

**REDUCING**

**EXPLORING THE  
INTERSECTIONS  
BETWEEN TRAUMA,  
RACE AND  
CRIMINALIZATION**

**STIGMA**



## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report examines the intersections between trauma, race and criminalization.

This report draws on data that was gathered through interviews and surveys with racialized women with lived experience of trauma and criminalization.

Involvement in the criminal justice system carries stigma for women. This can be compounded by other factors, including race, sexuality, immigration status, and other intersecting systems of oppression. The stigma of criminalization impacts a woman's help-seeking intentions and access to services such as

housing, health care, employment, and services for survivors of gender-based violence.

This report is part of the Reducing Stigma project, which is led by Elizabeth Fry Toronto and WomanACT and is looking into the experiences of racialized trauma survivors with experience of criminalization. The research was designed and conducted in collaboration with Community-based Researchers with lived experience of criminalization. The project aims to improve women's access to and experience in services, through research, education, and policy reform.

## ABOUT

Woman Abuse Council of Toronto (WomanACT) is a policy and planning body that has been operating in Toronto since 1991. Today, WomanACT is a charitable organization working to end gender-based violence through research, policy, education, and community mobilization.

Elizabeth Fry Toronto is a community-based charitable organization dedicated to helping women and non-binary people break free from cycles of victimization and criminalization. Operating since 1952, Elizabeth Fry Toronto delivers gender based, trauma-informed services and advocates for justice and equity for women and non-binary people who are criminalized, and their families. These services include counselling, reintegration services, community support services, and transitional housing to women who have either been or are at risk of being in conflict with the law.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND

Research indicates that women and girls in the criminal justice system have high rates of violence and trauma in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> One study found that 86% of women in the criminal justice system in Canada have experienced physical violence and 68% have experienced sexual violence.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, women who have been in conflict with the law are more likely to experience different forms of trauma and violence throughout their lifetime than women in the general population.<sup>3</sup> The role of trauma in women's lives has been demonstrated to be both a direct and indirect pathway into criminalized behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Mechanisms used to cope with current or past violence, such as theft or illegal drug use, can be a pathway into criminalization.<sup>5</sup> Other studies show that women are often coerced into crimes by abusive partners or may turn to criminalized behaviour, such as theft or fraud, in order to flee a violent situation.<sup>6</sup> Experiences in the criminal justice

system, including experiences of discrimination or security practices within prisons, can both worsen and reproduce trauma. Despite an increasing understanding of the causal link between trauma and criminalization in the lives of women, it is often disregarded by the justice system.<sup>7</sup>

The experience of trauma and criminalization can be compounded by other intersecting identities of oppression, including race. Racialized women are overrepresented in the criminal justice system and the fastest growing prison population in Canada.<sup>8</sup> Indigenous women account for 4.3% of the adult female population, yet 43% of women in federal prisons in Canada.<sup>9</sup> Indigenous women in Canadian prisons have higher rates of past traumas, such as physical or sexual abuse and histories of oppression.<sup>10</sup> Black women make up 3% of the adult female population in Canada, yet 9% of women in prisons.<sup>11</sup> Racialized women also face barriers to reporting acts of violence, and

<sup>1</sup> Tam, K., and Derksen, D. (2014). Exposure to trauma among women offenders: A review of the literature. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Barrett, M. R., Allenby, K., and Taylor, K. (2010). Twenty years later: Revisiting the task force on federally sentenced women. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service Canada.

<sup>3</sup> Grella, C.E, Lovinger, K., and Warda, U. (2013). Relationships among trauma exposure, familial characteristics, and PTSD: A case control study of women in prison and in the general population. *Women & Criminal Justice*, 23, 63–79

<sup>4</sup> Foy, D. W., Ritchie, I. K., and Conway, A. H. (2012). Trauma exposure, posttraumatic stress, and comorbidities in female adolescent offenders: Findings and implications from recent studies. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 3, 17247

<sup>5</sup> Brazil, A., Doherty, S., Forrester, P., and Matheson, F. I. (2012). Everyone has trauma here...there's always a sad story: An examination of self-reported trauma in a female offender population. Unpublished raw data.

<sup>6</sup> Kopels, S., and Sheridan, M. C. (2002). Adding legal insult to injury: Battered women, their children and the failure to protect. *Affilia*, 17, 9-29

<sup>7</sup> Coughlin, G. (2019) The Victimization of Criminalized Women and Trauma Trails: Pathways to Criminalization and the Dichotomy of the Victim/Offender Continuum. *Gender, Colonization, and Violence*. 5, 5-15

<sup>8</sup> CRIAW/ICREF (2018). Rising Incarceration Rates of Racialized Women. Available at: <https://www.criaw-icref.ca/publications/rising-incarceration-rates-of-racialized-women/>

<sup>9</sup> Office of the Correctional Investigator. (2021) Annual report. Available at <https://www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/rpt/index-eng.aspx>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

have to navigate multiple risks, including the risk of discrimination by the criminal justice system.<sup>12</sup>

Criminalization can also increase the likelihood of unemployment<sup>13</sup> and homelessness,<sup>14</sup> affecting women's long-term economic security and putting them at greater risk of further victimization. Involvement in the criminal justice system carries stigma for women, which can also be compounded by other factors including race, sexuality, immigration status, and intersecting systems of oppression. This stigma can impact women's ability to seek help and their experience when accessing services or supports. Studies show that women involved in the criminal justice system often receive fewer services and supports.<sup>15</sup>

This research set out to better understand the intersections between trauma, race, and criminalization in the lives of women and gender diverse people in Toronto. The findings from this primary research illustrate women's understanding and experience of these intersections, and their experiences in navigating systems and accessing supports.

## METHODOLOGY

The community-based research undertaken for this report was part of a larger project, *Reducing Stigma and Improving Access for Women with Experiences of Criminalization and Trauma*. The objective of this research was to understand the experiences of women in accessing and navigating services. The project also set out to understand how to improve women's access to

and experiences with supportive services. The research questions that guided the community-based research were:

- What are the intersections between intimate partner violence and criminalization for racialized women in Toronto?
- What are the experiences of accessing and engaging in services among racialized women with histories of intimate partner violence and criminalization in Toronto?

The research adopted a definition of women that includes trans women, cis women, non-binary, and gender-diverse people. Racialized women were defined as BIPOC and/or Black, Indigenous and People of Colour who are visible minorities. This research also adopted an inclusive term for criminalization to mean any experience with the criminal justice system.

Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered through an online survey and in-depth interviews. The scope of the community-based research participants included: trans women, cis women and non-binary people; over the age of 18, who self identified as Black, Indigenous or a person of colour or visible minority; with experiences of criminalization in Canada; and past or current experiences of intimate partner violence.

Due to the complexity of the area of research and the unique and individual experiences of intimate partner violence, criminalization, trauma, and access to services and supports, this report is by no means a complete illustration of experiences, challenges and solutions.

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<sup>11</sup>Office of the Correctional Investigator. (2014) A case study of diversity in corrections : the black inmate experience in federal penitentiaries, final report. Available at <https://publications.gc.ca/site/fra/454302/publication.html>

<sup>12</sup>Richie, B. E. (2012). *Arrested justice: Black women, violence, and America's prison nation*. New York University Press.

<sup>13</sup>Western, B., Kling, J.R., and Weiman, D.F. (2001). The labor market consequences of incarceration. *Crime & Delinquency*, 47, 410-427

<sup>14</sup>To, M. J., Palepu, A., Matheson, F. I., Ecker, J., Farrell, S., Hwang, S. W., and Werb, D. (2016). The effect of incarceration on housing stability among homeless and vulnerably housed individuals in three Canadian cities: A prospective cohort study. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 107(6), 550–555.

<sup>15</sup>Oser C., Knudsen H., Staton-Tindall M., and Leukefeld, C. (2009) The adoption of wraparound services among substance abuse treatment organizations serving criminal offenders: The role of a women-specific program. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*. 103(Suppl. 1), 82–90.

## SURVEYS

A total of 55 surveys were completed online between October 2021 and December 2021. Participants were recruited through Elizabeth Fry Toronto and WomanACT networks and partner agencies. The purpose of the survey was to understand the barriers and limitations women with experiences of intimate partner violence, trauma and criminalization have in accessing supports and services.

## INTERVIEWS

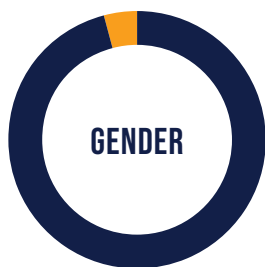
A total of 10 one-hour interviews were conducted with research participants. The interviews were conducted between November 2021 and January 2022. To complement the survey, the interviews took a more detailed approach to understanding the barriers and limitations

racialized women with experiences of intimate partner violence, trauma and criminalization have in accessing supports and services and their ideas for improving service delivery.

## RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the project, especially the research design. The project had to continually adjust research methods based on the health and safety of the research participants and researchers. The research was conducted remotely through video conferencing and telephone calls, with considerations made around digital literacy, digital access, and security. As a result, the project tried to remain flexible and adapted the research policies and methods accordingly. The team also considered the additional health risks and economic pressures faced by participants.

# DEMOGRAPHICS AND BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS



- 96% cisgender women
- 4% transgender women



- 71% have children
- 29% don't have children

- 27% yes
- 73% no



- 54% yes
- 46% no



- 42% Black, African, Caribbean
- 14% East/Southeast Asian
- 24% Indigenous
- 10% Latin American
- 12% South Asian
- 6% West Asian

AGE RANGE **24-63**

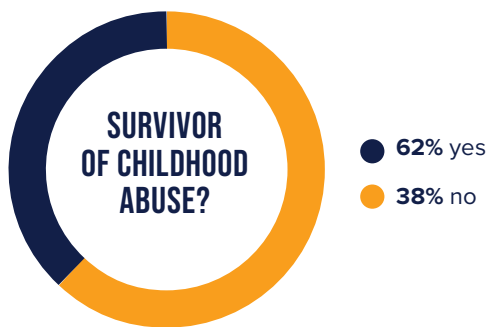
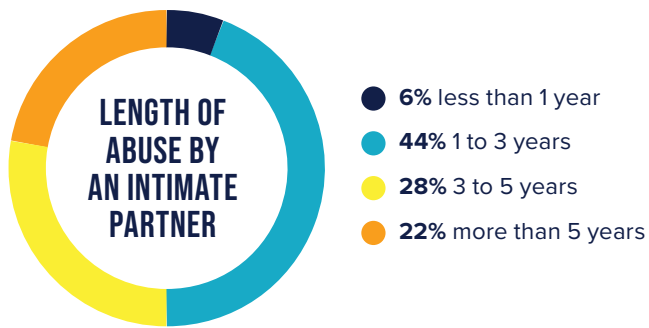
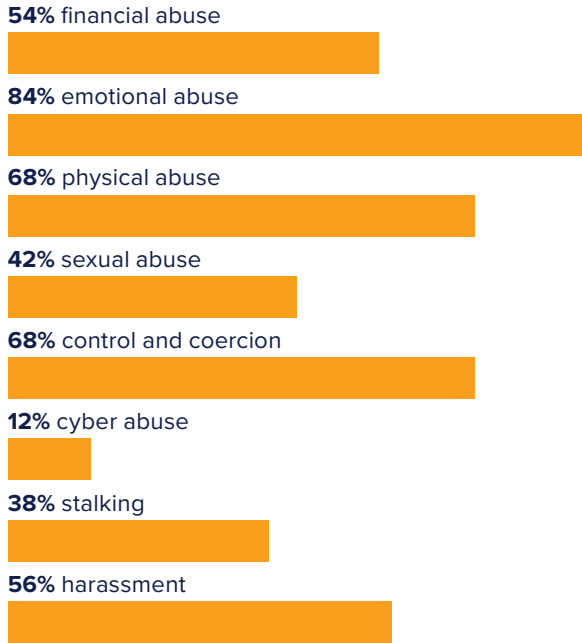


- 79% Heterosexual
- 4% Gay/Lesbian
- 15% Bisexual
- 1% Two-Spirit
- 1% Queer



## TRAUMA DEMOGRAPHICS

### TYPES OF ABUSE EXPERIENCED BY AN INTIMATE PARTNER





## INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

- 53% of survey respondents reported that intimate partner violence had directly contributed to their criminalization.
- 56% of survey respondents reported that their partners had forced them to participate in criminal activities. Women noted that their partners would threaten them with violence or continue violence until they agreed to their partners' demands.
- 38% of survey respondents reported that their partners or ex-partners had threatened to report crimes that they did or did not commit. Women shared that at times their partners had persuaded or forced them to plead guilty to crimes they did not commit. In one example, a participant shared that she was charged with

an offence by a man because she had turned down his interest in a relationship.

- Intimate partner violence impacted women's confidence and self-efficacy, which impacted their ability to stand up for themselves or resist participating in criminalized activities. Low self-esteem was often coupled with social isolation which led to increased dependency on their partner.
- 44% of survey respondents reported that they had engaged in criminalized activities to cope with or escape violence.

## TRAUMA

- Trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder were associated with women's aggression, disassociation, anxiety, and feelings of



hopelessness. Many women spoke about the impact of trauma on their decision making, and ability to react to situations appropriately.

- Women reported that unresolved trauma left them vulnerable to substance use, violent relationships, and involvement in the criminal justice system.

*“It was a downward spiral of abuses that led to poor choices of associates and decisions who/which further abused me. I felt I had nowhere left to go and didn’t care anymore about laws or my self worth.”*

## CHILDHOOD ABUSE

- 62% of survey respondents reported that they had experienced childhood abuse that had a significant impact on their decision making and life skills, including their ability to form healthy relationships.
- Women spoke at length about the complex relationship between childhood abuse, mental illness, substance misuse, and poverty across their lifetime. One participant described these experiences as a vicious cycle in which involvement in the criminal justice system was an inevitable consequence.

*“When people experience trauma and violence, especially early in their life, it makes it difficult to distinguish right and wrong. Sometimes to the point of committing a crime or getting deeply involved in something you cannot get out of.”*

## SUBSTANCE USE

- Women described that substance use often led them to criminalized behaviours to support their addictions or led them to make poor decisions.
- Trauma and prolonged exposure to violence was a catalyst for women’s substance addictions. For example, women described self-medicating with prescription drugs and alcohol to cope with violence and mental health issues.

- In some cases, women reported substance addictions as the direct cause of their incarceration. This was often because their criminal charges involved stealing alcohol or getting access to illegal drugs.

*“My traumas led me to addiction and my crime has to do with addiction.”*

## HOMELESSNESS

- Several women reported that they had to resort to criminalized activities to earn money to pay for their rent, including selling drugs and sex work. Women described not having a choice on whether they wanted to participate in criminalized activities; they viewed their options as a choice between having to participate in criminalized activities to keep their home or being homeless.
- Homelessness was a common experience among women who had left their abusive partners. Without housing and income, women described criminalized activities as a necessity to meet their basic needs.

## POVERTY AND FINANCIAL DEPENDENCE

- Poverty was discussed as a common pathway into the criminal justice system for women.
- Economic dependence on abusive partners was a common reality among women. This created a situation in which women could be more easily persuaded into criminalized activities by their partners.

*“My partner was mentally abusive he would control the money, I thought he was a good man looking after me and taking care of me. He wouldn’t let me go to work. [...] He kept paying for things and then would throw it in my face. He said you can’t do without me, you will always be with me, you will never leave me. The more he said it, the more I was determined to get out. I started doing my crime. I gave him his money back and I threw him out.”*

# KEY

## ACCESSING AND NAVIGATING SERVICES

- Women faced significant knowledge gaps about available supports and services and their eligibility criteria.
- Practical barriers to service access included long waiting times, service costs, and isolation from support networks by abusive partners.
- When accessing services, women experienced stigma and discrimination based on both race and experiences of criminalization.
- Accessing services and supports was more difficult while serving a sentence or after leaving the criminal justice system.
- Peers were a key source of information about services, programs, and supports.
- Women felt hesitant to access services due to feelings of shame or unworthiness, as well as negative childhood experiences with services.

# FINDINGS

## KNOWLEDGE OF SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

Women shared that they were often unaware of services and supports available to them. Even with knowledge of services, women were unsure if they were eligible for them or the best route to access them. While survivors shared that they were most likely to learn about services once they were in the criminal justice system, they also believed it was harder to access services at that point.

Some women described being unaware of services that might support them in fleeing intimate partner violence. In fact, very few women reported ever having accessed a service related to intimate partner violence, including a gender-based violence support service or shelter. A key barrier to accessing these types of services was a limited understanding of intimate partner violence or what they needed at the time. For example, some survivors described not recognizing at the time that they were in a violent relationship. Another key barrier to accessing a service for intimate partner violence was their lack of accommodation for mental health issues and addiction needs.

Most women reported that word of mouth was the most common and most effective means to accessing information on services and supports. Peers were seen as the greatest sources of information and women felt that they became more knowledgeable about services, programs, and supports through peer networks once they were involved in the criminal justice system. Not only did peers provide service information, but they could also share firsthand experiences. Informal networks of peers, including other incarcerated women, were discussed as the most valuable resource for discovering new programs and services.

Many women also discussed the importance of having a good worker and advocate to support

them in navigating systems and services. This supportive relationship could occur through many roles, including a counsellor, parole officer, social worker, or personal support worker.

## SYSTEM NAVIGATION

Many women discussed the lack of clear and available information when navigating systems and supports. Information was often not up-to-date, especially on websites, and lacked details on service eligibility and access. For example, one participant reported that she found information on a program online that she wanted to access. After travelling for over an hour to get to the program, the participant was told that the program had since been cancelled and that the website had not been updated.

There were also cases where women would be referred to a service by a worker, only to learn they were not eligible for the program. This was often because of their income, their postal code or because of their involvement in the criminal justice system. In these stories, women described having to fill out forms, prepare applications or travel to services, before learning they were not eligible. Some women reported that they felt workers were not aware of eligibility or did not consider suitability before referring them to a service or program.

*“I heard that the meetings were in person now, I checked online and it said that they were in person, I checked the time and everything properly, I went and there was no one there, I rode my bike all the way over there and I was so annoyed”.*

*“Often legal aid will give false information and you go off of the information and it’s untrue. If you ask three people the same question, you would get three different responses”.*

A common theme across interviews was the experience of women in navigating complex and

40%

of survey participants reported that they had experienced barriers to accessing services

44%

of survey participants reported that there were services and supports that they needed or wanted to access but were unable to. Examples included housing, counselling, legal assistance, and addictions treatment.

inaccessible systems alone. Women often shared that they felt they could only trust themselves to assess and navigate the services they needed. As a result, many women identified as being hyper-independent.

*“I always had to figure it out on my own, asking peers, calling numbers and asking questions because I was never offered any services”.*

*“I was on my own to figure it out... now that I have been in jail multiple times, I know what to do. No one cares to help you and no one helps you, where you find help is the people beside you.”*

Seeing this in a positive way, some women spoke about the importance of their own strength in navigating services, especially when faced with stigma and misunderstanding. Women used terms such as resilience, self-will, and determination as contributing factors to their experience.

## LONG WAITING TIMES

Waiting lists were a common barrier faced by women to accessing services. Women shared that waiting lists, especially for social housing, mental health support or addictions programs, were a common occurrence. Women also described being on waiting lists for counselling or to see a psychiatrist, often for several years.

Long waiting periods for services were common among women with experiences of incarceration. Women recounted memories

of sitting in jail and waiting for services and supports to become available to them. For example, one survivor described waiting up to three months to hear if her request for support had even been received by an agency. Another participant recalled hearing that she was not high risk enough to be seen immediately and would be placed at the bottom of a waiting list for mental health services.

Feelings of frustration and unworthiness were discussed in association with waiting long periods for support. The sense that their issues were not prioritized or important led women to lose hope or trust. Women also spoke at length about the need for more resources for services that already exist to increase capacity and reduce waiting periods.

### **FINANCIAL BARRIERS**

Living on a low income or being economically dependent on an abusive partner was a key barrier to women accessing services. Women described being unable to afford mental health support, mainly in regard to psychologists and long-term counselling. Not only did a lack of income create barriers to services, but it also made it difficult for women to not rely on criminalized activities to get by.

Some survivors described not being able to access appropriate legal supports because of their lack of income and being unaware of what supports were available to them. In one case, a participant reported that she was ineligible for legal supports because of the nature of her offence. The participant investigated the cost of a criminal lawyer and realized that she was not able to afford the cost of one, which would have been between \$5,000 and \$6,000 to support her in court. It wasn't until later, and by chance, the participant met someone who told her she may be able to secure legal aid.

Being unable to afford transportation created another challenge for accessing services and supports. Many women explained that they had little money left over once they had bought food with their social assistance, and commonly had to decide between food and transportation.



## SERVICE ACCESS IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

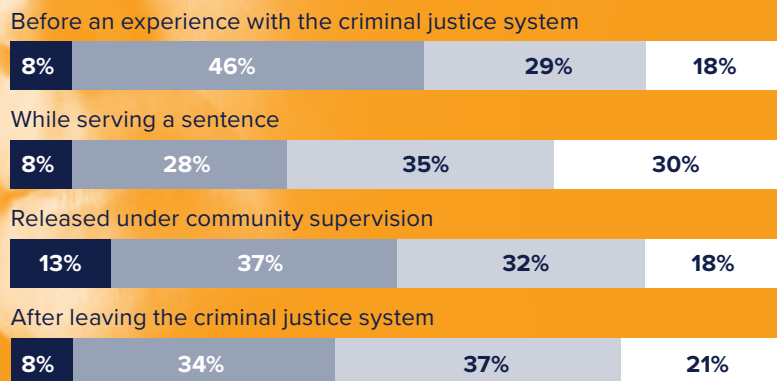
Women reported that it was more difficult to access services and supports once they were involved in the criminal justice system. It was especially challenging while women were incarcerated, where limited or non-existent telephone and internet access meant not being able to access the majority of services that required phone or online engagement. When women were provided with access to the telephone, it was only available for a short period of time. Without access, women reported not being able to contact social workers, parole

officers and external services to arrange supports.

Women’s experiences with service access varied based on the time point of their experience with criminalization. When participants accessed services either before entering the criminal justice system or when released under community supervision, about half of participants found it to be easy or very easy, while the other half found it to be difficult or very difficult. In contrast, accessing services and supports while serving a sentence or after leaving the criminal justice system was more often rated as a difficult or very difficult experience. Between the time periods, the percentage of women who rated service access as difficult or very difficult ranged from 47% to 65%, demonstrating challenges at all points of criminalization.

### ON A SCALE OF VERY EASY TO VERY DIFFICULT, WHAT ARE YOUR EXPERIENCES OF ACCESSING SERVICES AND SUPPORTS?

- Very easy
- Easy
- Difficult
- Very difficult



In addition to limited access to services while incarcerated, having a criminal record, stigma related to criminalization, and experiences of homelessness were listed as some of the more common barriers to service access when leaving the criminal justice system. Many women reported experiencing greater stigma by services and supports once leaving the criminal justice system, including from employment programs and housing services, which led to a lack of trust in services and supports. Women also shared that they were in greater need of services once leaving the criminal justice system, especially housing, employment and income support.

*“People look at you differently because you have a criminal record.”*

*“It’s hard to get good housing and employment when you have a criminal record.”*

*“Everything I have come in contact with surrounding my abuse or criminal record has been more detrimental. There was child protection involvement as a result of the abuse and that was unsupportive. It’s all further criminalized me and stigmatized me. It seemed like the system of things were designed to keep me in an abusive relationship unless I was willing to enter a shelter.”*



## STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

Survivors faced a range of negative experiences when trying to seek help, such as being stereotyped as a racialized woman in the criminal justice system, receiving false promises while also being dismissed, or having their opinions on what is best for them disregarded. Women frequently mentioned that they experienced discrimination by service providers because of their criminal record. One survivor described reaching out for support in relation to income supports. Once the community agency learned she had a history of criminalization, they treated her as though she was no longer deserving.

*“Even if they knew you were in poverty, they would treat you like you were no longer one of us.”*

Having a negative experience during service access, often caused by stigma or discrimination, led to disengagement with services more broadly. Overall, women described race and criminalization as a double barrier in navigating what was already a very hard and complex system to navigate.

## ISOLATION

Several women reported that they did not have the social networks or personal support networks, such as family or friends, to help them access services. Isolation created by partners was described as a key contributing factor to their inability to access support. For example, many participants described that their partners would isolate them from friends or family or coerce them into leaving social circles. Without support from family and friends, survivors shared that they did not know about services or that they should be accessing services at all. For example, one participant reported that her

partner forced her to stay in the house and kept her from accessing social media or seeing friends and family. Another participant shared that her partner made her feel as though there was no support or help available for her. Overall, women reported that isolation as a result of the intimate partner violence made it difficult to ask for help.

*“I was desperate and was isolated from my family and friends so I couldn’t go to them for money or help. I had lost my job and wasn’t receiving any support from them after my separation.”*

*“I did not know anyone cared about me.”*

*“I had bad associates and no positive role models who would mentor or provide supports to me.”*

## FEELINGS OF SHAME OR UNWORTHINESS

A few women described not wanting to access services because they felt shame and embarrassment for being a survivor of intimate partner violence or because of their experience in the criminal justice system. Many women reported that they did not seek out services or help because they felt ashamed for being in an unhealthy and violent relationship. This included not disclosing abuse to friends or family, in addition to professionals. Concerns about judgement for being in the criminal justice system, including incarceration, was another barrier to accessing services, including being judged because of the nature of their offence, fears around probation disclosures, or being seen as a perpetrator rather than a victim because of their criminal record. Previous experiences of stigma played a key role in these concerns and fears.

Several women also reported feelings of unworthiness as a barrier to accessing services. Women shared that they felt undeserving of support because of their experiences of abuse or

being in the criminal justice system. These feelings extended to not feeling worthy of support from professionals, as well as from their family and friends.

## CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Some women noted that negative experiences with services in their childhood led to a lack of trust and uneasiness in accessing services in adulthood. Engagement with social services, including child protection services and probation, was identified as a large part of some women's childhoods. Women often described it as a system or world that they had hoped to leave as an adult, but never could. Experiences with child apprehension, foster care and child protection agencies as children and young people were often illustrated as precursors to the lack of trust or unwillingness to reach out to services in their adulthood. Women also described being tired of continually needing to access or be involved with services.

*"I grew up going to counselling as a kid because my mother was also abused by my father and grew up going to my counselling services with my family and my siblings. Every other night of the week I was going to another center. By the time I got older I hated that type of stuff. I didn't want that stuff in my life."*

*"I was involved with Children's Aid as a kid and now I'm involved with my own two children. I was kind of sick with the services. I didn't want more agencies to be involved with me."*

Overall, survivors shared a lack of trust in services that was rooted in past negative experiences, in both childhood and adulthood. This was often compounded by other barriers to access faced by women with involvement in the criminal justice system, including stigma and a lack of knowledge on services and supports available.



# KEY

## EXPERIENCES WITH SERVICES AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Many women reported poor treatment and discrimination in services based on their race and experiences of criminalization, including stereotyping, threats, and subjugation.
- Trauma-informed approaches were seen as essential to successful service delivery and were conceptualized by survivors as being treated with respect and dignity, having a non-judgmental environment, and service providers understanding the complex relationship between trauma and criminalization.
- Important characteristics of service providers were being compassionate and supportive, along with offering a wide range of individualized supports.
- Positive experiences with service providers – including counsellors, parole officers, or police – could increase women’s trust in the service system, while negative experiences with these providers led women to discontinue services and lose trust.

# FINDINGS

## TRAUMA-INFORMED SERVICES

Many women identified the importance of trauma-informed programs and approaches to service delivery. Trauma-informed service providers were described as being empathetic and helping women overcome barriers. Women also spoke about the importance of services in understanding the relationship between trauma and other aspects of their life, including involvement in the criminal justice system. For example, one participant felt that services were more effective when they worked to address her trauma and its impact on her actions, compared to the many services that did not understand this connection.

***“Probation and other workers and agencies need to understand the reason women may turn to theft. It was not because I was a bad person but because I was desperate and alone. We need to tackle the real issues of why women participate in crimes.”***

Women also described trauma-informed services as treating them with respect and dignity, regardless of their experiences. It was seen as important for post-carceral services and supports that provide independence, promote freedom and help women restore control over their lives. Survivors’ descriptions of these experiences included that they felt treated like a human or that there was a greater focus on their well-being rather than their criminal record, which sent a message that services understood the complexities that had led to involvement in the criminal justice system.

Some women also spoke about the value of creating facilitated and trauma-informed group programs with women with lived experience of trauma and criminalization. Women shared that the combination of a non-judgemental environment, along with shared stories, created a feeling of belonging for the first time.

***“I wanted people to have a trauma informed approach because that made me feel comfortable, made me feel safe, made me feel welcomed”.***

***“What made a service beneficial was when it was trauma informed, empathizing with the barriers of your experience and that work with you to overcome that and maintain recovery through process.”***

## SUPPORTIVE SERVICE PROVIDERS

Women described the importance of having workers who were compassionate, supportive, and non-judgemental. These characteristics were seen as essential among all service providers who they engaged with, such as counsellors, parole officers, or social workers. Women also spoke at length about the benefits of engaging with services and workers that could work at their own pace and were not temporary.

***“I was lucky enough to be assigned a compassionate parole officer with experience and knowledge of a situation like mine.”***

Women viewed a positive experience with a worker as getting a wide range of support to enable change to their situation. For example, one participant described the importance of workers acting as an advocate on their behalf, while another highlighted feeling like you are getting all the support, including income, that you are entitled to. A few survivors noted the importance of workers who spent the time getting to know them and who provided individualized support. Models of service and case management that provided a range of wraparound services in one location were deemed an ideal model of support.

Other women spoke about the importance of workers with lived experience of the issues they were experiencing.



***“We need people on the outside who have gone through the system and experienced similar trauma to work with.”***

A positive experience with a worker increased women’s trust in the broader systems and services. One participant shared that she initially believed people did not want to help her and struggled to share personal information with workers. Yet after a positive experience with a counsellor, the participant had a change to her mindset and felt there were people that did want to help her, which shifted her perspective on community agencies.

In contrast, some women reported that they did not want to reach out to services more than once because they were made to feel as though they had failed if they needed help again. Women described feelings of embarrassment or shame if they had to re-access a service for abuse or addictions.

***“I felt as if the service provider felt as if she wanted to say ‘what are you doing here again – we have already helped you’.”***

One participant explained feeling no longer able to access her family doctor because of the doctor’s response to her not leaving her abusive partner. The participant described disclosing the intimate partner violence to her doctor to explain her injuries. Initially, the doctor listened and gave the participant information on where to go to get help. However, the doctor then became increasingly frustrated with her on her next two visits because she had still not left her partner, so she never returned.

### **RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION**

Many women reported that being racialized and having experience in the criminal justice system resulted in poor treatment and discrimination within services. This included services and professionals adopting and perpetuating racial

stereotypes, which were compounded by stereotypes related to criminalization. As a result of this discrimination, women reported feeling judged, not being taken seriously and receiving inadequate support. A few participants identified themselves as white-passing individuals and said that they were often treated better than other racialized people because of this.

***“Service providers judge you and make assumptions about you.”***

***“People look at me and see a junkie and a whore right off the bat because of my racialized trans identity.”***

Once services or a worker became aware of their criminal record, women reported that their treatment and reception would change. This was described as their identity being overtaken by their involvement in the criminal justice system as an offender. In some cases, participants described services pushing them away and encouraging them to use services seen as predominantly for those in the criminal justice system. In other cases, participants described service providers as using their experience in the criminal justice system to threaten or hold power over them. For example, one participant shared that a service provider would threaten to send her back to jail as means to make her engage with services. The participant highlighted the negative association with services and programs that were part of bail conditions.

***“People would threaten to send me back to jail because of a part of my parole condition. Because I was convicted, they would look down at me, just by the way they spoke to me, their body language, eye rolls and energy that was given off.”***

***“Workers talk to you as if you were an inmate and not a person.”***

Some women reported that because of their involvement in the criminal justice system, service providers would act unwillingly on their behalf. Survivors described this experience as losing their voice and losing decision-making power once they were labelled as an offender. Other women felt that once they were in the

criminal justice system, others knew best. Women recalled being subjugated to decisions made on their behalf. For example, one participant was told by a lawyer not to speak about her experiences of abuse when she was in court for a criminal offence, which prevented her from sharing her story in the way that she hoped to.

A couple of women shared their experience of using services that were not led by racialized people, or that did not have racialized people in their programs. They did not feel comfortable as they did not think their experiences were reflected in the programming and they were the only person of colour in the room.

### EXPERIENCES WITH POLICE

Many women shared negative experiences in their interactions with police, or other aspects of the criminal justice system. Several women viewed police as unresponsive and unsupportive, especially in regard to the support required to help women in abusive situations. Women recalled experiences when they were not believed by police and when they were blamed by police for the abuse they were experiencing. Some survivors recounted situations in which they were not seen as victims, and therefore were left in violent or precarious situations. For

example, one participant recalled trying to report her partner for violence to the police so that she could flee with her child, but the police told her that there was not much they could do. In another example, one participant said that she was always afraid of speaking to the police about the violence she was experiencing because they would constantly make her feel bad for remaining in a relationship with her abusive partner.

One woman reported that because of her involvement in the criminal justice system, the police did not take her seriously when she would report intimate partner violence. The participant reported that she was viewed as an accomplice in her partner's crimes or wrong doings. The participant also shared that it was hard to get a restraining order against her partner, despite evidence and several police reported incidents. Another participant explained that because the criminal justice system did not recognize her as a trans woman, she was placed in a men's prison when first incarcerated, placing her at risk of violence and without protection.

Negative experiences in the criminal justice system were a key cause of a lack of trust in the system among women and resulted in women disengaging with any services thereafter.

***“There wasn’t support. No one told me where to call if the perpetrator breeched bail, or if they were stalking me or contacting me. Got to the point where [the perpetrator] told me I had to write a letter to get him off the charges or else he would beat me”.***



## INDIGENOUS PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES ON SERVICE ACCESS AND EXPERIENCE

Indigenous participants described unique experiences in accessing and navigating services, as well as racism and mistreatment by service providers. Women described their experiences as unfair, unjust, biased, and prejudiced. They spoke about the stereotypes attributed to Indigenous people that followed them around within the criminal justice system. In some cases, women described visibly creating distance from other Indigenous people in programs to avoid mistreatment or stereotypes.

***“A lot of the services I attended [would] see me with native people [and] they act like I was inhumane because they were just treating me like a stereotypical drunk Indian.”***

Indigenous participants described the criminal justice system as a way to control women. For example, one participant described the criminal justice system as a tool used to confine her. She discussed growing up with experiences of intergenerational trauma in a family and community that were survivors of residential schools and systemic oppression. Accordingly, she sees the criminal justice system being used to deal with her rather than providing her with the supports she needs to address trauma.

Some Indigenous participants explained that they had to position themselves as a bad person or in a bad situation in order to get help. One participant described that if she did not present in a certain way, that service providers would view her as taking away resources or supports from others. Another participant described having to always appear needy and complacent.

***“Service providers wanted complacent people who did not think for themselves. If you had ideas, you were an activist, or you were educated. They would treat me like I was trying to overthrow the program. They were trying to***

***hide the program from me ... and act like the program didn't exist.”***

***“[Practitioners] would take everything personal and if you raise up through their program, they act like you were trying to be better than them so you always had to play like you were dumb and stupid in order access services. This reinforced criminal behaviour because I think well I might as well keep the lifestyle going because this is all that services are offering me, and this is all that is available.”***

Indigenous participants discussed the importance of Indigenous and culturally competent services. In particular, it was important to have Indigenous services that reached out directly to them. The proactive approach and initiative by these services made the experience of navigating the criminal justice system and finding supports easier. Several women described that as soon as they disclosed their Indigenous identity, Indigenous services became proactive in supporting them. Women also explained that within halfway houses, elders are important for supporting women navigating through the system.

***“When I was 19, Aboriginal legal services approached me and I knew that if I got arrested again, I could seek them out. Aboriginal legal services would write release plans and it could include different actions that they would want you to take: attend treatment, access housing, get on OW or ODSP.”***

Some Indigenous women described navigating Indigenous services and non-Indigenous services, where there were rules or norms related to the service, rather than a focus on personal needs.

***“I went to a few women's resource centers where women are there, but they keep such a docile mindset, women are supposed to be so stupid and not supposed to have intelligence in these places and because I'm native they would always want to send me to native places, but the native places would treat me like I'm not native enough.”***

## BLACK PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES ON SERVICE ACCESS AND EXPERIENCE

Black participants recounted stories of racism when accessing services and engaging with the criminal justice system. Women recalled experiencing overt racism in the criminal justice system and in the shelter system, and described instances in which they were stereotyped by workers. For example, one participant described engaging with a worker who stereotyped her and other Black women in the service as lazy and uneducated. Black women shared that the racism and stereotyping led to sub-standard support from service providers.

*“I felt there was a lot of young Black girls and a lot of them didn’t work or they didn’t have any education so a lot of the counsellors deemed like all of us, lazy”.*

*“It wasn’t a good experience – not for me. I would call it degrading because often times I got into it with shelter workers over how they spoke to children, how they spoke to adults with limited English ...I thought they were very disrespectful, very racist, and they looked down on a lot of the women and children that were in the shelter system. I don’t think it was a good thing. I don’t have one person to say that this person was good within the shelter, I don’t have that experience”.*

Black participants discussed having to overcome the burden of anti-Black racism, in addition to the stigma attached to being in conflict with the law, in order to access services. Some Black women spoke about the additional barriers if English was not their first language or if they had an accent. For example, one woman recounted her experience of living in a temporary shelter with her son because of abuse she had experienced from a partner. Despite being informed about a program that provides income support, the participant reported that she received very little support from staff compared to other non-racialized women in the temporary shelter. She felt judged for her involvement in the criminal justice system by workers and felt that workers assumed that she did not care or did not want to make changes. The participant described workers not putting effort into her case because they made assumptions about her life and choices.

# KEY

1. A common pathway into the criminal justice system identified by women centred around exposure to violence, which was associated with substance use and mental illness, furthering the risk for involvement. The complex relationship between trauma, addictions, and mental illness were also identified as a key barrier to fleeing intimate partner violence.
2. Intimate partner violence and criminalization were connected in multiple ways. Women had experiences of being coerced into criminal activities and were often threatened to be reported for criminalized activities by their abusive partners. Women also turned to criminalized activities to help cope with and flee from violence.
3. Experiences of stigma and discrimination, based on race and criminalization, were faced by women when accessing and engaging in services. Involvement in the criminal justice system resulted in structural barriers to housing and employment, poor treatment within services, and feeling devalued within systems. These experiences caused women to internalize stigma, develop different ways to cope with stigma, and expect future discrimination.
4. Navigating services and supports was difficult when services worked within siloes, were temporary, or had long waiting lists. Women reported that professionals often had ideas of what services women should access, when, in what order, and for how long, that differed from them. Women spoke about the difficulty in addressing issues related to addictions, mental illness, and trauma independently despite their interrelated nature.
5. Having a strong advocate and worker was critical for most women. A strong advocate for women was someone who offered individualized support and ensured that women were receiving all the support they were entitled to or could access. They were often viewed as a mentor or champion that didn't have strict time constraints to service engagement. Having a positive experience with one worker often led women to feel hopeful and increased their trust in broader systems and services.
6. A trauma-informed approach was seen as essential to successful service delivery. This was conceptualized by women as being treated with respect and dignity, having a non-judgmental environment, and providers understanding the complex relationship between trauma and criminalization. Services with strong peer and service user engagement were also seen as valuable and a key component of a trauma-informed organization.