

# RESEARCH CONNECTION

## Criminalized Indigenous women's perceptions of successful reintegration and the impact of mental wellness and health inequities

*By Kirston Blom & Candice Waddell-Henowitch, PhD*



### Why this research is important

This literature review highlights systemic failures that continue to oppress Indigenous women, reinforcing cycles of incarceration instead of fostering pathways to healing and reintegration. Without culturally relevant, trauma-informed, and community-driven interventions, these women remain trapped in a system that was not designed to support their success. The literature review underscores the importance of holistic healing approaches and meaningful reintegration strategies that honour their identities and support reconciliation. Failing to act means continued neglect of these women's rights, dignity, and well-being, perpetuating the very colonial violence that led to their criminalization in the first place.

### What you need to know

Criminalized First Nations and Métis women in Saskatchewan face significant mental health challenges and health inequities within the justice, mental health, and addiction systems. This literature review explores their experiences and suggests trauma-informed, strength-based, culturally grounded interventions.

### How the research was conducted

We examined existing literature on the experiences of Indigenous women within the criminal justice system, with a specific focus on the intersection of health inequities and their effects on mental wellness.

The literature was selected using targeted search terms related to First Nations women, Métis women, the criminal justice system, health inequities, and mental wellness. Sources utilized included Google Scholar, I-Portal Indigenous Studies Portal, Statistics Canada, National Collaborative Centre for Indigenous Health, and Brandon University Online Library.

### What the researchers found

The researchers revealed consistent findings across various studies. The review highlights the deep systemic failures related to patterns of inequality, discrimination, and violence, which result in Indigenous women being charged, prosecuted, convicted, and imprisoned at disproportionately higher rates compared to the general population. Upon reintegration, these women face significant barriers, often returning to the same marginalized environments that contributed to their criminalization. Many were incarcerated for survival-based offences rooted in violence, poverty, and systemic oppression, yet the justice system continues to punish them instead of addressing these root causes.

The researchers identified critical barriers to reintegration, including family reunification, child advocacy, stigma, and obstacles to medical, mental health, and addiction services—factors that perpetuate their entanglement in the criminal justice system. Participants described a system that not only continues to fail them but also imposes settler-colonial structures under the guise of “Indigenized” healing plans—programs that claim to honour cultural practices but remain controlled by the very institutions that criminalized them.

### How this research can be used

This research helped to identify a significant gap in the available knowledge by highlighting the tendency to categorize all individuals of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit descent as Indigenous. It emphasizes the importance of redefining what successful reintegration looks like from the perspectives of First Nations and Métis women involved in the criminal justice system. It also explores the role that health inequities play in their mental well-being, which will be the focus of a future research proposal. By using an Indigenous methodology focused on storytelling, women can redefine success on their own terms.

This research approach will create a safe space for them to share their experiences, highlighting their self-determination, empowerment, and the reclamation of their identities. It also allows them to resist societal narratives that aim to diminish their worth.

### About the researchers

**Kirston Blom** is a band member of the Peepeekisi Cree Nation on Treaty 4 Territory and has Red River Métis heritage. She is a graduate student in the Master of Psychiatric Nursing program at Brandon University. This literature review serves as the foundation for a master’s thesis exploring the successful reintegration of criminalized First Nations and Métis women in urban Saskatchewan. Dr. Candice Waddell-Henowitch is her thesis advisor.

**Dr. Candice Waddell-Henowitch** is an associate professor in the Faculty of Health Studies in the Department of Psychiatric Nursing at Brandon University. [WaddellC@brandonu.ca](mailto:WaddellC@brandonu.ca)

### Keywords

Criminalized Indigenous women, health inequities, mental wellness, trauma-informed care, strength-based approach, reconciliation, criminal justice system, urban Saskatchewan

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Editor: Christiane Ramsey [RamseyC@brandonu.ca](mailto:RamseyC@brandonu.ca)  
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