



Can we decolonize prisons?

Indigenized programming as a human right

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Chaire UNESCO recherche pour l'éducation en prison
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CENTRE FOR
CRIMINOLOGICAL
RESEARCH



University of Alberta Prison Project

- Conducted in-depth interviews with **587 incarcerated men and women** inside four provincial prisons and two federal (one male and one female) prisons in Western Canada from 2016-2020.
- Roughly **40%** of our participants were Indigenous.
 - **25%** attended residential schools or had family members who did.
 - **34%** percent lived on reserves.
 - **34%** percent experienced the foster system.

Typical "open concept" prison unit (houses roughly 80 prisoners)

Indigenous peoples in Canadian prisons

- Indigenous adults account for 30% of prison admissions, despite representing only 5% of the population.
- Incarceration rates for Indigenous people increased by 43% over the last decade,
- Indigenous account for 50% of female prison admissions, and 4% of the population.

These disparities are higher in the prairie provinces where we conducted our research.





Residential schools

Today's Child

By HELEN ALLEN



This alert young fellow is Norman, 14 months old. He's a sturdy, healthy baby of Indian and German descent. When Norman had a medical check-up last fall the doctor rated him "bright plus" and his expression tells you why. He is a handsome boy with sparkling dark eyes, brown

and is, well co-ordinated. He eats and sleeps well. Norman is a happy youngster with a most appealing personality and good potential. He needs loving parents who will appreciate these qualities and value his heritage. To inquire about adopting Norman please write to To-

A CHILD IS WAITING Happy, Playful Girl



Sherri, 3... loves to be hugged and cuddled.

Three-year-old Sherri can quickly win your attention with her wide smile and big brown eyes. An attractive girl, she has straight black hair cut

she is talking, repeating what others say and is more attentive. She is attending a speech therapy program once a week and her foster



SAFE! IN YOUR HANDS

Your hands could hold the future of a little child. Without parents, without a home, these children are in need of love, these children of Indian Heritage are in need of a home. If you have such a home, would you like to help a little boy or girl, then you can become part of AIM.

OUT OF NOWHERE. INTO HERE...

One day child's life and future was uncertain, lonely. He found the kindness of a stranger, a person who saw him as a person, not as a statistic. He was in a home, he was loved, he was safe. If you want to make a difference, if you want to make a child's life better, then you can become part of AIM.

RESOURCES for ADOPTION of CHILDREN

2240 Albert Street
PEORIA, Saskatchewan
S4P 2Y2
Phone: (306) 523-6881

A CHILD IS WAITING



DENNIS
Dennis, 12, is a shy, withdrawn boy who is looking for a loving home. He is a good student and is interested in sports. He is looking for a home where he can be loved and accepted.

WAYNE
Wayne, a 10-year-old boy with a serious expression, is looking for a home. He is a good student and is interested in sports. He is looking for a home where he can be loved and accepted.

JEANETTE
Jeanette, a 10-year-old girl with a serious expression, is looking for a home. She is a good student and is interested in sports. She is looking for a home where she can be loved and accepted.



BRADLEY AND PATRICK
Bradley and Patrick, 7 and 6, are active boys who are looking for a home. They are good students and are interested in sports. They are looking for a home where they can be loved and accepted.

LOUIS AND MARTIN
Louis and Martin, 7 and 6, are active boys who are looking for a home. They are good students and are interested in sports. They are looking for a home where they can be loved and accepted.

JOEY
Joey, 6, is a boy with a serious expression, is looking for a home. He is a good student and is interested in sports. He is looking for a home where he can be loved and accepted.

A Program of the Saskatchewan Department of Social Services and Department of Northern Saskatchewan

and active, the boys usually get visitors on a regular basis.

MOSSBANK

The Mossbank family, who have lived in the town of Mossbank, Saskatchewan, for many years, are looking for a home for their children. They are looking for a home where their children can be loved and accepted.

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BLACK TOP SHOP - SAT. SEPT. 30
FURNITURE PARADISE - OCT. 21

WE WOULD LIKE TO KNOW

The following information is being provided for the purpose of making it known to the public that the following children are available for adoption.

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MACLEAN'S

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Education

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CANADA

Canada's prisons are the 'new residential schools'

A months-long investigation reveals that at every step, Canada's justice system is set against Indigenous people

By Nancy Macdonald
February 18, 2016

Canada's crime rate just hit a 45-year low. It's been dropping for years—down by half since peaking in 1991. Bizarrely, the country recently cleared another benchmark, when the number of people incarcerated hit an all-time high. Dig a little further into the data, and an even more disquieting picture emerges.

What's the problem with critiques of Indigenizing prisons?

- Opposition to cultural programming is usually **based on abolitionist theory**, rather than empirical evidence, such as including the opinions of incarcerated Indigenous peoples or communities.
- Empirical work on the topic suggests that Indigenous peoples and communities overwhelmingly support Indigenized programming, including the Indigenous-led **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** and the **National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG)**.
- Incarcerated indigenous peoples **fought for cultural programming** (Adema 2014, 2018).



What is “Indigenized programming?”

- Prison classroom programming teaching Indigenous cultures and history.
- Staff facilitating and encouraging spirituality.
- Involving Indigenous Elders and communities in rehabilitation.
- Creation of special Indigenized prisons called “healing lodges”.



Findings (positive impressions)

Participants explained that Indigenized programming:

- 1) Taught many incarcerated Indigenous peoples their history and culture for the first time;
- 2) Helped incarcerated Indigenous peoples feel empowered and prideful about their culture and heritage;
- 3) Helped incarcerated Indigenous peoples cope with traumas, including residential school and foster care experiences;
- 4) Can create a support network between Elders and fellow prisoners (rather than being coercive and top-down); and
- 5) Is necessary to basic religious accommodation in prison.



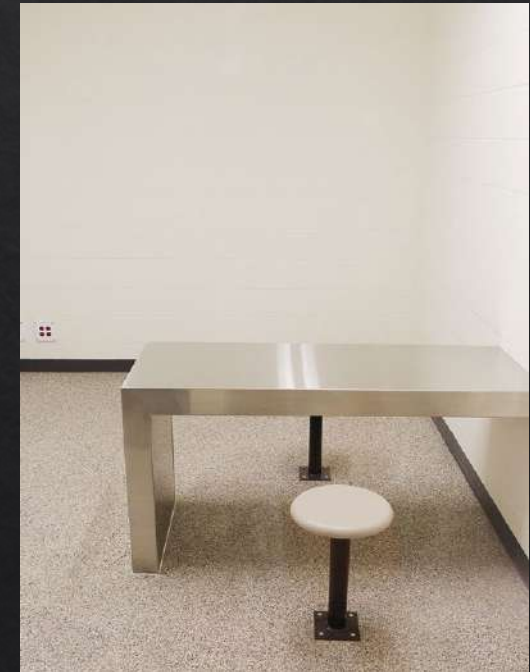
Sweat lodge held on the grounds of the Springhill Institution

Irene

- ◇ I was 19 when I first got in trouble [. . .] it was my first charge as an adult, [and] I have been incarcerated each year since. I wasn't aware of much of my history, my Aboriginal social history, I've only learned about all that this past year through the new incorporated programs here.

I am Native, I am Cree, I am from Alberta. I have participated in almost all the programs here [...] I basically learned about my history and understood about colonization and residential schools and the impact thereof. I just needed to really understand how much [it impacted me] as a Native American and um, I just don't wanna be defined by [my past] so, I made the choice to change my ways and sober up and leave all that behind and things have been really good for me.

1) Taught history and culture for the first time

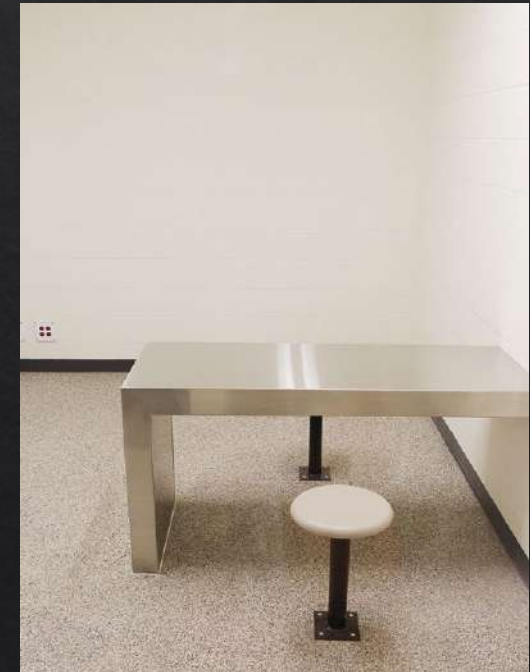


Typical interview room

Samantha

1) Taught history and culture for the first time

- ◆ I was thinking about it and lotsa these girls, they sing [and drum], they do beading – who had never even done that, or like, thought of doing that before coming here, yeah [. . .] in the past few decades it's been assimilation, you know? Termination kinda thing. That's like, our culture was pretty much beaten out of us, strictly forbidden right? For a lot of years, and like my grandparents are all residential school survivors. And they managed to come back from that and, you know, managed to remember all of the songs and all the practices – like the ceremonies that they did when they were younger, that's pretty amazing, I think.

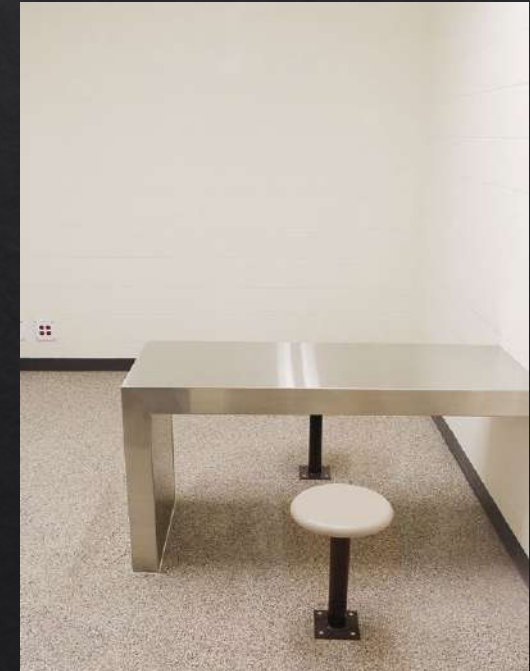


Typical interview room

Nathan

- ◆ My [foster parents] threatened me. Told me to tell people I was half-Spanish or Italian. Anything but Indian [. . .] I went to the federal system... and I really hated... identifying myself as Aboriginal, because of the trauma that I've been through in my early years. But once I went to the federal system [. . .] they have an amazing... Aboriginal community in there. An amazing Aboriginal community. [. . .] I now today, I have no problem being proud to say I'm part Native.

2) Helped participants feel empowered and prideful about their culture and heritage



Typical interview room

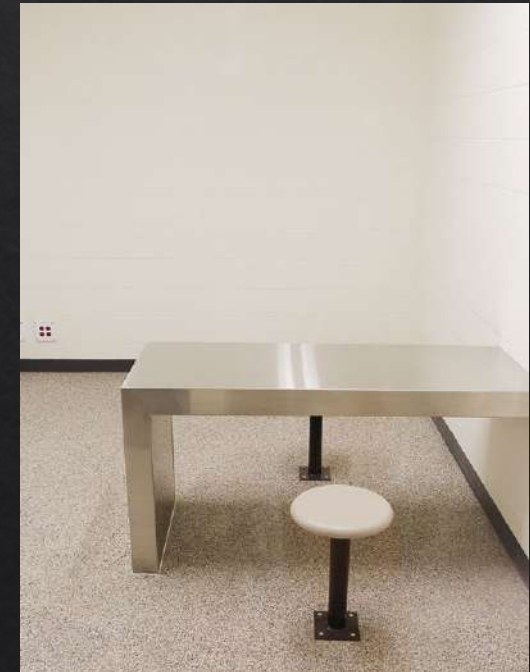
Chester

Interviewer: What was [attending residential schools] like for you?

Chester: I still struggle through that [trauma], you know. The abuse you go through, some of the things that happened [at the school], *oh man* (emphasis). [. . .]

The sweetgrass here helps a lot for that, being in residential school, it helps me relax. You know, to have that. [. . .] I wish we had sweet grass [right now]... you know what I mean? Because... [my past] kind of overwhelms me sometimes. [. . .] but I'm looking forward to the pipe ceremony next Wednesday.

3) Helped participants cope with traumas, including residential school and foster system experiences



Typical interview room

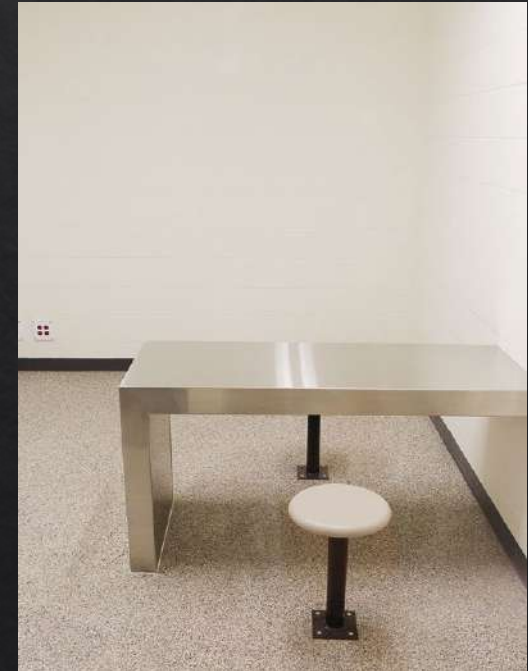
Clayton

[Aboriginal moderate intensity program] talks about colonization and how we were hurt as [Indigenous] people. And how it makes us wanna turn to substance abuse more. [. . .]

It teaches us how to deal with our emotions and, umm, how to cope [with trauma], you know?

[. . .] I find that it actually does help. Because before, I looked at things in a really pessimistic way, like telling myself that I couldn't do it, or that I was a failure. But with all these people [a support network]... and now I'm able to, like, redirect myself to... like: “I can do this”. You know? “I am worth it...”.

4) Creates support networks between Elders and fellow prisoners (rather than being coercive and top-down)



Typical interview room

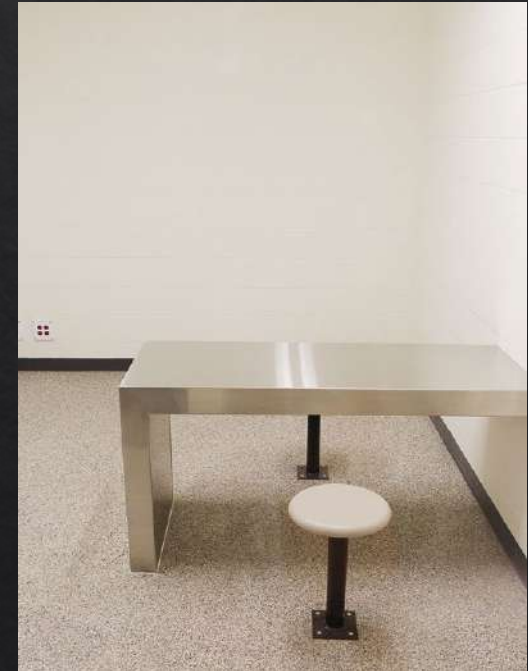
Jamie

Programming? Right now I'm thinking they're all gonna be useful. I literally haven't learned anything in life. I done it all on my own.

[. . .]

[Being sexually abused] made me angry, and I felt useless. I felt it was a dirty thing. I felt dirty. Like it was my fault. I had a lot of anger. And I was really disappointed in myself. I felt like a failure. Like I was just like a nobody. I didn't deserve anything [. . .] cause when you feel like you're worth nothing, it doesn't matter. It's not gonna matter anyway, cause I'm not worth anything, what difference would it make? Who cares? And I wish there was someone there to say, you know, [Jamie], you are worth it. You. Like, just something, give me kick in the ass, “get to school, go to school [Jamie]”.

4) Creates support networks between Elders and fellow prisoners (rather than being coercive and top-down)



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- 5) **Is necessary to basic religious accommodation in prison.**



Sweat lodge held on the grounds of the Springhill Institution

Findings (criticisms)

Participants criticized the following aspects of Indigenized programming:

- 1) Security restrictions
 - Access to Indigenized programming is greatly inconsistent for medium and high security prisoners.
- 2) Staff prejudice/racism can prevent access.

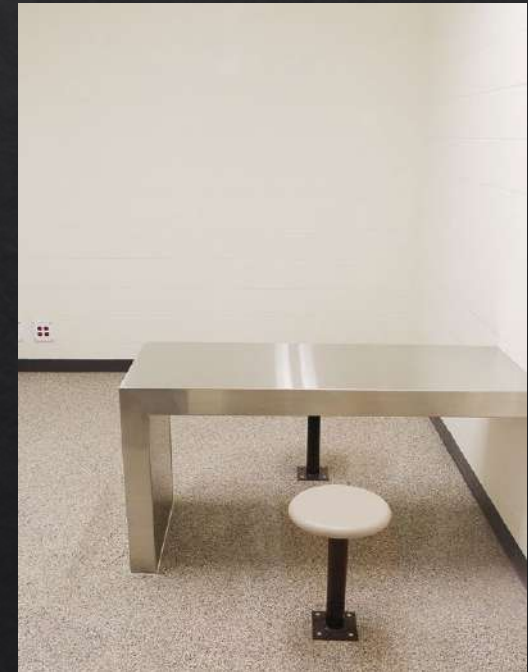


Sweat lodge held on the grounds of the Springhill Institution

Chester

1) Access to Indigenized programming is greatly inconsistent for medium and high security prisoners.

They keep the drum behind the counter, plus the sweetgrass and the matches. [Using sweetgrass] helps [me] out, because being in residential schools... [I] went through a lot of shit man, and being in here [during a lockdown] is kind of like “wow”, [not being able to use them] brings it back [triggers memories] all the time, you know what I mean? Cause they [residential schools] took away everything from us. You know, no sweetgrass, no drums, you know. No pipe ceremonies, nothing.



Typical interview room

Rory

Rory: Sometimes we run out of sweet grass, we run out of our BBQ lighter, you know? [And we need more, but] they [correctional officers] don't care. And that, too, is a big problem here, is when we want to go out and smudge a lot of the guards won't let us. [. . .] some of them look down on us like: "fuck you guys, you don't need to do that shit". [. . .] Some of them don't care.

Interviewer: So what do you do in that situation, you just have to wait?

Rory: You just bite your tongue, right? And just do whatever you can. Here it [practicing culture] is a "privilege", so we just have to treat it like that [. . .] last time I said [to them] "this isn't a residential school, man".

2) Staff prejudice/racism can prevent access.



Typical interview room

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Finding: prison as refuge (Bucerius, Haggerty, & Dunford 2020)

Many of the most vulnerable people in prison (who are often Indigenous), **fear leaving prison because they have zero outside support.**

They explained how prison is a “refuge” from their life on the outside, which can be more dangerous than imprisonment, as they return to:

- Abusive households
- Homelessness and the cold
- No access to medicine/medical attention
- No mental health support
- No support for drug-use





Reintegration study (over 7 years)

- Why do some people see **prison as a refuge** and how can we address this?
- Does cultural programming **extend into the community**?
- How do released people **find support**?
- How can social services **improve and increase collaboration**?
- Are social services **culturally-informed**?
- How can we give **power to Indigenous communities** and organizations for supporting re-entry?

Other gaps in knowledge

- Context of the Canadian prairies:
 - Reserves and remote communities
 - Geography and weather
 - Drug poisoning crisis and gangs



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Thank you!

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