their children (Pedlar et al., 2018). For example, navigating the placement of their children while in custody was problematic (Pedlar et al. 2018). While some children were placed with family members, others entered foster care. Further contact between women and their children was limited due to geographical restrictions in addition to limitations in the willingness of guardians to continue contact (Pedlar et al. 2018). Due to this fracture in relationship and the many competing practical demands that go along with re-integration, such as securing housing, employment and staying substance free, women identified significant barriers in re-gaining relationships with their children (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; O'Brien, 2001; Pedlar et al., 2018; Richie, 2001). As noted by Stone et al. (2017), this can result in "a loss of identity as a mother, due in part to her perceived violation of socially accepted norms and loss of ability to mother since being stripped of maternal responsibilities" (p. 300). However, resuming the role of mother continues to be an important factor motivating women to change their lives (Heidemann et al., 2016a; O'Brien, 2001). As significant literature points to the importance of mothering as a

deterrent to crime and as central to a women's self-identity, many have pointed out the importance of facilitating re-unification between women and their children (O'Brien, 2001; Richie, 2001). Regaining their role as mothers also assists women in forming new identities that counter the internalization of being a 'prisoner' (Pedlar et al., 2018).

Central to CSC's re-integration philosophy is to "help offenders identify pro-social lifestyles… that will integrate them as productive members of society and law-abiding citizens" (Fortin, 2004, p. 16). According to this perspective, women should exit prison and be prepared to take on the identity of a productive member of society, one who feels a sense of belonging to the community. However, as articulated by FIW in a study conducted by Fortune & Arai (2014), FIW indicated that "the ultimate form of exclusion was being sent to prison…(where) being pushed out of the community started long before they went to prison and persisted after they were released" (p. 88). Women described their feelings of difference, of exclusion from the community, due to their past experiences of addictions, poverty and imprisonment which drastically deviates from societal expectations (Fortune & Arai, 2014). These feelings of difference continued after prison, as women's material situations remain unchanged and they were unable to participate in normative activities and establish a comparable idealized standard of living (Fortune & Arai, 2014). It is clear that the identity imposed of being a "criminal" profoundly impacts all aspects of life for FIW who then struggle to become a part of a community they never felt they belonged to.

Success

As described above, there are some interpersonal factors that encourage re-integration efforts, such as resuming the role of motherhood (Heidemann et al., 2016a; O'Brien, 2001), receiving support from parole officers (Cobbina, 2010; Opsal, 2015), and being able to volunteer

or give back to others (Heidemann et al., 2016a; O'Brien, 2001; Pedlar et al., 2018). In addition to these factors, familial support and personal attributes of FIW, as described below are also two factors central to supporting FIW.

With respect to familial support, findings continue to support the immeasurable importance of family assistance to navigating post-prison realities (Cobbina, 2010; Doherty et al., 2014; Fortune & Arai, 2014; Heidemann et al., 2016; Maidment, 2006; O'Brien, 2001). The support provided by family is essential in their ability "to provide (the women) with material assistance, such as a place to reside, transportation, and money for necessities until they become financially independent" (Cobbina, 2010, p. 218). Beyond providing material assistance, the continued emotional support provided cannot be underestimated as women navigate their post-prison realities (Cobbina, 2010; O'Brien, 2001). Due to the importance of family relationships, FIW have identified "repairing fractured relationships with family members" (O'Brien, 2001, p. 291) as a priority upon community re-entry.

Another factor that has been found to encourage re-integration efforts, are personal attributes of the women themselves. When investigating personal factors that support re-integration readiness among Canadian FIW, Doherty et al. (2014) found that person specific factors such as a desire to change in addition to gains in self-esteem and belief in self-efficacy were essential components to community re-integration readiness. O'Brien (2001) reports growth in confidence as self-initiated changes "in developing a sense of efficacy for managing everyday life, creating relational competence, making decisions to promote physical health, and using internal resources to cultivate hope" (p. 292) as central to women's re-integration efforts. However, it is important to note that the researchers emphasize the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of person-specific and context-specific factors (such as availability of

institutional treatment, family and professional support, and continuity of care) (Doherty et al., 2014).

Although these above-mentioned factors have been identified as motivating influencers, which likely address important components integral to re-integration, these concepts in themselves do not define what success looks like from the perspective of FIW nor account for the processes required to achieve their goals. In fact, many of these factors are often outside of individual control (i.e., whether or not women have family willing to provide assistance, the ability to volunteer due to location or association-based parole restrictions). Furthermore, studies that explored elements of post-release success recruited participants by either leaving the definition of success un-defined (i.e., participants self-identify as successful and definitions of success are not sought from participants) (Heidemann et al., 2016b; e.g., O'Brien, 2001) or were recruited using measures of success as understood by correctional authorities (e.g., Cobbina, 2010; Maidment, 2006).

With regards to measuring success, recidivism has been identified as likely the only indicator of success in current use (Carlton & Segrave, 2013; Heidemann et al., 2016b). Within Canada, recidivism is defined as a revocation of conditional release or re-conviction that occurs within 2 years of the original release date from prison (CSC, 2007). However, studies demonstrate the problem with using recidivism as the only outcome indicator of successful re-entry (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Heidemann et al., 2016b; Maidment, 2006), as many argue that "recidivism alone is a narrow measure of success and has the effect of de-contextualizing women's criminalisation through an emphasis on individual choice and behaviour" (Carlton & Segrave, 2016, p. 284). Furthermore, the measure of recidivism fails to acknowledge re-integration as a complex process that requires significant continued change within many

interconnected domains of a woman's life. Without appreciating the milestones achieved and acknowledging the significant internal changes made by FIW, being "successful" is dictated by one indicator, not going back to prison, which does little to support women as they continue to re-define their lives outside of prison walls.

Recognizing this gap, Heidemann et al. (2016b) sought to understand how American FIW defined success. The key findings shared by FIW in this study include: obtaining a safe place to live on their own, being able to help family members and others, living free from criminal justice system surveillance, persevering through challenges, and living a "normal life" as preliminary definitions of success (Heidemann et al., 2016). Australian women in Carlton and Segrave's (2016) study articulated "temporary or long-term abstinence from illicit substances; achieving reunification with children…; escaping a violent relationship or avoiding-surviving a close encounter with harm or death" (p. 292) as other valuable descriptions of success. As these preliminary findings "demonstrated an acute disconnect between official models and measures for determining success and women's post-release perceptions and experiences" (Carlton & Segrave, 2016, p. 292), studies that further explore success as defined by FIW are needed. Specifically, studies that understand success from the perspectives of Canadian FIW are needed. As such, this study, in partnership with a local community partner, seeks to understand how FIW define success in life after prison through exploring their perspectives and experiences of community re-integration.

Research Partnership and Context

My community partner in this work is The Mustard Seed. This not-for-profit organization provides post-release support to both men and women transitioning back into the community after federal incarceration through their Open Door Program. The Open Door offers a suite of

programs and services both within the women's and men's federal institutions as well as in the community. Programs and supports include the provision of mentorship programs, hosting community-based support groups, a temporary housing solution through the Open Door Manor, offering logistical assistance (e.g., acquiring clothing, transportation to appointments, etc.) in addition to Chaplaincy services. Led by the Women and Men's Re-integration Chaplains and supported by a dedicated team of volunteers, the Open Door Program has been providing this integral support for over ten years for women and over twenty for men.

My involvement with this organization began six years ago when I started volunteering in the women's re-integration program as a community mentor. In this role, I was partnered with a woman near the end of her term of federal incarceration. Our relationship began while she was in prison and continued into the community for a one-year commitment as she transitioned back into the community. To support my involvement with the organization, I completed volunteer training with CSC, which further enabled my engagement with women while incarcerated within federal institutions. Through my involvement as a community mentor, I began to understand the complex and interconnected process that is community re-integration as I had the opportunity to partner with two women through the mentorship program.

As a research consultant by profession, I began to have conversations with the Women's Re-integration Chaplain about potentially conducting a collaborative research project that sought to understand further the experiences of women exiting prison. The Chaplain and I continued to have these conversations over the years, and the topic of exploring post-release was collaboratively agreed on. In addition to the fact that literature on post-release success is limited, the practical significance of the research to my community partner was compelling. As aptly noted by the Chaplain, "99 times out of 100 women can make the right decision, however, it is

the one bad decision that brings them back to prison and affirms their feelings of helplessness and failure" (Chaplain, personal communication, February 26, 2019). In this light, understanding success, how it is defined and experienced, becomes of central importance as the Open Door looks to further support and celebrate successes that are significant to FIW.

Key to this work was my involvement in the bi-weekly support groups that take place within the community. After taking a hiatus after the birth of my son, I resumed as an Open Door volunteer over two years ago. I began attending the re-integration support groups that occur bi-weekly on Saturday nights. The support group runs from 5 pm to 9 pm and involves sharing a meal, a sharing circle, an event or activity (such as bringing in a Paint Night or Yoga instructor) and concludes with prayer. Participants include women who are currently incarcerated within a federal institution but who have received a permit to attend the evening, women who are serving the remainder of their sentence within the community, and those who have completed their sentence in full and are no longer associated with the criminal justice system. The Chaplain, as well as a select number of volunteers, have received CSC approval to escort incarcerated women to and from the evening and are responsible for monitoring the women on site. Despite my ongoing wait to receive CSC escort training, I have been able to provide transportation for women who reside in a half-way house both to and from the event.

Central to the philosophy of the Open Door is to provide a welcoming and supportive environment for women of all walks of life regardless of faith tradition. Participants are not required to disclose their criminal past, and unless participants decide to share that part of their life, their criminal history remains unknown. Success is a topic that is often discussed both collectively as a group, and through conversations I have had one-on-one. Participation in this group informed my conceptualizations of post-release success as I was able to ask questions and

engage women in exercises about success to support the development of the interview guide for my research. This invaluable guidance, which critically informed the study, is described further in Chapter 3.

Researcher Positionality

It is well acknowledged that the characteristics and personal experiences of a researcher impact all aspects of the research process, from conceptualization of the research question to data collection and analysis, and finally, the reporting of outcomes (Berger, 2015). As previously stated, it was my involvement as an Open Door volunteer that led me to complete my thesis research with a focus on understanding what success means and looks like to those with lived experience. Although my pro-longed engagement with this community has provided contextual insight, I am keenly aware that my knowledge is partial at best, as I cannot truly understand the full impacts of incarceration. Beyond being a woman, a mother, and being of similar age with many of the women I have met, my lived experiences have been different. I acknowledge that my converging identities as a white, heterosexual, Christian, married mother who comes from a middle-class background and is employed, university-educated, and able-bodied result in varying levels of privilege that may impact the way I approach different aspects of the study.

In order to attend to these biases, it was vital for me to be attentive to how my past experiences and perspectives, which have been further informed by my reading of the literature, impact the way in which I hear and understand what is shared with me. In Chapter 3, under the section of rigour, I discuss the different approaches I employed to continue to attend to these biases. Above all, my commitment was to honour the stories of the women I spoke to, which has required ongoing reflexivity and continued engagement with those who are the true knowledge holders. One of the primary reasons a qualitative description methodology was selected for this

exploratory qualitative study was due to its focus on sticking close to the words of participants to develop a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon as articulated by participants (Sandelowski, 2000). This method has helped ensure that the words of my participants were not lost in my interpretation but positioned them as foundational to the study itself.

When taking a qualitative research course, my instructor talked about how with writing comes power. When we write about others, and it becomes accepted as knowledge, as truth, we must be cognizant of the impacts it has on those we write about. As my engagement as a member of the Open Door community will continue to extend beyond this work, I am especially mindful of these impacts to those I know, those I care for, and are cared for by. It is with this dedication to my research participants and to the Open Door community to which I belong that I seek to bring forward the wisdom so generously shared with me.

Chapter 3: Methods

Description of Methodology

A community-based participatory research approach (Israel et al., 1998) and a qualitative description methodology (Sandelowski, 2000) was used to answer the research question, how do women define success in life after prison? Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative description methodology was selected as it requires the researcher to remain close to the words and events as described by research participants to provide "a comprehensive summary of events in the everyday terms of those events" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 334). This requires the researcher to "produce findings closer to the data as given, or data-near…(that) are still detailed and nuanced interpretative products" (Sandelowski, 2010, p. 78). Although researchers have long utilized this methodological approach, Sandelowski (2000) articulated qualitative description as a distinct methodology in her seminal article, *Whatever Happened to Qualitative Description?* She wrote the article to address the rise in qualitative studies that purported to be a specific methodology (e.g., grounded theory, phenomenology) but resulted in a robust description of the phenomena rather than a product in congruence with the stated methodological approach (e.g., theories, phenomenologies). By articulating qualitative description as a distinct methodology, researchers can make clear the intent of the study "as a valuable methodological approach…when straight descriptions of phenomena are required" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 339). This approach is especially useful when the literature, such as the literature on post-release success, is limited. This methodology uses various techniques for sampling, data collection, and analysis and typically incorporates visual representations to further demonstrate the relationships among the data. In particular, data collected through semi-

structured interviews is recommended as is conducting a qualitative content analysis on the data (Sandelowski, 2000).

Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR) Approach

In addition to a qualitative description methodology, a community-based participatory approach (CBPR) was implemented throughout this study. Inherent in participatory approaches, is democratizing knowledge creation by partnering with community-based stakeholders who are directly impacted by the knowledge gained or created (Kajner, 2013). In contrast to traditional approaches, this approach requires researchers to move from the traditional role of an 'expert' to a 'collaborator' as they recognize the knowledge implicit to local communities (Kajner, 2013). Some of the key principles associated with CBPR are a commitment to integrating the knowledge learned into social change efforts that impact the community of interest (Israel et al., 1998) and involves a process of co-learning which "facilitates the reciprocal transfer of knowledge, skills, capacity and power" (Israel et al., 1998, p. 179). Furthermore, CBPR reflects continual engagement between both the researcher and community members throughout the research process where results and findings are disseminated in a way that is mutually beneficial to knowledge producers and users (Israel et al., 1998).

As this research initiative began in the community, a CBPR approach that engaged women with lived experiences and the Open Door was well suited. Through my engagement with women in the community support group over the last two years, I have been able to have conversations and participate in activities together that aimed to better understand elements central to success and re-integration as part of the development phase of this study. The activities that took place and their corresponding impacts on the study are described in a further section in

this chapter entitled *Study Development Phase*. Prior to addressing these CBPR principles in practice, a description of the theoretical groundings of this study are discussed.

Theoretical Grounding

First, it is noteworthy to observe that feminist research as a methodological approach has many similarities with CBPR (Van Deventer Iverson & Hauver James, 2014). In fact, as a number of academic disciplines have been involved in the advancement of participatory approaches over the years, various terminology has been developed such as action research, CBPR, collaborative inquiry, feminist community research, and participatory action research to name but a few (Bivens et al., 2014). Although some make distinctions between the terms, others use them interchangeably. What they do share in common are "the principles of co-creation of knowledge, and transformation of the local community" (Bivens et al., 2014, p.11). Despite these synergies, as dominant male understandings of incarceration and rehabilitation have historically and continue to be applied to incarcerated women, an approach that centers women's experiences is best suited to engage this research population. More specifically, feminist standpoint theory was the theoretical framework adopted for this study.

Standpoint Theory surfaced in the 1970's and 1980's as a critical feminist theory concerning the "relations between the production of knowledge and the practices of power" (Harding, 2004, p. 1). This epistemology questioned the ways in which scientific inquiry claimed to be value-neutral and posited that in "society most people do not participate in the making of culture … (but) rather, they are the product of the work of specialists occupying influential positions in the ideological apparatus" (Smith, 1987, p. 19). Therefore, Standpoint Theory with its roots in Marxian thought seeks to provide a voice to marginalized groups by valuing their experiences and enabling the development of a counter narrative to hegemonic perspectives

(Harding, 2004). Standpoint Theory has been adopted by a number of other social justice movements throughout history, which signifies its organic nature that "appeal(s) to groups around the world seeking to understand themselves and the world around them in ways blocked by the conceptual frameworks dominant in their culture" (Harding, 2004, p. 3). This wide appeal has been met with criticism, as the knowledge ascertained is deemed by some as 'folk science' which sits in direct contrast to the principles espoused by 'objective' Western inquiry (Harding, 2004). However, its supporters contest that Standpoint Theory as an epistemology provides answers to questions that explains "accounts of nature and social relations not otherwise accessible – accounts that provide valuable resources to justice movements" (Harding, 2004, p. 3).

Within the context of this study, feminist standpoint theory is used to understand FIW's self-conceptualizations of success and the processes they engage in to reach these self-conceptualizations. By first understanding the standpoint of women with lived experiences of incarceration and community re-entry, these understandings can be applied toward "bettering the condition of women and creating social change…(as) women's experiences not only point to us flaws in larger economic and political systems but also offer potential solutions to these flaws" (Brooks, 2007, p. 60). These critical reflections on success in life after prison and the factors impacting success are examined when considering the constraints and limitations imposed by those who purport to (and are mandated to) support women in their re-integration efforts. However, in recognizing the diversity among women and women's experiences, the theoretical lens of intersectionality is also incorporated.

Intersectionality is a way of investigating and comprehending the human condition "that sheds light on the complexity of people's lives within an equally complex social context" (Hill et

al., 2016, p. 25). Instead of privileging any one factor, it acknowledges the interplay of multiple factors or identities such as race, gender, class, sexuality among others that converge to result in varying levels of privilege and disadvantage (Burgess-Proctor, 2006; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). This approach, heralded by some as central to the evolution of feminist criminology in the 21st century (Burgess-Proctor, 2006), was a response to critiques from women of colour and other marginalized groups who saw the previous "approach (as) reductionist because it assumes that all women are oppressed by all men in exactly the same ways or that there is one unified experience of dominance experienced by women" (Burgess-Proctor, 2006, p. 34).

When considering the diversity of incarcerated women, intersectionality allows for the exploration of multiple standpoints. For example, Pollack (2000) conducted a study with incarcerated Caribbean-Canadian women who were "acutely aware that the way that a "normal" inmate is constructed has little to do with their own experiences…as their stories reverberated against the dominant narrative about women in prison" (p.77). From their standpoint, their criminal activity was tied to meeting social and economic needs as despite working, many of the women were unable to secure sufficient finances to support themselves and their children. They contested histories of physical and sexual abuse and dependencies on substances which are often depictions of incarcerated women. In fact, the women in Pollack's (2000) study desired financial independence, not wanting to rely on governmental assistance where reliance on subsidized housing was seen to "perpetuat(e) and enforc(e) Black people's ghettoization and marginalization" (p.79). Although Pollack's (2000) study was specifically focused on Caribbean-Canadian women, it is clear how the uniqueness of their experiences may be lost when considering a more diverse sample of women.

An intersectional analysis becomes of particular importance for Indigenous women where

factors such as race, class, and gender intersect to impact their road into criminal activity and similarly impact their post-release experiences. For example, research among incarcerated Indigenous women demonstrates greater need of substance abuse support, education and employment assistance (OCI, 2019) and greater assistance for therapeutic trauma care as greater proportions of incarcerated Indigenous women continue to report experiences of physical and sexual abuse than non-Indigenous counterparts (Barrett et al., 2010; OCI, 2019; Shaw et al., 1991). These factors, among others, such as differential treatment by the criminal justice system (Comack, 2012) and the ongoing impacts of colonization (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), coalesce to provide a picture of the unique experiences and constraints that Indigenous women face upon exiting prison.

To facilitate an intersectional analysis, socio-demographic variables were captured during the interviews. Additional factors shared by participants, such as the length of time in prison, past history with substance abuse, education and employment history also became important factors to consider as women emphasized different aspects of success and required supports due to the combination of factors and experiences that impact women. The analytic approach is described further in the *Data Analysis* section of this chapter as well as in the presentation of findings (Chapter 4). Beyond facilitating an analytical approach, the concept of intersectionality continues to call for reflection on the diversity of women's experiences and cautions minimizing uniqueness in the search for commonalities.

Study Development Phase

To follow is a description of how I built relationships with participants of the Open Door during my attendance at the community support group over the last two years or so and the benefits of this collaborative CBPR approach. I will also describe the collaborative arts-informed

research activities I engaged in with incarcerated and FIW that helped to shape the interview guide.

Relationship Building and Engagement

Central to CBPR, is building relationships with the community of interest to provide mutual benefit and build trust (Israel et al., 1998). In practice, this meant partnering with the Women's Re-integration Chaplain and women who participate in the Open Door, which included both volunteers and women with lived experiences. To do this, I became a regular attendee of the community support group that occurred bi-weekly in the community in July of 2019. Although I was involved with the Open Door as a community mentor, I had not participated in the community support group, which required me to develop new relationships in a new social setting. Over the last two years, I have been picking up interested attendees from a half-way house in Edmonton and driving them to the community-based group and returning them after the event. This prolonged engagement in the community not only provided me with critical contextual information about the nuances and complexities of re-integration but also helped me build relationships with participants and meet a practical need of my community partner by providing transportation.

Another element central to CBPR as previously discussed is to move from the role of a researcher as an 'expert' to becoming a 'collaborator' (Kajner, 2013). I was able to do this by conducting two arts-informed research activities at the bi-weekly support groups in the community on Saturday nights. These activities served as an informal research process as a first step to understand women's perspectives and experiences regarding success. As described by Cole & Knowles (2012), arts-informed research is a process aimed at "understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of

inquiry" (p. 59). Although these activities are not considered "research" in the conventional sense, as ethical consent was not sought, and data was not gathered for the purposes of communication, this engagement was vital to the study's development.

For example, conducting these activities allowed me to engage a more diverse audience of participants as event attendees included incarcerated women. Research continues to affirm women often have multiple experiences of incarceration and subsequently have multiple experiences with community re-entry (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Maidment, 2006). In Canada, it is also known that Indigenous women are more likely to be denied forms of early release, such as parole, which are often served in cities and large communities (OCI, 2018). Therefore, upon their warrant expiry women return to their remote communities and are not included in research initiatives due to difficulties in locating and recruiting participants (Pedlar et al., 2018). By allowing these activities to occur informally, I heard from incarcerated women who have valuable perspectives about post-release success. I was also able to incorporate feedback from those who would likely have been difficult to engage once returning to their home communities. Although my community partner and I sought Correctional approval to include incarcerated women to participate in the interview stage of the research, due to the impacts of COVID-19 (which is discussed in a subsequent section), we were unable to secure Correctional permission.

Additionally, it is well documented that qualitative studies or qualitative components of mixed methods research typically utilize interviews as a data collection strategy when working with incarcerated and FIW (e.g., Bove & Tryon, 2018; Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Doherty et al. 2014; Heidemann et al., 2016b; O'Brien, 2001; Opsal, 2015; Pollack, 2007; Pollack, 2009a; Richie, 2001; Severance; 2004, among others). Conducting interviews is often a beneficial approach when considering the difficulty of recruiting participants post-release who often have

many competing demands and pressing realities to attend to once exiting prison. From the perspective of working with incarcerated women who require institutional approval to participate in research initiatives, individual interviews are often the only viable option. Despite these realities, there is recognition that data collection strategies that bring women together are beneficial (Rumpf, 2017). Group approaches that enable critical reflection and dialogue are desirable as they promote knowledge being generated in a participatory manner that often highlights the impact of societal or systemic inequalities (Rumpf, 2017). In conducting informal groups-based activities with the community support group where women from prison attended, I was able to learn from this rich dialogue that occurred which shaped the interview guide development (described further on the following page).

In addition to reaching a broader audience during the development phase, conducting these exercises allowed me to position women who have experienced incarceration as the experts in this study and myself as a learner. As previously stated, this is important in CBPR and had specific significance to my research population. As I learned through my engagement in group and through a review of the literature (Pollack, 2009a; Turnbull & Hannah-Moffat, 2009), women are often given little authority to speak about themselves as their honesty and authority is continually questioned. In fact, as found by Pollack (2009a), it is the voices of caseworkers, psychologists, and parole workers whose perspectives or assessments are documented within an incarcerated women's correctional file and live on as the official version of women's re-integration efforts. Positioning women as the knowledge holders, as the experts, proved to be important, not only for garnering candid feedback in the arts-informed activities but to inform how I approached interviews with participants. When it came to conducting the interviews, I explicitly stated that my intent is not to evaluate or judge the veracity of their statements or

experiences, which is a commonplace experience between women and Correctional workers but was to learn from them. I found this approach to be an essential step in building trust with my participants.

Arts – informed Research Activities

In total, I engaged with women on three separate nights in the activities that are described below. The first activity, creating a visual map of success, occurred over two nights. During the first night the map was built collaboratively and on the second night I was able to bring back and share the results of the map for further discussion. The second activity involved a writing exercise on success.

Map of Success. The intent of this activity was to highlight the major concepts women associated with success and what women identified needing from others and from themselves to move forward meaningfully towards self-conceptualizations of success. To create the map, I drew a large tree and I asked several questions associated with success. Questions included: when thinking about community re-integration, what are some of your immediate goals? What about long-term goals? When you think about your life five years from now, what essential elements of your life must be present for you to feel successful? After each question was asked, participants were encouraged to write what came to mind on a stickie note in the shape of a leaf. Participants were encouraged to write one concept per stickie note, and the concepts were added to the tree. To explore what participants needed from themselves, the participants wrote down key concepts on small square stickies that were adhered to the base of the tree as they were considered essential nutrients required for growth. Lastly, participants wrote down what they needed from others on sun and cloud stickies to represent the external elements that will impact their growth. I facilitated a brief discussion about the concepts provided. Participants shared

further context concerning the concepts by comparing it to life in prison or life before prison to demonstrate the concepts' significance in their life at that moment. In total, three volunteers (including myself), six women with lived experiences, one correctional officer, and the Women's Re-integration Chaplain participated.

At a later date, I brought back the results to the group after conducting a content analysis, which highlighted the key phrases, such as family relationships, sobriety and so on and were grouped into the three distinct groups: elements central to success, needs from self, and needs from others (Appendix A). Interestingly, only one woman from the tree exercise was in attendance that night. For the remaining participants and volunteers, this was the first time they had heard about the exercise as we discussed the results. Eight women with lived experiences and three volunteers (including myself) participated.

Although the women affirmed that many of the concepts such as housing, employment, re-establishing finances, etc. were critical elements of success or contributed to their success, they questioned how the distinct elements were related to one another. Through this discussion, it became clear that success must be understood within the framework of their re-integration journey. Only by understanding success through the lens of a journey that requires many inter-related components such as belief in themselves and supports from others can one truly understand how success is defined, what it looks like in their daily lives, and how it may change over time. It also became evident that success should be left for the women to define rather than asking leading questions that touch on different aspects of success. Based on this feedback, I kept the three central elements (defining success, internal factors, external factors) in the interview guide, but framed the questions in the context of success as a journey that occurs over time where elements inter-relate. For example, in the interview guide participants were asked to

define success in practice in their lives and were then asked where the road to becoming this person that they want to be began. In this approach, strongly advocated for by the women who participated in the discussion of the tree-building exercise, success is considered as a process that occurs over time and allows for the discussion of the many inter-connected elements and discrete events that impact success along the way.

Beyond the essential feedback I received about developing the interview guide, both nights, especially the second night, resulted in rich and deep sharing of past experiences and how their experiences informed current beliefs and strategies moving forward. The second night which was less structured and consisted of me briefly describing the components and asking the women for feedback, yielded the richest dialogue as women were more freely able to express their opinions and provide insight. This experience was important for me as I began to consider the interview guide and further informed my approach to conducting interviews.

Success Writing Exercise. The last activity involved drawing on the professional expertise of an Open Door volunteer who led the group through a creative writing activity on success. She asked participants to write a letter to someone exiting prison and advise them on how to re-integrate successfully. Seven women with lived experiences, six volunteers, and the Women's Re-integration Chaplain participated. Some participants read their letters out loud, and we discussed the importance of what was being shared while others provided me with their written letter. Through this exercise, the importance of attending to one's emotional needs and reaching out to others was consistently voiced. It further emphasized the importance of understanding where the journey begins for women and what it will continually require of them to transition into the community.

In summary, the CBPR approach employed in the development of this study was extremely beneficial in supporting further stages of the research. By building relationships and engaging with women I may not have been able to engage with during the interview stage, I was better able to understand how women with lived experiences thought of success. Not only was I able to incorporate their feedback into developing the interview guide but through my interactions I was able to learn more about conducting interviews with FIW, such as being clear about not judging the veracity of their claims which is often commonplace between FIW and their parole officers. Other CBPR approaches, such as member checks to promote the reliability of the findings, are described in the relevant section of this Chapter. Knowledge mobilization strategies are outlined in Chapter 6. Prior to discussing the research process, the impacts of COVID-19 are first addressed.

COVID-19 Impacts

On March 17, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was declared a state of public health emergency in Alberta. In accordance with Alberta Health Service guidelines, the Open Door suspended the in-person support group meetings in the community. Although the support group resumed virtually in May 2020, a substantial decrease in attendance was observed. While the decline in attendance was likely the result of several factors, the most notable impacts were the loss of attendance by incarcerated women and those residing at half-way houses where movements were restricted. The group continued to meet virtually until July 2020, whereby in-person gatherings resumed in compliance with Alberta Health Services guidelines at public parks. Women at one of the half-way houses in Edmonton were able to resume attendance provided we secure transportation and meet social distancing protocols. As of late September of 2021, the support group moved indoors and continued to adhere to the province's recommended

guidelines. Although there have been communications CSC indicating that some community-based permits will be provided to support re-integration, as of now (Fall 2021) it remains unknown when incarcerated women will return to the support group due to the fluid nature of COVID-19.

When all in-person gatherings were suspended, I had completed the arts-informed research exercises and was in the process of submitting my ethics application to the Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. Additionally, my community partner and I had spoken with senior staff at the Edmonton Institution for Women about including incarcerated women who attend the support group in interviews. At the time, we were awaiting Regional Headquarter Approval from Correctional Service Canada to proceed. However, the emergence of COVID-19 impacted the study in a number of ways. First, as all CSC institutions revoked permits that allowed women to attend events in the community, it became clear that I would be unable to include incarcerated participants. Secondly, recruitment was anticipated to occur through my attendance at the support group. Due to the decreased number of attendees, it became apparent that additional strategies would need to be explored and other partnerships made. One of the half-way houses supported recruitment through posting the recruitment flyer, however as indicated by staff, the more pressing day to day needs of residents during the pandemic took precedence. As such, I was unable to secure any participants through this avenue. Lastly, to comply with Alberta Health Services guidelines, the ethics boards at the University of Alberta required all interviews to occur virtually or over the phone.

Recruitment

A convenience sampling approach was purposefully employed (Patton, 1990) to recruit FIW, who are often challenging to recruit post-release due to the many practical needs and

demands when re-entering the community (Arsenault et al., 2016). The majority of participants (n = 14) were recruited through the support of my community partner who posted the recruitment flyer (Appendix B) on her private Facebook group. In this group, her contacts include FIW she has known through her role as the Women's Re-integration Chaplain for over ten years. I also verbally recruited participants through my attendance at the support group (n = 2) both virtually and in-person when the support group resumed in-person gatherings. Both recruitment activities occurred in tandem and were iterative over two months. Despite my involvement with the Open Door over the last year, most participants (13/16) were unknown to me prior to the study.

Ethical Considerations

Once receiving communications from an interested participant via email or phone, a copy of the information letter and informed consent were provided through email (Appendix C). Participants who made contact by phone were asked for an email address to send the document. The information letter provided an overview of the study, including benefits and risks to participating, how their privacy will be protected, and how their information will be used. Within the information letter, participants were informed that they could withdraw their consent up until two weeks after receiving a written transcript of the interview. A list of statements comprising the verbal informed consent was also provided. Before the interview over Zoom or over the phone, participants were asked to read the information letter and verbal consent form and were encouraged to ask any questions about the study. At the onset of the interview, the information letter was discussed, and participants were asked if they had any additional questions. Verbal consent was then sought by asking participants to affirm yes or no to a series of statements and women were asked to select a pseudonym to be referred to in the study.

When reviewing the information letter with participants, the limits to confidentiality were reviewed. This was especially essential when considering that a significant portion of participants are still under the purview of the Parole Board of Canada, where unreported criminal activity would be a violation of their conditional release. To ensure their participation in the study would not impact the conditions of their release from prison, they were encouraged to avoid these topics. Discussing the potential risk of emotional discomfort was also essential to re-iterate with participants at the onset of the interview. Although the topic of the study was centered on success, success is often considered in contrast to past experiences either before or during prison, which may cause some emotional unease. Participants were encouraged to let me know if they were experiencing any discomfort or anxiety and the voluntary nature of their participation was emphasized. A list of places of support was provided for women, and the Women's Re-integration Chaplain kindly offered to be "on-call" to speak with any women who might need further support. After each interview, a short debrief was conducted to ensure that any questions were answered, concerns were heard, and places of support were provided if desired.

No ethical conflicts arose throughout the study. However, it is important to note that the nature of free and informed consent is often at odds with lived experiences of incarceration. When incarcerated, life is dictated by strict environments and rigid schedules where consent is often implicit. I believe by re-affirming the intent of the study and positioning the participants as experts, it fostered greater trust and transparency between myself and participants. I also emphasized the fact with participants on Zoom or over the phone that whether they chose to participate or not, there would be no impacts to their involvement with the Open Door. This was an important aspect for me to re-iterate with women as I am an Open Door volunteer who

provides transportation for women to attend the group and I did not want participants to feel an obligation or undue pressure to participate. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta.

Data Collection

Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted and covered three main areas. The first explored definitions of success and how participants worked towards realizing their self-conceptualizations of success in practice. The second area involved exploring what participants have needed from themselves to be successful and will continue to need to be successful. Third, the support participants required from others, such as family, friends, correctional, organizational and community supports, were explored. Lastly, some socio-demographic questions were asked of participants to contextualize their responses further. Based on the feedback received in the earlier engagement with women in the community support group, the questions were framed to consider success and what is needed from themselves and others within the context of their re-integration journey. Follow up questions were asked to understand further concepts articulated by participants as needed. A copy of the interview guide can be found in Appendix D.

As in-person interviews were not possible due to the onset of the pandemic, interviews were conducted over the phone or through Zoom, a video communications software, dependent on participant preference. Eight of the interviews were completed over the phone while the remaining eight were completed over Zoom. All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of participants. Following the recording, all interviews were transcribed manually. Once each audio recording had been transcribed in full, I listened to the interview in its entirety as a quality control measure to ensure the accuracy of the transcript. A word document containing the

transcription of the interview was sent to each participant through email and gave them the opportunity to add, modify, or make changes to the transcript.

Before data collection had begun, I wrote a research memo that reflected on my experiences so far with incarcerated and FIW regarding post-release success. This process enabled me to articulate my underlying assumptions or beliefs about success that I had gained through my engagement with the Open Door community, making me cognizant of potential biases that I may bring into the data collection process. Research memos continued to play a significant role throughout data collection as I wrote a memo after each interview. These memos helped document key and repeated concepts and their relationships among one another and document factors that may have impacted the interview process itself (e.g., one participant had re-scheduled her interview multiple times). Furthermore, insights provided during the interview debrief were also captured in research memos that impacted my engagement in subsequent interviews. For example, one participant mentioned that she had re-scheduled the interview multiple times due to her anxiety in participating. Thankfully, her anxiety was alleviated during the interview, but this re-enforced the importance of flexibility when scheduling interviews with participants. Finally, the research memos also enabled me to reflect on how I felt the interview had gone and how I may have impacted the interview.

Data Analysis

The data generated by each interview was analyzed using a qualitative content analysis approach. Qualitative content analysis allows for the "subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1278). More specifically, a conventional content analysis, as outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), was implemented. A conventional content analysis

involves an inductive approach to developing codes, which is best suited for studies focused on thoroughly describing a phenomenon when existing literature is limited (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Once I had completed transcribing an interview, I read the transcript through its entirety to support understanding it as a whole "as one would read a novel" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279). The transcript was then re-read, and text representing key concepts were highlighted, and I recorded my initial observations and thoughts of the transcript on paper. Prior to developing codes, I repeated this process with eight transcripts that represented a variety of participants (e.g., women with children such as young children and adult children, women with no children, those who had multiple experiences of incarceration or first experience with incarceration, those with varying ethnic or cultural identities, etc.). After reviewing the eight interview transcripts, "labels for codes emerge(d) that (were) reflective of more than one key thought" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279). These codes became the initial coding framework and were organized under the interview guide's three key areas: success, internal factors, and external factors. After the initial coding framework had been established, I used NVivo, a data analysis software tool, to assign codes. As this process was iterative, codes were changed multiple times to better reflect the data as more transcripts were coded and the data was further reflected on. The codes were then sorted into categories based on how they related to one another. Through this process, codes identified under internal and external factors were reorganized to address similar categories under inhibiting and supporting factors. The categories were also reviewed multiple times to ensure internal homogeneity (the data fit well within the category), as well as external homogeneity (the categories were distinct) (Mayan, 2009). Lastly, after further reflecting on the categories, they

were sorted under dominant themes. As such, categories are further referenced as sub-themes organized under dominant themes in the Results described in Chapter 4.

After being well immersed in the data and the preliminary analysis was completed, the results were further split by several socio-demographic factors identified during the analysis where unique experiences/perspectives were observed in adherence with an intersectional analysis. Beyond the socio-demographic variables asked of women, this analysis also included information that came up in the interviews that pointed to differential experiences. For example, women whose past charges related to theft or fraud emphasized different aspects of success than those women where substance abuse was a significant contributor to their past criminal activity. These factors were examined to explore the different standpoints presented by women as they defined success and described it in practice in their lives. Additional factors such as age, family supports, past educational or occupational history were also factors explored during the analysis. Where differences were observed, they are discussed in the Chapter on results. Lastly, when considering the facilitators and barriers women experienced and how these factors impacted conceptualizations of success, an analysis of how policies and procedures impacted their journey was also explored.

Rigour

To promote the trustworthiness or rigour of this study the guidelines of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were implemented. To ensure credibility, research participants had the opportunity to review a transcript of their interview and provide any feedback or modifications they saw fit. When needed, I followed up with participants to clarify aspects of their transcript to ensure I fully understood the significance of what they had articulated. Through conducting interview debriefs,

a couple of participants indicated their desire to be further engaged in the study as they appreciated the CBPR approach, which encourages continual engagement between researchers and participants throughout each stage of the research. On a couple of separate occasions during the initial data analysis stage, I had conversations with participants about the codes and how they were categorized. This also included describing the relationships between the codes, sub-themes, and themes. Lastly, my pro-longed engagement in the community and the conversations we have continued to have about success have further served to promote the credibility of findings.

In addressing the criterion of transferability, which considers how research findings may be applied to other research settings, I wrote research memos after each interview, which thoroughly documented the process leading up to the interview, the research setting and external factors that may have potentially impacted the interview. Furthermore, the socio-demographic information captured also provided important contextual information when considering transferability of findings to other settings.

I conducted an audit trail as a strategy to address the criterion of dependability, which is concerned with the reliability of the study. An audit trail ensures that the decisions made throughout the research study are clear and reasonable to others (Mayan, 2009). I began keeping a journal and documenting decisions made over two years ago as I participated in the support group and talked to community stakeholders about the project and approach. Based on this early engagement, decisions were made over time to meet the needs of the community and work within the restrictions of CSC and COVID-19.

Confirmability is a criterion specific to the data collection and analysis phase concerned with objectivity. Due to my pro-longed engagement in the community and my review of the literature, I wrote a research memo prior to data collection that outlined my underlying thoughts

and assumptions. This was important for me to go back to as I collected data and analyzed it. This helped ensure I was mindful of my potential biases that may impact the interview and analysis phase. I continued to write in a research journal throughout the analysis and writing of the findings and results. Lastly, I discussed the findings with my community partner and presented initial findings to FIW at the community support group to ensure the findings were logical.

In addition to the criteria set out by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the concept of reflexivity, as mentioned previously in *Researcher Positionalit*y was an important element supporting the rigour of this study. This required me to consider my role as not only a researcher, but as an Open Door volunteer and the impacts this may have on all phases of the research process. To support this ongoing reflection, I kept a reflexive journal and had debriefs with my community partner.

Chapter 4: Results

Due to the generous contributions by participants, the results presented here address the question: how do FIW define success in life after prison? Success was explored in the context of participant's community re-integration journey, which women defined as beginning in prison and extending into their time within the community after release. Participants were also asked to identify what they need from themselves and others to achieve their re-entry goals and aspirations. Before describing the results concerning success, demographic information and factors pertaining to participant's involvement with the criminal justice system is first outlined. Following this review, a model with key findings addressing women's definitions of post-release success is presented. Factors that support and inhibit women in reaching their goals/successes are then addressed and include internal and external factors. Furthermore, where experiences differed due to varying intersecting factors (e.g., employment history prior to incarceration, age, etc.), the differences are described within the relevant sub-theme. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms they selected throughout this Chapter. In two cases, participants requested to use their real names, citing the importance of claiming their voice.

Participant Demographics and Criminal Justice System Involvement

In total, sixteen women were interviewed about their experiences returning to the community after federal incarceration. All participants had been incarcerated at the Edmonton Institution for Women (EIFW). While the following information describes the diversity of participants represented, some factors, such as age, are explored further when considering the differential experiences as expressed by participants.

Age

Participants ranged in age from 26 to 59 on the day of their interview (Table 1). When considering the age of participants when beginning their last incarceration, nearly half (n = 7) were under the age of 34 which is consistent with the fact that most incarcerated women are under the age of 34 (Savage, 2019). However, as demonstrated in Table 1, a diverse group of women concerning age were also captured within the study.

Table 1.

Current Age and Age when Incarcerated

Age Range	Age when Incarcerated (n)	Current Age (n)
18 – 24	2	0
25 – 34	5	5
35 – 44	4	4
45 – 54	4	3
55+	1	4
Total	16	16

Family Composition

The women that participated in interviews were asked whether or not they had children and their current marital status. Most of the participants interviewed have children (n = 12). Of the 12 participants who have children, five have children under 18 and seven have children over 18. Participants with younger children were most often responsible for their care. The remaining quarter of women who did not have children (n = 4) ranged in age from 30 to 58.

Concerning marital status, ten women considered themselves to be single. Five participants were either in common-law relationships or were married, where three of the five participants had remained with the same spouse or partner from before incarceration. One participant indicated that she was currently in a relationship.

Ethnic or Cultural Background

Women were asked to indicate their ethnic or cultural background. Their verbatim[1] responses are contained in Table 2. Nearly half of participants (n = 7) identified as White, Caucasian, or of European descent. Five participants identified as having Indigenous heritage, with four of the five participants specifically identifying Métis heritage. Participants also identified as Hispanic (n = 1), Filipino (n = 1), Middle Eastern/Icelandic (n = 1) and from South America of African descent (n = 1).

Table 2.

Ethnic or Cultural Background

Ethnic or Cultural Background	(n)
Caucasian/White/European	7
Métis	2
Swedish, Native, and French	1
Métis and Lithuanian	1
Métis and Gwich'in	1
Hispanic	1
South America, African descent	1
Filipino	1

[1] Where necessary, small exclusions or modifications were made to preserve participant anonymity (e.g., removed the name of a city/town from a country outside of Canada)

Middle Eastern/Icelandic	1
Total	16

Place of Residence

When asked where participants lived before their last incarceration took place, all indicated living in an Albertan municipality. Alberta municipalities included: Edmonton (n = 7), Calgary (n = 3), Fort Saskatchewan (n = 1), Rural Sherwood Park (n = 1), Rocky Mountain House (n = 1), and Lethbridge (n = 1). The remaining two participants lived in Regina, Saskatchewan (n =1) and Yellowknife, Northwest Territories (n = 1). Five participants relocated to different communities after their incarceration. The remaining 11 currently live in the same city they lived in before incarceration.

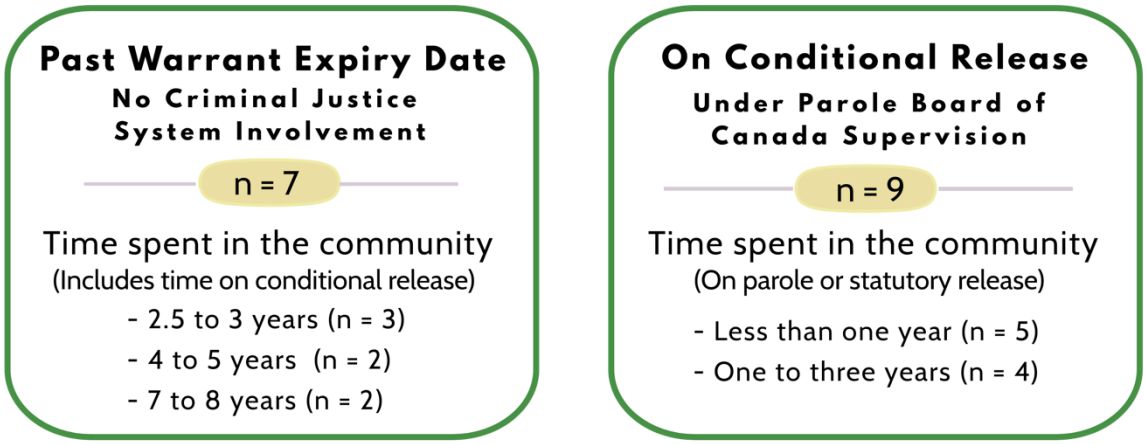
Current Criminal Justice Service Involvement

At the time of the interviews, seven women (n = 7) had surpassed their Warrant Expiry Date (WED), which meant they were no longer involved with the criminal justice system (i.e., had served their sentences in full). Women in this group indicated reaching their WED anywhere between one to five years ago. In addition, all seven indicated being released on a form of conditional release (i.e., day/full parole, statutory release) before reaching their WED. Therefore, when considering the total amount of time spent in the community (conditional release and after their WED), they have been in the community anywhere between two and a half to eight years.

The remaining nine participants (n = 9) were serving the remainder of their sentences in the community under supervision. Most have been in the community for less than one year (n = 5). The remainder have been in the community between one to three years (n = 4). An overview of these two participant groups is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Participants' Current Criminal Justice System Involvement



Note. The status of participants concerning the criminal justice system at the time of their interview.

Time Incarcerated

Although not all participants specified the amount of time in prison during their last incarceration, most indicated remaining in prison for under one year (n = 6) or between one to two years (n = 4) before being released on parole or statutory release.

Table 3.

Time Incarcerated During Last Federal Sentence

Time Incarcerated	(n)
<1 year	6
1 - 2 years	4
2 - 3 years	2
More than 3 years	2
Not disclosed	2
Total	16

Additional Factors Identified by Participants

Although information concerning participants' past criminal activity was specifically not sought, many participants shared context about their life before prison, including the criminal activity that led to their incarceration. Women indicated that this information was integral to understanding their experience of community re-integration and current definitions of success.

For ten of the women I interviewed, substances played a crucial role in their past. A number of the women with past substance abuse dependencies identified experiences of physical and/or sexual abuse through adolescence and/or adulthood. For the most part, those with past histories with substances had been detained in provincial jails or federal prisons before their last federal sentence. Five participants identified theft and/or fraud as the criminal sentence that led to their incarceration. All five indicated that this was their first interaction with the criminal justice system and did not have substance abuse histories. The remaining participant described her involvement in the sale and possession of drugs; however, she had no personal experience with substances.

Defining Success

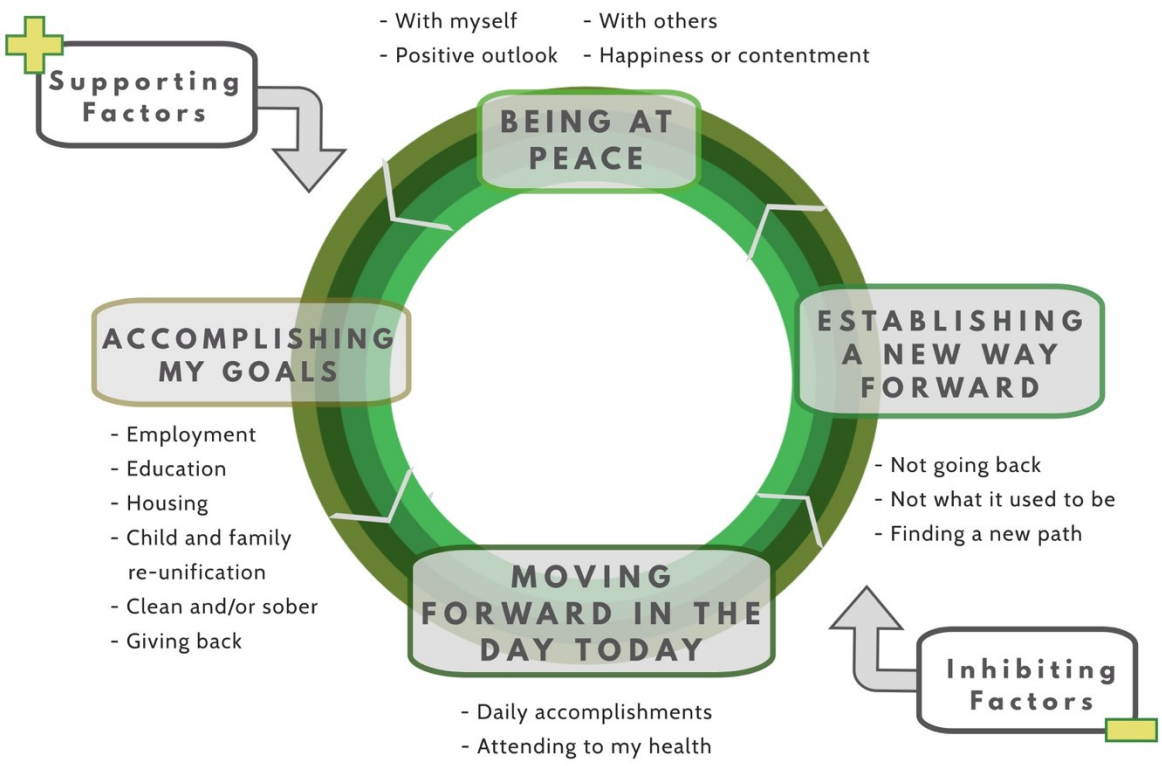
When it came to defining success, participants were asked questions that not only asked them to identify what success means to them in life post-release but also explored what the path of success looked like in their lives. Key themes and sub-themes were identified across the analysis of these questions. Although questions that focused on understanding the process (e.g., If you think about becoming the person you want to be as a journey, where did that journey begin for you?) yielded similar themes as did questions on defining what success looks like in their lives, they also provided valuable context and insight into why these aspects of success were critical and how they relate to other successes defined by participants. Participants accomplished this by

contrasting their current life with life before prison to demonstrate the significance of their growth. In the following presentation of the results, the key themes and sub-themes are described by including overall descriptions and contextual examples to demonstrate relevance.

The following figure presents the four key themes identified by participants: Success is Being at Peace, Establishing a New Way Forward, Moving Forward in the Day to Day, and Accomplishing my Goals. The sub-themes represent aspects of success within each of the themes presented. While some of the themes precede others and impact other success themes, the relationship between the themes is not linear. In fact, participants often achieve success in multiple themes concurrently, as will be described further in the following narrative. Overall, all themes play a role in a holistic understanding of post-release success and are crucial to achieving and maintaining ongoing successes in their lives. As such, a circular representation is most appropriate in representing the ongoing nature of success (see Figure 2). While the arrows depict a counter clockwise direction, the direction does not relate to the order between the themes. Instead, it represents that all four aspects (shown by the four different colours represented in the circle) are ongoing. Although the Supporting and Inhibiting Factors are referenced in the following Figure, they are explored further in the section entitled Factors.

Figure 2.

Success Defined



Note. Themes are displayed in all capital letters, whereas corresponding sub-themes, in smaller text, are presented along each theme.

Being at Peace

When defining success, common to all participants was the concept of being at peace. While this was reflected in healthy relationships for some, for nearly all, being at peace involves an internal state of being at peace with themselves. Being at peace is also reflected in their perspectives towards life and overall happiness and/or contentment concerning their current situation in life. Four sub-themes made up this theme and are described in more detail below using illustrative quotes.

With Myself. Being at peace with myself was often described as knowing, accepting, and loving oneself and was noted by many as one of the most significant aspects of success in their lives. As illustrated by Josephine:

> I think being able to be okay with who you are. Like I, that's a huge success that it took me a long time to get to the point where I was okay with who I am…. which is weird because it's like I've had so many other successes like with employment and you know other opportunities but like my bank account has nothing to do with my success. It's all something that's internal.

Similarly, others echoed Josephine's sentiment. For example, Elizabeth talked about the importance of believing in herself and loving who she is as a critical component of success in her life. When asked what success looked like in practice in her life, Zoe stated that it was "being at peace with myself."

In order to be at peace with oneself, some described their path towards self-acceptance which involved addressing past trauma. The healing that participants had accomplished was considered a success and essential precursor to moving towards other successes. As described by Jade:

> One of the biggest things I had to draw on was changing my self-esteem. I had to spend more time telling myself I was worthy and what happened to me and the abuse was not my fault. I had to start giving myself small affirmations just to change my perspective because so long as I was not worthy, you can't move forward.

For Jade, the healing that she experienced was a significant success in her life, especially when considering the stigma around mental health that she noted was prevalent among her age group (>55 years). It was not until Jade entered federal incarceration that she began to address the trauma that she had experienced as a child. Similarly, Marsha, who experienced sexual abuse as a child, also described the healing she had accomplished as a significant success. As she

shares, "the healing and growth of my mentality and you know spirituality is at peace. You know a level of healing that has been accomplished whereby I am comfortable in my own self."

For others, the path towards self-acceptance required addressing negative self-perceptions fostered by others throughout their lives. For example, Anna described feeling many failures in her life because "success was dictated by prestige and money and I hate to say it but a penis. I wasn't born with one so my job was to procreate and I didn't do that either." For Anna, shedding these negative perspectives and "just being able to get up and face the day in a positive manner with none of that baggage hanging around" is success in itself. This also requires Anna to put herself first. As she shares: “I always came last in my life before. I was a caregiver to my mother so you know work came first, mother came first, and I got lost in the shuffle. So now it's about me.” Other participants echoed Anna’s perspective as they talked about the importance of taking care of themselves first. For Zoe, she notes that "if I'm not okay with myself or if I'm not, you know, able to take care of me first then I'm not good to anyone."

Although being at peace is not simply a state that can be reached but requires significant ongoing efforts (to be described further in Moving Forward in the Day to Day), women were clear that being at peace with themselves is a significant success. For most, this process began in prison (n = 13) or just before incarceration once the reality of prison became certain (n = 3).

The process began as women decided that they wanted to change their lives for the better. Women described various reasons that instigated their decision to change, which occurred at different time points for women when serving their federal sentence. For example, Sherry, who had been federally incarcerated multiple times, noted that when visiting her mother on her deathbed, she promised to change her life for the better. While for others like Sunflower, who battled addictions for most of her life and actively sought help, this internal journey towards

success began the day she ended up in prison. Sunflower attributes this to having access to programs in the federal institution that were unavailable during her stints in the provincial system. Moreover, for others like Sunny, it was not until she had an opportunity to attend community events on escorted temporary absences and received support from community members that she began working towards changing her life. Following these decisions required hard internal work that involved correctional programming and reaching out to other supports (to be discussed further in Supporting Factors).

A lack of internal peace was often discussed by participants when describing their pre-prison lives. Although they did not solely attribute their criminal activity due to the lack of internal peace, they were clear that their pre-prison perspectives shaped the decisions that were made. For example, as stated by Emily:

> I think before being incarcerated I was broken but not even having a clue that I was broken. I was just trucking along trying to carry on without acknowledging all the things that may have broke me along the way where being away literally you know forced me to look at these things and evaluate these things and figure out where I wanted to be and who I wanted to be.

Others echoed Emily's sentiment that going to prison and having everything stripped away, their focus shifted towards better understanding themselves. Josephine shares how when focusing on herself, letting go of shame from the past, and coming to peace with who she is was the beginning to moving forward.

> Once I kind of stripped myself of that idea of self and identity and it was like all taken away for me because before I went in you know I had the clothes and the shoes and the stuff that you think is yourself that you put on top that you know gives you this ability to

> look in a mirror and be okay with who you're looking at. But like once all that was gone and then having to like go from that, in that learning process of looking in the mirror hating what I seen looking back at me and then being like actually having to learn how to love this person who is looking back at me and like start to like strip away those things. Let go of those things that I was kind of guilty of, felt shame for carrying. Just letting those things go.

Although all women talked about the difficulties and trials of being in prison, coming to peace with themselves began while incarcerated. While success in other areas of life will come, women are clear that being at peace with themselves is significant and will better position them to reach their goals. Erin shares the importance of internal work.

> But success is kind of like a self-journey and it's first on the inside. Unless you do that internal work everything outside helping you is not going to be as effective as it would be if you did the internal work. In my eyes anyways.

With Others. Success is also defined as being at peace with others and is described as having successful and healthy relationships. For many participants, this involved successful relationships with family members. For example, before incarceration, Lily described strained relationships with her family. However, as she now shares:

> I can see success in the relationships that I have. My mom and I are a perfect example of that. We were oil and water before I went away and I talk to her twice a day now. So, to me that's a clear-cut success.

Similarly, Sunflower described being closed off with her family before incarceration. However, since she has returned home to live with her parents on parole, she shares:

> I'm very open and honest with my parents...so that's a success. Um...my family, my siblings, especially my younger sister they are pretty much no secrets or anything between us. So that's success, right? It's having those open relationships and being honest.

Participants spoke about the hard work that both they and their family members invested in rebuilding their relationships. However, for others, where family relationships were deemed irreparable, or they had no family, developing new relationships with members in the community became of utmost importance. As Sunny describes, success is having:

> Healthy relationships with people, having friends. I don't have any family so yah just ...having friends that would never, I have some, very few, but very solid lifelong friends and I didn't have that before. I was alone all the time.

Even if women desired reconciliation with family members, some women lived with the reality that these relationships were permanently altered. As Anna reflects on her relationship with her family, "I don't know if those relationships will ever be repairable. I doubt it. I doubt it because I've changed and they haven't." As a woman in her late 50's, Anna describes this loss as extremely difficult as she "didn't know any other way of life" and notes that this process is "different for someone whose twenty-five as opposed to someone whose fifty-eight." Anna and others spoke about dealing with considerable loss and grief when it came to irreparable relationships that were long-standing. Therefore, in place of those relationships, developing healthy relationships with others in the community were necessary and were a success.

When developing new friendships, participants were clear that they need to be healthy and supportive individuals, unlike some relationships they had before prison. For Josephine, the

major draw to her group of friends before prison was because she believed her friends were positive supports. As she shares:

> Like emotionally I think that I had the support. I thought that I had the support before my incarceration. That was a huge reason why I was doing what I was doing was because these people accepted me. My family no longer accepted me. These people accepted me. We'd have all of these bright ideas like oh we could get money this way or get money that way so it seemed like so supportive and so like we took care of each other and it was such an illusion of what support actually is. Because the support that I have now like if somebody seen me doing something they would like tell me no you're not doing that.

While for some rebuilding relationships began in prison, most discussed this occurring when they returned to the community as time passed and participants met people and built trust with new and existing friends and family members. While healthy relationships are a success in itself, they also play a critical role in supporting women transitioning back into society (to be discussed further in Supporting Factors) and were noted as a measure of success.

Positive Outlook. Another aspect of Being at Peace relates to participants' attitudes and outlook towards their life post-prison. It is important to note that participants were clear that having a positive outlook and attitude is a choice and often occurs within challenging and complex contexts (to be described further in Inhibiting Factors).

Jade describes the positive outlook that she employs each day as she focuses on the potential of the day set out before her. She describes success as:

> Getting up every day and despite what the day before was like starting each day new. Because every day has the potential to be a good day...And for me it’s a good day until it’s not and then it’s a good day, then you make it a good day again.

Jade explained that for her to move forward, having a positive perspective enables her to let go of the things outside of her control and focus on what she can do. A number of participants echoed her sentiments.

For example, each morning, Sunshine sets a vision board for herself. She talked about not focusing on her flaws or the past but setting forth a clear vision of what she wants to achieve for the day. Sunshine believes that having this perspective not only provides encouragement but also helps fight negative thoughts. Not giving up is vital, as Sunshine explains, "So when you don't give up on yourself then you're able to look at things a little different, like renewing the mind, because it's a mind thing."

One such impact of a renewed perspective involves the ability to see and be open to new opportunities. As Erin shares, "and it's also the way people interact with others, right? If they go into the interview or in anything else and they're shut down, they're not gonna get too far as well. So it's all about perceptions as well." Sunny also reiterated the importance of having a renewed perspective because success is "going forward with opportunities and being able to see those opportunities."

Participants also described the importance of focusing on the positive instead of the negative due to the detrimental effects that a negative perspective can have on making progress. Beyond limiting potential opportunities, others described the mental or emotional impact of focusing on the negative. As shared by Luna:

> I don't look at the negative as much as I used to. I focus more on being positive all the time and always looking at the positive in everything that happens. I mean crappy things happen but if you're going to look at it and always you know see the negative then it's kind of..it's defeating emotionally.

While a negative perspective is self-defeating, participants talked about a positive attitude as motivating. Elizabeth also spoke about choosing to see the good in those around her, including parole and correctional staff. She discussed how in her previous experience re-integrating, she saw her parole officer and halfway house staff as unhelpful and viewed their interventions as detrimental. Elizabeth believes that having this perspective "hinders growth if you feel that everyone is against you" and therefore suggests seeing staff as real people instead of solely authority figures.

Having a positive perspective also extended to how some participants described prison. For example, women would say that despite the difficulties of imprisonment, they chose to see prison as an opportunity to better themselves. As Jade shares, “the fact is I took what was probably the worst situation of my life and turned it around to make it one of the you know the most helpful and best situations I could've gone through.” Similarly, Luna explains, “I like to look at the entire experience of having to go to prison as it was something I needed and I got a lot out of it.” Despite the difficulties experienced when incarcerated, women chose to see the positives that resulted from their imprisonment which is a perspective that they carried with them into the community.

Happiness and Contentment. Another aspect of success commonly described by participants was overall happiness and contentment with where they are at in life. For example, when Grace was asked what success meant to her, she shared the following, "I think that you're content with where you're at whether you are going to school or working or doing what you love. I think that's success." Similarly, Elizabeth spoke of "feeling good about where you're at in the moment," which looked different for each woman depending on the stage of life she was currently in, and what goals she was working towards.

For Erin, who was serving a life sentence and lived on the streets since the age of ten, her sense of contentment and happiness in life came from the knowledge that she was creating a new life for herself. As Erin shares: "You know, going to bed with a healthy and happy conscience knowing that everything I did today was for me and for my kid that's on the way." For her, setting goals and working towards them every day generated a sense of accomplishment and happiness that is an integral part of her daily success. Similarly, Sunny describes her sense of joy and contentment in life as she moved towards living "a life that isn't stressful, depressing, and dark" but is characterized by fun in the day to day. A prime example for Sunny is her employment, "I go to work. I laugh at work. I have fun at work. I work in the motorcycle industry so it can't not be fun."

When talking about happiness and contentment in life, Marsha shared her perspective on the importance of acquiring possessions in life but also addresses the difference between material successes and internal successes.

> Yah. So, if I can accomplish getting the house and I know, I get it, it sounds so materialistic but that’s what life is you know like living as a human being. Yah you want success in your material things because that’s what you work towards you know but for me success now it’s like in my mind and mentality of happiness and gratitude and is so different compared to before because of my experience.

When returning to the community two years ago, one of Marsha's goals was to purchase her own home with her common-law partner. As her goal was now soon to become a reality and is a success in itself, for Marsha, her happiness and peace of mind were of utmost importance as these internal aspects are often attributed to why larger goals can be accomplished. Happiness was also considered a measure of success. As Willow explains:

> Happiness to be honest. It's not money. It's not possessions. It's not like don't get me wrong. I got out of jail. I had two cardboard boxes. I now have a car. I live in a cabin. I own a cow. I have two cats. I have a great partner. We have, I have a stepson we get every weekend you know so? But how I measure my success is for sure I have millions of pictures and videos of us and the kids at creeks and lakes and just having the things that actually matter in life I feel.

Feelings of happiness and contentment in life are aspects women identified as both definitions and indicators of success. They demonstrate a different path in life than before prison and support women as they establish a new way forward.

Establishing a New Way Forward

Establishing a New Way Forward means not going back to the same life as before incarceration or returning to prison, and is also characterized by a change in participant's values and priorities. This theme also involves a commitment to discovering and often re-discovering a new path forward that fits within their new value system.

Not Going Back. Not surprisingly, a component of establishing a new way forward was not going back. As shared by participants, not going back involves the ability to stay in the community and not return to prison. As shared by Sherry, success is "not getting revocated or making choices that get you put back within your charges" and, as Marsha shares, "getting by would mean that it doesn't have to be criminal".

Beyond the consequences of returning to prison, not going back was also defined as not going back to past behaviours and lifestyles that participants identified as toxic. For example, staying away from drugs was extremely important for Willow, who used to sell cocaine and was a heroin addict for years. Other women also expressed her sentiments where addictions played a

crucial role in their lives before prison. Often this involved staying away from individuals whom they knew from past involvement with drugs and who were still participating in the same lifestyle. To do this, Willow and Sherry both describe deleting their social media accounts entirely in order to start new and decrease the temptation of going back. Ultimately, Willow decided to relocate after her release to a new province to cement cutting ties and establish better relationships with her family. It is also notable that whether related to drugs or not, severing ties with past contacts who negatively impacted participants was necessary. As Anna shares, it can become easy to fall back into relationship dynamics, such as with her mother, that were toxic and led to other unhealthy beliefs and behaviours. This process of maintaining boundaries is ongoing as described by Sherry:

> I mean people will creep up right from your past and you have those choices to make and those are some of the biggest things that I struggle with right now, right? Like completely shutting down your social media and who you know I mean what you do with it, who you talk to… it's just, it's a whole new way of life.

Whether it is to prison or past behaviours and lifestyles, not going back is an essential aspect of success. As shared by Elizabeth, "I feel I'm successful when I don't revert back to my old ways." However, women were clear that to move forward, having a thorough understanding of the past is critical but is important to not get stuck in. As Anna shares: "I think you have to look in the rear-view window to appreciate where you're at, but you can't live there." While looking back supports an appreciation of where women are currently at, looking back can also bring awareness of how easy it is to fall back. Grace spoke of a friend who was released on parole at the same time, who began hanging out with old associates and engaging in illicit substances. This individual ended up going back to prison within a month. To Grace, this

experience reinforced the importance of not going back to old ways. As she says, "It just makes me think like how easy it is to fall back into that. And how fast like it could, all your hard work could go backwards."

Not What it Used to Be. In order to establish a new life moving forward, participants discussed how their priorities and values in life post-release were different than in their lives before incarceration. In fact, this shift in values often occurred as women addressed past experiences and perceptions that formed their views of themselves and of success.

Lily described this phenomenon when discussing the significant financial success she had achieved before prison as an investment banker with three university degrees. Since being incarcerated, Lily's values have shifted towards relationships with family and friends. As Lily describes, "I wanna be able to rely on my family and it's more important to me to be able to go to a family event or go to a friend's barbeque than get front row tickets to a concert." Other participants also discussed a shift in value from material things or outward indicators to more personal definitions of success. As explained by Jade:

> At one time I thought success was money, house, family, car all of those things. Now my view of success is more personal successes. Going back and healing the trauma that I went through, putting myself on a whole new path, a healthier path, is a success to me.

As success has shifted in focus towards personal successes, what is truly seen as valuable has changed considerably for participants. While they shared that accomplishing goals are significant success in themselves, they are not the only definition of success. In fact, some shared how their shift in values to more personal successes is considered a more significant success in their lives. As Josephine explains:

> It was kind of like these belief systems that I was raised on where I thought like oh, yah like turn the other cheek if you see something going on... like I know I witnessed my mom be a victim of like domestic abuse and I never spoke about it. I just kinda was like whatever, like it happens, which kinda led into my own life but those types of values and belief systems they led me to obviously like a life that was you know not so ideal. And to kind of associate with kinda unsavoury people and just a wrong sense and idea of what family was...So getting rid of all of that, that's probably like my biggest success is being able to say like you know what I'm going to stand in my truth.

This shift in perspective has also led to handling situations differently than before incarceration. For example, Elizabeth discussed being laid off as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While in her past she described going and obtaining money illegally to feel better about her situation, she decided to live within her means on Employment Income. As she indicates:

> My view of success has changed like I don't need to have everything all at once. I used to think that. I used to think oh I need to have this, I need to have that and I know I don't have to have those things. Just maintain my level of living, as long as I have food and a place and you know my necessities, I think I'm successful.

This shift in values and subsequently in behaviours is a daily process for women and is ongoing; however, to establish a new way forward, success must be dictated by different values.

Finding a New Path. Following the change in behaviours and values is finding a new path forward. Although women spoke about developing a plan for release while in prison, all described their plans changing when entering the community. For some, plans changed due to unanticipated circumstances. For example, Erin and Zoe became pregnant, and as such, their

focus and priorities understandably changed. Elizabeth, who entered the community during a downturn in the economy shortly followed by the onset of the pandemic, had to adapt and see employment opportunities in fields she would not typically have considered.

While some plans changed due to unforeseen factors, many found that their initial plans were no longer feasible once entering the community. Erin described her desire to return to college and complete a degree in social work or addictions. However, once entering the community, she was told that she did not qualify for acceptance due to her past even though this was part of her accepted post-release plan. Once in the community, Erin learned that the College that accepted women with a criminal past no longer existed. Emily viewed her post-release plan developed in prison as her plan of success. However, once entering the community and experiencing many obstacles concerning employment, she recognized that her path forward would be different than initially thought. As she shares:

> You kind of make this plan while you're in there and then when you get out I found it very overwhelming to know that my plan was not going to go exactly as planned. Like so I have a restitution order, so part of my success plan was you know I was gonna get a job. This is what I was going to do. I was going to work full-time and you know within a year I'm going to have that paid back and life is gonna go on...as supportive as everybody seems when you're in there and says you know there's people that will hire you, I found that part to be quite false. ... It was a lot of doors that closed before anything really opened but you know and I always had that group of people that supported me really, really well and just kept on telling me you know whatever help you need but it wasn't that I needed help from everybody else I just needed to figure out how to get on my path of yah making things okay again.

As plans changed, women were forced to establish and re-establish new plans that moved them forward. It also required accepting the reality that achieving their goals would take longer than initially anticipated. As explained by Erin:

> I've taken a few steps back, not out of discouragement or disappointment within myself due to me not being able to accomplish the goals that I've set out for myself, but it was just more for..I couldn't do it right then. I didn't erase it off the drawing board, I still kept it on there, it was just pushed back.

For some, defining success with respect to employment is still something they are trying to define. For example, Lily, who has been in the community for three years, shares her concerns.

> I'm definitely struggling with how I define success like in my career. And it's something my parole officer and I talked about. There are so many limitations for myself on employment and it has been a huge challenge for me on parole.

Like Lily, Willow has encountered significant challenges obtaining employment in her field due to her criminal record despite the fact that she is past her Warrant Expiry Date. Although Willow has completed her diploma in social work and received permission from the solicitor general to work with vulnerable adults and children, she has struggled to find an employer due to her criminal past. As she indicates, "I'm still trying to figure it out. I just finished my diploma program so I'm still trying to figure it all out too. I'm not fully there you know." She plans to continue her education and complete a bachelor's program in social work to continue her goal of helping others.

Moving forward requires an ongoing commitment to finding a new path within changing and challenging environments as women look to redefine what a successful future will look like in life after prison.

Moving Forward in the Day to Day

Participants also indicated that success involves being engaged in their lives through daily accomplishments and attending to their health as essential components to moving forward in the day to day.

Daily Accomplishments. Success on a daily level involves completing tasks that need to get done. For example, Sunflower spoke of "making sure that you're getting up every day at a decent hour instead of sleeping your life away." The idea of getting up, getting ready for the day and accomplishing whatever is laid out ahead, whether it be work, taking care of children, or going to programs, were all noted as daily accomplishments.

For one, completing tasks everyday fuels feelings of accomplishment, as Grace describes, "Like doing what you needed to get done that day... I don't know for anything, for work or for your home life or your personal life. It's some, like doing something that makes you feel accomplished for that day." While tasks may involve logistical things that need to be completed on a daily basis, they may also include hobbies. As Sunny shares, “Just keep on doing different things, like take up photography, take up whatever, whatever you can, keep yourself busy, doing something that.. something that's going to give you results.” For Sunny, while completing the day to day tasks of keeping her house clean, going to work, or working out were all important successes, being engaged in other activities that provide positive feelings of accomplishment were also significant.

On the other hand, completing tasks demonstrates a significant personal shift for women who before incarceration did not have a stable life. For example, for Erin, who had lived on the streets prior to incarceration and shares, "I didn't have a 9 to 5 job. I didn't get up every day. I didn't have responsibilities," engaging in the mundane tasks of everyday life reflects her ongoing success. Marsha also shared the significance of daily accomplishments when considering her life before prison and her upcoming goals.

> My perspective of success is different today because now it's, I'm more grateful of things that I am accomplishing on a daily basis overcoming and owning my depression. Like that to me is successful where before even though it can be the same in some ways cause like today I still don't have the house and I still don't have the business as of today but I know like I will eventually so that to me is success because I know that it's going to come anyways.

As she explained, success is found in the daily accomplishments that solidify the future that she is working towards. For her, that involved addressing her depression and enjoying completing the day to day things that will bring her closer to achieving her goals.

For those who had just exited prison, accomplishing daily tasks can often be all that women can do. This is seen especially for women who exited during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many supports and services that they would typically access were closed or had limited availability. Sherry, who recently exited prison on statutory release, talks about success as just "making it through one day at a time." Even small things like making phone calls and acquiring an identification card can be successes. Jade, who exited prison during the pandemic, describes her perspective on daily accomplishments and success:

> Some are larger accomplishments, others are just something so simple that could seem so hard to do. For example, just being able to get my birth certificate. I have been jumping through hoops for the last two months just to be able to obtain one piece of ID because I had no other pieces of ID... Like I mean there's so many challenges that we face when we get out that you know yesterday could have been just a total shit day and you get up and go okay let's look at it in a different perspective and let's make today a better day than yesterday even if it's one simple accomplishment and you got a phone call instead of a recording that you kept, that you've been getting for previous days. It makes it a small success, but it is a success on its own that you can't count those little things that make it look like a bigger success when you look through your, back at your week and go, I accomplished more than I thought I did.

When reflecting on the significance of accomplishing these day to day tasks, women spoke of how these small accomplishments or successes lead to other successes. For example, Willow spoke of small accomplishments as "those stepping stones along the way" to reach her goals. Sunny also shared that creating small goals and achieving them builds self-esteem. Sunny discusses the importance of setting and achieving daily tasks or goals.

> I need to make little successes and achieve them, like make success, like make small goals and achieve them and rebuild myself using self-esteem rather than feeding ego from other people, you know what I mean? ...small attainable goals as the only way you're going to get there. Set baby steps. Baby steps eventually become big successes.

While other successes are to come from day to day accomplishments, success can also be seen in maintaining life circumstances. As Elizabeth explains, "Success could be maintaining certain situations, like maintaining like your home or maintaining like your parenting, active

parenting, maintaining healthy relationships, that's success." Elizabeth saw maintaining her current life situation as a good measure for her success as it reflects ongoing success in different aspects of life.

Accomplishing tasks daily is essential for participants to move forward. They are important as small successes lead to larger successes, fuel feelings of accomplishment, and build self-esteem. For those living under parole restrictions, accomplishing daily tasks may be one of the few things they do have control over, although they may not be able to impact the result (to be discussed further in Inhibiting Factors).

Attending to my Health. As their journey towards success began internally, attending to their health in the day to day is also vital. Many participants indicated that the most challenging time during their transition was right after release. As Marsha explains, "you're starting from scratch." Beyond addressing practical concerns such as housing and employment, women also described the mental and emotional challenges of entering the community. As Erin explains,

> I had so many anxiety attacks when I got out. But the positivity over rode all of that but I still allowed myself to feel that anxiety based of.. not denying it and making it worse. But the doubt comes in, oh am I going to be able to do this? Okay, can I do this? Am I actually capable of doing this? What if I mess up?...The mental and emotional aspect of transitioning is huge to me because if people don't identify that, that's what actually sets them in a different direction if they don't take hold of what they are actually feeling and what they're thinking and being able to control it.

As Erin explained, focusing on her mental and emotional health has been critical for transitioning into the community without letting her fears and anxieties drive her back to familiar behaviour. As she explains:

> When I'm in a state of shock or apprehensive or uncertainty or doubt I tend to fall back onto what I know. And unfortunately, those decisions do not benefit me in a good, in the long run whether it's being relapsing. I've never relapsed but the thought process was there.

This experience was echoed by a number of participants when discussing the overwhelming task of returning to the community and rebuilding their lives. Critical to maintaining mental and emotional health is reaching out to individuals who provide daily support and encouragement. However, while reaching out to positive supports is essential (to be discussed further in Supporting Factors), reaching out can be difficult when, as Marsha explains, you have developed an "institutionalized mindset." She describes this perspective further.

> But honestly rebuilding your confidence to re-integrate and getting your head space and mind mentality of being institutionalized takes time...What I mean by institutionalized mentality, I mean like you're always like on the edge of somebody either judging you or is about to like screw you over or you know is talking to you because they want something from you...When you become confined or like in jail around these other people with that type of mentality because that's how it is in jail you do need to decompress re-integrating back into the community and that takes time depending on you know what traumas you know happened with you, you know throughout your life and then being in jail.

Others continued to reiterate the importance of securing emotional and mental health support as they addressed the anxiety that came from returning to the community and facing situations that arose. For example, Luna, who indicated that a measure of success in her life was her progression in her mental health awareness journey, requested that one of her conditions of

her release on parole is that she would continue to see a therapist. Luna shares the importance of the support that her therapist provides.

> She helps me deal with the day to day stuff but we also deal with past you know, past traumas and, and things like that. And when I'm having a really crappy day and I can just text her and say you know like this is where I'm at right now having that support person that's you know helps me figure out why it's having such an impact on me.

Participants spoke of receiving this support from many different sources such as family members, friends, organizations, Elders, Chaplains, therapists, psychiatrists, and so on. However, as will be explored further, securing professional support in the community has been a significant barrier for many women (see Inhibiting Factors).

Maintaining physical health is also an essential part of attending to health in the day to day. For Sunny, this involves waking up at 5 am every morning and running three miles on the treadmill. While feeling strong and healthy is vital to Sunny, it also helps her address post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She explains, “I need that work out every day. That gets my endorphins going in the right direction. Because I have PTSD, I have to keep that negativity and anxiety levels down.” For Lily, yoga, a practice she began in prison, continues to be an asset to her while in the community. As she explains, it is "something that I just consistently do just to calm my mind and just kind of reconnect and reset daily." Similarly, for Sunflower, her 10 kilometre walks five to six times a week are considered daily successes and allow the necessary time for self-reflection.

Maintaining spiritual health is also an aspect of managing ongoing health. While some participants identified with Indigenous spirituality or specific religions such as Islam or Christianity, others spoke of spirituality globally or more generally. For Josephine, participating

in sweats and ceremonies while incarcerated was crucial to her spiritual and healing journey, which she continued while in the community. These spiritual practices have also connected Josephine with her culture, which is an integral part of maintaining her overall health. For Sunflower, who came to faith while incarcerated, God plays a significant role in her daily life. When asked about the importance of spirituality while in the community, she shares, "It's helping me to stay strong. Knowing that he's there for me all I have to do is talk to him and he guides me and he helps me through." Beyond personal guidance, faith communities also play an important supporting role. Erin mentioned that she “had the luxury of having tons and tons of support through four different churches." Regardless of faith tradition, spirituality is an essential part of finding peace and maintaining balance.

Accomplishing my Goals

An aspect of success iterated by all participants is reaching and accomplishing goals. When asked about success, a number of sub-themes were identified about reaching goals. They include: employment, education, housing, child and family reunification, maintaining sobriety/being clean, and giving back. As these sub-themes were also considered post-release goals, understandably, they were also identified as significant successes once accomplished as they required much time and effort to achieve amidst adversity. The adversity faced in each of these domains will be discussed subsequently in the section on Inhibiting Factors, while the focus of the following section is to describe the aspects of success. It is also noteworthy to mention that depending on how long participants had been in the community, the following sub-themes are considered either goals or successes. Both perspectives (whether described as goals or success) are shared below.

Employment. For nearly all participants, securing a job after prison was a high-priority goal that was a considerable success when achieved. Beyond the practical significance of a steady income, employment also contributes towards other internal aspects of success, such as providing a sense of accomplishment and enforcing positive feelings of self. However, as women had been in the community for different amounts of time, had varying employment histories, and sought different fields of employment, success in employment was experienced differently among the women and is outlined below.

Before incarceration, some of the women were employed in the trades. Marsha was an esthetician, Sunny was in automotive services, and Elizabeth was completing her apprenticeship as she looked to complete her journeyman ticket. Once exiting prison, women were able to re-enter their professions and, in some cases, resume employment in their existing workplace. Although Elizabeth was impacted by the economy when she re-entered the community as she was looking to complete her apprenticeship, none of the three women described incarceration as having a significant negative impact on their employability in their chosen field. Notably, all three women had an employment history and were familiar with the requirements of their professions. Gaining employment, and in Marsha's case, planning to open her own business were clear successes in their lives.

In other cases, before prison, participants worked as accountants or bookkeepers and, in one case, an investment banker, which required further education to secure. On their release, all women had restrictions to their employability which inhibited them from working with money. As Anna shares, a complete ban on working with money harmed their employability as they could not leverage their financial or mathematical skill sets. This limitation required women to re-discover a new employment path. Luna was able to get her foot in the door as an

administrative assistant with a company that provides corporate office furnishings. As she shares:

> My background is accounting but that's not really something I can do anymore so I applied for this job and it was supposed to be an admin assistant and within I think like a week and half of being there my role was totally evolved like it just they were like yah you know what you can do way more than what we wanted you to do. So, they just kept giving me more and more stuff.

Although obtaining employment is a success and is needed from a logistical standpoint, women who had professional careers pre-incarceration described struggling with obtaining meaningful employment. For example, Lily, who has three university degrees, gained employment in an entry-level position and is trying to determine what her future career will look like considering her criminal record. Similarly, Emily has found it a struggle to obtain meaningful employment considering the limitations that her criminal record continues to impose. In these cases, women have recognized that employment and compensation will look drastically different post-release than anticipated. This further complicated long-term plans for participants who have to pay restitution orders.

However, a significant number of participants had not held down a job before or had been employed inconsistently due to life circumstances. For example, Willow, who lost her mother at the age of ten and was in and out of homes and custody during her adolescence, described further instability as an adult resulting in an extensive criminal record. Therefore, once Willow was released, securing a job as a server was a major success considering the lack of employment history and criminal past. Although this was an initial and significant goal reached, Willow has secured other employment opportunities and has finished her diploma program since then. Erin

and Sunflower also described working in entry-level fields such as in a warehouse and as a server. Although these were starting points and employment successes for women looking to develop a work history, they led to further employment opportunities and encouraged some to pursue further education.

Education. Roughly a third of participants indicated that going back to school and completing their education was an important goal post-release. For example, Elizabeth went back to school to finish her technical training as a plumber and gas fitter, whereas Sunshine completed bible school post-release. Both completing and attending school are considered successes as they propel women forward to reaching other goals such as meaningful employment.

Willow described that her graduation was a "pinpoint" of her success when completing her diploma in social work. As she explained, her graduation was a milestone that reflected the significant adversity faced in obtaining employment and pursuing her education. It also fueled feelings of belonging. As Willow shares, “It makes you feel like a normal person. It makes you feel like you're doing good for once.”

Beyond the long-term benefits to employability when completing further education, attending school can also open up other opportunities. Grace, who completed her degree in Native Studies, describes her experience seeking employment and receiving a unique opportunity through her education.

> I had a really hard time finding a job when I got back because of my record. I got turned down a lot...But also a lot of the jobs I was applying for were like, kind of like, just like jobs at Walmart and stuff like that. And I don't know I guess they don't hire people with criminal records but then I got hired on with the, like a high position in the government...And then they just ended up keeping me on.

Through participating in summer school, she received a student internship with the government of the Northwest Territories, which was a position that was ultimately extended.

Housing. While housing was important for all participants, as Sunny shares, "because that's where you start," the significance of housing was different depending on a participant's particular situation. Like Sunshine, Marsha, and Emily, some women went back to residing with a common-law partner with whom they had lived before incarceration. Luna was able to return to the home that she already owned. Although housing is still significant, it was not articulated as a significant goal nor aspect of success due to existing situations that were already in place.

However, for women whose life before incarceration involved substances and who often had inconsistent housing, securing a safe place to live was considered paramount. As shared by Erin, "I've had a few places in the past but I was already using and I just needed a place to continually get high. So, this is my very, very first place that I've had since I've been sober." Erin discusses the importance of being safe, which begins with having a safe place to live. As she shares, "knowing that I'm safe and that I have the capability of laying boundaries. I have the capabilities still to say who can and cannot be in my life or around me. Just continuing to keep myself safe." Similarly, Grace and Sunny also spoke of the importance of having a safe place of their own to live. While these participants spoke about intermediary housing, whether it be in a halfway house or with family, it was obtaining a safe place on their own that was considered a success. Although homeownership was a goal for some, having their own place, whether subsidized or rented did not draw much importance.

Child and Family Reunification. A post-release goal often articulated by women was resuming a relationship with their family and children. As Emily explains:

> And when I went away my daughter was only, I was away when she turned one. So, you know she was quite, quite, little and my son was close to six so he, we sat down and we explained to him what was going on and stuff like that. So, like my mission when I came home was to be the biggest part of their lives.

Although Emily returned home to her children and common-law partner after incarceration, others reported that their children were in the care of another family member. In some cases, redeveloping relationships with children were further strained due to the geographical distance when incarcerated, and conditional release requirements meant women could not return to their home communities. For example, Grace was required to stay at a halfway house in Edmonton as there was no equivalent facility available in Yellowknife.

Some participants talked about rebuilding their relationships with their children as a process. This process was crucial for women who were seeking to regain custody. For example, Elizabeth's fifteen-year-old daughter lived with Elizabeth's mother during her incarceration. Once exiting prison, Elizabeth's initial goal was to "have contact like regular visits with my daughter" to help re-establish their relationship before resuming custody. Grace also spoke of the importance of "not rushing it and just trusting the process." One of Grace's goals was to reunite with her child and move to a new city. However, she quickly realized that this process needed to be gradual, allowing her son to adjust to having her back in his life before moving.

For those women with older children, reconnecting with their children was still important but looked different. As for Marsha, she wants to be able to take care of her family and children financially.

> I have extra money for when you know my family, my kids, my, even though they're grown now. My mom, who's like, she's retired now. You know when you need, you need this or you need that like I'm able to do it.

Being able to support their adult children and family members was also a sentiment shared by others. Women discussed redeveloping relationships with family and children as critical successes that provide the support that some describe as essential to re-integration. As articulated by Luna, "I really developed and rekindled relationships with my kids and my family that without them I don't know if I would be as successful re-integrating back that I have been."

In other instances, where participants had been away for significant periods, maintaining contact and developing relationships looked differently. As Josephine explains:

> I have an eleven-year-old son and I get to talk to him whenever they answer the phone. He's eleven. He's always really busy. He gets bored fast talking on the phone and I have to live with that. That I was so sick in my addiction and my life in myself that I chose other things over him. And that wasn't what was going through my mind at the time I was just really sick.

As Josephine and others share, there are long-term impacts to relationships with their children that will take time to improve. While Josephine's son is young and she hopes to build a better relationship with him over time, Sunshine discusses the loss of her relationship with her adult children.

> I have a husband that believes in me you know and that as well. He stayed by me the whole time by the way through this whole thing. Yah so he's been with me the whole time. My children though are not because they still throw it in my, my daughter still throws things at my face. She hasn't let the past go. Even after all this time so we no

> longer have a relationship. That's her choice. I still reach out right? And there's strength in that.

For women like Sunshine and Jade, who have had to let go of the past for themselves to move forward, the inability of their children to forgive them or desire to rebuild a relationship is an outcome they have to accept. Unfortunately, in these instances, women do not discuss reconnecting with their children or family as a goal or a success, recognizing that their desire for reconciliation is not matched by their loved ones.

Maintaining Sobriety and Staying Clean. Not surprisingly, success is maintaining sobriety and staying clean. As Sunflower shares, “I am a recovering addict and I've been clean for over four years," which she identifies as a monumental success in her life. Sherry also describes "managing your addiction," and Elizabeth indicates "refraining from like using substances" as vital successes. Maintaining sobriety and staying clean were often described as vital to underpinning success in every other area of their lives (e.g., Attending to my Health, Being at Peace with Myself and Others).

Upon release, women face difficulties while in the community, and consequently, their draw to substances is heightened. As Erin shares:

> But I had some really hard challenges. I was only out 2 months and I was ready to throw the towel in and give up and go walk downtown Jasper Ave and pick up drugs after being sober for nine years.

Although Erin did not return to substances, she and others identify their addictions as a struggle that continues long after being released into the community. Sunflower describes this ongoing struggle as the life cycle of an addict.

> I'm not sure if you're familiar with the life cycle I guess if you want to call it of an addict anyway. But yah the cravings were quite forceful there for a while. Right? Not, not so much now. Every now and then they come up but...I mean I'm sure I'll live with that for the rest of my life.

Sunflower, among others, describes the importance of being aware of their triggers to continue to be successful.

Giving Back. A number of participants shared that giving back, whether it is to the community in general or other women transitioning back into the community from incarceration, as a goal and as a success in their lives. Women described the importance of giving back when reflecting on the support they received. As Anna explains:

> Giving back to the community is important to me, as when my life was falling down around me, community supports are what helped me. I had lost everything, so depending on help was difficult for me. I want people to know there is no shame in asking for help.

For some, this was reflected in the career paths that they wanted to pursue. For example, both Erin and Willow shared their desire to work in addictions or social work to help others with similar past experiences. Willow describes her motivation for helping others.

> I've always liked helping people and stuff like that but I had so many people within the justice system even when I first got arrested in remand in Calgary, the women and men who didn't know me from a hole in the wall but showed care, showed compassion. And that was like, that's what to me that's success when you can take somebody who's at their bitter worst and look past all of that and be like it's okay, you're going to make it through this. Hence why I just got a social diploma of social work and I'm going for my bachelor's in September.

Similarly, Sunshine has dedicated her life to helping others. After completing bible school, Sunshine began a non-profit organization for those experiencing homelessness and continues to receive many sponsorships to continue her work. Years after Sunshine's warrant expiry date, she was asked to conduct the funeral for one of her most incredible supporters, her correctional caseworker. She describes her interaction with other Edmonton Institution for Women employees after the funeral service and her mission to help others.

> They're looking at me and they're, like there's twenty-five, thirty of them, right? From the EIFW or more. And they're looking and looking and they're looking at my name tag. I hear one out there saying nice you know they just like they, it was like wow. So they said there's one percent chance of people leaving you know what I mean there's not many that don't return back right? And I got to say to them then it's because people like yourself haven't given up on me. You know and so for success for me is that I'm going to daily be able to get the focus off myself and how I can impact somebody and that's all I think of day to day. Is to be able to give back and never take things for granted.

Participants also spoke about helping women during their transition into the community after incarceration. As Lily shares, "Cause it's tough like it's not easy re-integrating back and if people are successful at it there's no reason they shouldn't try and help the person behind them." Being able to provide for others during their transition into the community also makes participants feel good as they recognize the significance of the help. As Emily explains:

> It's like oh my gosh I can help somebody else out so that to me makes me feel better about things when I'm able to help. Like that knowing that you know, we all kind of struggle so if I can help that one person that maybe is in the same spot that I was and really has no clue what's going on.

Beyond supporting those in the community who require support, Lily talked about a "social obligation" to sharing her story with members of the public. When exiting prison, one of Lily's long-term goals was to give back to the community by partnering with organizations that held similar values. One of the areas where Lily volunteers are in Universities where she speaks to criminology students about her experiences.

> I think there's elements that people don't fully understand what happens in prisons. And so I think there's an opportunity there for them to ask questions and I'm as candid as I can be you know... But I think there's also an element of you know, I was someone that was extremely successful in this city and I fucked up my life and I think it's easier for people to do then they realize. So, I think there's an element of you hear someone doing it and you realize how easy it is to than maybe you won't do it.

Giving back and supporting others is a success for women who themselves have been recipients of support and recognize its significance.

As described, success is Being at Peace, Establishing a New Way Forward, Moving Forward in the Day to Day and Accomplishing my Goals. Each theme represents key sub-themes central to participants' understanding and experience of success in their lives. However, as the amount of time that participants had spent in the community post-release greatly ranged (from 3 months to 8 years), it is not surprising that some themes of success were emphasized more often by some participants than others as they reflected on their current state. In the following narrative, these differences and similarities are discussed to support a more nuanced understanding of success, especially when considering the experiences of women who had recently been released.

Although Accomplishing my Goals is considered significant by participants as it often underlines many other areas of success in their lives, for those women who had recently exited prison, many of their goals had yet to be achieved. In fact, nearly all women shared that their plans changed once entering the community. Women spoke about facing unanticipated barriers, such as securing employment or housing or facing unexpected life circumstances, such as getting pregnant, which impacted the goals they had initially set out. For example, Erin, who had planned to get her diploma in social work, found that the college that would grant her admissions despite her criminal past was no longer operational. As such, she had to pivot directions and secure employment working in a warehouse. Her plans were further altered when becoming pregnant; however, Erin's long-term goals still include further education. Even though many goals established pre-release remained the same, such as securing employment, housing, and child re-unification, the timelines in achieving these goals were often extended. As such, working towards these goals daily as emphasized in the themes Establishing a New Way Forward and Moving Forward in the Day to Day became of utmost importance and were aspects of success most often discussed.

Regardless of their time in the community, all participants emphasized the importance of Being at Peace with themselves, which was an ongoing journey that required women to Attend to their Health (Moving Forward in the Day to Day). However, for those women recently released, the importance of attending to their mental and emotional health was often discussed as central. As women shared, support is most needed right after release. As Marsha shares, "you're starting from scratch." Beyond reaching out and coordinating with multiple supports, women also experience mental and emotional impacts of exiting prison. While some experiences are related explicitly to leaving prison or approaching their Warrant Expiry Date as experienced by Willow

and Lily, others like Luna shared about the anxiety of entering the community. For Luna addressing the anxiety in the community was a short-term goal. As she explains: "be[ing] in the community and not have the fears of going back and just be I guess aware of my surroundings and not be afraid of anything and everything". Others talked about triggers associated with substance abuse that occur due to the stress of re-entering the community. Regardless, mental and emotional support is vital during this stage of women's transition into the community to promote self-awareness and processing of emotions while providing a "sounding board" for women to discharge feelings and frustrations that often accompany the difficulties faced post-release. While women who have been in the community for many years still secure support for emotional and mental health, their needs are not as pronounced as when first released as they have established their lives in the community. For example, Marsha shared "decompressing" from her "institutionalized mindset," which means she sees others more positively and does not question their intent as often.

Regardless of how long participants had been in the community, the themes of success that require daily attention, such as Being at Peace, Establishing a New Way Forward, and Moving Forward in the Day to Day, are vital. In fact, they are seen as ongoing requirements for women to continue to Accomplish my Goals. Nearly all women shared that the journey of community re-integration does not end; therefore, women must continue to make daily decisions that propel them forward and keep the past in the past. For example, Sunny, who has been in the community for seven years and is long past her Warrant Expiry Date, shares:

> I'm integrated now I would say but the tools are always there, you have to use them at all times. You never forget because you know we, everybody, we've all been hurt and some of us yah, we get, we don't want to get hurt again, so you always have to explore new

> things and meet new people and, and continually build yourself, keep your self-esteem and re-integration, the tools like, the stuff I learned helped me with that everyday. I never forget and I never will.

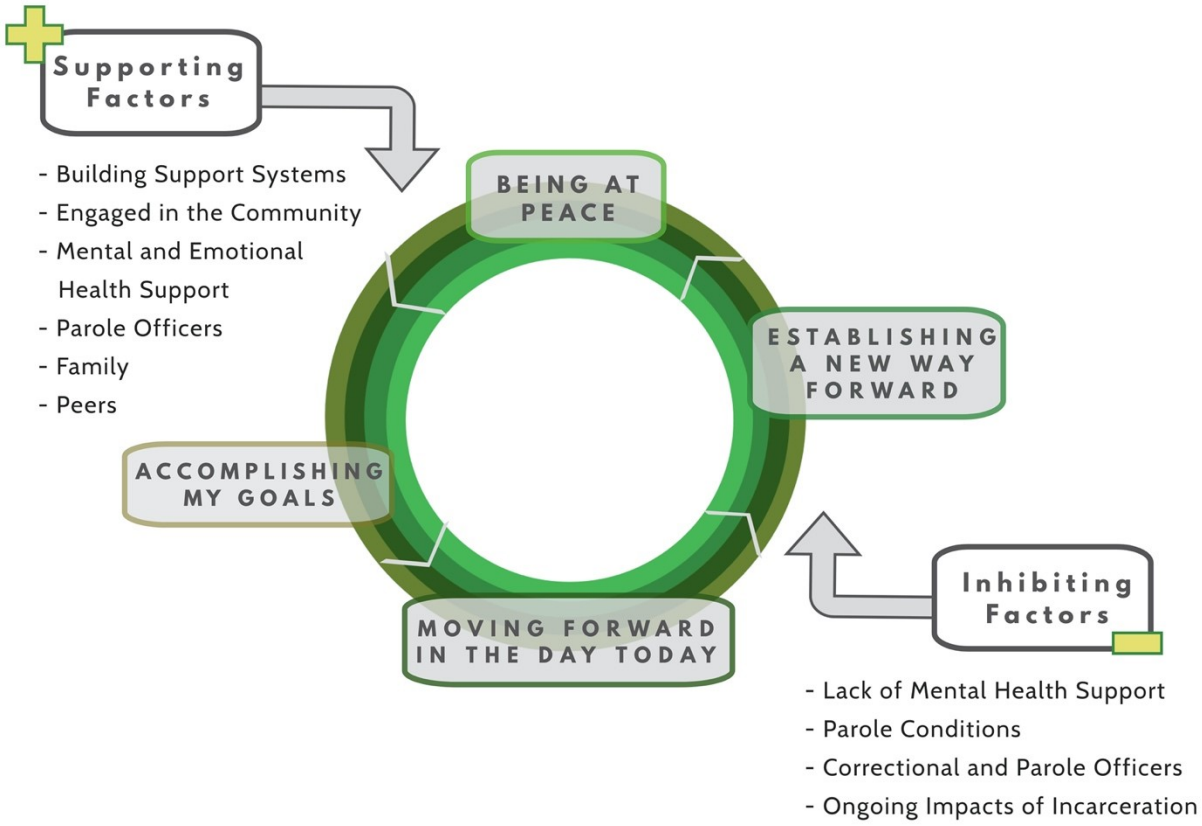
Similarly, for women who have struggled with addictions in their past, such as Erin, regardless of the time that passes, the journey of community re-integration " continues to go and will always go and it grows all the time… because as an, from an addict's point of view it is a daily journey." Participants shared that community re-integration is seen as a vital part of continual success and involves their participation in the community. As Josephine explains, "I think that we should always be developing and adapting and like creating new communities and I think that's like a big part of success is having that community and support."

Factors

To understand what factors impact women's post-release transition and experiences of success, participants identified external and internal factors that inhibit and support them in their re-integration journeys. The dominant themes identified for Supporting and Inhibiting Factors are displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors



Supporting Factors

The dominant supporting factors (or themes) identified by participants include Building Support Networks, Engaged in the Community, Mental and Emotional Health Support, Parole Officers, Family, and Peers. As factors often involved support from external parties (e.g., individuals, organizations) as well as individual efforts, both internal and external contributions are described within the factor. For example, under Building Support Networks, significant personal effort is required to establish supports (e.g., internal factor) but also involved support from others such as Chaplains and Elders and community organizations (e.g., external factors). As such, the contributions of each internal and external factors are described collectively under the relevant theme.

Building Support Systems. Participants were clear that in order to be successful, developing support systems or networks was essential. As shared by Lily, "re-integration is not an easy thing…you have to have an amazing support system and if you don't have a support system re-integration is damn near impossible. It's a challenge." The specific supports accessed by women addressed a variety of needs such as addictions treatment and recovery, housing, education and employment services, mental and emotional health support, medical care, and transportation needs. Furthermore, the support accessed by women varied depending on their individual circumstances and the availability of support from family and friends.

Support was received by organizations that provided various services ranging from community mentorship programs, consultation services that connected women with other resources, substance abuse programs, assistance in securing housing, among others. Beyond the provision of resources and services, some organizational staff provided emotional support and guidance based on their experience with other FIW in addition to meeting transportation needs. Support was also received by parole officers, halfway house staff, and health care professionals such as therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and family and friends. Participants reported accessing many sources when seeking support in the community, recognizing that they would be central to their post-release transition. As Erin shares:

> It's just establishing the support system because you cannot do it alone on the outside. By no means can you get out and expect to do everything on your own. Having that guidance whoever you choose to walk with you on the outside is very beneficial for you in the end.

When it comes to developing their support system, women were clear that this process is best established while incarcerated and on parole. As Elizabeth explains:

> I think I spent like nine months in the halfway house so that's where I probably built my foundations of supports. If I didn't have the amount or the quality of supports by the time I left there I probably wouldn't have been as successful. So I would say from the time before you even leave the prison to the time that you're leaving the halfway house, you need to build that network for sure.

Similarly, Erin described receiving support from the institutional Chaplain in setting up appointments with organization representatives within the prison as she began developing her post-release plan and support network. By creating these connections during the transitional period, women reported increased feelings of confidence as they began establishing the support they recognized would be vital to their success post-release.

Through participating in different programs, women also had the opportunity to network with others which provided further opportunities or awareness of other community supports. As Jade shares:

> Something that is extremely helpful is ladies like the volunteers at re-integration. You know, just to be able to sit and talk with you ladies that networking makes a huge difference other than a wall full of pamphlets. You get out and everything is just like a wall of paper. You don't know what you're looking for cause you don't know what is out there to help you.

Through networking and receiving recommendations from peers or others, women received encouragement and practical assistance in addition to locating additional programs or supports. Marsha expressed a desire for learning about all available support in one place, noting the significant “disconnect is when you don't know about it," which is a sentiment that others echoed.

Regardless of the support accessed, developing their support networks was described as their responsibility, which, as participants specified, required significant motivation, positivity, and drive on their part. As Jade explains:

> I believe that if I want to get it done, I'm the driving force because a lot of times I find that not only in the institution but since I've got out someone says I'll do that and I'll get back to you. Well, if I was waiting for them to get back to me, I'd still be sitting here waiting...You know so this is the way I drive my own, I'm the driver of my own little bus.

The importance of support networks cannot be understated. However, as women often shared, it does require them to reach out to others and be honest about their needs. Participants spoke of needing, as Josephine described to be, "completely honest like with myself, with other people, just having like that rigorous honesty is huge for me." She goes on to share the importance of letting go of shame and acknowledging her needs as an essential part of being successful in her life on an ongoing basis.

While developing support networks is described as crucial when transitioning into the community, women continued to reach out to supports as the months and years passed. Sherry pointed out that re-integration does not end once surpassing the Warrant Expiry Date as she shares, "Oh well because I've reached WED a couple times. It's not my first rodeo but in the end it's all about your choices." As Sherry and others shared, reaching out to others when needed is essential for maintaining their new way of life in the days and years to come. As nearly all participants indicated that the process of re-integration does not end, developing strong support systems becomes vital when considering the short-term and long-term success of women post-release.

Engaged in the Community. Women spoke about the importance of maintaining their routines while in the community, such as going to work, attending addictions support groups, working out, daily self-affirmations, and others. Routines are considered necessary, as Erin indicates, "It's just my routine that keeps me going. Cause when I fall off and don't do things that basically started the whole journey, I always fall into self-pity, oh I can't do this, I'm ready to give up mentality." Routines were fundamental once entering the community as they established structure within a new and often overwhelming environment. While maintaining daily routines is considered necessary, engaging in other community activities is also essential in developing a new life and identity post-release. As Josephine explains:

> There is more than just 12 steps out there. And I think a lot of people get overwhelmed because it's like k I've been in jail and now I'm sober. They lose their sense of identity. Like oh I'm going to go to five meetings a day and it's kind of daunting and there's other stuff out there. There's like paint groups. There's mindfulness groups. There's like running groups.... I think that's huge. I didn't know I needed that when I first got out I was like kind of k I'll do the five meetings a week… It's still good to go to those meetings but it's like k, like you need to do other things. That can't be your hobby.

Josephine, among others, talked about engaging in activities within the community that bring enjoyment and enable them to develop new connections and relationships based on common interests. This engagement builds self-esteem while also providing further networking opportunities. Understandably, developing new connections was particularly important for participants under supervision in a new city or in cases where many participants' pre-prison relationships no longer continued post-release.

Similar to Josephine, Elizabeth began going to an African dance club, cooking classes and attending sweats at a sweat lodge. She shares the importance of engaging in activities that facilitate feelings of belonging in the community in place of past communities.

> So, whether it's a new thing, whether it's something you used to do like back in the day when you were younger and you just stopped doing it, it like feeds that missing part of you instead of going to drugs or alcohol or hanging out somewhere where you're probably not going to have much fun but you feel comfortable with those people. Like I just feel some of us were missing that connection and we thought that, or I thought that it was with a certain group of people but it's not true. You can have those connections with many different other groups of people or by yourself and still feel good and still feel comfortable.

Grace spoke about her involvement in community craft sales, that beyond giving her something to look forward to for the weekend helped her feel more connected to the community. As she shares, "I find when you're involved in your community you meet more positive people and get more insight on things and more aware of what's happening around you."

In addition to fueled feelings of belonging and accomplishment, being engaged in the community was also seen as a way to give back to others. As addressed previously, Giving Back is considered an aspect of success under Accomplishing my Goals and can only be achieved through community involvement. Women spoke of volunteering at organizations that support other women who were exiting prison and the community in general. Some participants shared the importance of using their past experiences to connect with and encourage others as they no longer carried the shame associated with their past. Josephine describes sharing her story with a woman who attended a program at a not-for-profit organization where Josephine now works.

> Sharing my story is huge. There was a period of time where I had so much shame and like I didn't want to tell people that I used to be an IV drug user. I didn't want to tell people that kind of stuff. I didn't want people to look at me like that, you know? Like, like I'm covered in jail tattoos and just like I used to be like wearing long sleeves and trying to hide that and I'm like no this is like a part of who I am. One of our program participants had said like oh I like your tattoos and I said thanks girl I did them in jail. And she's like, her whole demeanour changed when I said that and she's like you went to jail and then we were actually talking. She wasn't looking at me like oh you're some privileged person that's never had a problem in their life and you know like just being able to just be authentically me is huge.

Whether giving back to others or engaging in new activities and groups, being engaged in the community is vital to developing a sense of belonging and attachment to the community that reflects women's new values and priorities. It also supports overall enjoyment in life and allows for the development of new relationships that become part of their support network.

Mental and Emotional Health Supports. Participants talked about receiving mental and emotional support from professionals as well as from family and friends. Although all types of support, for example, those focusing on meeting needs such as housing, employment and addictions support are considered vital, many women emphasized the importance of receiving mental and emotional support. As Jade articulates, mental and emotional support are significant as they enable self-awareness, which helps women seek the support they need and not turn to past thought processes or behaviours. As she explains:

> If you're having an emotional breakdown in a crisis, if you can't recognize that you're having a really hard time then you don' t know to go looking for the resources that will

> help you with that hard time. As an example, if you have problems with substance abuse and you're starting to really crave it...When that happens, you're not thinking clearly so you don't think well I need to reach out or I need to look within and go okay what's happening in my life that's making me crave so badly.

Sunshine explains that while meeting basic needs is essential, not addressing underlying issues will continue to bring women back to prison. She shares her experience in a halfway house when witnessing women receiving funds for material needs but not addressing the internal needs, which she identifies as key.

> Everybody else was bringing all this stuff in and giving them all the funds and too much at one time. It didn't give them time to process. It was like feeding the exterior of them and not meeting the want inside them… So, they were all looking like they got it together on the outside where they needed the help on the inside. That's what I found. With it all comes hand in hand. You can have all the money in the world. It can't fix brokenness.

In fact, participants such as Lily describe how through counselling, she decided to end her relationship with her fiancé as she saw similar warning signs that she experienced in a past relationship. She describes discussing this realization with her parole officer, who indicated that her decision to end the relationship was a clear example of how Lily has changed. Lily describes the significance of being able to identify “warning signs” along the way.

> So, I think for me, it's more like recognizing along the path, like the warning signs, right? So, if you're driving down the highway and you're doing 120 and you see the deer coming and you stop great. If I'm doing a 180 in a Ferrari I can't. And I feel like before I was doing a 180 in a Ferrari and now, I'm driving like a minivan... Like I mean it's not a bad

> vehicle. It's compact and it's got everything I need but it's a freaking minivan. I'm not doing 180 in a minivan.

Beyond the personal benefits of receiving support, Emily described the significance of "professional wisdom" from a child psychologist. Emily and her five-year-old son participated in a program with a psychologist before her sentencing to prepare him for when she would ultimately be incarcerated. Emily continues to seek guidance from the same psychologist as her son struggles with anxiety. She reports the guidance as invaluable as she recognizes the significance of addressing mental health on an ongoing basis, not only for herself but also for her children.

For others, like Sunflower and Grace, receiving professional support was crucial when returning to home communities where triggers to substances and past lifestyles were abundant. Grace served her conditional release in Edmonton. She discusses securing support from a counsellor before she had transitioned back to her home community in Yellowknife.

> I made the appointment before I got back to Yellowknife because I knew it was going to be hard for me to move back there. And cause a lot of my friends there were all still doing the same thing and I didn't want to do that. And so, I made that appointment, and I had a counsellor and I saw her for two years every two weeks and she was one of my biggest support systems.

While situational factors may encourage reaching out, Marsha describes the importance of seeking mental health support periodically when considering past traumas. Although Marsha considers the healing she has accomplished as a significant success in her life, she recognizes the importance of seeking ongoing support to "reset." As she shares:

> I think people like myself which is, I endured a lot of trauma when I was younger and I didn't understand how to take care of it. People like us that have gone through like terrible disgusting traumas, we can get to a place of healing but I know with the therapy I have gone through so far even it's like there are days that I'll get to a place and all that therapy and all the you know tools and techniques to calm myself down or to get better goes right out the door and I'm like freaking out...It's like okay, I need to reset and so resetting is like talking to a professional again.

Many women talked about the importance of Indigenous programming and spirituality while incarcerated, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. A few women spoke about the four aspects of health (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual) as depicted by a medicine wheel that addresses the importance of balance and interconnectedness between these domains. When asked what women can do to best support themselves moving forward, Sherry shared:

> Well I think it's self-care like physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritual. All four aspects right like because if one of them is out then the rest is going to be completely out...So if you can take care of yourself in all four directions, all four aspects in life then you have balance.

Indigenous participants also spoke about the importance of sweats and ceremonies while incarcerated as central to their healing journeys. As Grace shares, "we had our sharing circles and we'd do sweat lodges so that all helped with like the mental emotional part of it." In fact, Josephine attributes the beginning of her journey towards success as starting with ceremony. As she explains, "I did a lot of ceremony while I was inside like sweat ceremonies, letting go ceremonies, like drumming and just kind of like got in touch with culture. I'd say like that's when

that journey started." Therefore, when transitioning into the community, participating in ceremonies and engaging with culture continued to be important to maintaining overall health. In the community, Sunny's relatives connected her with the Métis Nation of Alberta, and she has enjoyed learning and participating in her culture with others.

As previously shared, participants' journey towards peace with themselves, often cited as the most significant success they have achieved, required reaching out and receiving support. Not surprisingly, receiving this ongoing support in the community is also essential to transitioning into the community post-release and promoting long-term success. Although some participants were able to secure support from professionals, many women claim that mental and emotional supports are severely lacking, both within prison and in the community (to be described further in Inhibiting Factors).

Parole Officers. Almost all participants discussed their parole officers as one of their most significant supporters. On the one hand, parole officers were knowledgeable in connecting women with resources specific to their needs. However, beyond that, participants described the invaluable guidance shared by their parole officers as women pursued their goals. As Sunflower explains:

> My POs have been fantastic as well...they're there to help you keep on track. They are also sounding boards, right? There've been a few times when, with my last PO we've, we've had some conversations of some stuff that comes up and, and she helped me through it, you know?

In fact, Willow commented that “I can't imagine people who hit their WED and are just kicked out of jail. I would have went right back to my old lifestyle cause that's what I knew how to make money." Beyond the guidance that parole officers provide women, others shared the

importance of the accountability that they provide. Luna, who calls her parole officer "amazing," appreciates the honesty of her parole officer, who "calls it like she sees it" and "calls you out on your bullshit." As she describes it, "I need someone to say you know like, why the hell are you doing that? Or what is your thinking process behind that as opposed to saying, oh it's okay you know what tomorrow will be a different day."

Although parole officers' accountability is appreciated, emotional support is considered invaluable as women share their struggles and look for assistance when walking through difficulties. For example, Erin, who had been incarcerated for ten years, found being in the community extremely anxiety-producing. She cites her parole officer and the institutional Chaplain as her top two supporters when returning to the community. As she describes:

> My parole officer contacted me almost every day. And you know, they took me out for coffee or just went for a walk and said see it's okay. It's okay to walk, cause I was always on guard thinking cops were coming or this is really not real.

Women spoke about having open and honest relationships with their parole officers, which they view as an essential factor to reaching their goals. The encouragement they received also affirmed the success that women were reaching in the community. For example, Grace's parole officer was very encouraging and supportive of Grace going back to school, which was an important goal for Grace as she looked to better her long-term employment opportunities.

Sunshine described the support she received from her caseworker and eventual parole officer as instrumental in changing her life. Sunshine describes this individual as "genuine" as she wanted to help Sunshine not simply because she was a case assigned to her, which Sunshine believes people can sense. As she explains, "She really saw something in me that I never saw myself. And that made a big difference." Her parole officer found Sunshine a job at a church

where she could manage donations despite her criminal past, which was the theft of finances. Sunshine shared that the criminal sentence received and the criminal activity that she engaged in were not the same; however, despite telling the judge in her trial, Sunshine's confession was not believed. After getting to know Sunshine, her parole officer believed her and advocated on her behalf for the job. As she shares:

> She told them if you put $4,000 dollars in a purse and ask Sunshine to watch it, it will be there when you come back and it's true. But outsiders and not all but a lot of people they see the crime, they see the time, they see you as.. they label you right away. And that's the key that I never wasn't labelled by the ones that believed in me and I surrounded myself around. You know and that and they were willing to put in the time to help me.

Beyond the assistance in securing employment, her parole officer, among others, paid for Sunshine to attend bible school. Initially, Sunshine declined the offer to attend bible school due to concerns about her learning style which is primarily verbal. However, Sunshine attributes her attendance to the confidence that her parole officer placed in her and the willingness of her parole officer to attend school with Sunshine. While the support Sunshine received was phenomenal, she recognized that her parole officer broke the rules by providing the level of support that she had. In fact, Sunshine was only comfortable sharing about her parole officer, knowing that as she had passed away, there would be no repercussions to her parole officer.

Parole officers played a significant supporting role for women as they returned to the community by providing access to resources, guidance, encouragement, and accountability. All of these features were considered significant to participants.

Family. While healthy relationships with others, particularly family, are considered aspects of success, the support provided by family was noted as monumental by many. The

support met immediate needs, such as housing and transportation needs, as well as providing ongoing support and encouragement as women began establishing their lives outside of prison. As Grace shares:

> Right from the beginning I've had a really strong support system with my family. Like I have an aunt and a cousin in Edmonton and I spent lots of my weekends there in the halfway house and they were my biggest support system while I was there. And then my mom and my grandmother, my parents they all really encouraged me a lot and when I moved back home, I was able to live with my parents and so I had them for my support system.

For several participants, the support they received from their families was viewed as instrumental to their success. As Sunflower shares: “My parents have been amazing. Especially my mom…They've given me a lot of strength. And I know I sometimes think that I honestly wouldn't have been able to do it without them.” Participants shared that the encouragement they received from their family provided them with strength and with motivation to continue to move forward. Willow described the motivation her family provided when visiting her in the halfway house.

> It would have been my family driving up and doing those hour visits, those were my biggest [supports] cause that's what drove me to be like k, you're home now they can't see you like how you've been acting the last ten years of your life. Like you got your family here that's trying to make an effort. I got to try to make an effort, so it held me accountable.

Not all family members were ready to embrace participants upon their return. As Sunflower shares, some relationships took time to re-establish and developed the longer Sunflower remained in the community and continued to refrain from substances.

> It was a trial there for a while. My older siblings for the first little while were very standoffish and not ready, right? They were kinda standing off and watching to see what I'm going to do. Fair enough, right? Then I had my two younger siblings that supported me 100% right from the get go.

Three participants described their relationship with their common-law partner or spouse whom they had been with before incarceration as a great support throughout their incarceration and when returning home. Marsha describes the process of growth and learning that she and her husband experienced due to her incarceration. Now Marsha considers her husband her number one supporter and is anticipating purchasing their first house in the near future. Emily described her partner's strength while taking care of their young children while she was incarcerated. She explains how that experience impacted their relationship post-release as he has become more attentive to the emotional needs of himself and their children.

> And then my husband too. He at no point did he ever say like I'm stuck here with kids. I'm struggling. I, you know, they're struggling. We're having hard times like you know there's every now and again he'd show up for a random visit that I didn't know was coming just because he was like oh my gosh, we had such a bad day. Like you know me, and [child] had a good cry together or you know [child] did this today and you know it brought out a side of him that I didn't even know existed. But yah he never, ever complained about it. He did what had to be done but yah at the same point he knew

> sometimes he had to come and see me and talk to me and you know maybe just to build him up and tell him, tell himself that you know things are okay.

Peers. Participants also shared the importance of receiving peer support. For Erin, this began in prison as she spoke to others about their post-release experiences and why they had returned to prison. Based on their feedback, Erin established plans to address each of those potential risks identified by peers for when she was released.

In addition to post-release planning, women spoke of the insight their peers brought who had been in the community for a number of years and had re-established their lives. Anna describes hearing from a FIW who had been in the community for ten years who shared advice about the mindset women should have while on conditional release.

> That did me a world of good. Just from hearing that you know what resonated with me is you're still the property of the CSC. Just cause you're paroled doesn't mean you're scott free. And I think not so much for myself, because I'm older but for the young people you know the idea that they get out on parole and they're as free as a bird it's a fallacy, right?

Zoe indicated that "the most important support I received was probably from my peers." A view that others echoed due to the shared experiences among FIW who, as Anna shares, are "committed to their journey." As women navigate the road to re-establishing their lives, women draw comfort from others who are faced with similar obstacles and have similar experiences both when being incarcerated and when transitioning into the community. As Zoe indicates, "I just kind of looked to them like what was everybody else going through, to kind of make myself feel okay."

Understandably, as peer support is considered some of the best support received, women desire to give back to other recently released women. Lily discussed the desire for a group in her

home city that enabled women to "get together and like share their story or vent or like have that support."

Inhibiting Factors

In addition to identifying factors that supported participants, factors that inhibit progress were also addressed. They include Lack of Mental Health Support, Parole Conditions, Correctional and Parole Officers, and the Ongoing Impacts of Incarceration.

Lack of Mental Health Support. When it came to factors that prevented women from moving forward meaningfully, a lack of mental health support is identified as a significant barrier. Not only was mental health support challenging to access while in the community but also while incarcerated. As Anna shares:

> Any way you slice it, people are in prison and it's about crimes but there's always a bottom line. There is an underlying reason and I really think you need mental health help to get to those reasons. And they don't offer near enough of it in prison.

While many other participants share Anna's perspective, Sherry found that the support was available but required her to advocate for herself and to be completely honest with Correctional authorities. Sherry did not disclose past traumatic experiences during previous incarcerations due to the shame she carried and a desire to avoid reliving and discussing these experiences. As she explains:

> I think because it's not my first time I learned how to advocate for myself. And you know what I mean a lot of women don't know how to advocate for themselves. They don't know how to ask for what they need. There's too much shame and guilt attached to it. There's too much embarrassment. And if you can't advocate for yourself then you don't have anything and this time around I was like I need, I need, I need and I was given it.

Sherry describes the extensive trauma therapy she has been taking for over a year as “one of the best things I ever did” and was instrumental for Sherry in moving forward in her life.

While Sherry found the support to be available, others described fighting to receive mental health support. Willow described continually requesting support and being denied assistance because she did not have a diagnosable condition. Willow explains the process she went through to receive support.

> I told him I have trauma. I need help with trauma because my mom died when I was ten. I went home to home. I was in and out of custody, in and out, obviously something's wrong...I had to fight and fight and fight to see a counsellor and they tried to put me on like anti-anxiety, anti-depressant pills and I'm like don't ...I've been an addict for many, many years and you want me to take another pill?... I don't need their damn anti-depressants, I need to have a clear mind. I need to get help to manage everything that I have now. All these emotions that we numb for so long when we are using and whatever else. But they told me nope you're of sound mind.

In lieu of this support, Willow reached out to the Institutional Chaplain due to recommendations from her peers. Willow and others attribute much of their success to the support they received from the EIFW Chaplain, Elders, and Re-integration Chaplain during both incarceration and post-release. Although these individuals provide vital support, participants continue to voice concerns about the lack of mental health support provided through the institution. As Jade shares, while support is available, there is simply not enough.

> In the institution the number of mental health workers in comparison to the need is like a drop in the bucket. Because I would say, and it's probably a low estimate I'd say a good ninety to ninety-five percent of the women in there have all had abuse of some type in

> their past. So, when you're dealing with that many people who have abuse but aren't getting down to the root problem, we're only being warehoused. We are not being helped. We are not being rehabilitated. We are not being prepared to go out and be contributing members of society if you're not at your best when you leave.

Additionally, Sunny encountered difficulties learning about her Métis heritage while incarcerated which she noted as important to maintaining overall health. Although she hopes that this has changed since her incarceration, which was over five years ago, Sunny could not attend Indigenous programming because she did not have her Métis card. She also found that programs focusing on Métis culture were also missing in the institution.

> Métis culture is different from I guess First Nations. What would you call that? It's different from full Indigenous….I find that a lot of Métis women aren't proud cause we are in a limbo. We can't be proud of this heritage and we can't be proud of that heritage because nobody's, it's coming up now, but it wasn't a big thing back then. ...But it gives you some peace, it gives you some self-esteem, some, the healthy pride in being who you are.

Others pointed out the contradiction of receiving mental health support in prison, which they share is far from a supportive environment. For example, Lily talked about the difficulty of processing emotions as "they've [Correctional therapy or programming] dug it all up in a very hostile environment" where women do not feel safe responding to their emotions. The lack of safety is attributed to the presence of others. As Lily shares, “because you were scared inside that maybe the person next to you who has anger issues that you share a cell with wasn't the right person to have that breakdown in that cell.” Similarly, others spoke about perspectives like the "con-code" and the "institutionalized mindset" that do not foster a supportive environment. For

example, as Josephine describes, the "con-code" means that "you're not supposed to rat each other out," and the "institutionalized mindset" as Marsha explains means “you're always on the edge of somebody either judging you or is about to like screw you over or you know is talking to you because they want something from you.” Having these perspectives and feeling unsafe were identified by some as barriers to receiving meaningful treatment while in prison.

Although some women found the treatment and programs within prison to be beneficial, others had varying experiences. As Luna shares:

> The programs in prison are very generic. They're very, you go in on min when you're on a shorter sentence really there is one program that absolutely every person has to take and that's it. And it was more on my end that I forced the issue and wanted to work with you know the Elders. I wanted to work with Chaplains. Whatever help I could get from whoever I could get it because I didn't want to get out and be lost.

Similarly, while Lily noted that the programming was not “the best for myself," she found the one-on-one support with a therapist to be highly beneficial. She noted that the cognitive behavioural therapy was appreciated as it "really helped me dig deep like myself into like figuring out what was going on.” Others, such as Anna, found the programs in prison to be nothing more than “lip service.” In contrast, she found the programming in the community to be more meaningful.

Beyond the quality of the support offered, women also commented that while they may only be required to take a program once, there is a need for ongoing support. Sunshine and others talk about the need for ongoing support as despite completing a program that meets the Parole Board's official requirement, further assistance is needed. This was especially important for women who may have completed a related program years ago but are now transitioning into the

community. Older FIW also described the need for enhanced mental health services. As Anna explains:

> And I think part of it too is that they have to realize us older gals it takes longer. We've got more shit to wade through to get to the issue. You know so when you go on and they allot you three sessions. Well in three sessions you might not even get to your story.

While women identified significant concerns with the mental health support provided while incarcerated, these concerns continued into the community. While Marsha found a psychiatrist, who provided “amazing” support, the cost in itself was prohibitive at $185 an hour. Since then, she has sought other counsellors and therapists but finding someone who "clicks for you" and is affordable has been a struggle. Jade also described the difficulty in finding affordable support. She explains how the lack of support can impact the decision-making process.

> Cause even in the community like I mean if you're super low income it makes it hard. Like I mean who the heck can afford, you can't afford two hundred dollars in groceries a month, who the heck can afford two hundred dollars an hour to go and sit and talk to someone. You know? And if your need is that great, does that drive your gauge that okay if I just sell a little bit of drugs or if I just do a little bit of this you know to get the mental health then I'll stop, you know? Where do you justify, the justifications start coming in, well I need the help but I don't have the money, you know?

As Jade points out, limited financial resources require women to make tough decisions between meeting physical needs and addressing emotional and mental health needs. Beyond the need to address past experiences, mental health support is also considered significant when transitioning into the community from prison. As Lily describes:

> I believe that everyone that comes out should be required to do therapy for the first six months. Right? Even if it's like once a month. I think you should be required because there's a lot of change when you come out, like there's a lot of I don't know even like waking up and not knowing where you are. Right, and that's not just me. That's a common trend amongst people. Like one of my best girlfriends she was away with me and I remember I didn't meet her till I got to the halfway house and waking up in like total cold sweats being like where the fuck am I? And she's like it's okay, this is going to pass, like you are going to get through it but this is where you are right now.

In addition to addressing the change that takes place when transitioning into the community, older FIW indicated the importance of mental health support to address changed relationships. For Anna, Jade, and Sunshine, their relationships with family members were altered irrevocably. All spoke about the loss of relationships with adult children or parents. As Anna shares, "There's a lot of loss involved. And because I didn't know any other way of life you know? You know it's different for someone whose twenty-five as opposed to someone whose fifty-eight?" Learning to work through the loss and cope with starting a new life at an age nearing retirement was something women discussed as an added difficulty that they believe provides them with a different mindset than younger women as Sunshine explains, "because the younger seemed to have longer life and they're not looking. I look more seriously at my life at my age now."

Furthermore, while getting in touch with culture and spirituality was identified as significant to Indigenous participants in promoting health holistically, some women struggled to find these supports within the community. Josephine describes the frustration in gaining a connection to her culture while in prison just to feeling like that connection is lost.

> I'd say like that type of spiritual kind of, there needs to be more of that for a lot of people cause a lot of people are reconnected with their culture when they go back, like go into incarceration. And it's something that is so helpful but then you get out and it's like where is that stuff? It's nowhere to be found. And it's like, it feels like it's taken away from you again.

While some participants were able to reach out and connect with Elders, such as Grace, who continues to reach out to an Elder in Edmonton from when she was incarcerated and another Elder in her home community, as Josephine explains, "if you don't know people it's really hard."

Beyond the significance of mental and emotional health support when incarcerated and post-release, women talked about a lack of mental health support before their incarceration. This need is concerning when considering that some women sought help prior to committing their crime but were turned away due to a lack of availability. For example, when Marsha described the beginning of her journey towards a new life she defined as successful, she discussed the day a police officer pulled her over.

> A police officer pulled me over because I had a cellphone to my ear while I was driving. And he pulled me and the thing is I saw him. I saw him but because I'm so broken inside and I was I don't know if I was crying or complaining about something to somebody. I think it was my husband and but because of the turmoil in my mind in my emotions driving with the phone stuck to my ear seeing the police officer and like knowing I knew that he was checking on people...Like that day he pulled me over, when he pulled me over he said you know why I pulled you over? I said yes sir and then by this time I'm bawling, you know. You know it's like a cry for help. You know and that was the, that

> was the day so of a understanding that I needed to take a stress leave off of work figure out what the fuck is wrong with me like what is going on?

Marsha goes on to explain that while seeking support, she was turned away from the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton and told to "Google" places to receive support. Marsha does not attribute a lack of mental health support for the criminal activity she engaged in but notes that "I needed help and I didn't know how to get it." For Marsha, she received this support while incarcerated and is thankful for the group therapy, one-on-one therapy, and particularly the Indigenous healing programming in prison. Like Marsha, others indicated prison as the place they received support that they had long been seeking. As Jade shares, "Cause I got the help there in the inside that I never would have got on the outside."

Parole Conditions. Another factor that inhibited women from making progress were the conditions placed upon them by the Parole Board of Canada (Parole Board). Although not all restrictions are seen as inhibitors, in fact, a couple of participants noted that having restrictions on seeing specific individuals from their past is helpful. As Jade explained, it can be easier to communicate boundaries with past associates when the restrictions have been put in place by the Parole Board. Furthermore, when reflecting on their attendance at a halfway house, some women appreciated the gradual re-entry process when considering the significant transition from prison to the community. However, women shared concern about blanket conditions that failed to consider the individual needs of women and therefore further harmed their post-release transition. Impacts to employment, housing, and the impacts of Parole Board requirements upon transitioning to home communities are discussed.

Employment. For women whose crimes related to their careers working with finances, restrictions that inhibited them from working with money detrimentally impact their

employability. For example, Emily spoke of working at Tim Hortons and working in the back and preparing the baked goods. However, her employer noting Emily's "bubbly personality," requested that she work upfront with customers at the cash register despite Emily's conditions that prohibited her from working with money. While Emily continued to adhere to restrictions by telling her employer that she cannot work with money, she was eventually let go from her position. Emily describes the extreme difficulty in finding a job. As she shares, "you don't really realize how many people do not hire if you've got any sort of a criminal record so yah like that part was difficult." Emily is required to pay a restitution order, however as she shares, "Yah I'm definitely nowhere near paying any portion of my restitution order because it's just like we've got our necessities and then there's legitimately not much you know left after that."

Similarly, Anna is also prohibited from working with money; however, as Anna describes:

> Like that's one of my assets. So, for example before I was incarcerated, I worked at [workplace] in the counter, in the bank, in their vault. And we counted all the money you know from [events]. I'm really good at it and I'm really fast at it and you know the condition is I can't work anywhere like that but it's redundant because like there's cameras.

While restrictions prohibiting employment from managing financial accounts is something Anna views as reasonable concerning her previous crime, she shares that not being able to work in any place with money has "been a downfall for me just because I know I'm good at it."

Not being able to leverage past work experience also further harms employability for older FIW who are competing for entry level work with younger adults. As Anna describes, "I'm in that category you know I'm fifty-eight years old so if they've got a choice of people twenty to forty, they're not hiring old gals." Anna considers herself fortunate as she has a pension and

money from an investment that she can rely on financially but questions the logic behind restrictions that inhibit women from using their skill set altogether. For other women in their fifties, they have begun their own initiatives rather than compete for entry level positions. For example, Sunshine started a not-for-profit organization, and Jade is currently launching her own business. While Jade and Sunshine describe these as passion projects, self-employment enabled them to find meaningful careers that bypassed employment barriers.

Housing. A number of participants mentioned how their conditions impacted securing housing. For example, the Parole Board instituted restrictions on which neighbourhoods Lily was able to live. However, the neighbourhoods outlined by her parole officer as acceptable were outside of the price range that Lily could afford. She had to request that accommodations be made for her as she proceeded through bankruptcy and had multiple parties managing her finances.

Although Lily required accommodation to more affordable housing, other participants questioned the housing available. As Erin shared, the affordable places are often in unsafe areas with individuals involved in the use of substances. This criticism is also extended to halfway houses. As Erin shares, "Even the neighbourhood in the halfway house is kind of challenging because there is a drug house right next door." Another option available to Erin was a complex that was infested with bed bugs. For Erin, who shares that she has never had a safe home of her own and had been incarcerated for ten years, securing safe and affordable housing was considered paramount.

Josephine, who shared similar sentiments about the undesirable location of affordable housing, questions why the Parole Board will not allow parolees reside together who are

committed to their re-integration journeys. She proposes that a more individualized approach be considered.

> I'm doing really well but for whatever reason, like I understand there's rules and but I think they should start looking at cases more individual. Because like me right now I'm living downtown, not the greatest neighbourhood. My other friend she just got released and she doesn't want to live downtown either and it's hard...If we are doing what we are supposed to be doing why not look at it like an individual case and say okay these two girls like they live in the same building their paying, like I pay $750 she pays $800. They could have a nice house out of downtown like where their you know like not in that mix of things or in that scene. They could feel safe to go take the dog out for a walk in the evening. Not that we don't feel safe but look at it like an individual thing and they'd be able to save money cause they could probably find a place for $1200 bucks and you know like. That's kind of challenging as like I wanna say like well look she's doing good but because we are both parolees they don't want us living together and it's like this just keeps us kind of down here.

While women faced obstacles accessing housing within larger municipalities, Willow found her only housing option as particularly challenging. As Willow explained, due to the low numbers of women requiring halfway house residence, she was placed in a Women's shelter, which provided many obstacles for her.

> So they kept me over at [women's shelter] with everybody who was just getting out of abusive relationships. That was a huge part of my trauma was abusive relationships that I had to deal with. So, when I got put in there it was, I had to get a job right away cause I was like this is fucking crazy. You guys put me in the worst place ever...I found meth

> bags on the bathroom counter the day after I got out of jail. That could have been my whole slipping slope. You put me into a shelter where there's not supposed to be drugs where these women are, it's a women's safe haven where they can come with their kids and stuff like that. They're not allowed to be using...Yes, you're not supposed to be using and stuff like that, but these girls are allowed to come and go as they please. They're on a totally different plan than what I am being a parolee… Like that made it really hard.

In addition to the presence of drugs and women escaping abusive relationships, Willow described "butting heads" with the woman who ran the home as, from Willow's perspective, the woman's focus was on the business and not on the clients themselves. Housing continues to be a struggle for women post-release, whether finding a safe and affordable location on their own or residing within halfway houses.

Transitioning to Home Communities. Before transitioning to home communities, a number of women were required to serve part of their conditional release within a different municipality. This imposed difficulties for women as they began preparing for post-release and developing support networks in places where they did not intend to reside long term. For example, Grace was required to serve part of her time in the community within Edmonton as they did not have facilities available in her home community, Yellowknife. As she shares:

> It was really frustrating when I was planning my release because they have a place here [Yellowknife] for men to go when they're on parole but they have nowhere for women. So, I could not get released back into my community on day parole I had to go and build community supports and do everything within Edmonton and then have to start all over again in Yellowknife and that was very frustrating to me because to me it just made no

> sense but there's nothing that you could really do because there's nowhere up here for women to go when they are released.

For Grace, this delayed her in reaching her goals, such as resuming her relationship with her son, finding long-term employment, and returning to school, as she was required to reside in Edmonton. Furthermore, others found it difficult to locate resources for their home community when initially residing in a different community post-release. Lily served her day parole in Edmonton before relocating to Calgary. Although Calgary is by no means a small community, Lily described the difficulties of locating the resources needed.

> It's challenging when you're in Edmonton to find out resources about a community that's not Edmonton. Right? You don't have access to the internet, you don't have access to these other things so it's challenging to then all of a sudden move to a different city and it's like how do I figure this out? How do I find this information? Well, I'll go to a library. How do I get to a library? Right, like I don't have any money to go to the library to pay for my bus fare so it's weird things like that where it's super challenging and I wish there was better supports there for people.

Another frustration mentioned by Willow and Lily pertained to the different levels of services provided by sister organizations when returning to home communities. Both women spoke of the invaluable support from the Elizabeth Fry Society in Edmonton, who visited women in prison and in halfway houses to support their transition into the community. However, Willow found the lack of continuity of support while in British Columbia disheartening.

> So Elizabeth Fry in Alberta was amazing. The women came to the jail and stuff they would help you with like resumes, they were the most helpful group of women ever from Alberta. Then BC Elizabeth Fry, I was not a homeless woman I was in a halfway house

> so they would not help me. They wouldn't give me any services. It was the only person, the only company, I'd touch based with in Alberta that keeps all your stuff on file and whatever. And in BC they didn't have my stuff all filed because they're separate from Alberta they said. They wouldn't give me any help, guide me on anything. I couldn't even print off a resume there at the Elizabeth Fry in British Columbia. They're terrible here.

Correctional and Parole Officers. While parole officers were a supportive factor identified by many participants, a lack of care or understanding demonstrated by correctional and parole officers inhibited women both practically and emotionally as they sought to move forward meaningfully. While incarcerated, Sunshine described receiving a poor assessment from a correctional worker who classified Sunshine as high risk for re-offending. Although Sunshine does not believe that this individual intended her harm, as she explains, "she just treated us all like another. You know what I mean? She never got the time to really invest in, she was just doing the programming and that, and she didn't believe a word I said." Thankfully, the superior officer who reviewed the assessment changed the recommendation realizing that it was inaccurate. As Sunshine shares, not being believed and being viewed as just another "inmate" is detrimental to developing self-esteem.

> Because I seen how she treated the others and it was the same thing. So, you're defeated before you even get that foot and I've seen that so many times in there that my observation is that I was going to prove her wrong. You know and that and so that's why. Yah and I was very upset in there, right, because I thought how, how can you, like how can you believe in yourself if you don't have the support around you? ...Yah, and so when you look at it and that and I see the ones that passed and the things they've told me about what they've been told by others like from the superiors in the EIFW. Well, they were

> given up on before they were given a chance. And I, and honestly there, they have committed suicide and stuff like that. It's so sad.

Similarly, Luna discussed the lack of understanding demonstrated by some correctional workers employed by Correctional Services Canada. From her perspective, “they treat people like their numbers as opposed to treating them like human beings" and suggests that Correctional workers “develop empathy and understanding and come at it in a more personable way than it is just a system.” In particular, Luna suggests that staff focus more on re-integration activities that promote women’s connection to the community and assist them in developing support networks. Luna describes the importance of temporary absences in enabling a gradual re-introduction to the community.

> Honestly, I think if there was more ability for the women to re-integrate slowly with ETAs [Escorted Temporary Absences] and UTAs [Unescorted Temporary Absences] and stuff like that without the, it's such a process to do it. And while I can understand it, at the same time their methods and behind some of the things they do don't make sense. And I think if they revamped that and concentrated more on getting people re-integrated before they are ready to get out, it wouldn't be so difficult and there would probably not be as much.. What is that word? Recidivism. If they had the experiences and were able to go out and you know go to re-integration or go to Celebrate Recovery and all those things that are out there that are so important that they limit a lot and even the things like NA [Narcotics Anonymous] and AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] and stuff like that if they had more involvement. If they took the time and actually took girls or the women out to these different meetings and stuff I think it would make a huge difference on the girl’s outlook. Like NA for example, they do it once a week but there's never anybody to take them and

> none of the guards are anything are ever able to do it. So, these girls get there you know ETAs and most of the time it's around addiction and they never actually get to go anywhere because there's nobody to take them. And they don't really care, so they don't like, it's not a huge concern to them whereas to the women it's a huge concern and very important to go to these meetings and meet people and have the supports before they ever get out.

Women also described experiencing difficulties with Parole Board staff while in the community. Although many women spoke of the open and honest relationship they had with their parole officers, who provided invaluable emotional support, others mentioned the relationship with their parole officer to be more complicated. Lily describes the importance of having someone outside of the justice system to rely on for support when considering the unequal power dynamics between women and their parole officers.

> You need someone that you can literally talk to about the good, the bad, the ugly. It doesn't have to be a partner. It can be anyone but it's not going to be your parole officer. It's not going to be a caseworker. It's not going to be someone that is connected to the justice system in any way because you can't have an off day with them...Because you don't know them, you don't know how they are going to react. You don't know. For me my report is riddled with like if she starts to go off track with emotional issues right, that's a trigger. So, if I'm having a bad day and I don't handle it properly like I risk going to remand for the night to cool off. That's not okay. So, the reality is they're not going to be the people you turn to. They're the people you are supposed to but they're not going to be because they still have this like power in the background to change your life in a split second.

Similarly, Josephine describes frustration with the lack of "decisional autonomy" that she experienced. In particular, Josephine described receiving a lack of support from the Director of a minimum-security institution and halfway house in Edmonton, when planning to secure independent housing. Although Josephine had reached out to several community supports that enabled her to secure housing, furniture, and other essentials, the Director recommended Josephine go to supportive living. While Josephine explained her financial plans, the Director continued to disagree with her decision, citing, "yah you'll have a new place for yourself that you can starve to death in." While ultimately Josephine met with the Manager of the supportive living complex, the Manager, after hearing Josephine's detailed plans, shared, “I think you're going to be fine. She's like, it sounds like you know what you want and you know what you're supposed to do and that you'll be able to pull this off.” Josephine ended up securing independent housing and has been able to provide for herself while on parole.

Women also spoke of a lack of understanding demonstrated by Halfway House Staff. Jade described how a meeting scheduled for her parole was cancelled due to her parole officer becoming ill. The cancellation of the meeting was not communicated to Jade until an hour past the meeting time. As she explains:

> Well I spent an hour with high anxiety over all of this not to mention the anxiety of the build up to it and then you know I've got staff going through well try to take care of yourself today. Uh yah...you feel like you're having the top of your head patted on going you know it will be okay. Uh yah, you haven't got a clue. You know or you appear to be a little more emotional today. Well yeah because you know I spent the whole weekend you know dreading having to go, pick at the same sore of opening up. It seems like just when

> you think you're… getting over something and you're living forwards, well let's pick open that sore again and let's re-visit this.

To Jade, the support she received was nothing more than "platitudes and appeasement" from staff who lacked an appreciation of the emotions associated with the process of transitioning into the community, which requires women to "keep re-visiting why you're here or what abuse you went through or let's you know let's keep re-visiting your crime, let's keep re-visiting this. Well if your crime was traumatic, how do you ever get past it?"

In addition, Jade found halfway house staff hard to relate to when considering their age difference. As she shares:

> Some of these kids are young that's working here, are younger than my kids, and you want me to sit and open up and share the struggles I'm going through when you're like, you look like you're twelve years old. You know like I mean how do you relate to where the things I've been through when you're not really old enough to really have much of an experience yet yourself?

Due to the age difference, Jade questioned the support received from staff who lacked experience and understanding of the additional barriers faced by women who have lived a longer life and are now faced with starting life anew. While correctional and parole officers can be one of the most influential supports for women returning to their community, viewing women as simply offenders is detrimental to women as they seek to move forward and re-establish new identities.

Ongoing Impacts of Incarceration. As women work towards building a new life for themselves, factors associated with incarceration continue to act as barriers. The sub-themes identified include impacts to their Identity and Employment.

Identity. Continuing to be seen as a "criminal" by others, whether in the eyes of the Criminal Justice System or by community members, impacts participants seeking to move past their past and establish a new identity. While for some like Marsha, who has learned to move on from those focused on her past, as she shares, "because I feel sad for them because it means they're judging people. It's not just me. It's them having that mentality that they don't need to have," others struggle with whether or not they can ever be over their criminal past. Emily describes the difficulty she faces when considering the relationships she and her family develop with others even though she has been in the community for over five years.

> Yah but then it gets tricky too then once you're out and like especially with the kids you know they're in sports and their school stuff and you know they're meeting new friends along the way and you know so there's these new families that are coming into our families. And you know I always get that nervous feeling of like okay I feel really bad like you know my son's made a really good friend here and his family wants to get us, get to know us and we're getting to know them like at what point do I say to them like I have a past? So that parts always been a really, really hard part.

Emily has had varying experiences when disclosing her past to the parents of her children's friends. She notes that it is easy enough for participants to Google someone to uncover their past. With that being the case, some discussed struggling to decide whether or not they should disclose their past to new parties in their lives. As women often describe themselves as a different person than before incarceration, some participants wonder when their past will no longer define them. However, Willow and many other participants believe their past will forever follow them. As Willow explains:

> When am I not a girl who did an armed robbery who is this terrible addict, this terrible person who has lied to police in her past? To as like when do you just become, when do I just become me? When, at what point can you just be like oh, finally the past is the past, moving forward, but it doesn't happen.

As Jade shares, when it came to internal factors that inhibited women from moving forward, “self-forgiveness is one of the hardest ones there is.” As she goes on to explain, “One of the hardest things for myself and for other people is to actually face what happened. Where you were at the time, face your background, and be able to forget it and move forward." This process is further complicated when others continue to define women by their past.

Employment. Regardless of parole conditions, women also spoke of the difficulty of gaining employment when disclosing their criminal past. Although not all jobs required a criminal record check or for criminal convictions to be disclosed during the application process, women talked about their difficulties when choosing to be open about their history. As Sunflower shares:

> Even with work you know there's been a couple of places that I've been open and honest about my criminal record and the fact that I'm a recovering addict and I haven't received the jobs because of that. Where they didn't physically ask, and so I'm learning you know what? I need to share when I need to share and not before that.

Similarly, Willow decided to be honest about her past when handing out resumes and found the process to be “defeating.” She described handing out over 20 resumes one day during her job search and found that once opening up about her past and her desire to move forward, "they just shut me down and they were like okay yeah we'll call you." Eventually, Willow found a woman who appreciated Willow's honesty and wanted to give her a second chance as a server at a local

restaurant, where she worked faithfully until returning home. Despite completing her social work diploma, Willow continues to encounter barriers to employment.

> I'm a social worker with a criminal record. I have permission from the Solicitor General in Victoria to work with vulnerable adults and children and even though I have this permission letter...It's hard to get a job. Cause as soon as they're like oh, you have a criminal record, no we do not want you...I work at a local shelter and I'm a casual there. The only reason why I got the job is the woman's known me since I was a little girl and she's giving me a chance and an opportunity so it's been if it wasn't for chances and opportunities, I probably would be selling drugs again just to be able to afford to [live] it's expensive.

Without the financial support Willow receives from her common-law partner, she claims that she "would not be able to afford to live right now" as she has found that in "having a criminal record, it's really hard for people to look past that even if it's been awhile or you've been clean or whatever. It makes it challenging." Due to these difficulties, some women spoke of not applying to particular places where they knew a criminal record check would be conducted as they were not likely to be hired.

Similarly, Lily, who had previously been employed as an investment banker, discusses her frustration with the lifetime limitations imposed on future career options when required to disclose her past.

> I'm a little resentful that after I've done my four years and that's the sentence I have that I technically have a life sentence because I have to disclose it. Like cause to them I go, does the prison system not believe in their programs? Do you not believe in the work that the Parole Board's done and that the parole officers are doing? Like you said that I'm

> good, so am I good or am I not good? Like, if I had to go and apply at a bank that's different, right? Then run your background checks, do what you have to do. Not every job needs background checks. Right, so there's a part of me where I go you're literally giving me a life sentence by making that an option for someone to check that box.

As Lily questions the Criminal Justice System's belief in rehabilitation, as do other participants, she continues to struggle in defining success in her career, which is particularly challenging for Lily as she shares, "I put a lot of my self-worth in my work."

Even those women who decided not to disclose their criminal history unless required have struggled with the possibility of their employers finding out. For example, Emily continues to be concerned about her current employer as they are not aware of her past incarceration. Although Emily is four years past her Warrant Expiry Date, the thought of them finding out "always is at the back of my mind that could change at any moment." While Emily hopes that her work ethic over the years means that "I could hopefully be fine," she remains concerned.

Finding employment, whether temporary or in a long-term career, continues to be a struggle for women due to their criminal past, and many like Jade wonder, "If you've done your time, when do you finally ever get to be past it?" As far as Jade is concerned, "You're always going to be an inmate. You're always going to be an offender...No matter how much you move forward that's always there it follows you."

Some women discussed how the identity of a criminal continues to impact long-term goals and subsequently the motivation to continue to move forward. Lily describes this tension:

> You go away and you serve time and stereotypes would say that you are a bad person because you went away. Alright, fine I can take the stereotype. You come back into the community, what is my motivation to get a job, pay taxes at minimum wage, and give

> back and be a better person when I can go sell drugs and make three times as much? Like what is my motivation to be a better person? Maybe I found it inside. Maybe I was in the middle of finding it but it's really hard...Right and you come out and you get like twenty or fifty no's right off the bat depending on how many jobs you are applying to. That's really hard so where's the motivation for me to keep going?

As Lily and others share, the motivation to move forward is supported by the vital emotional support provided by others when considering the difficult context women find themselves in post-release.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This purpose of this study is to discover how FIW define success in life after prison and understand what factors impact women as they reach their goals and aspirations. While literature exists concerning factors that shape the post-release transition of FIW, success is often defined by whether or not women return to prison (i.e., recidivism) rather than asking participants to define success for themselves. Studies that seek to understand FIW definitions of success remain limited (e.g., Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Heidemann et al., 2016). Therefore, this discussion will highlight critical findings as they relate to self-conceptualizations of success and the factors participants identified as integral to ongoing success. As success and the factors that influence them are often interdependent, key findings discuss the pertinent themes in both domains. The five key findings that will be explored in this chapter include (1) Success is internal peace: The significance of personal transformation and the value of mental health support, (2) Success is achieving post-release goals, (3) Success in the everyday: The importance of daily and personal successes, (4) Facilitating success: The invaluable role of the community, and (5) Success and support: The role of interpersonal relationships. While each key finding considers existing literature in light of the study's findings, research implications are also examined and are further expanded upon in Chapter 6.

Success is Internal Peace: The Significance of Personal Transformation and the Value of Mental Health Support

When defining success, participants were clear that coming to peace with themselves was a significant success, if not the most critical aspect of success in their lives. While some participants spoke of prison as a catalyst for change, others who had experienced multiple incarcerations cited specific events that resulted in their decision to change (e.g., loss of a family

member, time spent in the community) during their most recent incarceration. Similar to Doherty et al.'s (2014) study with Canadian FIW, the process involved making a personal decision to change their lives, which often required attending to past traumas and letting go of shame and negative self-perceptions. Through this process, women spoke of better knowing, accepting, and loving themselves. Although some studies have found similar findings concerning individual attributes and motivation for change, they are framed as personal factors that facilitate re-integration efforts (Bui & Morash, 2010; Cobbina & Bender, 2012; O'Brien, 2001) or indicate re-integration readiness (Doherty et al., 2014). The findings of this study suggest that the personal transformation that occurs is more than simply a factor that facilitates re-integration, but is a critical success in itself and is a precursor to best position women to pursue their post-release goals and aspirations.

While participants cited prison as the beginning of coming to peace with themselves, it also involved having a positive outlook and a sense of happiness and contentment in their lives post-release. For example, women talked about choosing to see the potential of each day, which beyond motivating participants, enabled them to see and be open to new opportunities. Additionally, happiness and contentment with where women were at in life was also a success shared by participants as they worked towards their goals in the day to day and enjoyed engaging in meaningful activities that reflect their current priorities (e.g., spending time with family and friends). Existing literature has noted that a positive outlook is a factor promoting desistance from crime (Lebel et al., 2008) and has explored the impact of a positive outlook on women's perceptions of their post-release success (Cobbina & Bender, 2012; Haverkate & Wright, 2021). However, success continues to be defined by whether or not a woman will return to prison (i.e., recidivism), which is only one aspect of success defined by women in this study. In contrast,

participants described a positive outlook and happiness and contentment in life as critical aspects of success that contribute to their peace and have ongoing importance while in the community.

Like much of the post-release literature concerning women exiting prison, participants described the difficulties faced and often noted systemic barriers that inhibited their progress. For example, they discussed parole restrictions that required them to reside in unsuitable housing situations (e.g., living in a halfway house adjacent to a drug house) (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003; Moses, 2014; Opsal, 2015; Richie, 2001) and parole restrictions that inhibited their employability (Opsal, 2015; Turnbull & Hannah-Moffat, 2009), among others. However, despite these significant barriers, participants described focusing on these limitations as detrimental as it diminishes their belief in personal agency and motivation. While the constraints women face is essential to understand when reaching post-release goals (and will be addressed in subsequent sections of this Chapter), for those returning to the community, success is a personal journey that begins within themselves and must continue in life post-prison.

Considering the existing literature on FIW conceptualizations of success, *Success is living free from criminal justice involvement*, was one of the five themes of success uncovered by Heidemann et al. (2016b). They found that for those women under community supervision, being free from criminal justice surveillance was a definition of success that dominated their focus. However, for those who were no longer involved in the criminal justice system, success was further defined as living a life free from past factors that "enslaved" them (e.g., substances, criminal lifestyle) (Heidemann et al., 2016b). In this study, although women on conditional release saw completing their parole as an element of success and desired to be free of inhibiting parole conditions, some described an appreciation of the gradual re-entry process. For example, some participants shared that non-association conditions with individuals from their pre-prison

lives made establishing boundaries with others easier as they had a no contact order in place. For others, transitioning to a halfway house before living on their own was viewed favourably as they faced many other competing demands upon re-entry. For others, the thought of losing their parole officer as a community support once hitting their Warrant Expiry Date was disconcerting. Despite this difference, nearly all participants in this study, whether or not they were under community supervision, would agree that being free from past factors that shaped their lives (such as addictions and crime) is success itself. In order to walk this road, participants continued to draw on their internal successes and the support of others as they began to establish new lives within the community.

The Need for Greater Mental Health Support within Prison and in the Community

The significance of personal success is evident among the research findings. Therefore, exploring the role of mental health support, which is identified as a dominant factor that both supports and inhibits maintaining their personal success, is now discussed. Women in this study were clear that behind criminal activity are underlying issues and reasons that need to be addressed to support women in coming to peace with themselves and promoting long-term success. Due to the significant personal success described by participants, one may conclude that women received sufficient support while incarcerated. However, overwhelmingly, a lack of mental health support was reported within the institution. The lack of mental health services continues to be observed in other jurisdictions such as the United States (Bakken & Visher, 2018; Moses, 2014; Petersilia, 2001; Richie, 2001) and Australia (Baldry, 2010), in addition to the Canadian context (Kilty, 2012). Specifically, Kilty's (2012) study with 22 FIW found that the availability of non-medical interventions was limited, and that medication was the primary management intervention employed to manage mental health concerns. Similarly, participants in

this study noted a similar frustration as some described fighting for mental health support, with one participant refusing prescribed medications as a strategy to address underlying issues. Furthermore, as Kilty (2012) points out and as was affirmed by participants in this study, refusing to provide women with their self-identified needs only serves to dismiss their personal agency, which is not congruent with the CSC guiding principle of *empowerment* that suggests that women need relevant options to make "responsible choices."

Despite the lack of mental health services cited, some women received support through institutionally provided cognitive behavioural therapy and counselling services. Although some participants in Kilty's (2012) study noted concern with institutionally provided counselling, as counsellors are ultimately accountable to correctional authorities, these concerns were not raised by participants in this study who described these programs as overwhelmingly beneficial. Similar sentiments regarding the benefits of cognitive behavioural therapy have also been noted in other studies (Doherty et al., 2014; Pedlar et al., 2018). It is noteworthy to mention that the recent Bill C83 reforms have sought to address this concern by providing health care professionals clinical independence and autonomy from correctional authorities (OCI, 2021). Although health care professionals can make recommendations, significant limitations remain as they are subject to review by the warden and may be further delayed or disregarded through further administrative review (OCI, 2021).

A criticism of correctional over-reliance on cognitive behavioural therapies is that they focus on individual choice and responsibility, ignoring the gendered structural and systemic biases women faced prior to incarceration and will experience at release (Balfour, 2014; Hannah-Moffat, 2009; Maidment, 2006; Pollack, 2007). Indeed, incarcerated women require further preparation for post-release outside of cognitive behavioural therapy and other CSC

programming that emphasizes individual choice. However, participants were clear that therapies that help them understand themselves within complex and intersecting social contexts are beneficial as, ultimately, women will continue to be held accountable for their decisions regardless of the barriers faced upon release and limited opportunities available.

Beyond the limited support provided, women spoke of the contradiction of receiving therapy or counselling in prison, which is predominantly experienced as punitive. As one participant powerfully stated, "We're only being warehoused. We are not being helped. We are not being rehabilitated," which is a sentiment other Canadian FIW have noted (Pollack, 2009b). In particular, some participants found it challenging to address the emotions resulting from counselling due to unsafe spaces (e.g., unpredictable roommates) and prison perspectives such as the "con code" and "institutionalized mindset" that require women to develop and project a hardened exterior. FIW noted similar concerns in Pollack's (2009b) study. Furthermore, for those who receive support, the support itself is restricted to a limited number of sessions or when CSC determines a program to be "complete" despite participants' protest. These findings continue to affirm that prison is far from the “supportive environment” described in CSC’s guiding principles.

Just as the support is lacking within the institution, women note similar concerns when being released into the community (Bakken & Visher, 2018; Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Doherty et al., 2014). The lack of support is further compounded by the stresses of meeting other community re-entry demands, such as securing housing and employment among others, with limited financial resources. One participant noted the difficult dilemma she was faced with when contemplating where she should allocate funds, to food or to secure mental health support, which can impact thought processes about returning to crime. Those who received support noted a

number of aspects where the counselling or therapy benefited their post-release transition. For one, the support helped address the anxiety of being released, which is a concern reported by others (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Doherty et al., 2014; Severance, 2004), and helped women process the unique symptoms of moving from a very structured and controlled environment such as prison into the community (Moses, 2014). In addition, women spoke of the importance of receiving support on an ongoing basis to continue to address past traumas and highlighted the importance of therapy or counselling to promote self-awareness. Self-awareness was noted as key to help women identify warning signs and potential triggers that, without attending to, will likely lead them back to prison as women are overwhelmed with meeting many demands. Women were often the dominant force in securing mental health support both in prison and when in the community. This often required relying on resources such as Chaplains, Elders, and reaching out to family members and friends to seek this vital emotional and mental health support. Literature affirms the difficulty in accessing multiple services and support post-release primarily with little assistance (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Doherty et al., 2014, Pedlar et al., 2018), and participants in this study underline the importance of receiving mental health support as vital to navigating life post-release.

While women require support beyond mental health, therapy and counselling are viewed positively in supporting women as they continue to move forward in their lives in a way that reflects their new values and priorities. Many women attributed their ongoing success to holding onto their new sense of self despite the barriers faced, where receiving critical emotional and mental health care support from professionals or members of the community was viewed as beneficial. While their personal success only further demonstrates the strength and resiliency of these women considering the limited resources available, better mental health care support is one

aspect where additional resources should be allocated. It is essential not to forget that some cited receiving support in prison that they would not have received in the community. Similar concerns have been noted by other FIW (Pedlar et al., 2018; Pollack, 2009b) and should continue to be a cause for concern as not only is the support within prison limited, but it continues to be limited in the community upon their return.

Success is Achieving Post-release Goals

Participants in this study identified accomplishing or working towards their post-release goals as successes in life. In fact, reaching their goals were often momentous as they took time to achieve and signified hard work and perseverance through adversity. The goals women identified as successes in their lives include: employment, education, housing, child and family re-unification, maintaining sobriety/staying clean, and giving back. It is important to note that literature has long identified these post-release goals as needs of women when returning to the community (O'Brien, 2001; Richie, 2001). Participants in this study affirm that these post-release needs represent their goals upon release and their success in the community.

While some of these accomplishments denote outcomes-based achievement, like securing employment and housing, other aspects, such as maintaining sobriety and staying clean, were ongoing. Similarly, Heidemann et al. (2016b) noted that within the five themes of success identified by their study participants, only one related to an outcomes-based measure, housing. Beyond the sense of accomplishment that came with reaching or working towards their goals, achieving them also contributed to personal successes such as building self-esteem and belief in self-efficacy. Additionally, some noted that these achievements demonstrated their belonging to the community as they accomplished goals valued by both themselves and society.

Much of the literature concerning community re-entry addresses the difficulties women face when attempting to achieve these post-release goals (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; O'Brien, 2001; Pedlar et al., 2018; Richie, 2001, Severance, 2004). In many cases, these obstacles were also highlighted by participants in this study. For example, some participants discussed the difficulty and importance of reuniting with their children, which others have continually highlighted (Moses, 2014; Opsal, 2015; Pedlar et al. 2018; Stone et al., 2017; Wilson & Koons-Witt, 2021). While these concerns are still important, the following discussion will focus on the unique insights offered by participants when considering the existing and emerging literature for the following: Education and Employment, Housing, and Giving Back.

Education and Employment

Participants shared that securing employment and completing or pursuing further education are post-release goals and successes in their lives. As both are inextricably connected when considering the post-release outcomes of participants, they are discussed collectively.

Within this study, participants had various educational attainment and work experience before incarceration, resulting in different post-release pathways to securing a job and, ultimately for some, meaningful employment. Despite these differential experiences, nearly all participants described some level of difficulty in securing a job post-release. Difficulties were attributed to either parole conditions that limited employment options (Opsal, 2015; Turnbull & Hannah-Moffat, 2009), the stigma they encountered from employers due to their incarceration (Batastini et al., 2017; Pedlar et al., 2018), and the long-term implications of having a criminal record to future career options (Babchishin et al., 2021; Nally et al. 2013; Petersilia, 2001). However, how these obstacles are experienced and the long-term impacts to securing employment in a desired career or occupation occur differently and are outlined below.

A few participants who had training and previous employment within the trades returned to the same profession prior to incarceration, which they identified as meaningful employment. Unlike women who worked in professional roles, women did not have restrictions that inhibited returning to their previous vocational occupations. It is also noted that a criminal record check is not perceived as significant of a barrier for professions within the trades. These findings are unique in that much of the post-release literature regarding employment focuses on women requiring further educational attainment and training as they often remain underemployed or unemployed post-release (e.g., Opsal, 2015, Pedlar et al., 2018, Richie, 2001). In comparison, while needs for education and training beyond high school are still needed for many incarcerated women, others were able to return to a profession they once loved, signifying success to women as they utilized their skill sets and knowledge within a profession of their choice post-release.

Although securing a job was a success for all participants, especially considering the obstacles faced, the pathway to finding meaningful employment continues to be an ongoing struggle for many. For example, although securing an entry-level job was a success for participants who did not have a work history or education or training beyond high school, current employment was seen as a first step towards long-term career goals. Additionally, those who worked in professional roles before being incarcerated, primarily in managing finances, had to reconsider their career directions considerably. For one, women who had previously worked in professional roles reported struggles securing a job due to the parole conditions imposed by the Parole Board of Canada. Participants in Opsal's (2015) study described how parole conditions further harmed women's employability by requiring women to submit to drug testing, attend counselling or programming, and/or report to a case manager at the discretion of their parole officer. Where parole officers were not flexible to limit interruption to women's jobs, they only

further harmed women's chances to secure and maintain employment (Opsal, 2015). In contrast, participants in this study primarily saw their parole officers playing a positive role and did not note barriers imposed to employment by their parole officers. This difference may be attributed to different requirements of the Canadian and United States parole boards or may be due to participant's parole officers who accommodated their requirements to fit within participants' schedules. Regardless, participants' concern was about the parole conditions themselves that limited women from entry-level labour by applying broad restrictions to working with money. As participants suggested, parole conditions should be reviewed individually and only address areas of particular concern (i.e., managing financial accounts) that women themselves recognize as reasonable. Failing to do so, women's chances of securing employment is only further harmed as in addition to having a criminal record, women could not seek employment in entry-level roles (e.g., a cashier at Tim Hortons).

In addition to difficulties imposed by parole conditions, some participants also raised concerns about the long-term impacts of having a criminal record on future career options. For example, despite completing post-secondary education, one participant described difficulty securing a job in her professional field due to her criminal past. Due to this difficulty, she claims that she would need to rely on welfare if not for the support she receives from her partner. Other participants have shared similar concerns, describing barely making ends meet despite their vocational and educational training in professional fields, which is a reality that has been reported by other FIW (Pedlar et al., 2018).

A recent Canadian study commissioned by Public Safety Canada has affirmed women's long-term concerns about employment through exploring economic outcomes for formerly incarcerated people 14 years after their release from prison (Babchishin et al., 2021). The

findings present a troubling picture. Of those who filed taxes in 2014, only half were employed. For those who were, the average employment income for FIW was just under $10,000, roughly a third of what was reported by females in the general population ($27,750). On average, FIW receive a lower income than formerly incarcerated men post-release ($10,000 vs $14,000), and while formerly incarcerated people are ten times more dependent on social assistance income, women continue to be more reliant than men (54.5% vs. 39.9%). Furthermore, disparities in income continue to be found between Indigenous and non-Indigenous formerly incarcerated peoples. Similar to participants in this study, additional barriers for participants over 45 in securing employment were found.

It is clear that despite the qualifications or competency of formerly incarcerated individuals, they continue to be underemployed or unemployed which imposes their reliance on governmental support even after over a decade of release from prison (Batastini et al., 2017). These results affirm concerns raised from a number of participants, particularly those who had secured post-secondary education or training, who question how their criminal record will continue to impact their career goals and employment success. As suggested by Batastini et al., 2017, further work needs to be done in reviewing the employment discrimination status across Canada. Furthermore, additional reconsideration of what occupations truly need a criminal records status check should be reviewed.

Securing vocational experience and further education while incarcerated has long been proposed as a solution to better prepare women economically for life post-release. While studies have long critiqued the lack of relevant post-release planning and preparation available (Barrett et al., 2010; Doherty et al., 2014; OCI, 2018; Pollack, 2009b), recent literature continues to report significant concerns regarding educational and vocational programming (OCI, 2021). A

recent Office of the Correctional Investigator Annual Report (2021) outlined concerns with the current CSC learning policies, significantly outdated technology, and current vocational training programs that do not provide skillsets valued within today's labour market, among several others.

While much of the report's findings are concerning, some particularly uneasy discoveries include that beyond supporting incarcerated peoples to acquire their high school equivalency, access or support for further education is not required and is therefore severely limited (OCI, 2021). Additionally, computers are noted as a rare commodity in prison and, where available, are significantly outdated as they are stand-alone units with outdated software that still use technology such as floppy disks. Internet access is also prohibited, which leaves incarcerated people severely "information deprived." These findings are problematic as incarcerated people return to an increasingly digital world where digital literacy is often an expectation of employers. In fact, concerning technology, the report states, "CSC is so far behind the community standard that it seriously puts into question its legal obligation to prepare and assist offenders for release" (p. 76). Although a couple of participants mentioned the need for support with new and emerging technology, it was not found as significant theme. However, this may be due to the reality that current programs and support provided by CSC are severely limited which would impact expectations of CSC in providing new services while incarcerated. Lastly, the report also affirms that the limited vocational training available to women continues to be gendered (e.g., sewing, wool shearing, floral and jewellery design), with women requesting less "feminized" options (e.g., accountant, office administration).

Considering the findings of the report, the voices of participants in this study are further contextualized as though they desired further education, it was always framed as a post-release

goal that they would acquire within the community. Only one participant secured further education in prison, which was completing her high school equivalency. As women must attend to multiple needs upon release, pursuing further education in the community may not be feasible for a number of reasons. Therefore, especially when considering the expansion of online education options, supporting women in furthering their education should be a considerable priority while incarcerated.

Housing

As long cited in the literature, housing is a critical post-release need of women returning to the community (O'Brien, 2001; Opsal, 2015; Pedlar et al., 2018; Richie, 2001; Severance, 2004;). Many participants in this study affirmed that securing housing was both a post-release goal and success when achieved. Heidemann et al. (2016b) also noted that housing was a theme of success described as *Success is Having my Own Place*. Like participants in Heidemann et al.'s study (2016b), some women described the importance of having their own place as it signified their independence and self-sufficiency within the community.

For others who had rarely had stable housing in life before prison, securing a safe place of their own was considered a monumental success. They indicated that having a safe environment to live where they have complete autonomy is central to moving forward in their new lives in the community, which expands Heidemanm et al.'s (2016b) conception of success to include secure housing. In Carlton & Segrave's (2016) study, escaping harm or death while in the community was described as a measurement of success by Australian FIW when considering the dangerous situations and environments women returned to post-release. Clearly, housing is one avenue that provides women with safety and security. However, participants in this study did not

describe escaping harm and death as a post-release goal or indicator of success in the community.

While some participants in Heidemann et al.'s (2016b) study highlighted the importance of having a place that they paid for on their own, others indicated that simply having a place of their own despite being subsidized was a success itself. Interestingly, while participants in this study viewed housing as a success whether they owned or rented the dwelling, government-subsidized housing was not often discussed. Alternatively, women described reaching out to organizations like the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women that supported participants by paying their first month's rent and damage deposit. Women likely reached out to organizations to provide support because, as one participant shared, the waitlist for securing affordable housing is quite significant (Pedlar et al., 2018). Understandably, as women have time frames in which they are expected to transition into the community from a halfway house, they cannot wait for a space to become available. Therefore, women often connected with multiple providers like Homeward Trust or the Mustard Seed to find intermediate support as they sought a place of their own. Recognizing the importance of housing as a success to FIW, further assistance in connecting women with affordable housing solutions should be explored further to facilitate women's re-entry into the community (Pedlar et al., 2018). However, as continually noted by the literature (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003; Moses, 2014; Opsal, 2015; Pedlar et al., 2018; Richie, 2001) and by participants in this study, transitional housing solutions are often in undesirable locations where drugs and criminal activity abound. These findings suggest that not only do affordable housing solutions for women transitioning into the community need to be available but that the location of housing options should be reconsidered.

Although housing was an important part of success for many participants, others did not describe housing as a post-release goal or success as they returned to housing solutions. A few participants described returning to their home before incarceration with a common-law partner. In one case, a woman was able to return to the home that she owned. These results were not found in Heidemann et al.'s (2016b) study, likely due to the recruitment method employed. In their study, they secured participants primarily from supportive housing facilities where participants who had returned to homes would not have been found. Due to the uniqueness of participants, results continue to point to the importance of understanding the unique needs and concerns of participants to better facilitate their transition into the community and promote their success.

Giving Back

Another success women reported was being able to give back to others. While giving back to others in the community has been noted in the literature as facilitating re-integration (O'Brien 2001; Pedlar et al., 2018), Heidemann et al.'s (2016b) study has affirmed that giving back is also a definition of success. Similarly, participants within this study affirmed that giving back was a post-release goal upon release and an ongoing aspect of success in their lives.

Regarding motivation, women often described how vital the assistance they received was and wanted to be able to provide integral support to others in the community. Many participants discussed the difficulties they faced before incarceration. Therefore, it is not surprising that women desire to support those in similar situations that they were in before incarceration. Furthermore, as women described their peers as being one of their most vital supports, assisting women who are now seeking to re-establish their lives in the community was also significant. Similarly, as noted in Heidemann et al.'s study (2016b), giving back and caring for others was

described as personally fulfilling and was a passion that did not provide them with any tangible benefits. As others have also noted (Heidemann et al. 2016a; O'Brien, 2001; Pedlar et al., 2018), giving back increases women's positive connections to the community, supports self-esteem, and affirms participants' belonging within the community.

While all women spoke of the altruistic reasons for giving back, for some, giving back moved beyond a volunteer basis and shaped employment goals. For example, some participants described how the desire to give back drove career decisions into areas like social work and addictions counselling. One participant even began a faith-based not-for-profit to support vulnerable populations. Considering this desire to give back in a professional capacity, further attention to how a criminal record impacts qualifications to post-secondary education institutions and securing employment should be reviewed. For example, although one participant received approval from the Solicitor General in British Columbia to work with vulnerable populations, her criminal record continues to be a barrier for her to secure meaningful employment.

Success in the Everyday: The Importance of Daily and Personal Successes

Participants described the difficulties faced upon release, which often required balancing competing demands and reaching out to organizations and individuals to coordinate support. While this process was described as overwhelming, success was still noted daily as women completed tasks that moved them forward, which was essential to all participants regardless of how long they had been in the community. For example, women spoke of getting up and getting ready for whatever the day held for them. While the specific tasks varied (e.g., taking care of children, going to school or work, attending addictions support groups), all represented small successes, including participating in hobbies or activities that women valued. Completing these daily tasks are important as they provide women with tangible results and a sense of

accomplishment that fuels self-esteem and motivation. These successes were equally important for women who had recently exited prison and faced significant difficulties rebuilding their lives. For example, some women re-entered the community during the COVID-19 pandemic, which further limited availability to the supports and services they would typically access. Therefore, small successes included their daily efforts, which, as one participant described, may be as simple as making a phone call to an organization and finally getting through to talk to someone.

Beyond the above-mentioned benefits of daily accomplishments, working towards their goals each day often demonstrated the change in values and priorities they established in prison and continued to work towards within the community. Key to this change in focus was women shifting their views of success from outward indicators (e.g., material possessions or achievements) to personal successes. Personal successes often encompassed women's' attention to and prioritization of their own needs. For example, attending to emotional and mental health needs was noted as vital to address fears and anxieties upon community re-entry, symptoms of moving from prison to the community, and to continue on their path of healing when considering past traumas. Attending to their physical and spiritual health were also aspects of personal successes emphasized by participants who described the importance of attending to their health holistically. In addition to attending to one's well-being, personal successes also include relationships with others. Participants described rebuilding relationships with family members and/or developing new ones with community members that, while successes themselves, also provided both practical and emotional support.

While material possessions or achievements have value and are often reflected in long-term goals (such as owning a home or starting a business), women emphasized the importance of success daily. It is essential to acknowledge that nearly all women described their post-release

plans changing while in the community. They described facing unanticipated circumstances and barriers that required them to be open to new opportunities and impacted their timelines to reaching their goals. The delays experienced by women in reaching their goals did not reflect personal failures but often demonstrated the reality that achieving their goals and aspirations may take much longer than initially anticipated. In the light of this reality, small successes denoted by daily accomplishments and focusing on personal successes became critical. Without them, reaching long-term goals would be impossible and provide women with little motivation to move forward. These findings are unique as post-release literature focuses on factors that promote or inhibit re-integration success (i.e., not returning to prison) as women seek to meet their post-release needs. However, participants were clear that success is found in more than just achieving their post-release goals. It occurred daily as women continued to demonstrate their commitment to living a new life.

While this finding is clear from participants' narratives, the intent here is not to claim that if women simply work hard enough and focus on daily and personal successes that the obstacles they face can and will be overcome. In fact, significant roadblocks to achieving their goals, such as securing meaningful employment as previously discussed, drastically shape the future trajectories of FIWs' lives. These roadblocks require women to continually re-consider their long-term goals, especially when considering pressing priorities and other competing demands. However, that is not to say that success is not experienced in the day to day as women continue to move forward within the problematic and often limiting contexts set out for them. In this respect, similar to participants in Heidemann et al.'s (2016b) study, success is seen through perseverance where participants "feel successful each day they are able to "make it through" and to take a step forward in a positive direction" (p. 36). Women in their study primarily described

perseverance in the context of facing challenges relating to factors such as trauma, mental illness, and substance abuse. While participants within this study described these factors, they also expanded the definition of perseverance to include persevering despite systemic barriers. For example, constraints to employability due solely to their criminal record are a reality women face daily. However, participants continue to find success in their progress as they move forward in meaningful ways towards their goals.

Considering the importance and focus of success in the day to day, it is not surprising that recidivism was only a small aspect of success mentioned by participants. Indeed, increasing their time in the community, a measure of success described by FIW in Carlton and Segrave's (2016) study, and staying out of prison are successes. However, it was not the dominant focus of participants who were equally likely to describe not going back to prison as an aspect of success as is not returning to past lifestyles and behaviours and getting by without crime. From their perspectives, life post-release signified leading a life anew, which requires more from women than solely focusing on avoiding returning to prison but requires daily attention to themselves and engaging meaningfully in life. Women in Heidemann et al.'s (2016b) study described similar views. While recidivism was one component of success articulated by participants, success was viewed as "rather than a focus on avoiding "failure" (a relapse, being re-incarcerated, etc.), success is instead conceptualized as walking a new path...It is a lifestyle choice, one that unfolds daily and over a long period of time" (p32). When considering these findings, success should not be solely determined by binary measures such as whether or not a woman has returned to prison or has reached her long-term goals. It should be understood in the progress achieved daily and the commitment made to support their ongoing wellbeing. These successes become even more pronounced when remembering the significant barriers and ongoing limitations imposed upon

women. It is only through daily success that other success will result, including women reaching their long-term goals and not returning to prison.

Facilitating Success: The Invaluable Role of the Community

Understanding the community's role in participants' life post-release is vital to understanding women's success as all noted community support and engagement as indispensable to facilitating their return. Specifically, this finding draws from *Building Support Systems* and *Engagement in the Community*, which participants identified as crucial supporting factors. Although individual relationships with family members, friends, and others are also considered part of women's support networks, the following narrative explicitly explores the impact of community organizations. Specifically, how community-based organizations or groups contribute to FIWs' definitions of success and what steps should be taken to enhance their effectiveness both within prison and in the community are examined. The impact of interpersonal relationships is addressed in the final key finding.

Building Support Systems

Women continue to affirm the many post-release needs of women exiting prison, including housing, education and employment services, mental and emotional health support, addictions treatment and recovery, and transportation support (O'Brien, 2001; Richie, 2001; Wolfer, 2019). In order to meet these needs, participants were adamant that developing robust support systems within the community are critical. As discovered in this study, most post-release needs are also considered post-release goals by participants. They are also considered successes when accomplished in the community (e.g., housing, employment) or are continually worked towards (e.g., maintaining sobriety). Some post-release needs also represent other critical aspects of success, such as attending to mental and emotional health that enable participants to move

forward daily and support internal peace. In light of these results, it becomes crucial to consider how community support systems currently assist women.

Notably, women reached out to a number of organizations to meet a variety of needs. While participants were very appreciative of the assistance they received, they described an interest in having a one-stop location that provides women with all of the information and resources they need. Their concerns are well raised and have been voiced by others when considering the complex network of support women must navigate as a range of services are contracted out to multiple private and community sector agencies (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Wesley & Dewey, 2018). Participants described reaching out to a number of community-based organizations, and although each offered a host of supports and programs, women still required further assistance to meet their needs. They also wondered if there were other resources available to them that they had yet to learn of. To try and bridge this gap, women reached out to other FIW and networked with community members to explore their options further. While their efforts are admirable as women described the robust community supports they had in place, it is concerning that a lack of centralized services and even comprehensive information about where to seek these supports exist.

As Wesley and Dewey (2018) uncovered, the Advocate Program is a one-stop shop model that provides a promising example of re-integration support. First of all, the Advocate Program provides an exhaustive list of wraparound services that includes support with: child and family re-unification, counselling, housing, transportation, employment, educational and medication assistance, in addition to assistance with basic needs such as providing bus passes, food, and clothing. Additionally, their holistic approach to providing care surpassed simply the provision of services or programs but included an environment that was women-centric,

supportive, and non-judgmental. Women described how staff's recognition of their individual needs and their investment into their well-being was of paramount importance. Due to the staff's enhanced understanding and commitment to the women, FIW received customized and realistic solutions that considered the structural inequalities and intersecting realities each faced. This approach promoted openness between program participants and staff as FIW felt more comfortable expressing their needs (Wesely & Dewey, 2018).

It is important to note that many participants acknowledged individuals such as Elders and Chaplains within the institution went above and beyond by providing women vital emotional support, guidance, and practical assistance. Other research with Canadian FIW have also affirmed the vital role of similar individual actors (Pedlar et al., 2018). Like participants of the Advocate program (Wesely & Dewey, 2018), women in this study spoke of the importance of individuals' investment in their lives as meaningful beyond meeting immediate needs. However, while the individual efforts of Elders and Chaplains should be highly commended, it is clear that the demand for this support requires many more like-minded individuals and sufficient funding for organizations to provide extensive wraparound programs and coordinated support.

As strong community support systems are vital to re-entering the community, some participants indicated that building these networks should start in prison and continue while women are in transitional housing. While some participants described this process beginning while incarcerated and again attributed Chaplains and Elders within the institution as facilitating the process, many cited their post-release plan as their guide to securing support after exiting prison. Unfortunately, for nearly all, their post-release plans developed while incarcerated did not play out as expected while in the community. In some cases, women spoke of the information they were provided within the institution as inaccurate (e.g., underplayed the

difficulties of securing employment, provided with incorrect information about further education options). Misinformation coupled with unexpected life events or situations changed their plans considerably. These findings continue to affirm that a lack of sufficient post-release planning exists (Doherty et al., 2014; Pedlar et al., 2018).

It is clear that establishing connections between incarcerated women and the community is essential to re-integration, which facilitates success. Therefore, it puts into question why correctional authorities do not greater facilitate the interaction between the community and incarcerated women, which is noted as vital to study participants and is outlined as a guiding principle of the CSC. For example, the principle of *Shared Responsibility* indicates that all parties of society, such as community members, not-for-profit organizations, businesses/private sector, including corrections workers and governments, should take responsibility for supporting FIW as interdependent aspects of society. However, facilitating the interactions between the community and incarcerated women does not seem to factor in as a significant priority.

For example, one area where the connection between women and the community occurs is through ETAs (escorted temporary absences), which enable incarcerated women to participate in community initiatives or visit family. However, as noted by one participant in this study, enabling these outings is not a priority to correctional staff. She described a lack of community escorts and a lack of willingness or availability by correctional staff to escort women themselves. Pedlar et al. (2018) found similar concerns at the Grand Valley Institution for Women in Ontario, where few correctional staff were available to take women on their ETAs (Pedlar et al. 2018). Furthermore, delays in paperwork processing meant that trained community volunteers who could facilitate ETAs would arrive at the institution to learn that the ETA would not occur (Pedlar et al., 2018).

Engagement in the Community

Participants talked about the importance of developing a routine right after exiting prison to facilitate the monumental transition from the controlled environment of prison to the community. Routines provided further structure to follow as women began to establish what their lives would look like post-release. However, beyond developing that routine, participants shared the importance of engaging in community-based activities that went beyond attending programs (e.g., Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous). Some participants talked about engaging in different activities such as cooking classes, running clubs, African dance clubs, volunteering with not-for-profit organizations, or participating in sweats at a sweat lodge. For these participants, it is vital to develop new connections based on shared interests that reflect their new direction and identities in life.

Fortune and Arai (2014) explored Canadian FIW perspectives on social inclusion within the community upon release. Their participants described inclusion as spaces where conformity was not key, but those with differences to mainstream society could participate and be authentically themselves (Fortune & Arai, 2014). In particular, some resource support centres and libraries were noted as inclusive spaces where women could locate stabilizing supports that provided practical support and promoted feelings of connection to the community (Fortune & Arai, 2014). However, participants in this study specifically sought out activities of interest in the community that were completely independent of post-release needs. As such, women engaged in meaningful activities and built relationships through new experiences with others where their criminal past was not a factor. These activities and relationships are an element of success described in the day to day as they promoted a sense of belonging to the community, contributed to building self-esteem, and provided joy and fulfillment in daily life.

Although the literature is clear on the importance of developing positive support networks within the context of securing post-release support (Bui & Morash, 2010; Fortune & Arai, 2014), participants in this study saw their engagement in the community beyond seeking a network of organizational supports. It is important to remember that nearly all participants described the process of re-integration as a never-ending journey that reflected leading new lives and subsequently new identities in the community. To continue their new direction and mindset towards life, participants described the importance of ongoing engagement in the community in roles not limited to relationships that developed during their transition into the community.

Research has thoroughly documented the stigma of incarceration that follows participants post-release (Barker, 2009; Fortune & Arai, 2014; Maidment, 2006, Pedlar et al., 2018), which has damaging impacts on self-perceptions as women internalize the stigma (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; O'Brien, 2001, Richie, 2001). Certainly, the stigma associated with incarceration continues to impact women as they attempt to secure post-release goals (e.g., employment, housing), which even includes their desire to give back to society by participating in normative activities (Pedlar et al., 2018). For example, volunteering with children typically requires a criminal records check, which may impact an organization's willingness to allow women to volunteer. However, the results of this study indicate the encouraging potential of participating in community-based activities of interest that are independent of securing post-release needs.

Success and Support: The Role of Interpersonal Relationships

Within the literature, the impact of interpersonal relationships in facilitating or inhibiting re-integration efforts is often explored. The following narrative focuses on how interpersonal relationships with family, parole officers and correctional staff have impacted participants'

journey with success and the varying roles they play in supporting or inhibiting women's return to the community.

Family

As found in the literature (Clone & Dehart, 2014; Cobbina, 2010; Doherty et al., 2014; Fortune & Arai, 2014; Heidemann et al., 2016b; O'Brien, 2001; Maidment, 2006), participants in this study affirmed the importance of family support in providing material support. Specifically, participants talked about receiving assistance to meet transportation and housing needs. More often described was the significant ongoing support and encouragement they received from family members, which others have documented (Cobbina, 2010; O'Brien, 2001). The value of such support has been described as vital in providing participants with ongoing strength and motivation.

The literature has noted that women are more likely to lose contact with their families while incarcerated than formerly incarcerated males (Cobbina & Bender, 2012; Severance, 2004) and that relationships between FIW and male partners are often destabilizing forces (Cobbina, 2010; Leverentz, 2006). However, some participants in this study resumed relationships with their partners post-release and indicated that their partners were supportive throughout their incarceration and after release. One participant cites her husband as her number one supporter, whereas another spoke of her partner's strength when attending to their small children and caring for her emotional needs during her incarceration. It is important to note that the sample of women who described returning to relationships is small (n=3). However, Leverentz's (2006) study that examined the influence of romantic relationships on women's post-release experiences found relationships with men were particularly destabilizing as they had histories of substance abuse and/or criminal records. Participants in this study did not note any of these concerns with

their common-law partners and described the healing and growing process their relationships underwent during their incarceration. Similarly, these participants themselves had no history of drug use and were gainfully employed before incarceration. It may be due to the different life histories of women that relationships with partners have differential impacts post-release than what is currently understood.

While familial relationships have considerable importance to women who exit prison, healthy relationships, particularly with family members, are also considerable successes in women's lives. Participants spoke about how they and their family members had worked towards improving their relationships and, as such, were considered "clear-cut success(es)." While some began re-developing relationships with family members while incarcerated, others spoke of this process beginning once exiting prison as time passed and women demonstrated their commitment to a new life. While undoubtedly healthy relationships impact enjoyment in life and provide crucial ongoing support and encouragement, they also reflect a significant personal transformation within participants and to some extent family members.

However, for those women whose relationships with family would not resume post-prison despite women's desire to rebuild connections, developing relationships with others within the community became critical. Not only does developing new relationships within the community support women's transition by providing material support, but by also affirming their new identities, which participants would not receive from family members. In fact, participants spoke of difficulties with some who continued to disparage and discourage them as they refused to see past their pre-prison lives. Establishing boundaries with family members who are not considered positive supports, not because of any criminogenic factors, but who refuse to accept women in light of their post-prison selves proved to be difficult but necessary. As women shared,

self-forgiveness is one of the toughest challenges they face and requires setting healthy boundaries even with those they love the most. Relationships were still a component of success articulated by these women but were not considered feasible concerning their current familial relationships. As such, their connection to the community is vital.

Parole and Correctional Officers

Nearly all participants described their parole officers as one of their most significant supporters post-release. Parole officers connected women with relevant resources, provided guidance, kept participants accountable, and provided invaluable emotional support, which others have documented (Cobbina, 2010; O'Brien, 2001; Opsal, 2015; Stone et al., 2018). Although the literature has outlined the conflicting role that parole officers play in providing transitional support and monitoring women's risk to re-offend (Opsal, 2015; Pollack, 2009b; Turnbull & Hannah-Moffat, 2009), predominantly parole officers were seen as positive supports. One participant did note the significant power differential between herself and her parole officer, which made it difficult for her to be open as she expressed concern that her admissions would result in returning to prison. However, for the majority, having an open and honest relationship with their parole officers is or was vital. In fact, some described the thought of losing their parole officer as a support once reaching their warrant expiry date as too bad. Participants clearly felt that their parole officers were invested in their wellbeing and chose to look at their direction and candour in a more positive light.

Concerning correctional staff within prison, one participant spoke about her caseworker, who eventually became her parole officer at release. She noted this individual as instrumental to her personal transformation in prison. She observed that her caseworker saw potential in her that she did not see in herself and had a genuine interest in helping her. When transitioning into the

community, her then parole officer advocated for her to receive a job that would involve working with finances, which should have been prohibited due to this participant's criminal history. However, the parole officer believed the participant whose account of her criminal activity differed from the official account. While this story is not the norm, it puts into perspective the initial vision of the Task Force for Federally Incarcerated Women that advocated for women-centred practice. As Pedlar et al. (2018) points out, correctional staff took on uniforms within Canadian institutions that further distanced inmates from workers, promoting the shift in approach away from rehabilitation to emphasize security and monitoring.

While correctional workers can have a significant positive impact on women's post-release trajectories, they can also have a corresponding negative impact. Participants spoke of institutional staff that treated all women the same and put little to no investment into who they were as individuals, which was dehumanizing. As one participant shared, "how can you believe in yourself if you don't have the support around you?" Not only does this practically impact women's pathways forward, as it is the opinion of officials that carry weight in women's institutional files (Pollack, 2009a), but they can inhibit women’s efforts for personal transformation. As re-entry literature has demonstrated the importance of positive identity verification from parole officers in FIW's post-release transition (Stone et al., 2018), similar attention should be paid to the impact of correctional personnel.

As correctional and parole officers have a significant impact in all aspects of women's journeys, from incarceration to in the community, it becomes vital for staff to recognize the significant role they play in facilitating women’s success or inhibiting progress. As seen in the Advocate program model (Wesely & Dewey, 2018), the personal investment of staff impacted participants most significantly, as they customized solutions recognizing the complexities that

women faced post-release. Although understandably the role of a correctional officer requires attention to several other dimensions, which primarily seems to be monitoring and surveillance, increased attention to the individual will likely yield better outcomes for all parties involved.

Chapter 6: Implications, Limitations, and Conclusion

Implications

In the following Chapter, implications to practice, programming, and policies are outlined below when considering success as defined by participants and key supporting factors that facilitate their success. Most of the implications recommend allocating further resources to rehabilitation and re-integration initiatives to support incarcerated women and those transitioning into the community. Although the CSC guiding principles, as founded by the TFFSW, are intended to focus on providing women-centred care, the below recommendations reflect the lack of prioritization to assist women in their transition back into the community. As participants in this study and others have shared (Pedlar et al., 2018; Pollack, 2009a), the ethos of CSC tends towards monitoring and surveillance where avoiding risk often means that no risk is deemed worthy in itself to detrimental effect. Therefore, an overarching recommendation is that an examination of current CSC resource allocation should be undertaken to understand what financial resources are put towards rehabilitation and re-integration efforts and to what extent their activities are prioritized.

In addition, as each of the following implications are reviewed, the conduct of correctional and parole board staff must also be thoughtfully examined. As participants mentioned, parole and correctional staff can be one of their greatest supporters within prison and within the community. On the other hand, providing incarcerated and FIW with negative identity verification provides damaging and lasting impacts. Therefore, accountability for correctional staff and parole board employees must also be incorporated into CSC's revised focus on facilitating women's transition into the community and their success as defined by participants.

Provision of Mental Health Support

Findings from this study clearly indicate that the personal transformation achieved by participants is one of the most significant successes they have achieved. It enables them to move towards pursuing a different life while incarcerated and in life post-prison. Although nearly all women spoke about this process beginning for them while incarcerated, they often reached out to family members or other individuals within prison (e.g., Chaplains and Elders), as a significant lack of mental health services within the institution was reported by participants. While others have documented the lack of mental health services within Canada and other jurisdictions (Bakken & Visher, 2018; Baldry, 2010; Kilty, 2012; Moses, 2014; Petersilia, 2001; Richie, 2001), and although CSC research itself acknowledges the significant mental health needs of incarcerated women (e.g., Derkzen et al., 2017), not enough has been done to rectify this concern. Therefore, resources must be allocated towards mental health support for incarcerated women as they address their past to move meaningfully towards new futures.

While this support is vital within women's federal institutions, continuity of mental health care within the community is also essential. However, as others have reported, continuity of care within the community (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Doherty et al., 2014) continues to be limited. In addition to requiring FIW to seek out the individual supports and services they need, they must also make tough decisions about where to focus their energy and limited financial resources. Transitioning into the community from incarceration is no easy feat, and mental health services enable women to address the many emotional and mental demands of re-entry. For example, it enables them to address the effects of moving from a structured and controlled environment to the community (Moses, 2014; Pedlar et al., 2018), continually equips them to attend to their healing journey concerning past traumatic experiences, eases feelings of anxiety

and uncertainty (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Doherty et al., 2014), and promotes greater self-awareness. Women noted the importance of self-awareness as key to not returning to past toxic behaviours when overwhelmed and facing obstacles that seem insurmountable. Providing counselling services also provides a safe outlet for women to express their frustrations and concerns about life post-prison.

It is clear that providing mental health support both within prison and as a continuing service while in the community will continue to support women in remaining successful in the day to day as they re-establish their lives and attend to their health holistically. However, it is essential to note that providing mental health support is not intended to serve as another way to regulate women's risk of re-offending and should be independent of CSC and Parole Board decisions, as others have noted (Kilty, 2012; OCI, 2021). It should be provided in the spirit of desiring women to accomplish the goals and aspirations they have laid out for themselves by enabling them to address their self-identified needs, which is a central aspect of success defined by women.

Recognizing Measures Beyond Outcomes

Participants were clear that reaching their post-release goals were monumental successes in their lives. However, as has been demonstrated in the literature and expressed by participants, some post-release goals such as securing meaningful employment continue to be an ongoing struggle (Babchishin et al., 2021; Batastini et al., 2017; Nally et al. 2013; Pedlar et al., 2018; Petersilia, 2001). While securing a job regardless is considered a success and a first necessary step towards reaching longer-term goals and providing a source of income, long-term employment outcomes are concerning in the light of a recent study conducted by Public Safety Canada (Babchishin et al., 2021). It is apparent that success must be understood as more than

simply checking off a box that indicates achievement of post-release goals as reaching these goals are often considerably constrained by factors unrelated to women's individual efforts. Therefore, additional criteria representing women's ongoing commitment to their re-integration journey should be adopted by CSC and the Parole Board and are discussed below.

Participants described success as being engaged in life daily by getting things done that needed doing and participating in hobbies and activities that provide a sense of joy and accomplishment. In particular, women spoke of a shift in focus from obtaining external material indicators towards more personal successes such as attending to their health and establishing healthy relationships with others. I had the opportunity to share the results of success with FIW who attended the Open Door community support group where most of the attendees had not participated in the study. Women affirmed that success, as presented in the results, resounded with their experiences. They noted that success was not linear but was indeed circular and emphasized the importance of taking care of themselves daily to move forward. However, they expressed frustration that their perception of success is not understood by their parole officers nor the Parole Board of Canada. Instead, women report the emphasis on outcomes-based measures such as securing housing and employment, which understandably cause much frustration as realizing these goals takes time. For women to be successful post-release, daily successes are paramount as they reflect women's ongoing intent to move forward in living new lives and working towards longer-term goals. As such, the Parole Board of Canada and their parole officers need to re-think what measures are determined as indicators of successful re-integration to better align with women's experiences and understandings.

Although recidivism has long been held as a measure of success, participants in this study, similar to those in Heidemann et al.'s (2016b) preliminary study of success, view not

returning to prison as a small piece of the success puzzle. As women describe living completely new lives after prison that reflect changed values and priorities, re-integration is a journey that never ends that requires a daily commitment to making decisions that continue to contribute to women's success in the community. It is interesting to note the emphasis on health to both the short and long-term success by participants when considering Maidment's (2006) study that sought to use recidivism as a measure of success. As Maidment (2006) discovered, although "successful" FIW may not have returned to prison, nearly all required round-the-clock health care in a supported living facility. Therefore, the results of this study support the critiques of others regarding the emphasis of recidivism as a measure of success (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Heidemann et al., 2016b; Maidment, 2006) and call on CSC and the Parole Board of Canada to implement measures that consider the daily efforts and involvement of women in their lives as indicators of success as they pursue their long-term goals in the community.

Removing Systemic Barriers

Employment. As is clear from the study's findings and the literature (Babchishin et al., 2021; Batastini et al., 2017; Nally et al. 2013; Pedlar et al., 2018; Petersilia, 2001), significant barriers exist when it comes to securing meaningful employment. Although it is important to note that participants described differential outcomes, such as those returning to their field within trades versus those with education and vocational training in finances who were prohibited entirely from working with money, overall, significant barriers exist concerning long term economic outcomes (Babchishin et al., 2021). If the belief is that women exiting prison have been rehabilitated and are ready to join the public as contributing members of society, then more needs to be done to ensure they have fair and equitable access to employment opportunities.

Firstly, parole restrictions must be reconsidered when recognizing how the conditions supposedly intended to support women limit them from securing entry-level work. There should be no reason why women cannot remain gainfully employed with employers like Tim Hortons simply because they would have to work as a cashier. While a couple of participants mentioned this scenario specifically within this study, I have heard this concern from others throughout my work as an Open Door volunteer. As cashier register audits and balances are completed daily, women would be held accountable daily. Therefore, banning women from working with money completely only further harms their employment options which are already severely limited due to their criminal record. As participants shared, not all conditions are bad, but restrictions should be customized to protect women from areas that they themselves perceive as potential risk factors. Without attending to the individual needs of women, blanket restrictions only serve to harm employability.

It is also recommended that provinces and territories review their regulations around criminal records as a protected status that would inhibit employment discrimination (Babchishin et al., 2021). As Babchishin et al., 2021 point out, although some provinces and territories have regulations in place, they differ from region to region, and ultimately legislation does not prevent employers from asking for a criminal record check. Even those employers who are open to hiring FIW may be unable to do so due to the delay in time required for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to process the request. The delays occur as the RCMP requires fingerprint verification from applicants with criminal records before disclosing the results. Therefore, this calls for revised legislation to determine whether a criminal records check is required and, to the greatest extent possible, to standardize these requirements nationally.

As others have proposed (Babchishin et al., 2021), updating the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to include criminal history as a protected status where formerly incarcerated peoples are not to be discriminated against is one avenue that would likely improve employment outcomes. Another potential avenue for improving employment and consequently economic outcomes includes ‘Ban the box’ legislation. ‘Ban the box’ legislation, adopted in many states within the US, prohibits employers from asking applicants about criminal records except when positions involve working with vulnerable populations. This type of legislation would provide FIW with further opportunities to leverage their existing skill sets and contribute to society in meaningful ways instead of requiring their dependence on social assistance.

Education. As literature has long pointed out (Barrett et al., 2010; Doherty et al., 2014; OCI, 2018; Pollack, 2009b) and has been recently affirmed by the latest Office of the Correctional Investigator Report (2021), much more must be done within federal institutions to prepare incarcerated women to exit prison. Correctional policies must be updated to emphasize the importance of providing continuing education beyond high school equivalency, enable access to updated technology and requisite training, and provide vocational training opportunities beyond gendered roles that reflect current labour market demands. It seems absurd that women return to the community and seek educational opportunities as they also attend to the many other requirements of re-integration when the education or training could have been secured within the institution. By providing this support, women will be better situated to pursue employment outcomes that are meaningful and feasible when accounting for the limitations imposed by their criminal past. If the position of the Government of Canada is that prisons are to be rehabilitative, much more must be done to better prepare women for the realities of 'going straight' on the outside.

Housing. Securing sustainable and safe housing for women exiting prison is essential. Beyond being a post-release need, securing safe housing of their own is considered a success in itself. These findings confirm Heidemann et al.'s (2016b) preliminary study, where participants indicated having a place of their own, whether subsidized or not, was a success. Most participants in this study described housing as a significant success; however, government-assisted support was not reported. Alternatively, women reached out to community organizations to secure financial assistance. When recognizing the importance of housing as a safe place for women to rebuild their lives, assisting FIW with securing affordable housing should be a priority.

It is recognized that a lack of affordable housing is a concern that impacts many Canadians across the country (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, n.d.). In 2017, the Government of Canada announced Canada's First National Housing Strategy (Government of Canada, 2017), which indicated that the most vulnerable Canadians would be prioritized first (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2018). However, incarcerated people are not included in the list of those with the greatest needs (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2018). It is important to note that although incarcerated women are not explicitly identified, many of the factors related to women's lives pre-incarceration and potentially post-incarceration are included as a priority (e.g., women fleeing domestic violence, Indigenous peoples, those with mental health and addictions issues). In recognizing the many intersecting vulnerabilities incarcerated women face upon their release, the National Housing Strategy, in partnership with CSC, should coordinate efforts and support women in securing sustainable housing.

Concerning halfway houses, more must be done to ensure that these transitional houses are located in safe areas. Participants in this study echo the voices of other documented concerns in the literature about transitional housing located in areas where many factors from women's lives pre-incarceration exist (e.g., high rates of substance abuse, crime) (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003; Moses, 2014; Opsal, 2015; Pedlar et al., 2018; Richie, 2001). Participants also shared that the halfway house they were required to live in is or was located next to a drug house. When providing transportation support for FIW in my role as a volunteer, women spoke about waking up in the middle of the night and hearing gunshots which was later affirmed by police. Considering what is known about many women's pre-incarceration lives, it is perplexing that women are housed in areas where past triggers abound. Further attention to the placement of halfway houses must be examined to ensure women are best situated to move forward.

Mobilizing the Community

A clear factor that supports women in reaching their self-defined views of success is the role of the community. This was described on two fronts, developing community support networks and being engaged in different community activities. Due to the significant positive impact that the community plays, enabling connections between the community and incarcerated and FIW should be of great importance. It is noteworthy to acknowledge that facilitating connections between the community and incarcerated women does not require any policy changes as the CSC guiding principles emphasize the importance of this role (TFFSW, 1990). Therefore, while FIW should be commended in their efforts to build community support networks, more needs to be provided on a systems level to promote their transition. Based on the findings of this study and the emphasis of the literature on the importance of supports (Carlton &

Segrave, 2016; Clone & DeHart; 2014; Doherty et al., 2014; Wesley & Dewey, 2018), the following recommendations should be implemented.

Within Prison. As a starting point, an up-to-date comprehensive listing of resources and places of support should be provided to women prior to their release (Doherty et al., 2014). This calls on CSC to ensure post-release planning provides women with clear expectations upon release. Although post-release planning must go beyond providing a list of resources or support, updated and relevant information should be at a bare minimum provided as an aspect of post-release planning. As one participant shared, she saw her post-release plan as her "plan of success" when re-entering the community. However, she described the disheartening experience of realizing that her plan was not feasible in the community as she tried to find a job that provided a livable wage and did not conflict with her parole conditions. Finding meaningful employment has continued to be an ongoing struggle even long past her warrant expiry date. Understandably, this participant's self-view of success was impacted even though her post-release plan did not account for the long-term limitations to her employment.

It is noteworthy to mention that the Women's Re-integration Chaplain of the Open Door program sought student assistance from a post-secondary institution to create a mobile application that houses a curated list of resources and support for FIW. While an innovative approach, maintaining and updating the application requires an ongoing commitment by Open Door staff or volunteers. Notably, the Open Door does not receive funding to maintain this important work. Further funding should support such vital initiatives with an increased partnership between CSC and community organizations to facilitate information sharing.

Although providing comprehensive information is an essential first step, more must be done to facilitate the interaction between community organizations and incarcerated women.

Participants emphasized the importance of developing supports while within the institution before release. A greater priority should be placed on providing organizations that provide transitional support access to the institution to facilitate information sessions and one-on-one individualized planning. Incarcerated women should not have to rely on institutional Chaplains and Elders to coordinate these supports. By enabling incarcerated women to be proactive in networking and developing support networks essential for their release, anxiety and stress levels will likely ease (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Doherty et al., 2014) as women tangibly begin working towards their long term goals and aspirations.

Beyond increased connections with organizational supports, facilitating connections between incarcerated women and community members should also be prioritized. For example, the Walls to Bridges Program is an educational program that brings together both incarcerated women and university students as equal peers who participate in courses that obtain credits towards post-secondary educational programs (Walls to bridges, n.d.). Pollack (2014) interviewed students at the Grand Valley Institution, both from the "inside" and "outside," about their experiences participating in the course. Students noted a shift in power imbalances where participants describe feeling equal, which facilitated reflection upon internal biases and judgements that they may have held towards the "other" (Pollack, 2014). Beyond the benefits of educational training, programs like the Wall to Bridges provide opportunities for community members to engage with those within the institution. As participants contribute and learn from one another and the course material, they also promote community members' insights into the realities of women and the criminal justice system (Pollack, 2014). While this educational program has occurred in some federal women's institutions, innovative programs such as Walls to Bridges tend to remain pilot programs instead of being rolled out on a larger scale (OCI,

2021). Therefore, programs that facilitate connections between community members and incarcerated women must be implemented more broadly.

Stride Nights and Circles are other examples of community engagement initiatives within prison that also show promise (Pedlar et al., 2005). In the Grand Valley Institution in Ontario, Stride Nights brought together community volunteers and incarcerated women to participate in different types of activities such as skill-building (Pedlar et al., 2005). Through this engagement, relationships were developed between incarcerated women and community members, which evolved into the development of stride circles (Pedlar et al., 2005). Each stride circle was comprised of one incarcerated woman and several community volunteers with the goal to provide ongoing support to incarcerated women upon release (Pedlar et al., 2005). This type of model enables networking early on in the process of transitioning into the community and provides incarcerated women with tangible supports before exiting prison (Pedlar et al., 2005). Despite the positive results of this initiative, programs such as Stride Night and Stride Circles have not been implemented more widely across the country but should be examined further.

Furthermore, correctional organizations should allocate sufficient resources to volunteer management positions with the institution. As one participant noted in this study and has been observed by others (Pedlar et al., 2018), barriers exist for enabling community members to facilitate escorted temporary absences (ETAs) despite the long process it takes for incarcerated women to obtain these "privileges." I have also experienced these difficulties in securing escort training as a volunteer with the Open Door. Although I have completed CSC volunteer training and received the requisite security clearance, I continue to wait for opportunities to secure ETA training. While the pandemic has had a substantial impact on ETAs, as they have been prohibited for most of the pandemic, I had been waiting over a year before the pandemic to receive the

training. As a volunteer for over six years, I know that my experience is not unique among volunteers. The lack of response from correctional authorities is disheartening and can terminate a volunteer's sustained efforts to pursue the training. CSC must leverage community member interest in facilitating ETAs, which enable incarcerated women to set up support and positive connections with the community long before their release.

Within the Community. Government funding to community-based organizations to provide FIW with wrap-around supports and services within a one-stop shop model must be explored further. Requiring women to secure multiple organizational assistance only further complicates their post-release transition as they struggle to locate relevant assistance and navigate multiple demands and appointments to meet needs. Providing a one-shop stop model is not a new concept when considering existing literature (Carlton & Segrave, 2016; Richie, 2001; Wesely & Dewey, 2018). Consequently, it is not surprising that participants in this study view comprehensive wrap-around supports as a significant benefit in facilitating their long-term goals/successes.

As an example of one promising case study, Wesley and Dewey (2018) described the Advocacy Program that provides extensive wrap-around support and services in one location. Participants in their study emphasized the importance of the holistic care they received from staff who demonstrated understanding and investment in their overall health, which was often emphasized as more important than the services themselves. Therefore, funding organizations to provide these supports where their ethos underlines similar sentiments described in the Advocacy Program (Wesely & Dewey, 2018) is central.

In addition to providing comprehensive wrap-around services and support, participants shared the importance of engaging in community activities outside of their need for re-entry

assistance. For example, participating in running clubs and attending cooking or dance classes were some activities identified by participants that reflected their engagement in the community that required no disclosure of their criminal past. Building relationships with community members over new shared experiences supported women's post-release identities, provided a sense of joy and accomplishment, and grew their support networks. Some participants indicated a desire to have an extensive listing of activities that they could take part in. While cost will likely be a barrier to participation, a listing of activities and associated costs would better inform FIW of the opportunities available within the community. Funding that enables women to participate in activities within their communities should also be considered as they draw FIW into the community and replace past social networks that were part of their pre-prison lives.

In the community re-integration support group, we often find that women are with us for some time, typically when attending ETAs or serving parole in the community. While there is no "end date" to participating in the support group, most women rely heavily on the group during the difficult time of transition. As women become further situated in the community and return to families and busy schedules, their participation in the community support group often wanes. Although participants cite the importance of the support they receive through the group and find comfort among those with shared experiences, being engaged within the community by taking up new hobbies or activities reflects women's return to society in ways they had not experienced before incarceration. Therefore, prioritizing women's engagement in the community as they choose areas of interest should be explored in more detail.

Finally, providing comprehensive wrap-around services and sharing information about activities within the community is also essential for those whose familial relationships will not continue upon community re-entry. As participants describe and as consistently found in the

literature (Clone & DeHart, 2014; Cobbina, 2010; Doherty et al., 2014; Fortune & Arai, 2014; Heidemann et al., 2016b; Maidment, 2006; O'Brien, 2001), familial support is essential in providing practical needs as well as emotional support. For those women who will not receive support and acceptance from family members, developing relationships and support networks within the community become vital.

In conclusion, it is important to note that the current support provided by community organizations was described as central to enabling FIW to attend to success internally and on a daily level and in reaching long-term goals. As mentioned in the introduction of this Chapter, study implications indicate that much more must be done by authorities such as CSC and the Parole Board of Canada. For those organizations in the community that assist women post-release, they should be commended for personally investing in women who are exiting prison and for meeting their individualized needs. Community-based organizations, their staff, and volunteers should continue to affirm the daily successes achieved by women as they make decisions that prioritize their needs and health. By recognizing that internal and personal successes are integral to FIW's enjoyment in the day to day, which will enable them to work towards long-term goals, organizations should uphold these aspects of success in their work with FIW. Additionally, creating connections with women while incarcerated is important, and while obstacles exist in negotiating access with correctional authorities, efforts should not be abandoned.

Knowledge Mobilization Activities

As a critical component of community-based participatory research is to ensure that findings of the study are shared in mutually beneficial ways for knowledge users and producers (Israel et al., 1998), knowledge mobilization activities become essential to address. These

initiatives become even more vital when considering the theoretical framework of feminist standpoint theory, which aims for social change and improving women's situations (Brooks, 2007). The implications of this study point to areas where system-level changes must be addressed to acknowledge how FIW define success and to facilitate their re-integration as they work towards reaching further aspects of success as reflected in post-release goals. Some participants indicated their desire for study findings to be shared with decision-makers in bringing forward the realities faced by women post-release as they pursue their vision of success in their lives. As such, further knowledge mobilization activities will continue to be thoughtfully considered in addition to those highlighted below.

To date, a presentation was provided to attendees of the Open Door community-based support group. After the presentation, an in-depth discussion occurred about the results where women affirmed the themes of success and shared some of their successes to date. A handout was also provided to participants (Appendix E). As mentioned previously in *Recognizing Measures Beyond Outcomes*, women were concerned that their understandings of success were not understood by correctional or parole board authorities. Therefore, moving forward, presentations with parole officers and correctional staff will also be pursued in partnership with the Open Door. A report summarizing key findings is also in development and will be shared with community-based organizations, CSC, and the Parole Board of Canada. It is also noted that interest in this study and more broadly into FIW has been expressed by a local member of parliament and senator. As such, further conversations regarding the results will occur to facilitate further knowledge sharing. Unfortunately, the impacts of COVID-19 have made engaging with different audiences considerably more difficult due to public health restrictions

and other competing priorities. However, continued efforts will be made to bring the findings forward as I remain engaged as an Open Door volunteer.

Limitations and Future Research

Due to the limited research concerning FIW's definitions of success post-release, this study is a first attempt within Canada to bring forward their perspectives. As such, additional research is needed further to understand FIW conceptualizations of success on a broader scale. For example, all participants in this study were incarcerated at the Edmonton Institution for Women. Additionally, most described serving their day parole within Edmonton or Calgary before transitioning to home communities in municipal areas. Although definitions of success were consistent across the sample, there may be variable experiences and understandings of success based on where women served their conditional release or where incarcerated. For example, those returning to rural or isolated communities may have additional insight concerning success and obstacles faced.

Additionally, broadening the number of participants would enable further understanding of the unique perspectives and needs of FIW when considering diverse socio-demographic factors. The sample of women who participated in this study was quite diverse. While as Patton (1990) points out that "any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences" (p. 172), diverse samples can make in-depth understanding of unique experiences difficult. For example, some unique perspectives were raised concerning the experiences of older adults (45+) who described additional barriers when seeking employment (Batastini et al., 2017) and securing mental health support. Differential employment outcomes were also observed between participants with either no employment histories, histories within the trades, or previous experience in financial positions. Significant

efforts have been made to bring forward the diversity of perspectives expressed in this study and to provide a rationale for the differences noted. However, further research should investigate these initial findings to explore the differential experiences of women which point to different needs post-release.

Beyond exploring some of these unique findings, further research that seeks exclusively to understand Indigenous women's experiences and perspectives about success is greatly needed. While Indigenous participants in this study noted an absence of missing cultural and spiritual supports once returning to the community, which should be addressed further, it is essential to note that all participants reside in Albertan municipalities where they have access to different resources and supports. Therefore, the voices of participants who return to First Nations communities or Métis settlements were not captured. As a significant overrepresentation of Indigenous women continues to exist within prison (OCI, 2019), studies focusing exclusively on their perspectives and experiences are critically needed. Specifically, studies founded in Indigenous research paradigms and methods should be explored further as they incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing that are not represented in dominant research paradigms (Wilson, 2008).

As the intent of this research was to take a strengths-based approach that focused on success, questions regarding women's life before incarceration were limited. Women were not asked to disclose their past criminal activity or to delve into their life histories. As FIW are often defined by their criminal history and re-live their past at every program and parole meeting, focusing on their successes was important. In fact, the first participant who responded to the recruitment flyer indicated she had shared her story multiple times before as a guest speaker to students within academic settings. However, she found that conversations focused on her life on

the streets, her criminal activity, and her experiences in prison. She decided to no longer participate in these speaking events as they focused on her pre-prison life and identity.

In contrast, when viewing the recruitment poster for this study and seeing the focus on success, she was excited by the potential of sharing her story in the context of her resiliency and success. While I firmly stand by the approach to focus on success, it became apparent through the interviews that past context is valuable when recognizing the differences among experiences (e.g., length of time incarcerated, number of times incarcerated, histories of abuse and substance abuse). In most cases, participants were open about sharing factors from their past often to point out why current views, behaviours, and accomplishments were successes. However, not all participants shared a depth of information concerning their past. Therefore, approaches that include information about women's' pre-incarceration lives should be included, especially considering theoretical frameworks incorporating intersectionality, but should be considered carefully.

Due to the impacts of COVID-19, the recruitment strategy in this study changed considerably. While initially, participants were to be recruited at their attendance at the bi-weekly community support group, the shift to virtual groups impacted the sample considerably. For example, viewpoints of incarcerated women were excluded as they were unable to attend the virtual group, and the portion of attendees decreased significantly. While a few participants were recruited through the virtual support group, most were recruited through the Facebook post facilitated by the Women's Re-integration Chaplain on her private account with FIW. This approach would have only included those involved with the Re-integration Chaplain and who have a Facebook account. That being said, most participants discussed reaching out to multiple

supports within the institution, the Women's Re-integration Chaplain being one party. However, it is noted that all participants represented resource-connected women.

As recruitment of women post-release is often tricky as women attend to competing demands and return to home communities (Arsenault et al., 2016; Pedlar et al., 2018), further efforts to include incarcerated women should continue in future research. However, an unexpected benefit of virtual recruitment was the ability to reach women who now lived in different parts of the country and had been in the community for different lengths of time. Future strategies should consider hybrid approaches of in-person and virtual recruitment.

As post-release success is often understood in the accomplishment of post-release goals and in not returning to prison, it is possible that some women viewing the recruitment flyer may have felt they did not qualify for the study as they were not yet "successful". In fact, this perspective was shared by one attendee of the community support group. As she had recently exited prison and was residing in a halfway house, she shared that she had not accomplished enough to be considered successful. When recruiting participants to explore post-release success further, it should be made clear that there is no pre-requisite completion of time in the community or achievement of goals required to qualify for participation.

Lastly, women in this study had spent differing amounts of time in the community post-release. It could be that those who had been in the community for longer periods had some concerns recalling aspects of their post-release experiences. However, themes seemed quite consistent among the sample.

Conclusion

As the number of incarcerated women continues to rise at alarming rates, understanding how women define success in life after prison becomes vital in supporting their return to the

community. However, literature exploring how FIW understand success is minimal, leaving the definition to be often interpreted as a lack of return to prison (i.e., recidivism). While not returning to prison is undoubtedly an aspect of success, it is a constrained view that fails to appreciate the post-release realities of women and the personal journey that is community re-integration. Although the focus of this study was to bring forward FIW definitions of success, equally important was recognizing factors that either support or hinder their success as they look to establish their lives in the community post-release. It is only through understanding the circumstances and limitations that face women that the magnitude of their success can truly be understood.

This study employed a CBPR approach that engaged both incarcerated women and FIW throughout the study to build relationships with participants, engage in activities to inform the interview guide, and seek feedback on preliminary results. Throughout ongoing engagement with FIW at the Open Door community support group, a qualitative description methodology informed by feminist standpoint theory and intersectionality was employed to explore how success is defined by 16 FIW. Through in-depth interviews, women defined success and shared how success was and continues to be experienced and realized in their lives after exiting prison. A qualitative content analysis approach was employed to uncover central themes and sub-themes of success as women discussed their experiences post-release. The same analytic approach was applied to discovering dominant themes concerning supporting and inhibiting factors. Key findings from this study integrate both concepts of success with the associated factors that impede and assist women as they work towards success as they now define it post-release.

Key findings included the importance of personal transformation that occurred for nearly all participants in prison. Coming to peace with oneself by attending to the past and continuing to

address their ongoing mental health needs was considered one of the most significant successes one could achieve. This internal peace was also crucial to working towards goals and aspirations in life, as internal peace included a positive outlook and happiness or contentment towards life. Similarly, participants described success as a day to day process involving personal successes such as attending to one's health and daily successes such as being engaged in life through completing different tasks. Success in the day to day was also reflected in establishing a new way forward which included not going back to past behaviours, perspectives, or prison and was also reflected in their new values and priorities for life that involved finding a new path forward. At the same time, success is also described as reaching or continuing to maintain their post-release goals, which often take significant time to achieve. However, daily and personal successes are viewed as instrumental to achieving long-term goals. These findings provide unique insights into the standpoint of women as success is seen as a daily internal measure which, as they described, is markedly different from life before prison.

While reaching post-release goals were often significant successes in the community, a number of external factors often complicated the journey towards reaching these goals. As discussed, parole conditions, correctional and parole officers, and the ongoing impacts of being incarcerated impose significant if not lifelong constraints that inhibit women from reaching their goals. Similarly, a lack of mental health support both within prison and in the community was noted as a barrier to attending to women's need to address their health on an ongoing basis. Building support systems and being engaged within the community are favourable factors that facilitate women's success by addressing post-release needs, providing vital emotional support, and engaging in community activities that match their new identities. Concernedly, women are

solely responsible for locating and coordinating these supports, which has been described as no easy feat.

As the Women's Re-integration Chaplain has thoughtfully noted in her engagement with FIW for over ten years, many women have returned to the community and are living the lives they have always wanted. The resiliency and success of these participants should be celebrated, and their understandings of success implemented as measures of success by correctional and parole board authorities. However, it is concerning that the inhibiting factors noted by participants have long been documented in the literature. Therefore, the results of this study speak to practice and policy recommendations that must be considered by authorities responsible for the management of incarcerated and FIW. If Canada claims that prisons are places of rehabilitation, much more must be invested into supporting women and preparing them for life after prison, including removing lifelong employability constraints. As participants have noted, without addressing the underlying contributors to crime, women will continue to return to prison. Their return to prison not only fails to leverage their strengths and contributions to the betterment of society but will also require ever-increasing investments into expanding the prison system.

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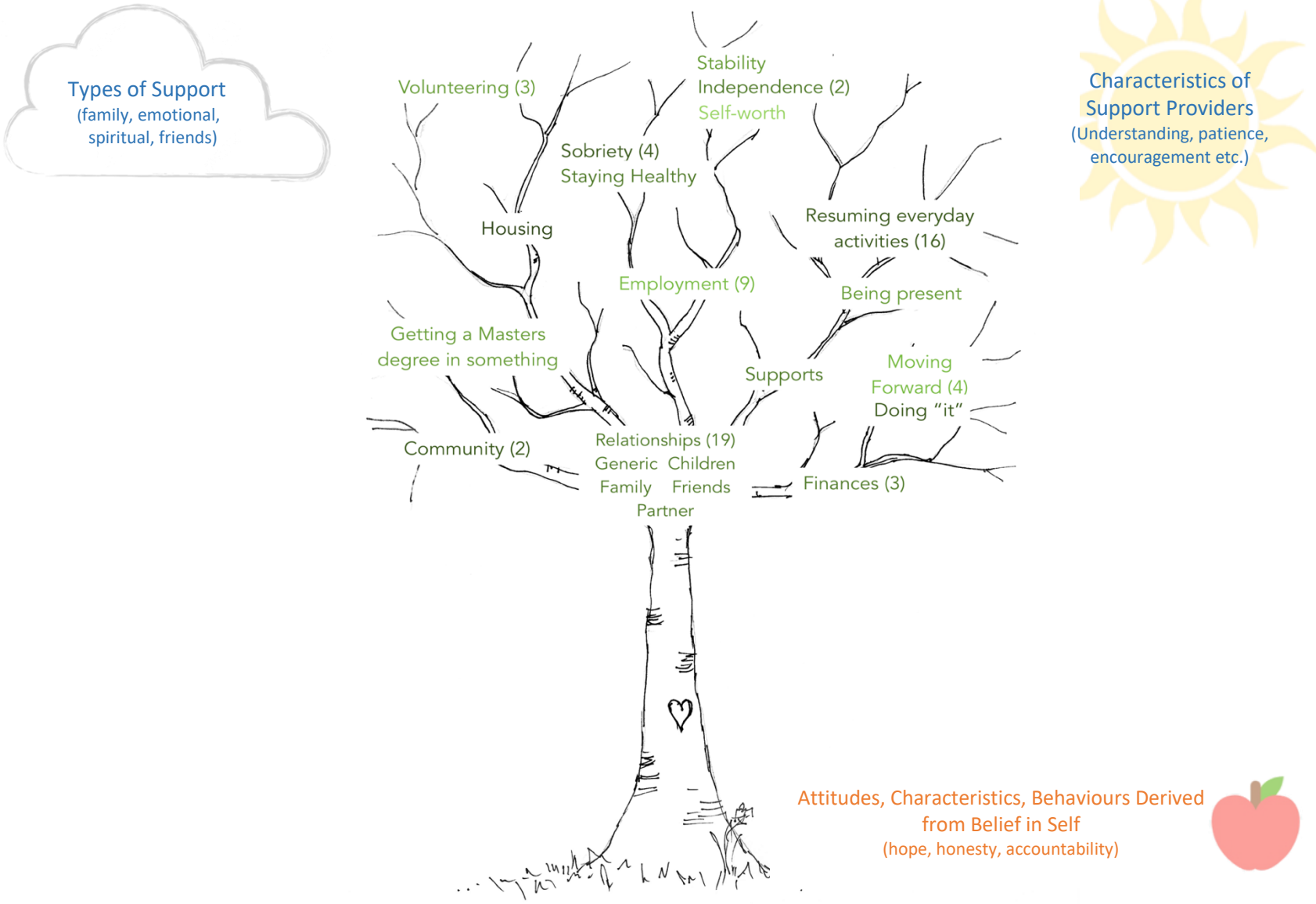
Appendix A: Map of Success



Appendix B: Recruitment Poster

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Defining Post-release Success:

Perspectives of Formerly Incarcerated Women

Have you been incarcerated in a Women's Federal Institution?

If so, you are invited to participate in this study. This study will explore how women who have experienced incarceration
define success after prison. It will explore what the journey of community re-entry looks like from your perspective.

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (Pro00096487).

If you participate, you will be asked to:

- Take part in an interview that will last approximately one hour.
- Be interviewed at a time convenient to you using video conferencing software or over the phone, depending on your preference.

If you are interested in participating in this study, or would like more information, please contact:

Jessica DeVries
jdevries@ualberta.ca
[redacted]

Jessica is a student at the University of Alberta and is conducting this research in support of her Master's degree. Her supervisor's name is Dr. Rebecca Gokiert who can be reached at rgokiert@ualberta.ca or [redacted]

Appendix C: Study Information Letter and Verbal Consent Form

Information Letter and Informed Consent

Title of Study: Defining Post-release Success - Perspectives of Formerly Incarcerated Women

Principal Investigator:
Jessica DeVries
University of Alberta - Extension
10230-Jasper Ave
Edmonton, Alberta, T5J 4P6
jdevries@ualberta.ca
[redacted]

Supervisor:
Dr. Rebecca Gokiert
University of Alberta - Extension
10230-Jasper Ave
Edmonton, Alberta, T5J 4P6
rgokiert@ualberta.ca
[redacted]

What is this letter about?

You are being asked by a student at the University of Alberta to take part in a study that explores how women define success after spending time in prison. In addition to being a student, I am also a volunteer with the Open Door Program, that provides re-integration support to women exiting prison. You are being asked to take part in this study because of your experience in prison and community re-entry. Because of your experiences, you have a valuable perspective about what success means to you.

Before you make a decision to participate or not, I will go over this form with you. You are encouraged to ask questions if you feel anything needs to be made clearer. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

If you participate, what will you be asked to do?

- You will be asked to participate in an interview. I can interview you over the phone or over the internet using secured video conferencing software such as Zoom or Skype for Business at a time that works best for you. Due to the current social distancing requirements to prevent the spread of COVID-19, no in-person interviews are possible at this time.
- The interview will take approximately one hour and will be audio-recorded with your permission. If you do not want to be audio recorded, I will take interview notes instead. The audio recording can be shut off at any point in the interview.
- You will be asked to describe your perspectives on what success after prison means to you. I am interested in understanding the journey of community re-entry. That includes understanding what your goals are and what you need from yourself and from others to be successful.
- Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. This means you choose what questions you want to answer and decide how much information you want to share. You can also choose to stop participating in your interview at any time. I will send you a written record of your interview for your records. After you have completed your

interview, you can withdraw your participation up to two weeks after receiving the written record of your interview. You can also add or remove content from your interview by contacting me.

- You will be asked for your permission to contact you again to check back with you in case I have any questions after reviewing your interview. You will also be asked if you want to receive a copy of the report.
- There will be no impact to your involvement with the Open Door, or Correctional Service Canada, or the University of Alberta whether or not you choose to participate in this study.

What are the benefits to participating?

You will receive no direct benefits in participating in this study. By sharing your perspectives and experiences, you will contribute to an increased understanding of what success after prison means to women who walk this journey. The results from this study may influence future policies or programs provided by community organizations that provide transitional support to women and Correctional Service Canada.

Are there risks in participating?

You may experience a minimal amount of emotional discomfort when participating in your interview. You may remember experiences that were tough when talking about community re-entry which may cause you to feel uncomfortable or uneasy. If you feel any discomfort, please let me know immediately. I will suggest places of support and provide you with their contact information if you want.

How will your privacy be protected?

- Your identity and any information you share with me will be kept confidential. Your name will not be connected with your interview and will not be in any report.
- Skype for Business or Zoom video conferencing software will be used to conduct your interview due to their enhanced security features. If you allow your interview to be audio recorded, your recording will be stored on my personal device and not saved onto the cloud.
- My supervisor or the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Board may review the written record of your interview, but your identity will remain confidential.
- I will securely store all audio-recordings and paper records of the study for 5 years which is the policy at the University of Alberta. All electronic records will be password protected and paper records will be secured. After the 5-year time period, all materials will be destroyed.
- There are limits to your confidentiality that you must be aware of**. The researcher is required to report any unreported criminal behaviour you may have engaged in, threats of harm to yourself or others, and reports of child abuse that you discuss in the interview. As your confidentiality cannot be maintained, it is strongly suggested that you not talk about these topics.**

How will this information be used?

- Your answers will be grouped with all of the answers that other women provide to the questions. A report that summarizes the information will be written in support of my thesis as a student at the University of Alberta.
- Other reports will be written to share with community organizations who provide transitional support for women exiting prison and for Correctional Service Canada.
- Other academic publications and presentations may also be created from the results of this study.
- Quotes from your interview may be used to help explain the results but **your name will not be connected to your quote. Your name will not be in any report, publication, or presentation.**

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

Please review the attached consent form if you would like to participate. You will be asked to respond to each statement verbally before your interview starts.

Thank you for your time.

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Study Consent Form

Have you read the Study Information Letter or was it read to you?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Do you understand that this study is being conducted by me, a student from the University of Alberta in support of my thesis?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Do you understand that you will be asked to answer questions about your experiences and perspectives on success after prison?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Do you understand that your participation is voluntary and that there is nothing to gain or lose should you choose to participate or not?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Do you understand that I am required to report any of the following disclosures: unreported criminal activities that you may have witnessed or been involved in the past, threats of harm to yourself or others, or reports of child abuse and therefore it is recommended not to discuss any of these topics.	☐ Yes	☐ No
Do you understand that you can withdraw your interview information up to two weeks after receiving a written record of your interview by letting me or Debbie Fawcett (Women's Re-integration Chaplain from the Open Door) know?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Do you consent to being contacted further if I have any follow-up questions about your interview? If yes, what is the best way of contacting you? _____	☐ Yes	☐ No
Would you like a copy of the report(s)? If yes, what is the best way of contacting you? _____	☐ Yes	☐ No
I know that some of my answers to the questions may be used in reports, presentations, and publications but my name will not be used.	☐ Yes	☐ No
Have you been able to ask questions about this study and talk about it with me?	☐ Yes	☐ No
I have received a copy of the information sheet and consent form.	☐ Yes	☐ No
I understand all of this and I am willing to answer questions.	☐ Yes	☐ No

Researcher Name	Researcher Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Defining Post-release Success:
Perspectives of Formerly Incarcerated Women

Variables to record.

- Pseudonym as identified by participant
- Does the participant have a pre-existing relationship with the researcher? [Yes/No]
- How did you hear about this study? [DF Facebook Post, Re-integration Group, Halfway house, Referral]
- I am interviewing women in the community that are at different stages in their journeys'. In order to ask you questions that are most relevant to you:
    - How long ago did you leave prison?
    - Are you currently on parole, statutory release, or past your WED?
    - If on parole or stat release - Do you currently live at a half-way house?

Defining Success

I am now going to ask you a series of questions that explores what success means to you. Although success means different things to different people, I am interested in understanding your perspectives, especially when considering what success means to you after leaving prison.

1. When you think of the word success, what comes to mind?

2. In your own life, what does it mean to be successful?
    a. What does that look like in practice?
    b. What does it mean to be successful daily?

3. If you think about the road to becoming the person that you want to be as a journey, where did that road begin for you? Probe - Did that process begin for you when you were in prison, or closer to your release date, or after leaving prison?

4. When you were leaving prison, what where some of your short term and long term goals to help you become the person that you want to be?
   Probe - What goals have been the most important or of highest priority to you? Why?
   Note: Short term (employment/personal goals); Longer term (career, educational goals)

5. How do you know you are making progress in your life? How do you measure success?

6. You mentioned that you have been out for _____, has your perspective of success changed over time as you have spent more time in the community? If yes, how so? Probe - Have your goals changed/shifted over time? How so?

7. Based on your experiences, did you find that the process of re-integration, of moving forward in your life, can often include moving backwards as well too? If so, why?

8. When does the community re-integration journey end from your perspective?

Internal Factors

I am now going to ask you some questions about how you have moved forward in your re-integration journey. First, we are going to talk about what you need from yourself to make progress.

9. What do you need or have you needed to draw on from yourself so that you can reach your goals and aspirations?

10. What is the most important thing that you can do or must continue to do, to support yourself moving forward? Why?

11. [You have mentioned that moving backward is part of the process]. Internally, what kind of attitudes or behaviours make it difficult for you to move forward? Why?Probe - What do you think is behind that?

External Factors

Now we are going to talk about what types of support you need from others in the community. Others include your family members, friends, correctional and other organizational supports. Supports can include programs and services such as help finding housing, or mental health support, or may include assistance you received from individuals.

12. What types of support or assistance have you needed from others as you have returned home? Probe - What was the most important support that you have received from others?Supports can be defined as material supports like providing childcare or transportation as well as emotional or mental health supports. Was there a type of support that you found was more needed? Is one more important than the other?

13. Is there a point during your re-integration journey where you required more support, or perhaps a different type of support? If so, what types of support and in what stages of your journey?
Probe - Does support change? Pre-release, day parole, full parole, stat release, WED?

14. When you think about the support that you received once leaving prison, was there any type of support you received that actually made things more difficult for you? If yes, how so?

15. Is there a type of support that you need or have needed during your journey that hasn't been available to you or you believe was lacking? If so, what?Probe - Who do you think should be providing this assistance?

16. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted you as you seek to move forward in your life?

Demographics

We are nearly done with the interview. I have a few more questions that ask you about different aspects of yourself such as your age and marital status. This information will be used to help understand if perspectives on post-release success differ between women who have different backgrounds. You do not need to answer any question that you feel uncomfortable with.

17. How old are you?

18. What is your marital status?

19. Do you have children under 18? Over 18?

20. How many children do you have?

21. What is your ethnic or cultural background?

22. Where did you live before you were incarcerated?

23. Where do you currently live?

24. How long were you in prison before you left?

Thank you so much for your time. Before we finish up with the interview…

25. Is there anything else you think I should know about success and community re-entry that we have not discussed?

If the participant consented for a member check in the informed consent, discuss next steps.

Appendix E: Success Handout