

# Health care, education key to keeping women offenders out of prison

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Women in provincial prisons require health care to address trauma, addiction and chronic diseases in order to lower reincarceration rates, according to a new study that of women leaving a B.C. correctional centre.

"Our findings show that their return to criminal activity was related to a lack of basic, primary [health](#) care—nutrition, medical and dental care. That's important because we can address these issues," said Patricia Janssen, a professor in UBC's school of population and public health and an investigator at B.C. Children's Hospital. "The health and education sectors have to work with the [criminal justice](#) system so that [prison](#) doesn't continue to be a revolving door for [women](#)."

Women leaving provincial prisons have a reincarceration rate of 40 per cent within the first year of their release and 70 per cent within two years. These women are typically incarcerated for theft, drug-related charges, assault, and breach of parole. In many cases, addiction issues leading to these crimes stem from a history of trauma.

For the study, the researchers interviewed 400 women leaving B.C.'s Alouette Correctional Centre between 2008 and 2010 and conducted follow-up interviews with 207 of them during the subsequent year. Over half the women in the study reported Indigenous ancestry and the average age was 34.

Through the interviews, researchers learned that many women in prison

not only suffer from mental health and addiction issues but also from [chronic diseases](#) like diabetes, hypertension, cancer, Hepatitis C, HIV and dental problems. Once they are released from prison, they often do not have a family doctor and cannot afford [dental care](#). Many turn to drugs to treat pain and suffering.

The researchers also found that many of the women in prison have not completed high school, making it difficult to find employment.

"This is related to poverty—women come from rural areas to cities to get away from circumstances at home and find employment. They are not well educated and often end up being exploited and getting involved in the drug or sex trade," said Janssen.

"Women are released from prison with a voucher for a bus ticket and their belongings in a plastic bag. Most are homeless, have lost their identification and have a lot of fear and anxiety about where they should go," said Mo Korchinski, a co-author of the study who interviewed women at a transit exchange after they were released from prison. "They end up going back to the same place they came from and get sucked back into the lifestyle that got them into trouble."

Korchinski, a formerly incarcerated woman who helped design the study, and co-author of the study Ruth Elwood Martin, a clinical professor in the school of population and [public health](#), have started a peer health mentor program that pairs women released from prison with a mentor. The mentor picks them up from prison and helps them to find housing, clothing and food. The program has helped more than 300 women and research is being conducted to test its effectiveness.

In Canada, it costs \$150,897 per year to keep a woman in prison and \$19,755 per year to supervise her parole. The researchers suggest setting up partnership programs between the health, education and criminal

justice ministries to address the unmet health and education needs of women leaving prison, and then evaluating the cost-effectiveness of these programs.

The study was published today in *CMAJ Open*.

**More information:** *CMAJ Open*, [DOI: 10.9778/cmajo.20160165](https://doi.org/10.9778/cmajo.20160165)

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