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"IT'S SET UP SO YOU TRIP AND FALL":

A report about formerly incarcerated people's experiences of prison-to-community reintegration in Kingston, Ontario

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"Sophie accurately encapsulates the very real systemic barriers and stigmatization faced by those reintegrating into the Kingston community from area institutions. As is evidenced in her report, the majority of these individuals find themselves homeless due to a lack of safe, affordable housing, adequate employment opportunities, and support services. The first priority upon release, and the largest challenge, is securing sustainable and affordable housing. This is the first step in moving formerly incarcerated people from marginalized, disadvantaged positions to thriving, independent, and stable ones. As a community, we need to focus on improving the availability of adequate services and supports for the overlapping and intersecting barriers faced by this population."

- Elizabeth Fry Society Kingston

"This policy report not only demonstrates a disturbing gap in prison-to-community reintegration service provision in our community, it does so in a compelling and compassionate way by centering the experiences of formerly incarcerated people. At the Queen's Prison Law Clinic, many of our clients, once paroled or released at the end of their prison sentence, face extensive barriers to their own successful reintegration, be it housing, employment, discrimination, mental health issues, and more. This report is not only timely, but necessary. We must address the barriers formerly incarcerated people face during their reintegration into Kingston if we want to build a safe, inclusive, and just community."

- Queen's Prison Law Clinic

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I understand that the research in this report has taken place on the lands of the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee Nations and without permission from these people or their Elders. Even the claim of the Canadian government to the land that is now called Kingston, as outlined in the Crawford Purchase of 1783, is fragile at best; there is no written contract, map, wampum, or list of leaders present at the Crawford Purchase, nor any proof that such documents existed except for a letter from Captain William Redford Crawford to the Governor at the time. (1-2) As a result of the terms of the Crawford Purchase, which were not clearly explained in Captain Crawford's letter, settlers began to invade the land in and around Kingston despite any proof of a legal surrender of the land from Indigenous communities having taken place. (2)

Long after the Crawford Purchase, Indigenous peoples are still imprisoned and researched on reservations, in residential schools, in the child welfare system, and in prisons on their own land. The incarceration of more and more Indigenous peoples, especially Indigenous women, is not a coincidence, but yet another example of the violence of the Canadian settler colonial state against Indigenous nations. As the prison capital of Canada, Kingston – the municipality, and the community more broadly – continues to participate in the systemic oppression of Indigenous peoples in our city and beyond.

In order to stop the imprisonment and criminalization of Indigenous and other marginalized communities, we must resist settler colonialism. I write in solidarity with these movements, and with the aim to privilege Indigenous voices as I continue to learn about my own role, as a white settler, in these oppressive systems.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Following the lead of many people with incarceration experiences, as well as other prisoners' rights advocates, I refuse to use language in this report that harms people with incarceration experiences and contributes to the creation of dangerous stereotypes. (3)

Instead of using words like “criminals”, “offenders”, or “inmates”, I use words like **“formerly incarcerated people”** or **“people with incarceration experience”**. These words are used to centre the expertise of people with lived experiences of incarceration.

Using this kind of language (often called **person-first language**) is important for three reasons: it emphasizes people's humanity; it resists damaging stereotypes; and it invites new conversations that recognize, rather than exclude, certain people's experiences.



WHAT IS THIS REPORT ABOUT?

What is reintegration?

While reintegration – the process of leaving prison and re-entering the community – is sure to happen for most incarcerated people in Canada, it is **anything but easy** in practice.

Reintegration is much more complicated than simply walking out of prison into your home community. Instead, for the person being released from prison, it is a difficult process that involves an overwhelming list of tasks to complete and agencies to visit. (4)

Reintegration usually requires a formerly incarcerated person to find housing, get a job, look for a doctor, attend mandated parole programming, open a bank account, re-apply for identification, search out safe and timely transportation, re-learn (or learn for the first time) the community where they're released, and reunite with loved ones on top



of dealing with other basic survival needs such as finding food, water, and temporary shelter. (4-8) Reintegration, then, is both a **physically exhausting experience and an emotionally challenging one as well.**

This report is an expression of my Master's research, which explored the reintegration experiences of formerly incarcerated people in Kingston. (9)

As a part of this research, and in partnership with several local non-profit and charitable organizations, I spoke with 23 formerly incarcerated people about their reintegration experiences in Kingston. Many of these people shared **unique and important** points of view on the city that we call home.

Why is it important to talk about reintegration in Kingston?

Kingston is a prison town. Kingston is not only the site of Canada's first prison, the now-closed Kingston Penitentiary, but also the current home to 7 penitentiaries around the city:

- **Millhaven Institution** (Maximum-Security)
- **Collins Bay Institution** (Maximum/Medium-Security)
- **Bath Institution** (Medium-Security)
- **Frontenac Institution** (Minimum-Security)
- **Joyceville Institution** (Assessment Unit/Medium/Minimum-Security)
- **Pittsburgh Institution** (Minimum-Security)
- **Regional Treatment Centre** for Ontario (located at Bath Institution). (10)

While Kingston's identity as a prison town is generally promoted by the local municipality as beneficial for the community, many people who have been incarcerated in Kingston have a different story to tell. (9)

The clustering of federal prisons and correctional administration in Kingston is one of the main reasons why many people coming out of prison, including Pedro,

Prisons in Kingston are home to almost 20% of all federally incarcerated people in Canada.*

one of the people I spoke to, decide to stay in Kingston.**

Pedro told me, **"I'm gonna stay here cause of the social programs, and because this town is used to dealing with people like me."**

However, even with the clustering of prisons, agencies, and non-profit service providers in Kingston, many of the people I spoke to experienced significant difficulties throughout their reintegration.

While many of Kingston's service providers were praised by formerly incarcerated people as being supportive communities and important in their efforts to stay out of prison, many of the people I spoke to resisted the City's vision of Kingston as a "liveable" or "affordable" city that fosters a "high quality-of-life" in the stories they told. (11)

For instance, **Cam** said that Kingston, “**is like a dumping ground, basically.**” When I asked him what he meant, he told me about how he was released from prison:

“They threw me in a cab and drove me down Princess Street to the parole office... And from the PO’s office, she [Cam’s PO Officer] says, ‘Well, there’s a shelter in town. Do you know where it is?’ ‘No.’ ‘Well, it’s four o’clock and I quit at four o’clock.’ So, I get booted out of there with a t-shirt in a blizzard and I had to find the shelter all on my own. I had no idea, I had never been to Kingston before in my life! I couldn’t even take a cab to it cause I didn’t have enough money, so I walked.”

Later, Cam explained his description of Kingston as a dumping ground even more by describing his daily routine at a local soup kitchen:

“I eat there almost everyday. It’s like a three-course meal, you know, for a buck. Makes you feel a little better, but again that place, when you try to forget

where you came to Kingston from, it’s hard, because everywhere you look... I know people who live here don’t realize it, but three out of every ten people you talk to just got out [of prison]. I have bumped into a lot of people and we just kind of nod at each other and keep going.”

Cam’s description of Kingston made me wonder what other people think about Kingston. When I asked **Rooster** if he liked living in Kingston, he explained:

“No, I don’t like it here. Not at all... Compared to anywhere else... I’d almost say jail too. There’s more respect.”

Even **Jamie**, after telling me she had grown up in Kingston, described her hometown as **“a sad, dark... little hole.”** She continued:

“I mean, nothing good comes from this place I don’t think. That’s my feeling. I mean, it can be beautiful.



You go down to the waterfront and everything, it's such a beautiful place, but it's a very, like to me, it's very, what's the word... Like dismal? Hopeless? Like, the drug subcultures and everything. They're not getting better, they're getting worse. And I see people that I've known my whole life and think, 'thank god I went away for those five years,' because like people that looked like you or me, they've got no teeth, their skin is grey, like they look at you and they don't really, they're not registering... And maybe I'm just harsh here cause I haven't gone anywhere else, but I talk to people from other places that come here and they're like, 'This is a sad, sad place. This city is a fucking sad place.'"

Cam, Rooster, and Jamie's stories are telling. Their experiences, as well as others I spoke to, draw attention to the urgency and necessity for local institutions, service providers, and decision-makers to take up their responsibility, not only **to care for and consider formerly incarcerated people as valued and active members of the community**, but to contribute to the development of Kingston as a more equitable city.

This report is mainly written for Kingston as a municipality.

Although federal and provincial governments also have a role to play (for example, they are responsible for the upkeep of the prisons themselves), Kingston cannot ignore its social responsibilities in caring for the formerly incarcerated people living in our community.

WHY DOES THIS REPORT MATTER?

I wrote this report to start local conversations about more **equitable** and **effective** reintegration solutions by highlighting the expertise of formerly incarcerated people living in our community.

Based on my interviews with formerly incarcerated people, this report will discuss some of the biggest difficulties encountered by people with incarceration experience, as well as recommendations for better reintegration solutions.

The objectives for this report are:

- 1. To increase awareness of some of the biggest problems facing formerly incarcerated people in their attempts to reintegrate into the Kingston community;**
- 2. To provide insight and recommendations about reintegration to the City of Kingston, KFL&A Public Health, local policy-makers, other service providers, and their provincial and federal counterparts; and**
- 3. To meaningfully think about and include the voices of formerly incarcerated people in conversations of local reintegration policy and practice**

HOW IS THIS REPORT MADE POSSIBLE?

In the summer of 2019, I contacted **14 local service providers** by phone and/or email to ask for their help with my Master's thesis project in whatever way they thought best.

Many service providers agreed to set up meetings between people who were interested in my project and myself, sometimes allowing me to use their office space to do so. Many also offered to show posters and pamphlets I had made for people that might be interested in speaking with me.

Between June 2019 and February 2020, I conducted **23 interviews** with formerly incarcerated people in Kingston.



When first recruited, people were asked if they had a preferred place in mind for the interview, ideally a place where they feel comfortable and safe.

As a result, my conversations with formerly incarcerated people took place in different locations across the city, including cafés, fast food restaurants, meal programs, office spaces, public libraries, park benches, and halfway houses.

The interviews were informal. I had a set of questions with me, but each conversation was unique.

Before their interview, each person was asked to identify their **gender**, **ancestry**, and **age**. Sixteen people identified as men, 5 as women, and 2 as trans women. Seventeen people identified their ancestry as white European, while 6 identified as Indigenous.

The ages of participants were between 27 and 76 years old (see Figure 1).

While some people had been released from prison only a few days before our interview, others had spent more than 30 years in the community since their last time in prison.

Almost all people had been to both federal and provincial prison. Most people I spoke to were parents. All of the people I spoke to were Canadian citizens, and all but one person were born in Ontario.

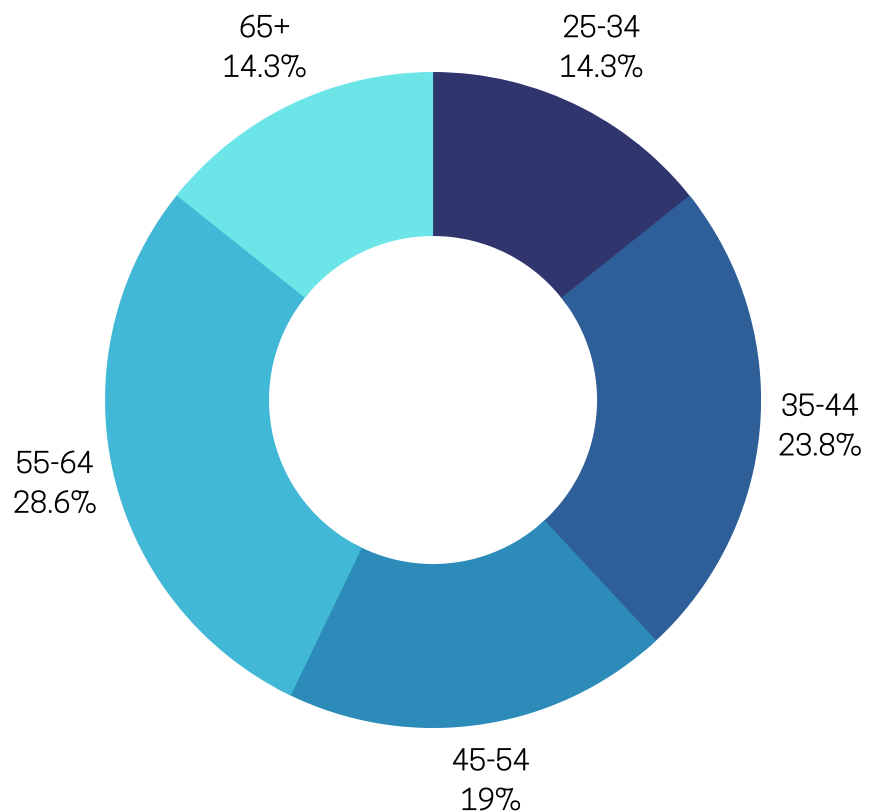


Figure 1. Ages of Participants

This report highlights the expertise of formerly incarcerated people.

The red text in this report is quoted from my interviews with formerly incarcerated people. Although edited to make them easier to read, these stories include powerful ideas, language and emotions that many of us can learn from.

ISSUES RAISED

PROBLEM #1: SYSTEM NAVIGATION

Thanks to previous research, we already know that the system is difficult to navigate.

We know that many formerly incarcerated people experience **extreme poverty** after prison, often with little or no support to be able to navigate the complicated system of federal, provincial, and local services in their community. (12-14)

We also know that many people have criticized the Canadian federal prison system for releasing incarcerated people with little to no reintegration planning or institutional support while still holding impossible expectations of 'successful' reintegration through parole conditions. (12,14-16)

The things I have learned about reintegration experiences in Kingston is unfortunately similar to the research above. But unlike most research about reintegration, what I learned **centres the expertise of formerly incarcerated people.**



Feeling abandoned and overwhelmed by the 'system'

Frank described reintegration **“to be too much sometimes. Especially at first when you have so many appointments.”**

I knew from earlier in Frank’s interview, and from others, that these appointments usually involved a visit to your parole officer, the police station, the halfway house or wherever you were staying, the grocery store, and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or Ontario Works (OW) offices, sometimes all on the day you were released.

Appointments at Service Ontario and Service Canada to get ID, walk-in clinics to find a doctor, and meal programs usually followed in the first few days after release.

Some people, like **Cam**, have to go through all of these appointments alone, even at the same time they're looking for housing or their next meal. Cam had spent almost a decade in prison before being released into Kingston. He had never been to Kingston before the day he **“was released and thrown in a cab at the gate.”** Cam explained:

“As far as the prison system after you're done, there's nothing. There's nothing. I thought at least there'd be some help through the system, but there isn't. You have to find it on your own. And when you've never been somewhere before and you don't know a single soul, it's not as easy as it sounds... I would go from one place, like the shelter, they told me about another place, and that place told me about another place. It's just, you have to go through all that, and it takes forever. It's not like a week... It's just a big heap on you. It's like, 'what do I do now?' And there's a lot of 'what do I do now?' You know? A lot of people say,

‘well, you're free.’ Well, no, you're not. I guess you're not behind walls, but there's a big difference.”

For Cam, freedom was not simply about being released from prison. In the context of reintegration, freedom meant not only being able to meet his immediate needs, but having access to resources in order to make meaningful, informed decisions about his future.

Working with inadequate welfare supports

Unfortunately, Cam wasn't the only person I spoke to who continues to experience extreme poverty long after release from prison. **Steve** spoke angrily about the poverty he experienced. He told me:

“When I got out, I was given the shirt on my back, my own shirt, and a windbreaker. That was it. And I had nothing. I came out with absolutely nothing... And because I'm in a halfway house I'm not allowed to go to welfare or disability for resources. And I've been trying to build up clothes... There's no start up, no nothing when you come into a halfway house. I find it very hard, very frustrating.”

Finding mental health care

Tom also had a hard time finding community supports upon release, unable to find any programs that could meet his unique mental and emotional needs as a formerly incarcerated person.

After being released to Kingston, Tom found support from the local area's primary provider for mental health and addictions services.

He was enrolled in a program there, and told me that being in the program was the first time he had felt supported in his mental health journey. Unfortunately, the service provider went through a wave of budget cuts:

"When they were having financial cuts, the program was cut. So, I was one of the clients that was basically told that I wouldn't have services, that they wouldn't support me. [...]"

Steve explained to me that, under the province's current welfare system, incarcerated people – whether in prison, on parole or probation, or serving a conditional sentence – who are staying in community residences or halfway houses funded by federal or provincial correctional services are not able to collect OW or ODSP.

Instead, **people like Steve are only able to receive \$149 a month, or \$37.25 per week**, for personal needs, such as hygiene, food, clothing, etc. (17-18)

Steve's limited income made system navigation almost impossible. As someone with a disability who was unable to receive ODSP, Steve had a lot of difficulty finding a job that would accommodate his accessibility needs.

However, on top of looking for a job, Steve needed to do the impossible: **secure work appropriate clothing, buy groceries and hygiene products, and save money for his own apartment on a monthly budget of \$149.**



Some people that come out of prison suffer PTSD. Like, some of the things they see in prison that they shouldn't be seeing. Like, some people are in there for years on end. They suffer depression, anxiety, and when they come out, they're nervous as ever!

Like, they don't know how to adjust to society. Some of them don't even know what a cellphone is, or how to use a bank machine. Like, okay, they have psychologists inside, but some of them, some of us are basically pretty much shoved out of prison into halfway houses where, okay, sometimes we'll be offered services by a psychologist through parole, but some of us, once a psychologist deems that we don't need their services anymore, they stop seeing us. But, when we're stuck, well, we need to see somebody! We don't know where to go or where to turn. Especially with mental health services not up and running with their budget cuts and that... I'm not sure if I can go there or what."

People in prison are 2-3 times more likely to experience mental illness than the general population. (19)

This is generally for two reasons: first, people with mental illness are more likely to be criminalized and arrested; and second, conditions in prison can cause mental illness to get worse. (20-23)

In some cases, **the rate of mental illness for incarcerated people in Canada is as high as 80%, with some studies finding that more than 20% of people in Canadian prisons have attempted suicide.** (19,24) These numbers, while horrifying, are not surprising; most people incarcerated in Canadian prisons have experienced violence as children or youth and continue to suffer trauma as a result. (24)

Unfortunately, the physical and emotional violence of the prison environment **only adds to the trauma** that people have already experienced. (15,19,23)

However, the experiences of those who were a part of this project suggest a larger, even more troubling pattern of mental illness and violence in Canadian prisons. **Of the people I interviewed, all 23 had experienced at least one form of violence or abuse before and/or during prison.**

These experiences ranged from suffering physical or emotional abuses as children, to police harassment, to sexual violence, to witnessing murder.

More than two-thirds of the people I spoke to discussed their struggles with mental illness and how it affected their day-to-day lives. Like others I spoke to, Tom's mental health had declined because of the violence he experienced in prison to the point where he considered suicide. Once released from prison into Kingston, Tom made the decision to seek help, but was eventually turned away without any ongoing support for his mental illness.

People with incarceration experience face unique mental health challenges once they are released from prison, and should receive mental health care that is targeted towards understanding and healing from prison experiences.

Experiencing institutional barriers to successful reintegration

Asking formerly incarcerated people to successfully reintegrate without providing them with the resources – material and emotional – in order to do so, as **Vicki** says below, sets people up to fail:

“Reintegration into the community, um... The program is set up to fail. The program that's supposed to help the offender not offend isn't [working], it's set up so that you trip and fall. You have to self-initiate and if you don't have the skill set to self-initiate, you don't know how to turn over those stones to find the information you need. You simply walk right over them. And that's the hardest and most difficult thing.

You're looking for a place to live, you're looking for a job. You can't get a job because you don't have a place to live, you know? You're doing everything out of say, the library, on a computer. You don't have your ID... But agencies also get their hands...



handcuffed. So, you develop this mindset that if I come to this agency, and they say ‘Yes, you need this, this, this, but we only provide this,’ you think that this is gonna be done by that agency and then this agency will do that, and then it doesn’t happen. And now, you have to chase it down and the frustration level gets so high that you just say, ‘You know what? Fuck it. It’s not worth it.’

And if you go to agencies, they should be telling you, ‘this is available for you, this is available for you, this is available for you.’ But they don’t. You’re just told that you can go here and get a welfare cheque. But do they tell you about the discretionary rental payment, which pays for first and last months’ rent? No. So, you’re thinking that from this little welfare cheque, ‘Now I gotta make everything happen.’ [...]

But they don’t tell you the ins and outs, you know? ‘You need a lawyer, you need that, now you’re applying for legal aid. Well, you don’t have a fixed address.’ So, now I have to get all of this, I have to do all of this, I have to do all of this, I have to do all of this, and then maybe they’re gonna say no

anyways. So, I’m not going to do this, I’m not going to do this, I’m not going to do this, and I’m not going to invest in myself, because you won’t invest in me. So I’m not worth it.”

If we can learn anything from the experiences of Steve, Cam, Tom, Vicki, it’s that our local system of social services is confusing, dehumanizing, and difficult to navigate.

However, each story also offers us wisdom, expertise, and a lesson in what it might mean to invest in our community from the perspective of someone with incarceration and reintegration experiences.

From these stories, we learn that investment in Kingston’s social services sector means trying to make our systems/services more user-friendly, easier to navigate, and generally more accessible to, and inclusive of, people with different experiences and abilities.

PROBLEM #1: RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The City of Kingston, along with local, provincial and federal partners, should establish a collaborative resource hub specifically for people with prison experiences.

When I asked Vicki if there was a resource she wished she had when reintegrating, she told me:

“A one-stop-shop. Everything there, right there. Explained. The roadmaps. Everything. And if you need somebody to initiate for you, they’re right fucking there instead of going here, and here, and getting the information, and the misinformation.

We need a one-stop-shop. A get-it-all-in-one-place. I come and apply for this, and I apply for this, and I apply for this and I don’t care how many fucking social agencies you have spider-webbed off of it. I want to do it all right here and you send the information and I walk away and then I become a recipient, thank you very much! Cause my brain is trained to eat when I’m told to eat, be in my cell when I’m told to be in my cell, go to sleep when I got to and wake up when I got to. I’m told when to piss, shit, fart, walk! And I can’t think.

By the way, I have cognitive distortions now cause I’ve been abused all my life, and neuroses and anxieties, and hysteria.”

PROBLEM #1: RECOMMENDATIONS

2. KFL&A Public Health should create a System Navigator position within the health unit to assist and advocate for the health and wellbeing of people with prison experiences throughout their reintegration journeys:

Jack, after being released from prison just days before our interview, was surprised that, in the prison capital of Canada, there were no public health resources for people with prison experiences: **“I would hope that they would try to put something in place, like to have an office just for that reason, like public health, like basically that's our place to go when we get out, that will help us get out. Like, finding family doctors when you get out. There should be a place that could help us do that, point us in all the right directions for mental health, for physical health, for all of it [...] I think that's a serious flaw in the system. Of all places that should have it, it should be here [in Kingston]. And, I think there should be a specific office for just that. And staff appointed people to like. Not CSC people. Like maybe somebody that knows the system? But not on their side.”**

While public health experts have promoted the saying “prison health is public health” in recent years, there is very little available to people with prison experiences in terms of public health resources after being released from prison. (25) As Jack points out, this absence of public health in conversations of community reintegration in Kingston is simply unacceptable.

PROBLEM #2: HOUSING

Kingston's affordable housing crisis

Having never been to Kingston before spending time in prison, **Stan** talked about the **disappointment and confusion** he experienced when he arrived at his halfway house:

“When I thought I was coming to Kingston, the way I thought of it was, there’s all the prisons around, so the prisons probably support most of the people that are in Kingston, you know? I thought it was going to be a right up tight ass town. And then just seeing the amount of people that are homeless.

And then I’m hearing that the big thing is crystal meth in Kingston, and that’s just sad, you know? And I guess the homeless rate is really up there. So, I mean, it’s tough to see... As soon as I get my own place, I’ll be a little bit better.”

Unfortunately for Stan, and for nearly all of the people I spoke to, finding safe and affordable housing in Kingston is nearly **impossible**.



It’s no secret to people living in Kingston that the city is experiencing a housing crisis, one that is becoming worse every year. (26-29)

With an increasing demand for housing, a low vacancy rate, and the resulting hike in rent prices, **safe and affordable housing in Kingston is becoming harder and harder to find.**

One of the consequences of this housing crisis is the large number of people without stable housing in Kingston.

According to the Point in Time (PIT) Homelessness Count in 2018, Kingston has a large number of people who are homeless for a city its size. (30)

As part of the local PIT Count in 2018, **152 people were counted as homeless in Kingston.** Almost all of the people included in the most recent PIT Count listed welfare as their main source of income, which isn't enough to meet most housing prices in Kingston.

For example, **the maximum housing allowance for a couple enrolled in the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) in 2017 was \$769, falling short of the average monthly rent of a one-bedroom apartment in Kingston - \$975 - by more than \$200.** (30)

One trend that was significant amongst those included in the most recent PIT Count in Kingston was experiences of incarceration and homelessness. Of the people included in the PIT Count, **16% said that they had been in prison in the last year, and 8% said that their criminal record was a barrier to finding stable housing in Kingston.** (30)

However, the experiences of people I spoke to also suggest a larger trend of homelessness after prison than what is shown in Kingston's latest PIT Count report.

Of the 23 people I spoke with, **19 people experienced homelessness or were at risk of homelessness when they were released from prison.**

Twelve people came out of prison into transitional housing, 4 people needed to access the emergency shelter in Kingston, and 3 were provisionally sheltered in local motels.***

At the time of their interviews, one person was still experiencing absolute homelessness, two were living in a motel, and 11 were still in transitional housing. Nine people had found permanent housing, mostly in the form of month-to-month rental units, although 5 of these people expressed safety concerns, poor living conditions, and property standards bylaw violations in their homes.

In order to help fix the local housing crisis, the Province of Ontario and City of Kingston have begun offering incentives to residential developers to build new housing units, especially in the city's historically polluted "brownfields". (31-32) This plan has been quite successful, especially in regards to housing targeted towards university students, with the construction of new housing units taking place throughout the city.

However, the availability of **affordable housing** remains a big problem in Kingston.

A recent report from the Mayor's Task Force on Housing showing **a shortage of more than 3,900 affordable housing units** in the city and more than 7,000 households in core housing need. (33),****

Finding a home as a person with prison experience

All of these conditions set the stage for a challenging and stressful search for safe and affordable housing in Kingston, especially for those who are coming out of prison.

For instance, **Eddie** was given a list of local motels when released from prison and took a cab to the cheapest one on the list:

"I wouldn't book in. I called a cab right away and, well in the short

time I was in the lobby, there was some people who were doing drugs, drinking, language, yelling. I was just like 'man, this is worse than prison!'"

Eddie ended up spending the night in another motel just across the street from the first one. He stayed there for a week before moving to a third motel where he was able to get a better weekly rent with the motel owner if he paid cash.

"But it was very stressful," he continued, "I'd saved every dollar I'd ever made while I was in prison. So, I was fortunate that I had a few dollars to fall back on while I was out. But I couldn't keep living in a motel at three-fifty a week. It doesn't sound like much, fourteen hundred a month, but it is when you're unemployed and my pensions hadn't kicked back in yet, because the old age pension and guaranteed income supplements stop while you're in prison."



Eddie found permanent housing within three weeks, which was a record amongst those I spoke to who had never lived in Kingston before.

After sleeping on friends' couches for a couple of weeks while he waited for his ODSP to start up again, Frank was also able to get a room at a motel when he got out of prison.

Frank had been living at the motel for four months when I spoke with him, and although he was ready to leave, he understood that there weren't a lot of opportunities to find something better in Kingston throughout the school year:

“[The motel is] just a dump. It’s old and it’s like a slum, slum lords, you know? Not very nice at all. But I mean, especially for the amount I’m paying in rent, you know, I could probably find something a lot better than that... When I got out the students were still here and stuff like that, so it’s harder to find places when the students are here. There’s not a lot of places. [I’m paying] eight-hundred [a month] there but it’s just a room, you know? It doesn’t even have a kitchen in it at all. So, I’m pretty much cooking out of a microwave or a toaster

oven. It’s nowhere you’d want to stay long-term, but I’ve already been there too long. I want to get out of there.”

Trav, also living in a motel, was looking for an apartment, but with little luck. He had already been to see a number of different units in the few weeks since he’d been out, but quickly found that most affordable housing in Kingston is not built for seniors with a fixed income. He told me about one place he had looked at in particular:

“It was all included for eight-fifty. It was just... It woulda turned your stomach to see it. Um... the bathroom, it had big tiles and this whole bottom section, big black mold. The tub, you wouldn’ta even gotten in. It was slippery, it was black at the bottom. Oh, and getting up there, it was on the third floor. The stairs going up were like fire escape steps. They were like, narrowed in and steep. No way I could handle that. Yeah, I said, ‘No, that’s really out of the picture.’”

For most of the people who shared their stories with me, finding safe and affordable housing in Kingston was “really out of the picture.”

PROBLEM #2: RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The City of Kingston should build more affordable housing.

While the City continues to promote itself as a government that will build affordable housing at sites such as 805 Ridley Street and 1316 Princess Street, they have yet to do so, even despite recommendations from the Mayor's Task Force on Housing. According to the report released from the Mayor's Task Force on Housing, **100 affordable housing units will need to be built every year** to meet the housing demand in our community. (32)

Unfortunately, it seems that the City has no political will to meet this demand. This is especially true in regards to the municipal budget; the City of Kingston's 2021 Operational Budget will see an increase of only 0.98% to its housing operations, but the 2021 Capital Budget for Housing and Social Services is just \$2.8 million, **a decrease of almost \$5 million from the previous year.** (34-35) The City's refusal to prioritize the community's demand for affordable housing in a meaningful way is a failure of civic responsibility. This failure is even greater when we consider what happened in Belle Park during the summer of 2020, where unhoused people set up a tent city in response to poor service provision during the COVID-19 pandemic, were **promised no evictions, and yet were forcibly evicted by the City and Kingston Police.** (36-38)

The City of Kingston must take its vision to become a "liveable" city seriously, for the sake of all of Kingston's citizens, and **build more affordable housing.** (11)

PROBLEM #2: RECOMMENDATIONS

2. The City of Kingston should create municipally operated accountability tools for landlords of low-income housing to ensure these units stay safe and habitable.

Currently, the only accountability mechanisms for landlords of low-income housing in Kingston are the provincially legislated Residential Tenancy Act (RTA) and the municipal Property Standards Bylaws. (39-40)

While there is no question that both the RTA and the municipal Property Standards Bylaws are important and necessary to protect the safety and rights of tenants, **they are not always effective in doing so for a number of reasons.** For example, it is the responsibility of the tenant to file a report with the Landlord Tenant Board (LTB) – the provincial body that enforce the RTA – when a landlord refuses or neglects to make necessary repairs to their unit.

However, many people who live in affordable housing face **many barriers** to reporting such disrepair including: **fear of eviction, fear of paying higher rent when the repairs or renovations are complete, not having access to a computer or phone, abusive landlord-tenant relationships, mental health issues, lack of financial or social resources to file a complaint** (i.e. receiving time off work for an LTB hearing, bylaw inspection, and/or legal aid appointments), **and not knowing who to call for help.** (41)

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PROBLEM #2: RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result, **many people continue to live in affordable, but unsafe, housing**, causing damage to their health and wellbeing. (41) This was the case for most of the people I spoke to for this project.

In light of these barriers, a few municipalities have created more **strict accountability systems** to make sure that tenants living in affordable housing remain safe and supported throughout their tenancy.

For example, the City of Toronto has implemented a program called RentSafeTO, a bylaw enforcement program that requires building owners and operators to comply with municipal building standards. (41) As a part of the program, all landlords with apartment buildings with 3 or more storeys and/or 10 or more units are required to register and renew their membership every year, as well as undergo regular evaluations from bylaw inspectors, post hardcopy results of their evaluations in places accessible to their tenants, and make their tenants aware of their rights to access help through the RentSafeTO program. (42)

A program like RentSafeTO, when adjusted to fit the unique housing landscape in Kingston (i.e. adjusting the building size requirement for landlords to register from 3 storeys and/or 10 or more units, to two storeys and/or 3 or more units; and including motels as an integral part of Kingston's housing stock), **would undoubtedly increase the quality of life for thousands of people across the city.**

PROBLEM #3: THE EMOTIONAL BURDEN OF REINTEGRATION

Surviving the trauma of prison

One of the most significant difficulties that formerly incarcerated people face upon their release from prison is the emotional burden of reintegration.

For example, **Shanadora** tried to spell out the emotions that she, and others, experienced during reintegration, explaining that **it was more than just getting a job or finding a place to live**, although those things are important:

“The whole time I was in prison... I was always in survivor mode. I don’t feel like I live that way anymore, but when you’re in jail, you have to be on guard for everything. Cause you never know from day to day what’s going to happen.

A two-year period when I was in there, seven women hung in there... It’s emotional and stuff like that, but that’s what you’re coming out with. You know what I’m saying? That’s why I say it’s a big fear to come out, doesn’t matter who you are.

And here’s what I found, I call it ‘the highs and lows of coming out.’ For the first three months, you’re on a high cause everything is new [...] And then sets in the depression, the lows. ‘Fuck, I don’t have a job yet. Fuck, I don’t have no money.’ And that’s when the trouble will start, when you get into the lows...

Cause you know what? You may be okay when you go in, but I don’t give a fuck who you are, when you come out, you are coming out with baggage. You’re not okay. Cause it’s the stuff you see in there that you can’t run from. It’s the stuff you live with day to day.”



Culture Shock

On top of the emotional trauma that some people, like Shanadora, carry with them upon their release and into their everyday lives in the community, many incarcerated people **experience an intense kind of culture shock** when they leave prison.

Pedro explained his experience of culture shock to me in our interview:

“[It’s] like sensory deprivation. That’s the best way I can think to describe it. I’ve never quite heard institutionalization very well explained.

It’s a really hard thing to put your finger on, even when you’ve lived through it. And if you’re an introvert, like I felt stunned. I felt shocked. It was like being in shock. Cause I went from four months of solitary confinement and then four months of being three people in a cell, and then I was downtown, with no family support, no community support. I just got dumped after eleven years in prison. I just got dumped on Bath Road and I hitchhiked into Kingston.”

A few minutes later, Pedro said:

“I do feel this great gulf exists between me and other human beings. I do have a vile temper, I get moody sometimes. I have a mood disorder or something. I have really down days and really angry days. Feeling like, feeling like no one understands. It’s so important for us to feel understood.

I feel like no one understands, like I have no connection to other human beings. I feel like I’m on the outside looking in, like... Like it’s a club that I’m not allowed to be a part of. I just hate how I started so young. By the time I was twenty-six, I was very institutionalized.”

When I asked him what the word **"institutionalization"** meant, Pedro explained:

"Well, it gets thrown around a lot, but it just means that I was completely adjusted to the rhythm in jail, like, to the guards bringing me my own food and everything.

Like, when I got out to the street, I was like, where the hell are these guards? You know? Don’t they know it’s six o’clock? Having to take care

of myself is completely abnormal, right? Like, if you don't have a toothbrush, you can't just yell over to the next cell, 'Hey, can I get a toothbrush?' You have to actually walk down to the store and buy one. There's so much that you've never done for yourself when you grow up in jail. You get out and you have to do it for yourself. They [CSC] really do make you dependent in a way."

Pedro mentions "institutionalization" as a way to describe how he became accustomed to life in prison.

In the context of prison, the term **institutionalization** refers to the ways that incarcerated people try to adjust to prison life in order to survive it. **It means becoming used to the culture of the prison, which is usually quite different from the outside world.** (43)

Often people become so used to living in prison, they struggle to live in the community upon release.

As a result, people coming out of prison often experience extreme culture shock that can have terrible consequences for their mental health.



Chip certainly felt the consequences of institutionalization when he was released:

"It was just, like when I got out, you get institutionalized too, eh? Like, I got institutionalized a bit. [...] I didn't know what it meant either 'til it first happened to me... But uh, you wind up, you get involved in all the politics and everything inside and you exclude the outside world almost while you're in there.

Sometimes after a while, it just makes it easier to take your mind away from it, take your mind out of it cause it's hard living both, both outside and inside when you're in there. [...] And when you get out, and

you don't really realize it until you're out here, and then you're... boom, you're thrown out into it.

I know with me, I had a hard time going into like, shopping centres and places where there was lots of people and stuff like that. Just being around people. Actually, even at home, I would just close my curtains, not answer my door, not answer my phone, turn the lights out. Just watch TV in the dark and just avoided people in general.

And just had a hard time like, everyday activity, especially for the first while. Like, you get in there [prison], and you're basically a robot sort of thing, right? You're told what to do, when to do it, almost like you're programmed. Like, everyday activities.

And then, when you get out here, you gotta do everything yourself basically. You know, it shouldn't be a hard task, but it is. And, you know, it gets easier after time, but the thing is, you still never get back to the same, the same way. I didn't anyways... You lose that everyday way about you that you had before. I used to be a real people person, but I'm not now."

In order to survive prison, Chip needed to shut out the outside world completely, becoming institutionalized and **"involved in all the politics and everything inside."**

However, when Chip left prison, he was unable to go back to the way his life was before he was incarcerated.

Paying close attention to Shanadora, Pedro, and Chip's feelings of isolation, fear, confusion, and depression helps us to understand that, for some, reintegration may be impossible without proper mental and emotional supports.

We aren't just asking people with prison experiences to get a job, find a doctor, or secure housing upon release, but to thrive in a world outside of prison, one that is no longer familiar to them, with little to no preparation or support.

PROBLEM #3: RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Local service providers, in partnership with the City of Kingston, should establish a client-led, empathy-driven case management system for people with prison experiences.**

At the end of our interview, I asked **Henry** if there was anything he still wanted to talk about that he felt that I missed. He said:

“I think... that the health people should take a better look at the stress that is caused to people that are coming out... And let the workers and people know that maybe sometimes they have to be a little bit more understanding and have a little bit more of an open mind. So, they can realize that, especially a person that’s been in a long time or done long periods of time on uh, the ‘instalment plan,’ – you know, like four years here, five years here, three years here – there’s a reason that’s happening. And the reason could be anywhere from just a simple thing of not being able to get that apartment when they needed it or who knows?”

Do you understand what I’m trying to say? Like, there’s a lot of stress on a person when they’re coming out... I don’t think a lot of people, workers and that, really realize the depth of some of these disabilities, you know? In order to give them a little space and help them, instead of causing them more anxiety and stress.”

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PROBLEM #3: RECOMMENDATIONS

"Cause we don't need it. We got enough already. But that's one thing I found that hit me the hardest, was being overwhelmed by so much coming at me at one time, you know? Make sure you got financial backing, make sure you got a place to stay, make sure you got proper clothing, make sure you got some money in your pocket, make sure you got food. It goes on and on and on, that list. It's endless when you first get out cause you have nothing.

And so we need people there that understand that we want everything today and we're not gonna get it for a while to give us some help, get us through it and to be patient. Be more patient, you know? In order to get us through these things. And, by giving us the phone and giving us the numbers and going with us there and showing us, you know, this is where you come for this, this is where the coupons are, this is where you can access this, and finding out that this is what you actually need first.

What do you need? Not what he needed or she needed when she came out, what do you need? Cause everything's different in different people's minds of what's most important and sometimes they need to learn to try and space things out and to get their priorities straight on what they want to do first.

And there should be somebody there with you to say, 'Hey, let's go make a phone call.' Not just a case worker, but somebody that's

(Continued on the next page)

PROBLEM #3: RECOMMENDATIONS

willing to stick with you and show you and hang out with you if you're having a bad day. You know, 'Let's go have a coffee, we'll think about what we can do next,' or something.

It's always nice to have somebody there, cause when you're by yourself and you're facing all these things and you're sitting there late at night in your bed in the shelter, and you're going, 'God, what have I got done? Have I got anything done?' You know? You're like worried to death."

While the funding from government institutions is lacking to create a comprehensive client-led case management system, it is clear from my experience speaking and working with many non-profit organizations in Kingston that **the capacity, skill, and political will exists amongst the local network of service providers to pursue such an initiative.**

PROBLEM #3: RECOMMENDATIONS

2. Local service providers must actively prioritize emotional healing over risk management in their work with formerly incarcerated people.

Many of the people I spoke to explained that their physical, mental and emotional rehabilitation often took a back seat to security and risk mitigation. **Violet** told me:

“The programs [in prison] are shitty, they don’t do anything, they don’t help anybody. I mean, they’re mandatory, some of the programs, but it’s like, they should have more. And like, in terms of your mental health, they have mental health workers, but they don’t let you get like, in depth. When you have a meeting with them, they only let you talk about the very minimal, they don’t go right into deep detail and actually work on healing. So, it’s kind of like, what are you guys really doing? How are you guys really helping people, you know? You’re not! You’re just letting them be here and you’re not actually giving people the help that they need. They have like the same ten medications for every friggen thing, you know? If you have depression or anxiety, you’re going to get the same thing...”

Like, a lot of the time when you’re in the system, it’s because something has happened to you. You’ve experienced trauma and loss and you need in depth things to help you fix that. Not like, you know, just a few sessions and then you’re done.

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PROBLEM #3: RECOMMENDATIONS

It needs to be more in depth things, more stuff for healing for trauma and like, I don't know, things to make you feel better."

Similarly, **Jamie** explained that ideas of risk and security often made it more difficult for people to successfully reintegrate:

"[N]umbers in textbooks don't define who we are, right? So, just because statistically someone with a background like myself is more likely to do this doesn't mean that I'm gonna do it. So, don't treat me like that number on the paper. Look at me, and see what I'm doing and let's go from there..."

They need to be more understanding and compassionate, and listen to what our needs are to get better. Not what you know, what those black and white letters say on a piece of paper. I'm thinking about what my conditions say. And so, instead of continuing to punish us and exaggerate our trauma and stuff like that? Help more! More 'why' instead of, 'Go sit in the corner, you're bad!' What happened? And these are the events leading up to this. How do we stop this? You know?"

Many formerly incarcerated people said that working with agencies that used a risk management model of reintegration only made their problems worse. In these settings, people like Violet and Jamie often felt more like a set of data points and less like human beings with unique needs and experiences.

CONCLUSION

I do not claim to ‘give voice’ to people with prison experiences. People with prison experiences have been using their voices to talk about their experiences of oppression and injustice for a long time, and only they can fully describe the experience of reintegration in Kingston.

In other words, **this report should not stand in the place of much needed in-depth and ongoing consultation with formerly incarcerated people about what they think should change in our community.**

That being said, this report puts forward **six recommendations** from some of the formerly incarcerated people in our community. These suggestions are meant to help local politicians, service providers, and other decision-makers **foster change**, both in their day-to-day operations and long-term planning activities.

The recommendations proposed in this report are not only reasonable; they are also necessary. **Without proper supports, formerly incarcerated people will continue to be set up for failure in their attempts at reintegration**, needlessly suffering from physical and mental health issues, food insecurity, unemployment, unsafe housing, and homelessness. For many of the people I spoke to, the lack of local supports upon their release was a matter of survival.

If Kingston is to truly become a “liveable” city, the municipality – and the community more broadly – will consider the experiences in this report carefully, understanding what is at stake if they choose otherwise.

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NOTES

- * This estimate is made from my own calculation using information provided online regarding CSC's institutional profiles (<https://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/institutions/001002-3000-eng.shtml>), as well as the total number of people in federal custody in Canada from Statistics Canada (<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/cv.action?pid=3510015501>). This calculation assumes that each institution is operating on full capacity
- ** Each person I spoke to was given a pseudonym, or a fake name, to ensure their confidentiality and protect identity within the community.
- *** The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (2012) defines being “provisionally accommodated” as, “accessing temporary housing provided by government or the non-profit sector, or may have independently made arrangements for short-term accommodation” (p. 3). People who are provisionally accommodated are considered to be ‘at risk of homelessness’ because of the instability and insecurity of tenure that often accompanies these experiences. In this context, those in transitional housing and motels could be considered provisionally accommodated.
<https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/Definition%20of%20Homelessness.pdf>
- **** According to Statistics Canada (2017), a household is in “core housing need” if it can't find local median rent housing that is not in need of major repairs, has enough bedrooms to suit the family according to the National Occupancy Standard requirements, and costs less than 30% of the household's total income before tax.
<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/households-menage037-eng.cfm>

All pictures included in this report are the author's personal photographs.

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