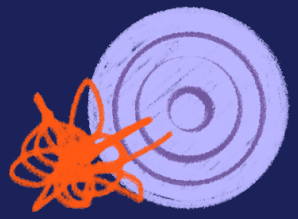

Community over Custody

Exploring community-based approaches for women impacted by the justice system

Sarah Smith, Churchill Fellow 2024

the CHURCHILL fellowship

Contents

Acknowledgements

The Churchill Fellowship

This project was made possible by the funding I received from The Churchill Fellowship. I am incredibly grateful for this grant and for the support I received from the team from the day I found out I had been shortlisted, to the present. Being able to do a Churchill Fellowship has been a once in a lifetime experience, and I would encourage anyone to apply to this unique programme.

The Churchill Fellowship is a charity that supports individuals to follow their passion for change, through learning from the world and bringing that knowledge back to the UK to lead the change they wish to see. Every UK citizen over 18 can apply, regardless of their qualifications, background, professional experience or age.

The Fellowship was created as the living legacy of Sir Winston Churchill for the nation, aiming to honour his memory by reflecting his unique contribution to national life. Whilst The Churchill Fellowship does incredible work in supporting changemakers to have an impact in their communities, it's vital to also acknowledge the problematic legacy of its namesake. Sir Winston Churchill is often remembered as a wartime leader who played a major role in the defeat of Nazism. However, he also held unacceptable views on race and was a strong proponent of colonial policies that led to widespread suffering.

In my report, particularly in relation to my journey in Canada, I talk about the devastating effects of racism and colonialism, how it shapes systems today like the justice system, and how Indigenous communities are continually required to show strength and resilience in the face of oppression. The irony is not lost on me that one of the Indigenous led organisations I visited was located just off 'Churchill Avenue'. In my report, one of my recommendations is around addressing structural racism – this means being able to confront legacies in their entirety.

I would like extend sincere thanks for the below organisations and individuals for making my Churchill Fellowship happen:

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About the author

I am a criminal justice policy, research and communications professional in the charity sector. My current role is Policy Manager at One Small Thing, a charity whose mission is to redesign the way the justice system responds to women and their children. A core part of my role is influencing policymakers and contributing to conversations that support culture change across the justice system, with the ultimate aim of improving outcomes for women impacted by the justice system and their children. Before joining One Small Thing, I worked for Refuge, the largest domestic abuse service provider in the UK, where I provided project development support for the National Domestic Abuse Helpline.

My interest in justice policy began during my time working for The Forgiveness Project, a small charity that uses restorative storytelling to combat narratives of harm and conflict – and who runs interventions in prisons. Through this work I met people from around the world who rejected prevailing narratives on punishment and blame, and were reimagining what justice and healing can look like. Importantly, this work challenges the binary distinction between who is a 'victim', and who is a 'perpetrator' that is so commonly communicated.

Summary

My Fellowship focuses on women's experiences of the justice system in Canada, Germany and Finland, and explores how organisations and individuals in these countries deliver and advocate for community-based approaches for women. This research saw me exploring different sentencing practices, initiatives run by third sector organisations and policy work taking place that is moving their communities closer to a future where prisons are not seen as the solution. With the justice system in England and Wales in crisis, there is an urgent need to reimagine how we respond to harm in communities, and what 'justice' can look like for women. What is clear is that when you are speaking about justice issues, you are always tapping into a much broader conversation. It's never just about the justice system – it's about inequality, it's about structural violence, it's about trauma, and it's about how we treat those who have often been chronically failed and excluded by systems and services. It's about all of us, and the society we want to live in. During my travels I was fortunate to meet those who rejected prevailing narratives on crime and punishment, and instead focused on the evidence of what works for women, and what creates the communities we all want to live in.

Where did I go? Canada: Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto Germany: Bremen, Berlin, Finland: Helsinki

Whilst I couldn't possibly put everything I learnt to paper, I have organised my key pieces of learning and recommendations as follows.

Stable, safe housing for women should be seen as foundational

Recommendations

1. Explore opportunities for increased collaboration and knowledge sharing between women's justice organisations and those working in homelessness prevention and housing.

2. Build on existing knowledge to explore how the Housing First model can support women impacted by the justice system.

3. Monitor the implementation of key Government strategies such as the National Plan to End Homelessness, raising how the strategies impact women in the justice system.

Prevention is a mindset

Recommendations

4. Explore opportunities for increased collaboration and knowledge sharing between women's justice organisations and those working in anti-poverty and social welfare.

5. Explore the impact of guaranteed basic income models on women impacted by the justice system.

6. In influencing communications, focus on policies, strategies, and solutions that prevent crisis, moving away from just describing the problems.

Using prison as a solution to social need harms women

Recommendations

7. Strengthen communication with public and policymakers around the efficacy and benefits of community-based approaches for women.

8. Explore how non-reformist reform strategies can inform influencing work.

Understanding and addressing narratives on crime and punishment is key

Recommendations

9. Undertake scoping to understand public and political attitudes to crime and punishment, how these differ across key audiences, and the role of the media in shaping and influencing these views.

10. Explore creative ways to communicate justice issues to the public.

Prioritising flexibility, choice and agency is vital for women impacted by the justice system

Recommendations

11. Ensure service design is informed by women with lived experience of the justice system.

12. Consider how mandatory programme participation impacts women's sense of autonomy and how women can play a more active role in the type of support given, and the way it is delivered.

Understanding the reality of women's lives is essential

Recommendations

13. Centre the voices of women with lived experience in conversations with policymakers.

14. Embed intersectional approaches at every level.

15. Advocate for interventions that aim to increase decisionmakers understanding of women's diverse experiences, such as detailed pre-sentence reports.

Embedding lived experience improves knowledge and supports change

Recommendations

16. Ensure women with lived experience are compensated fairly for their time and expertise.

17. Provide development opportunities for women with lived experience.

18. Ensure there is support for trauma at every stage.

19. Examine where in your organisation barriers might exist that prevent women with lived experience of the justice system from applying, progressing or feeling valued.

20. Create diverse opportunities for input, collaboration and leadership - avoiding over reliance on personal storytelling.

Reducing disproportionality and addressing racism is central – and a task for us all

Recommendations

21. Use platforms and privilege to highlight racial inequality in the justice system, and organisations working this area - in conversations with decisionmakers, in policy work, and through public communication channels.

22. Self-educate on effective and meaningful allyship.

23. Show solidarity and allyship with organisations supporting Black, Asian and minoritised women, whether this be supporting a campaign, contributing to policy discussion, or through equitable funding practices.

Key recommendations for policy makers

Resource the women's sector

1. Commit long term funding to community-based specialist women's services, moving away from short-term, competitive commissioning processes.

2. Protect and prioritise smaller 'by and for' organisations, recognising their specialist expertise and reducing barriers that may exclude them from commissioning and funding processes.

3. Support the scaling up of the Women's Centre Model as a core, prevention-led approach, diverting women into trauma-informed, wraparound community support instead of prison.

Strengthen the foundations for stability in the community

4. Tackle housing insecurity by scaling up social housing and strengthening private renters' rights and protections, including introducing private rent controls.

5. Scale Housing First nationally, and evaluate its impact on outcomes for women impacted by the justice system.

6. Commission guaranteed basic income / universal basic income pilots, and evaluate their impact on women's justice outcomes.

Build better decision-making

7. Involve women with lived experience of the justice system in policy design, paying attention to diversity and intersectionality.

8. Embed anti-racism across policy-making, with clear accountability for ensuring all policies are anti-racist in practice.

9. Embed trauma-informed, gender-responsive decision-making across the justice system – and seek training, guidance and resources from experts who can support this upskilling.

Introduction

In September 2024, at the Labour Party Conference, then Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood announced the government's intention to create a Women's Justice Board. What would be the primary purpose of this initiative? To reduce the number of women entering prison, ultimately resulting in fewer women's prisons.

The creation of this board was received positively across the sector by those who had been specifically calling for a Women's Justice Board, such as the National Women's Justice Coalition of which One Small Thing, the charity I work for, is a member.

But if there are to be less women in prison, what does a community-based approach look like, and how do we get there? The Sentencing Act 2026 legislates for an increase in community-based sentences through policies such as a presumption against short sentences, and an expansion of suspended sentences. However the question of exactly what the vision is for a robust community justice system, and importantly how it is funded, remains.

The call for less women in prison has been a longstanding agenda item for those working in women's justice. Most women in prison are sent there unnecessarily, when they could have been safely supported in the community. The impact of prison can be especially devastating for women, who often lose their homes, jobs and their children – sometimes permanently. According to Prison Reform Trust, an estimated 17,500 children were separated from their mother by imprisonment in 2020, and in 2023, half of women leaving prison did so without settled accommodation to go to. All this, often for the sake of a matter of months in prison. Just over half of women in prison receive sentences of six months or less.

"For women, prison is almost never the answer to issues we should be trying to solve."

The experiences of women affected by the justice system, often impacted by trauma, poverty, and structural violence, are diverse, but speak volumes about the impact a chronic lack of investment in communities can have for individuals. One thing is clear, what we're doing now isn't working. For women, prison is almost never the answer to issues we should be trying to solve. The good news is that we aren't ignorant to some of the solutions.

We know that when women are supported and managed in the community instead of unnecessarily ripped from their support networks, they can stay with their children, maintain their homes or be supported into housing, and keep up their employment if they have it.

All those things make it much less likely that they will be further drawn into the justice system. So, with this knowledge, why have community sentences declined? And why have we not seen secure, long-term funding for women's specific and public services in the community that could prevent women's involvement in the justice system in the first place?

In my role as Policy Manager at One Small Thing, I gather learning from solutions such as our pilot residential community for women and their children, Hope Street, and work on broader research around practitioners' understanding of community-based solutions for women, and what they think needs to change. Nearly half of respondents to our survey reported that they believed that women received short custodial sentences rather than community orders, precisely because there are not enough services in the community. All too often prison is used as the solution, in place of creating strong and well-resourced communities.

In 2025, I embarked on my Churchill Fellowship, visiting Canada, Germany and Finland. It was an eye opening experience exploring how those working on the frontline and beyond are moving their communities closer to a future where prisons are not seen as the solution for women – and, importantly, how they are inspiring policy makers to get on board. Many of the challenges we face are similar, and it was fascinating to learn how they have approached these with a different perspective. Throughout my journey, broadly I was interested in exploring:

- What a community-based approach for women looks like in other contexts.
- What kinds of community support women have access to, and who delivers it.
- How do we respond to harm in communities.
- How we create conditions in the community to prevent involvement in the justice system, and for women to thrive.
- How we work to influence change on justice issues for women, and what the levers of change are.

What I found on my journey filled me with hope and showed that there is a global community of organisations and individuals who care about changing the narrative around justice. I am excited to share my learning over the following pages and hope that, whether you work within the voluntary sector or shape policy, you will be able gain insight from what I found on my journey. The aim of this project is to stimulate discussion, provide insight, and ultimately show that it's not only possible, but vital, to reimagine justice for women.

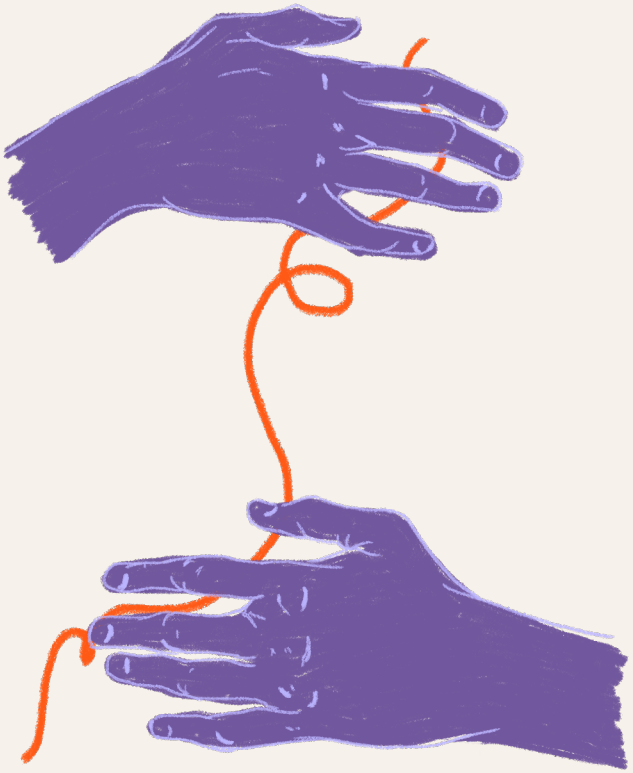
Canada

Montreal

Ottawa

Toronto

‘Healing involves the wellbeing of the entire system.’



Before diving into the organisations and services I visited during my time in Canada, it’s important to set some context. During my travels I wanted to learn more about the places I was visiting, beyond just the specific justice context. Whilst there’s no way I could become an expert in the time I had in each country, there are some key contextual facts in Canada to acknowledge.

Firstly, the land now known as Canada was colonised by Europeans. Indigenous Peoples have continuously inhabited what is now Canada for thousands of years and today there are over 1.6 million First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, across hundreds of diverse and unique communities, speaking more than 70 languages. The process of colonisation represents what many today recognise as genocide.

Secondly, Britain played a central role in the colonialisation of Canada. This shouldn’t come as a surprise – English is one of the official languages of Canada alongside French, Canada is a member of the British Commonwealth, and we share the same Monarch. Most of these facts aren’t unknown, however the reasons behind this association are rarely spoken here. Many of the systems in Canada today, including the justice system, share similarities with our systems here in the UK.

Thirdly, it’s not ‘history’. What I mean by this is that the process of colonisation is not just something that happened in the past, it’s a process that requires active participation of systems and practices today. The justice system is no exception and can perpetuate cycles of institutionalisation – even mirroring the harms to Indigenous Peoples caused by residential schools, and involvement with child welfare authorities[1].

First Nations Garden,
Montreal Botanical Garden

[1] For more context, read my blog

During my time in Montreal, I visited the exhibition 'Indigenous Voices of Today: Knowledge, Trauma, Resilience'. The exhibition bears witness to the still unrecognized knowledge of Indigenous peoples in Quebec and Canada as well as the deep wounds they carry, and their incredible resilience.

Around one hundred carefully selected objects from the Museum's Indigenous Cultures collection are combined with more than eighty powerful stories (texts and videos) from members of the 11 Indigenous nations in Quebec, shedding light on their knowledge and philosophies. They speak out about their suffering as well as their dreams and plans for a better future to help restore their health, which has been undermined by the process of assimilation2.

Whilst not about the justice system directly, much of what is described can provide context for the Canadian justice system today where Indigenous people are disproportionately imprisoned. In 2022/23 Indigenous women accounted for half of all female admissions into federal prisons3, despite making up less than 5% of the population.

The exhibition is also a celebration of the lives, legacies and diversity of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and the valuable knowledge they hold. "*Healing involves the wellbeing of the entire system*" is a quote from the exhibition and is particularly relevant when thinking about the justice system. Solving the challenges within the justice system is vital, but it's also so important to look at what comes before – at the places where exclusion can also occur. It really is about the health of the whole system in a community – like education, health, housing and everything in between.

This understanding, of the interconnectedness between different parts of a whole, is a good place to start when thinking about how to address challenges in the justice system.

[2]Description taken from the Museum's website – more information can be found here
[3] Government of Canada, JustFacts 2024

During my time in Canada, I have been fortunate to speak with Indigenous led organisations working with women impacted by the justice system, and learning about approaches that can challenge prevailing narratives on punishment and how we respond to harm in communities in a way that recognises intergenerational trauma.
These conversations have been eye opening and offer valuable insights into what we understand about justice, community, and healing.

Ontario Native Women's Association

During my time in Canada there was ongoing debate in the UK over the introduction of new sentencing guidelines. The dispute over the Sentencing Council's new Imposition guidelines, the implementation of which was blocked by the Government, continued and saw the introduction of the Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Bill. This bill (now an act), submitted by the Justice Secretary, was brought in to prevent sentencing guidelines, used by judges and magistrates in England and Wales, from referring to personal characteristics such as race, religion or belief, and cultural background in their guidance regarding when a pre-sentence report (PSR) should be requested.

The new iteration of the Imposition guideline, the draft of which was publicly consulted on, was generally positively received by criminal justice charities, with the section on PSRs seen as a positive way to acknowledge and address the racial disproportionality and discrimination we see in the justice system.

People from Black, Asian and minoritised communities are overrepresented in the justice system in England and Wales, and face unequal outcomes and treatment - such as being more likely to be remanded, and facing disproportionately higher odds of receiving custodial sentences4. Women and pregnant women were also included in the Sentencing Council's list of cohorts for whom a pre-sentence report may be particularly important. The Government's decision to effectively block the new guidelines by introducing a bill that would make it unlawful for judges and magistrates to consider personal characteristics when deciding if a PSR should be requested, has been widely criticized.

While these discussions were taking place at home, I was in Ottawa, Canada, learning about a specific type of pre-sentence report developed in response to the acknowledged overincarceration of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. I visited Ottawa's branch of the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) to learn more about how they support Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people impacted by the justice system.

ONWA is a not-for-profit organization which aims to empower and support all Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people and their families in the province of Ontario through research, advocacy, policy development and programmes that focus on local, regional and provincial activities. Ending violence against Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people and their families and ensuring equal access to justice, education, health services, environmental stewardship and economic development, sit at the cornerstone of the organization.

ONWA's Strategic Issues Model www.onwa.ca/about

ONWA's work on justice related issues is represented through their Gladue program – the first ever Gladue program for Indigenous Women by Indigenous Women.

What is Gladue?

Gladue is a sentencing principle which recognizes that Indigenous Peoples face racism and systemic discrimination in and out of the criminal justice system, and attempts to address the crisis of overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples in custody. The team at ONWA explains that Gladue 'evolved from judicial recognition of the over incarceration of Indigenous Peoples in Canada as a result of the impact and harms of colonialization'

The Gladue principle, introduced in 1996, instructs Canadian Judges to consider other sentencing options, rather than imprisonment – based upon factors of specific life, social and cultural circumstances of Indigenous Peoples.

'A court that imposes a sentence shall also take into consideration the following principles: (e) all available sanctions, other than imprisonment, that are reasonable in the circumstances and consistent with the harm done to victims or the community should be considered for all offenders, with particular attention to the circumstances of Aboriginal offenders.' [5]

In order to support judges to take into account the unique experiences of Indigenous Peoples, a Gladue report can be requested. This is a type of pre-sentencing report which helps judges consider alternative sentencing options that recognise the unique circumstances of Indigenous Peoples, avoid unnecessary incarceration, and provide culturally sensitive support.

[5] Section 718.2(e) of the criminal code

ONWA's Gladue work

ONWA's program includes a 'Gladue Writer' who prepares and submits culturally grounded and individually focused recommendations to the courts for consideration during sentencing. These Gladue reports take into account Indigenous Women's personal experiences, their family history, the impact of intergenerational trauma of racism and colonization such as residential schools, in order for the court to fully consider their circumstances.

The team explains more about their process of producing a Gladue report:

"Their lawyer can request it on their behalf in court, and then an organization like ours can write it for them. So, we meet with the person and learn about their history, their cultural background, their experiences in their lives, their family's lives.

We compile a report for them that includes their family history, the community they come from, and then their own personal experiences as well if they've experienced, let's say, substance use challenges or mental health issues.

And then we do collateral interviews as well, so we'll speak with family members or friends or chosen family, or sometimes workers, if they're connected to services in the community. So, it ends up being a fulsome overview of their life, their personal circumstance, and their family history.

Then at the end, we also do recommendations that are culturally based, but also that match what the person is interested in. So, we don't just come up with recommendations on our own and slap it in the report, we work with the person and ask them, does this work for you? Does this make sense for you?

So, everyone's recommendations look a little different. But the idea behind the Gladue report is that it outlines information about the individual's unique background and circumstances as an Indigenous person as well as culturally appropriate alternative sentencing options for the court's consideration."

ONWA's Gladue Writer

It can take on average between eight to ten weeks for ONWA's Gladue Program to complete a Gladue report. This far exceeds the length of time given to creating pre-sentence reports in England and Wales. And whilst a longer process is beneficial in providing detailed information for the court to consider, and creating a fuller picture of someone's life, this process can also be challenging. In my conversation with ONWA's Gladue team we spoke about the impact of trauma and why some women may not want to pursue a Gladue report even though they are entitled to one. A strength of Gladue reports is the time given to the process, and the depth of detail, however it's also easy to see how this has the potential to retraumatize.

This makes it all the more important that this process involves organisations like ONWA, who are Indigenous-led and approach this work through a culturally sensitive, and trauma and gender-informed lens. Additionally, as part of their Gladue program, alongside the writing of the report, ONWA have 'Gladue Aftercare' which offers holistic support for Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people from the initial Gladue interview onward – this can be support accessing Traditional Ceremony and cultural teachings, navigating the conditions of their release and recommendations of the Gladue report, or help addressing challenges around housing, substance use and trauma.

The team describe how vital this aftercare work is, and how it's

"more effective when you implement these types of reports within a community setting like this, where there are services that you that can directly be connected to".

ONWA's work on justice related issues sits alongside a variety of other community services they run and fits into their wider mission to empower Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people to become leaders in their communities. The role of the Aftercare Worker is to bridge the gaps and help build that safety net in the community so women, girls and Two-Spirit people can thrive.

"Usually, in their aftercare plan, we look at counselling. We have a trauma informed care counsellor here upstairs. I work with her. There's a Healthy Babies Program, so if they have any children, I connect them with them... They need help with housing, I'll be that worker... I'll try to help them to get a job. If they need a pre or post-natal worker, I can do that as well."

– ONWA's Gladue Aftercare worker

Gladue Outcomes

So, after all the work that goes into the creation of a Gladue report, what are the outcomes? Whilst Judges are not compelled to follow the recommendations in the report, only to read and consider them, the team tell me, "*we've definitely seen a lot of Indigenous women end up with better outcomes than what the crown was originally asking for after the production of a report. It is also not uncommon to see the Crown's initial position being reduced upon the completion of a Gladue report. We have even seen situations where a Judge will impose a conditional sentence or even sometimes a conditional or absolute discharge to allow the community member an opportunity to pursue the alternative sentencing options proposed in the Gladue Report.*"

– ONWA's Gladue Writer

It's important to highlight that Gladue work is not a perfect solution and shouldn't stand in isolation. Although Gladue was born out of an acknowledgement of the overincarceration of Indigenous Peoples it isn't, nor should it be expected to be, a panacea to overincarceration – the foundations of which start long before the passing of a sentence. And as previously mentioned, they work best when implemented alongside a network of services which are working to create the conditions in the community where women can thrive, such as those ONWA run.

There are also questions around the consistency and accessibility to Gladue services at a national scale.

In Canada's first federal Indigenous Justice Strategy published in March 2025, there is a priority action that seeks to address these concerns, and improve availability of Gladue services:

'Priority Action 20 (JUS, CSC) In consultation and cooperation with First Nations, Inuit and Métis and in collaboration with provinces and territories, examine the accessibility of Gladue services with a view to developing options for national standards on the production of Gladue reports to reduce barriers to accessing Gladue services.'[6]

[6] Indigenous Justice Strategy 2025

Ending thoughts

Whilst Gladue alone may not solve the overincarceration of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, when implemented alongside a network of community support, it can play an important role in preventing Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people from entering custody. Organizations like ONWA play a crucial role in this process, not only by producing high quality Gladue reports, but also by offering aftercare support and connection to a wide variety of community services. These services that address a variety of needs around trauma, housing, substance use, health, employment and more, are essential for supporting women to stay in the community and thrive.

A single piece of sentencing legislation or policy is unlikely to make all the difference on its own without a well-resourced community. This makes it all the more important that community services by and for Indigenous women are invested in and protected.

Since visiting ONWA, the Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Bill has now become an Act, meaning that the Sentencing Council – an independent public body which consulted the public on the proposed amendments to the sentencing guidelines- has been overruled by the Government. Not only does this set a dangerous precedent, but it means that the efforts to recognise disproportionality through sentencing have been stopped in its tracks. The Sentencing Bill, introduced in early September 2025, has further tested this precedent and seen the Government include a proposal in the Bill stating that the Sentencing Council will be unable to issue new guidelines without the approval of the Justice Secretary.

A foundational piece of learning from Gladue work in Canada, is that recognising, and naming disproportionality, is crucial. It sounds glaringly simple, but being able to recognise systems of oppression and urge sentencers to consider all available sanctions other than imprisonment, based on this knowledge, still seems like a challenge in England and Wales.

Thunder Women Healing Lodge Society

Building on these insights, an organisation I visited in Toronto, Thunder Women Healing Lodge Society (TWHLS), offers a powerful example of how culturally-rooted, community-driven support can transform the experiences of Indigenous women within the justice system.

TWHLS is a community-driven initiative raised out of concern and recognition of the urgent need to break the cycle of Indigenous women's over-representation in Canada's prisons. Indigenous-led, they provide trauma-informed, culturally appropriate services for First Nation (Status and Non-Status), Inuit, and Metis 2SLGBTQIA+ women exiting the justice system. The breadth of services and projects they run, which includes support for housing, skills and employment, food security and basic needs (and more), is truly impressive and reflects their holistic and individualised approach.

Artwork at Niigaan M'Nikeng Healing Lodge, by Paul Kohoko

Niigaan M'Nikeng Healing Lodge

A key part of their support for Indigenous women impacted by the justice system is their residential project, Niigaan M'Nikeng Healing Lodge. Niigaan M'Nikeng – The Way Forward – supports Indigenous women leaving prison on probation, as well as women on bail awaiting trial who would otherwise be held in custody. During my stay in Toronto I was lucky to be able to visit Niigaan M'Nikeng Healing Lodge and speak with Patti Pettigrew, TWHLS Founder and Executive Director, who showed me around and explained more about their impactful work.

10 women can stay here at a time and receive wraparound support including counselling, skills building, and transition support around housing, finance and independent living. Patti tells me that they don't put a limit on how long someone can stay at the healing lodge. They encourage women to gain independence in the community with their support, but many women stay up to a year. They recognise that the depth and type of support women need will vary as well as the time it takes for them to feel confident enough to move into independent housing, and so aren't prescriptive with time limits.

During my visit, I was really interested in the physical environment – how does it feel being in this space? And how can the spaces we create respond to trauma. In England and Wales many women involved in the justice system are victims of crimes more serious than the ones they are accused of, and often have deep experiences of trauma and multiple unmet needs.

That is why it was so important that Hope Street, the pioneering residential community for women run by One Small Thing (the charity I work for), was designed using trauma informed principles – down to the lighting, materials, colours and textures. So that the building itself could provide a foundation for healing and growth, a safe space to rebuild your life.

The women coming through the doors of TWHLS Healing Lodge may share similar life experiences, as well as the unique experience of living in Canada as an Indigenous woman. When you walk through the door, you feel as if you are walking into a home – there are no sterile smells, squeaky floors or dark hallways. The house has recently been refurbished so looks fresh and new, and has been decorated with soft furnishings and natural colours. It's the way you might intentionally furnish your home, as opposed to the formulaic choices seen in institutions.

More importantly than simply how the space looks, is how it is given meaning and contributes to a sense of healing. The building design was developed with input from Indigenous architects, the living areas are full of art by local Indigenous artists and artisans, and there is an outdoor area that is used for ceremonies and events. Patti describes how important this connection to culture is to healing:

"In order for Indigenous people to heal, you really have to delve deep into your culture and the spiritual aspects of your culture, right? So the women do that [here], and it works".

The Healing Lodge doesn't just look welcoming and homelike, it also feels lived in and communal – during my visit there are women occupying the various spaces, there's someone cooking in the kitchen, and when we go downstairs to the activity space, there are women listening to music and working on their regalia and beadwork together.

Patti also spoke to me about how important it is for the women to have connection to their children and family. She explains that some women have parents or grandparents who were put in residential schools, or were part of what is known as the Sixties Scoop – the large scale removal of indigenous children from their parents and communities, often to be placed in white families. Involvement in the justice system can further perpetuate this cycle of separation and intergenerational trauma. Patti talks about the impact this can have for women today, such as the loss of traditional community knowledge of parenting – which is why it's so important at TWHLS to support women to reconnect with their culture, including through reconnecting with children and family. Children aren't able to live in the lodge with their Mothers, however they've built a two storey house in the grounds to accommodate family visits.

"Every other weekend there's a family [staying], because a lot of women come from reserves, so their communities could be hundreds of miles away. And so what that means is, if their family wants to visit with them, they have to come to Toronto, they have to find accommodation, and they can't afford to pay for it".

– Patti Pettigrew, TWHLS Founder and Executive Director

During my visit I was invited to be part of a circle with staff and residents, where I heard more about women's thoughts and feelings about living at the Lodge. The circle started with smudging, a ceremony for purifying or cleansing the soul of negative thoughts during which sacred herbs are burnt to produce smoke. It was an honour to be invited to take part and to share this space with them.

Connection with children

Many of the women in the circle were Mothers. One woman spoke bout how, over Christmas, she was able to have her children stay with her in the private suite.

Care, compassion and community

Women spoke about the genuine care and compassion they felt in the Lodge and how grateful they felt to have the opportunity to be there.

Second chances

Some women had lived at the Lodge more than once and they mentioned how it feels like a place for a second chances - recognising that it is never too late to make changes in your life, and that it's a process that takes time.

Dedicated team

One team member mentioned that it doesn't feel like hard work, but 'heart' work. A woman staying at the lodge spoke about how she feels the team are really there for her - she'd been up in the night and someone had stayed with her the whole time.

Growing their impact

Thunder Woman Healing Lodge Society has ambitious plans for the future centred on expanding their capacity, particularly around providing housing for Indigenous women impacted by the justice system. They are currently in the process of building a brand new healing lodge from scratch. This new six-story building will offer 12 beds for women leaving federal and provincial prisons or before the courts on bail, all of whom will participate in the Thunder Woman Healing program and receive wrap-around supports.

Women who have completed the healing lodge programme, but who don't feel ready yet to move into independent housing, will be able to stay in any of the 12 transitional units also located in the new lodge, supporting them to gradually transition into the community whilst accessing TWHLS support.

The new lodge will also house their Indigikwe – Social Enterprise project – a shop and gallery space that will provide opportunities for women to display and sell their artwork and beadwork, and to learn valuable retail and business skills. This initiative is part of a broader effort to support economic empowerment and skills-building for women as they rebuild their lives.

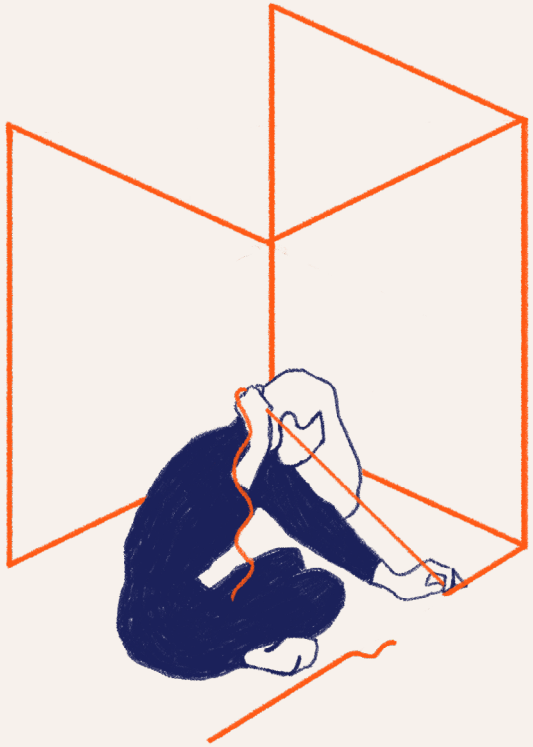
> "When the women graduate the program here, or they leave, they have the opportunity to work at our head office... At our new Lodge, we 're going to have a little storefront, like a social enterprise ... and a lot of the women that come into the lodge, they end up being able to do really good bead work, and so they 'll be able to display their work".

Patti Pettigrew, TWHLS Founder and Executive Director

Thunder Woman Healing Lodge Society is also working to strengthen the network of Indigenous led healing lodges across Canada. They have helped form a council of Indigenous led healing lodges and are planning to host a national conference to bring together leaders and practitioners in this field, supporting them to develop a shared vision, and coordinated voice to create systemic change.

What seemed clear to me during my visit, is that when you are support by TWHLS, you aren't just interacting with a building or a service. You are being invited to be part of a community of people who care deeply about what happens in the next chapter of your life.

‘It’s not the walls that we’re trying to hammer down. It’s the carceral beliefs.’



Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau

Canadian Association Of Elizabeth Fry Societies

In Ottawa I met up with Emilie Coyle, the Co-Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS), the leading national organization supporting criminalised women and gender diverse people. They envision a world that doesn’t rely on incarceration, with strong and well-resourced communities for all. They work toward building this world by addressing the persistent ways that criminalized women and gender-diverse people face social and economic barriers and exclusion.

CAEFS was founded nearly 50 years ago, in response to a pressing need for a national voice representing women and gender-diverse people affected by incarceration in Canada. Originally, the network began as a handful of local Elizabeth Fry Societies, community-based, non-profit organizations providing direct services on the ground. These groups came together to establish a national association that could together focus on public awareness, policy advocacy, and monitor the conditions of confinement at a broader scale.

A major catalyst for the association’s formation was the limited infrastructure for women in the Canadian prison system. At the time, there was only one federal prison designated for women: the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario. Women from across the vast country were sent

to this single institution, resulting in isolation, especially for those from distant or marginalized communities, including many Indigenous women. Due to the lack of female facilities, some women were also incarcerated in sections of men's prisons, creating significant safety and rights concerns. CAEFS played a major advocacy role in reforming the system and has continued to monitor, support, and campaign for ongoing improvements, including access to rights, and more community-based options for women.

Through its history, CAEFS and its members have maintained a dual focus: providing direct support and advocacy for women and gender diverse people impacted by the justice system, and engaging in national dialogue to promote structural change. This includes challenging policies and legal systems , expanding services, and embedding the voices of those with lived experience. As of today, the network continues to collaborate closely with local Elizabeth Fry societies, Correctional Service Canada, policymakers, and international organizations, remaining a powerful voice for justice reform in Canada.

Today, their membership network is made up of 22 local Elizabeth Fry Societies from across Canada who run frontline services, whilst CAEFS focuses on national level change and collaborates with local members on key issues.

This network of organisations working together under a joint vision, across such a large country as Canada is impressive, and represents an organised, coordinated and collaborative approach to creating systemic change. A common thread that unites members (each one is self-governing) is their commitment to prison abolition.

"What we talk about is, how can we shrink prisons out of existence? And what does that take? Because people hear 'prison abolition', and they think we just want to go with hammers and start hammering down the walls. But it's not the walls that we're trying to hammer down. It's the carceral beliefs. It's the idea that people are bad and they need to be punished. And those carceral beliefs are in schools, are in hospitals, are in prisons, they're in all of our institutions."

– Emilie Coyle, Co-Executive Director of CAEFS

It's understood that providing services for justice impacted women, even if it means being adjacent to the 'system' at times, doesn't mean you can't also work to dismantle that very system. This can be seen through CAEFS work legally challenging Canada's institutions, as well as their work campaigning for better resourced communities where women and gender diverse people can thrive – and where criminalisation is not seen as a solution. In this way, prison abolition is just as much about challenging our societal views on punishment and how we respond to harm, as much as it is about challenging legal systems. There's nuance and balance to their approach which aims to respond to the immediate reality faced by the women in the system, whilst also shrinking prisons out of existence for the future. Emilie describes this as challenging

work as they always have to be asking themselves, 'is what we're doing further solidifying the presence of prisons?'. At times, Emilie shares, the answer to that question is 'yes' whilst they address the immediate needs of women caught in the justice system. But abolition remains as their guiding light, a constant that causes them to scrutinise how their actions today take them to a future where we don't rely on incarceration.

"We want to build a world where everyone has what they need … If people cause harm to each other, what are some of the ways that we can actually deal with that harm and prevent that harm from happening again?"

– Emilie Coyle, Co-Executive Director of CAEFS

During my time in Canada I was able to visit some of the local member Elizabeth Fry Societies and understand more about how they apply their shared values on the ground in their services.

La Société Elizabeth Fry Du Québec

In Montreal, I visited La Société Elizabeth Fry du Québec /the Elizabeth Fry Society of Quebec (SEFQ), a community-based organization founded in 1977 whose mission is to help women who are, have been or are at risk of being in conflict with the law. When they were founded, women who had been in prison had few resources to turn to. In response to this need, in 1980 they opened Therese Casgrain House, a community-based residential facility for women. Today, SEFQ continues to support women leaving prison at Therese Casgrain House, and has developed a whole body of support tailored to the changing needs of those they work with, including prevention and diversion programmes.

I met with Aleksandra, their Executive Director, who generously shared more information about SEFQ's work and the local justice context. She described to me how from the 1960's in Quebec, there has been an increased focus on building a welfare state – and redistributing resources to services such as health, education, housing, and justice. She described that although some of this redistribution hasn't always been successful, transitional housing for those leaving prison has been a success of this approach. As such, SEFQ don't rely on philanthropy and fundraising to support their work at Therese Casgrain House (in contrast to how many organisations supporting women in the justice system operate in England and Wales). Essentially, they are needed by the local Government and therefore have a platform to negotiate for the resources they need to run their service.

Therese Casgrain House

Aleksandra showed me around Therese Casgrain House and explained more about how it works. The majority of women at the house come directly from prison. The earliest they can come is a sixth of the way through their custodial sentence, but many arrive a third of the way through their sentence. The house can also be used as an alternative to custody for women on license who may have breached their conditions – instead of returning to prison, they can be supported by SEFQ. Whilst they are staying at the house, women don't pay for things like groceries - any money they earn can be kept for their future in the community. Aleks tells me that some women have described their time at the house as life changing and a way to be connected with other support services in the community.

EVE Program

As well as supporting women who have already been in prison, one of their key goals is to divert and prevent incarceration, developing alternatives that can address the root causes of involvement in the justice system. One of the ways they do this is through the Eve Program. In operation since 1988, this program supports women accused of economic crimes such as shoplifting and fraud, and aims to support them to address the causes that led to committing an offense, and to de-escalate charges. In England and Wales, theft from shops was the most common indictable offence for women in 20237, and more women are sent to prison to serve a sentence for theft than for criminal damage and arson, drug offences, possession of weapons, robbery, and sexual offences combined8.

The project has addressed significant backlog in the courts, offering a means to de-escalate charges related to economic crimes, ranging from lower-level offences like shoplifting to more serious cases such as fraud. For less serious offences, participation in the programme can be a true diversion, resulting in no criminal record, while for more serious crimes, it can serve as leverage for sentence reduction. The programme can also be used post-release, either as a short intervention or as a more intensive, longer-term support. Aleks tells me that whilst the project has been well integrated into the justice system in Montreal, it often reveals the complex and interconnected issues present in the lives of the women it serves.

The Elizabeth Fry Society Of Ottawa

In Ottawa I visited The Elizabeth Fry Society of Ottawa, one of the longest running members of CAEFS. As with all member societies, they are committed to taking an abolitionist approach, which for them means preventing the criminalization of women and gender-diverse people, and creating alternatives to incarceration as it exists today.

The Elizabeth Fry Society of Ottawa offers pre and post charge diversion programmes, youth programming, and runs residential services such as Lotus House for women on bail who would otherwise be held in custody on remand. In England and Wales women are disproportionately impacted by remand and many don't go on to receive a custodial sentence.

For example, in 2023, two-thirds of women remanded by the magistrates court didn't receive a custodial sentence[9]. Women are often remanded for their 'own protection' due to a lack of resources in the community, particularly around mental health and safe accommodation, not because the offence itself warrants custody. Whilst women stay at Lotus House they receive support from Elizabeth Fry Ottawa whilst they await sentencing and can participate in various programmes. This can include life skills, counselling, and resources to help address the factors that may have contributed to their involvement in the justice system. The aim is to empower residents to continue their lives in the community—maintaining connections, accessing services, and preparing for court, and importantly avoiding the disruption of imprisonment. The work they do during their time at Lotus House can be taken into consideration at sentencing, which in the majority of cases do not ultimately result in a custodial sentence.

Betsy, the Executive Director of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Ottawa, highlighted that housing remains a significant challenge faced by the women they support. This concern is not unique to Ottawa. Safe and appropriate accommodation is also a major issue for women impacted by the justice system in England and Wales. In 2023-24 almost half of women (47%) left prison without having settled accommodation to go to. Betsy tells me how difficult it can be to support women to find housing after their time at Lotus House comes to an end, and shares more about their ambitions for the future aimed at addressing these challenges.

[9] Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefings Winter Factfile 2025

"So I want to create housing. ... the idea of having a bail house, transition house and temporary housing, all in one place that has all of the support services that we offer as well ... a little community of support, that's the dream".

– Betsy Chaly, Executive Director of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Ottawa

Elizabeth Fry Toronto

The Elizabeth Fry Society of Toronto has been operating as a non-profit since 1952 and today delivers gender based, trauma informed services, and advocates for justice and equity for women and non-binary people who are criminalised. Whilst I was in Toronto, I met up with Lucy, their Director of Programs who explained more about the support they offer.

What seems really clear to me as I learn more about E Fry Toronto's work, is that they have a strong focus on the intersections, particularly between homelessness, substance use, the care system, and criminalisation. Lucy tells me about some of the challenges her team faced in securing private rental units for supportive housing, with many landlords refusing to rent to them. Recognising how pivotal housing is in breaking cycles of, and even preventing involvement in the justice system, they have ultimately decided to build their own residential community for women.

What is this new project?

The new residential community will have E Fry Toronto's offices on the ground floor, a halfway house on the second and third floors, and permanent, subsidised flats on floors four to eight. The flats are intended to provide stable, affordable housing for women, with a focus on both those exiting the justice system and those at risk of homelessness.

Who is it for?

The accommodation is specifically for women who have been criminalised and young women ageing out of the care system. About half of the units are reserved for young women ageing out of state care, a group at high risk of homelessness. Lucy tells me that research has shown that within 12 months of exiting the child welfare system around 30% are homeless. She shares that many of the women they currently support in their halfway house have been in the care system themselves, highlighting the connection between care system experience, risk of homelessness, and subsequent criminalisation.

Key aims

Broadly, the project aims to break cycles of involvement in the justice system by addressing the intersection between care experience, homelessness and criminalisation. Their specific inclusion of accommodation dedicated to young people leaving the care system highlights their prevention-oriented approach.

For women who have already been criminalised and staying in their halfway house, the permanent housing aims to support them to build independence within a community, and prevent further involvement in the justice system.

"For me, community is key. Creating community for people and finding ways for people to belong. That's what we innately want and need."

- Lucy Gudgeon, Director of Programs at E Fry Toronto

A key element of the project that really stands out to me, is the emphasis on choice and autonomy. For the permanent subsidised housing everybody will be assigned a supportive housing worker and there will be counsellors available, but it is a choice whether to take up that support. Lucy explains that from her extensive experience working in housing, there is sometimes an attitude that in order for people to access subsidised housing, they have to agree to participate in a level of support that others would find intrusive – which I, for example, don't have to do in order to rent my flat. Whilst E Fry Toronto can work to empower people to ask for support (and they are ready to provide that support), the women are the experts in what they need.

Similarly, there will be community building activities in the building such as shared meals, but again participation is not mandatory. In this way, community building has to be a choice. This project is, after all, meant to support women to build independence in the long term, rather than be a short or intensive programme. It's supposed to feel like you are in your home, not a 'programme', and as you would in your own home, you make choices about how you interact with your community.

‘How do we keep moving the dial forward?’

East Block on Canada’s Parliament Hill, Ottawa

Senator Kim Pate

As well as learning about how support is delivered on the ground, I was keen to understand more about the levers for change at the highest level. I was lucky to be given a tour of the Senate building and East Block hosted by the Office of Senator Mary Coyle. Her team kindly explained more about the inner workings of the Senate and how laws get passed in Canada. This provided useful context to my conversation with Senator Kim Pate – nationally renowned advocate who has spent the last 45+ years working in and around the legal and penal systems of Canada. She also led CAEFS for 24 years until her appointment to the Senate in 2016. It was an honour to speak to her and hear about some of the key pieces of legislation she is working on, and how she thinks we can shift the dial on justice-related issues.

A theme that keeps coming up in our conversation is the criminalisation of poverty and how this disproportionately impacts women. Senator Pate tells me that in Canada, poverty and exclusion are often at the core of the criminalisation of women. Historic data shows that for over 80% of women in prison, their crimes were related to poverty and survival. Whilst the quality of data collection has declined over recent decades, Senator Pate tells me that systemic inequality remains and is a key driver of the cycle of criminalisation.

Image credit, unknown photographer

Having led CAEFS for 24 years, she describes how every law reform policy she worked on highlighted the need for robust social, economic and health reforms – a whole-systems approach to addressing the inequalities that intersect with justice involvement. That is why, when she was nominated to the Senate, she spent several years collecting evidence, laying the groundwork and building support for the introduction of a bill to develop a national framework for a Guaranteed Liveable Basic Income (GLBI).

What is Guaranteed Liveable Basic Income?

The GLBI bill that has been proposed in Canada by Senator Pate would require the federal government to consult with Indigenous and other governments within Canada, as well as civil society, to develop a plan to implement GLBI. Senator Pate's website describes what GLBI means:

'We see a guaranteed liveable basic income as one component of a robust, responsive and comprehensive economic, health and social wellness system, inclusive of universally accessible housing, childcare, education, pharma, dental and mental health strategies... By guaranteed liveable basic income, we mean a cash transfer sufficient to allow people to afford adequate food, housing, clothing, transportation and other necessities.

Instead of mimicking existing systems like social assistance schemes that police recipients and keep people in poverty and on the brink of crisis by providing too little to survive, guaranteed liveable basic income would support equality, choice and dignity. It would aim to reach those most in need, allow people to rebound out of poverty and participate in society without the spectre of being left homeless or with no support.

The bills call on the federal government to develop a plan for implementing a guaranteed liveable basic income at a national level and accessible to anyone in Canada who is over the age of 17 years and in need.'

Senator Pate is quick to highlight that the idea of GLBI is not something she came up with on her own, nor is it a new concept. But it is an idea that feels more timely than ever. When the bill was introduced in the Senate in February 2020, just weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the policy's relevance only intensified.

"Suddenly it looked prophetic, and 50 Senators signed on to push for that kind of approach. And so there's a fair bit of support for it in the Senate. There's a fair bit of support for it in the Government."

What impact could GLBI have?

I wanted to understand more about what impact an initiative such as GLBI could have on involvement in the justice system. In the women's justice sector in England and Wales, we often talk about how women are disproportionately impacted by the cost of living crisis and criminalised for crimes relating to poverty and survival, but I've never heard anyone link a policy such as guaranteed basic income to the prevention of involvement in the justice system.

In a 2025 report by Penal Reform International examining laws and practices which criminalise women due to poverty or status worldwide, they found that in all regions where they gathered evidence, women living in poverty and precarity were being criminalised for acts of survival. They highlight that in England and Wales theft from shops accounted for 40% of women's prison sentences of less than six months in 2023, compared to just 22% for men[10]. Updated figures show this has risen to 45% of women's prison sentences of less than six months being for theft from shops[11].

As the UK experiences an intense cost of living crisis and the sharpest fall in living standards since the 1950's, shoplifting is now at its highest levels since records began[12]. People working in the retail sector have described seeing new groups of people start shoplifting who may not have done so before – 'people who just can't afford to buy food'[13]. In Tower Hamlets, where 39% of residents live in poverty, Calpol was the most frequently shoplifted item in 2023, alongside a rise in theft of other essential baby products[14].

Senator Pate tells me about other local pilots of similar models to GLBI in Ontario and Manitoba, and the successes they've achieved. She cites how these programmes have lifted people out of poverty, improved health outcomes, reduced victimisation and criminalisation, supported women escaping abusive relationships, and improved participant's work opportunities. Indeed, a report by the Parliamentary Budget Office of Canada showed that at a national level Guaranteed Liveable Basic Income could cut poverty rates by 40%.[15]

> "Guaranteed liveable income is the big one that I want to get through before I'm out of the Senate … and I'm determined to get it through".
>
> *Senator Kim Pate*

While the UK Government is tightening the benefits system and responding to rising shoplifting rates primarily through criminal justice measures, we should consider more radical and transformative approaches to tackling inequality. Guaranteed basic income deserves a place in that discussion.

[10] From poverty to punishment Examining laws and practices which criminalise women, Penal Reform International, March 2025

[11] Ministry of Justice Criminal justice statistics quarterly: June 2025. Outcomes by Offence Tool

[12] www.bbc.co.uk

[13] The Guardian Online

[14] www.bbc.co.uk

[15] The Office of the PBO

Shifting the Dial

During my conversation with Senator Pate I was really keen to hear how she feels we can shift the conversation around the justice system. She says the thing she thinks has had the biggest impact is taking policy makers into prisons. Instead of relying solely on reports and presentations, which can leave policymakers unmoved, she has made it a priority to bring senators, members of parliament, and even judges into Canada's prisons.

"It challenges people's thinking in a way that talking to them, writing to them, doing presentations, doesn't."

Senator Kim Pate

She speaks to the need for decision makers to come to those with lived experiences of the issues they are legislating on, rather than waiting for their experiences to be exposed.

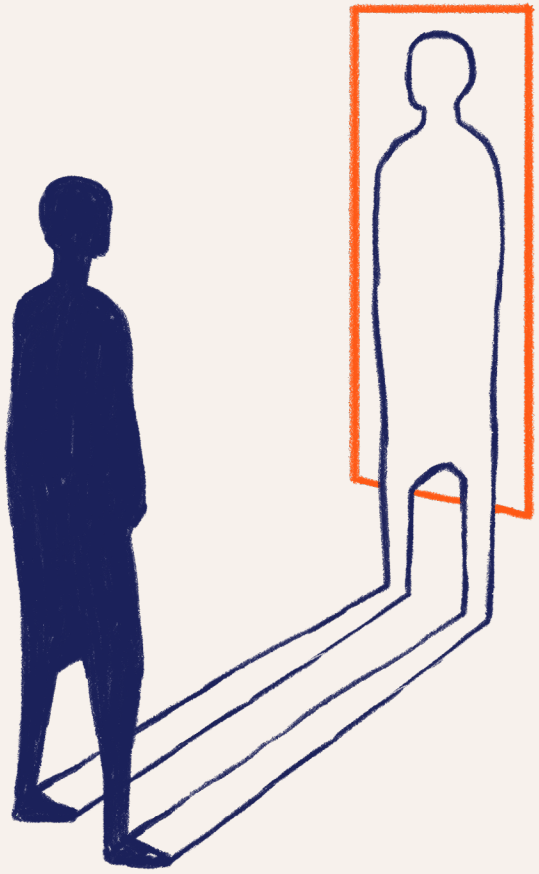
Her approach also extends to building solidarity and knowledge-sharing across sectors. Change is built not by lone actors gatekeeping good ideas, but through persistent, collective effort through a process of 'chipping away'. While she remains realistic about the slow pace of systemic change, her strategy is hopeful. Keep real human stories at the heart of your work, collect evidence, build alliances, and continue to push for policies (like the GLBI) that tackle root causes rather than symptoms. And importantly, make sure those who are responsible for passing laws come face to face with the realities of people's lives. As she says, 'Once you know, you can't unknow'.

"Anybody who is involved in the criminal legal system and has not been in prisons - doesn't know what the conditions of confinement are to which people are subject - has no business either working in the system or passing laws".

Senator Kim Pate

Germany

‘Does locking people away change anything?’



Germany’s incarceration rate is less than half that of England and Wales[16]. Whilst statistics can’t tell the whole story, they point to key differences in how prison is used. During my time in Germany, I wanted to understand more about these differences - how are women in the community prevented from entering prison in the first place, what happens when women do enter custody, and what happens during that time to prevent reoffending on release and to support them to return to their communities with stability.

Vechta Prison For Women

One Wednesday morning in June I found myself walking around a small German town called Vechta. I was early to a meeting I had at Vechta Prison for Women, and thought I would take a look around this quaint town in the morning sunshine. On my walk I saw the typical things you would see in a small town – a small, but bustling high street with people sitting outside with their morning coffees, some primary school children on an outing, the local hospital, and a church.

It would be hard to guess that in between all these community staples there would be a prison. In fact, Vechta has a variety of units dotted around the town that seemingly blend into the local surroundings. From the street there are no barred windows, and the brickwork matches that of the surrounding buildings.

[16] Incarceration rate in selected European countries in 2024 (per 100,000 inhabitants), Statista

There is even a church in the grounds of the main women's unit that is shared with the local community. At the door I was met by Dr. Martin Hölzen, Head of Education at the prison, who gave up his day to show me around and explain more about how the prison works.

Daily life

Something that appears to be key at Vechta is the focus on structure, and the efforts to mimic routines you may have in the community around attending school and going to work. Education isn't compulsory but there's a strong emphasis on encouraging participation. I notice as I'm given a tour of the building, that everyone seems to be doing something. Whether that's in the sewing workshop, in the classroom, or in the gym. We even bump into some women who had recently passed a decorating qualification and were helping to redecorate part of the wing. Martin jokes that he never wants to see the women he works with again – which is why they focus on structure, work, learning and building

Vechta, Germany

skills as a way to ensure women are able to transition back into the community, and never return to prison.

This idea, of as far as possible replicating structures found in the community, is also seen in the way women live with each other. Women in the closed unit live in residential groups, sharing a kitchen and bathroom. They aren't locked in their rooms and can access their shared spaces at any time.

Transitions and release

Martin describes how creating smooth transitions to the community is one of the most important parts of their work. When women arrive, they can often quickly progress to the open house once their risk has been assessed, with some going there shortly after arrival. This allows them to begin gradual, supported reintegration into the community.

When I asked Martin why he thinks Germany has a lower incarceration rate compared to England and Wales, he explained that entering prison in Germany is a slower process, typically reserved for cases of persistent offending. Most individuals are first given probation, similar to a community order, which aims to address the causes of crime in the community before imprisonment is considered. Martin also highlighted Germany's strong emphasis on prevention and smooth transitions out of prison, helping people to rebuild their lives and reducing the likelihood of repeat offences and the so-called 'revolving door'.

Vechta, Germany

The Mother Child Home

As well as having a closed Mother and Child Unit in the main part of the prison, there is also an open mother and child home a five-minute walk away. This home is for women and their children up to age six. The mother-child home sits alongside the women's open house, and resembles a sleepy suburban neighbourhood bordered by woods on one side.

Walking into the grounds of these units feels less like entering a 'carceral' environment, and more like walking into a small community. Whilst there are of course rules and routines that need to be adhered to, women are not 'locked in' and have a significant amount of independence.

The aim of the mother-child home is to prevent the unnecessary separation of women and their children, and therefore avoid the harm of maternal separation. They consider the best interests of the child, and the harm separation might cause them. Women and their children come to the house together, and leave together, and so there is no point at which the child 'outgrows' the age limit and is removed. Whilst most women who come here will have one child with them, the team tell me that they've had women with multiple children staying with them in the house.

So what does a typical day look like in the mother-child home? Creating a stable routine that as far as possible replicates how life might be were they living independently in the community, is key. In the morning, Women get their children ready for the day before going to work. Children are looked after by childcare workers in the on-site creche, and are joined there by children staying in the closed mother and child unit a five minute walk away. After a time of being at the mother-child home, older children enrol in Kindergartens in the community, and Mum will do the morning drop off and afternoon pick up. Whilst the aim is for Mum to care and provide for her child as independently as possible, there is a 24 hour team in the mother-child home who support her to do this and provide guidance and resources to strengthen the relationship.

Whilst you can't get around the fact that it is part of a prison, it doesn't fit the image of what we picture a prison to be – at least not in England and Wales. In England and Wales the maximum age a child can stay with their mum is 18 months, provided they have been able to get a space on a mother and baby unit (MBU). With only half of women's prisons having an MBU, getting a space is not automatic and must be applied for. More data needs to be collected around how many eligible women miss out on a space on an MBU due to lack of clear communication, lack of capacity or inaccessible application processes. But it's clear there are current challenges for women in accessing MBUs.

A 2020 Ministry of Justice review found that the MBU application process was too long, sometimes resulting in preventable short-term separations[17].

Takeaways from Vechta Prison for Women

The focus of their work isn't about isolating women from the community completely. It's about preparing them for returning to a life outside and keeping them in touch with it. Many of the women's rooms even look out into the community where they can see daily life.

Supporting transitions is crucial. These transitions involve progressive layers through to an open unit, and day release – all centred on preparing for the time when women will leave prison.

Work and education is paramount in creating structure and purpose, and importantly for supporting women to build skills and qualifications they can use on the outside.

If there's no good reason to separate mother and child, they avoid it. Whilst acknowledging that prison is not an ideal place for a child, they recognise that separation between mothers and their children can be more detrimental in the long run. They take measures to reduce the detrimental aspects of being in prison for children by having specific places for children such as play areas outside, and the ability to leave the prison and attend nursery outside.

I am grateful to Dr. Martin Hölzen for generously showing me around and for sharing the ins and outs of their work.

[17] Bromley Briefings Winter 2025, Prison Reform Trust

From left Freya and Kathleen from Red Tape Translation, Lisa and Tobias from Soziale Dienste Der Justiz, Berlin, Image credit: Unknown photographer

Soziale Dienste Der Justiz, Berlin

During my stay in Berlin, I was lucky to be hosted by Soziale Dienste der Justiz, which translates to 'Social Services of the Justice system' and runs the equivalent to what we would call our Probation Service in England and Wales. As the name of the German service suggests, the staff who work with people on probation are all qualified social workers and, in addition to their monitoring duties, take a great interest in supporting their clients to build lives free from the impact of crime. In fact, one of their key goals is to prevent people from going to prison, supporting people to break the cycle of crime thus creating safer communities.

They also run a specialist project for women involved in the justice system and at risk of a criminal sanction and/or imprisonment. This project is unique in Germany and has now been running for 30 years. Lisa, who works in the Women's Project team tells me that a big part of their role is understanding why a crime occurred and supporting women to avoid incarceration.

Preventing Imprisonment

They see it as part of their purpose to prevent people going to prison in the first place. This is backed up by a system where there are opportunities along the road to put the brakes on and prevent the revolving door. In this sense, the idea of prison as a last resort is more real in practice. *Does locking people away change anything or deter crime?*, they ask.

In Germany there are two main forms of 'punishment' – a fine or a custodial sentence (sentences of up to two years are suspended in the community). Fines are by far the most common sentence handed out and worked out with a formula based on the income of an individual. 80-85% of people are able to pay off their fines. A small proportion of people who are unable to pay a fine are supported to avoid imprisonment through community service. I will share more about how women are supported to do community service in the next chapter. An even smaller proportion are either pardoned or have their sentence deferred.

Although they aim to prevent incarceration, the team acknowledge that fines have the potential to disproportionately impact people living with poverty and multiple unmet needs, and that the approximate 10% of those who end up in prison for non-payment of a fine, are the most failed to reach people.

Often, they may be experiencing housing instability and as well as not having the means to pay off a fine, may not be aware that a fine has been issued and therefore have missed the support that could have been offered to them to prevent a custodial sentence.

The focus of Soziale Dienste Der Justiz is to support those in the community to stay in the community – to prevent people entering cycles of incarceration. This means not only helping people to comply with their conditions but also addressing other social needs that may intersect with justice involvement. These can include issues such as housing, substance use, or mental health. Recognising and supporting individuals with these challenges is seen as essential to enabling them to build a life free from crime in the future.

'The integration of people who have committed crimes is a task for society as a whole. It can only be successful with a comprehensive support system.'

[18] Outcomes by offence data tool. Ministry of Justice. (2024). Criminal justice system Statistics quarterly: December 2023.

Community is key

The approach is reinforced by their belief that supporting someone to break the cycle (or preventing a cycle from beginning) is more effective and sustainable when done in the community, not in a closed environment. In this way, preventing people from unnecessarily going to prison is seen as important in preventing reoffending and reducing crime.

This idea isn't alien to us in the UK. It is commonly acknowledged in England and Wales that custodial sentences, particularly short custodial sentences, increase the likelihood of reoffending, whilst community-based sentences are associated with lower rates of reoffending. Despite this evidence, community sentences for women have halved since 2011[18] whilst the use of short custodial sentences has increased[19]. Women released from prison are more likely to reoffend than those serving sentences in the community, with 44% of women leaving prison being reconvicted within one year[20]. England and Wales has one of the highest imprisonment and reoffending rates in Western Europe.

The question remains – knowing what we know about reoffending, why do we continue to send so many people to prison?

Throughout our conversation, the team in Berlin highlight how their work to prevent further crime works best when implemented in the community. The thinking behind this is that if prison is the only thing being used to prevent someone from committing a crime, then it isn't going to be the most effective tool for preventing reoffending considering the vast majority of those in prison will some day be released. People need to be able to build positive lives in the community, not away from it.

'There's always the chance to make change, and this can only be practiced outside in society.'

[19] Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefings Winter Factfile 2025
[20] Ibid

Understanding Women's Lives

Their Women's Project is described as unique in Germany, and has been running for three decades. A key part of their work is looking at why a crime has occurred – what are the circumstances in that woman's life and how can any challenges be addressed to prevent further involvement in the justice system? Their aim is to deliver gender specific solutions that prevent women from entering custody and to support them to thrive in the community.

The team are expert in supporting women that have been issued with fines. Before the fine is enforced, they invite the woman to meet with them to figure out next steps – whether that be a payment plan or community service. The project also runs drop-in office hours for women to initially seek support and information about their options with no strings attached or fear of judgement. They tell me these sessions are very well received and highly used. As well as supporting women to meet their legal requirements, they also offer a counselling service, supporting women to take control of their lives and address underlying trauma, and feelings of shame and guilt.

'It's better to implement this support in the community – it doesn't work as well in a closed environment.'

In addition to their direct support, their commitment to developing best practice is evident through their engagement with current research. They are actively exploring the use of the WRNA (Women's Risk Needs Assessment), a comprehensive, trauma-informed tool used to evaluate the risk factors, needs, and strengths of women - recognising that existing assessment methods are largely centred on men's experiences. By developing a tool that accurately reflects the factors influencing women's risk of reoffending, they aim to ensure that sentencing decisions and support strategies are genuinely responsive to women's lives.

Lisa tells me that their approach is based on empowerment, and on creating a safe space for women to talk about their experiences. She tells me that building a relationship and trust with the women is so important, and that they only feel they can support someone to make positive change with rapport. To support this, their team is diverse and made up of women from a wide range of backgrounds, who speak multiple languages.

Many of the women they work with experience deep feelings of shame, anxiety and fear about their situation, and part of their approach is to empower them, with their support, to take control of their situation. Through this work, they've learnt that many of the women they support are the sole carer of their children, are often experiencing substance use challenges, poor mental health, and normalised violence and abuse. Their efforts go beyond simply assisting women with paying fines or completing community service – they aim to address the full picture of women's lives.

Based on this approach, the team also want the court to understand more about the life of the woman before them. They are able to write pre-sentence reports for all the women they work with who will be coming before a court. They can't give women legal advice, but as Social Workers they advocate and make recommendations for their social needs through the reports

they prepare, and can even advocate for fine reductions.

In England and Wales, pre-sentences reports (PSRs) have declined over the years. The use of the most detailed type of PSR has fallen by 88% since 2013[21]. Evidence shows that community sentences are over 10 times more likely to be imposed by the court if a pre-sentence assessment has been conducted. This decline in PSRs has been linked to the concurrent fall in community sentences[22]. As well as the overall decline, the quality of PSRs has also come into question with less than half of court reports being deemed sufficiently detailed or personalised by the Inspectorate of Probation[23]. Pre-sentence reports can play a crucial role in enabling the court to appreciate the broader context of a woman's life, thereby supporting the handing down of sentences that are appropriate and effective.

It's fascinating to see how the women's project in Berlin places such a strong emphasis on understanding each woman's circumstances and dedicates significant time to preparing detailed reports. The team have observed first-hand the positive impact this personalised approach has on the women they support.

Making a difference

The team tell me they feel positive about their role and their ability to make an impact with those they are working with. Tobias, who has worked in the Soziale Dienste der Justiz for over a decade, still describes this as the 'dream job'. Although they understandably face challenges in their roles, they don't feel burnt out and that they have the resources to work through challenges. They say big changes don't happen overnight, but that it's the little victories they have with those they work with, that are really important. As someone who works for an organisation called 'One Small Thing', I can relate to this sentiment. I am incredibly grateful to Tobias and Lisa from Soziale Dienste der Justiz for generously taking the time to share the details of their work with me. I am also grateful to Kathleen and Freya from Red Tape Translation who provided expert interpretation for this in-depth conversation.

[21] Resetting the approach to women's imprisonment England and Wales April 2025, Prison Reform Trust

[22] Centre for Justice Innovation (2018) The changing use of pre-sentence reports

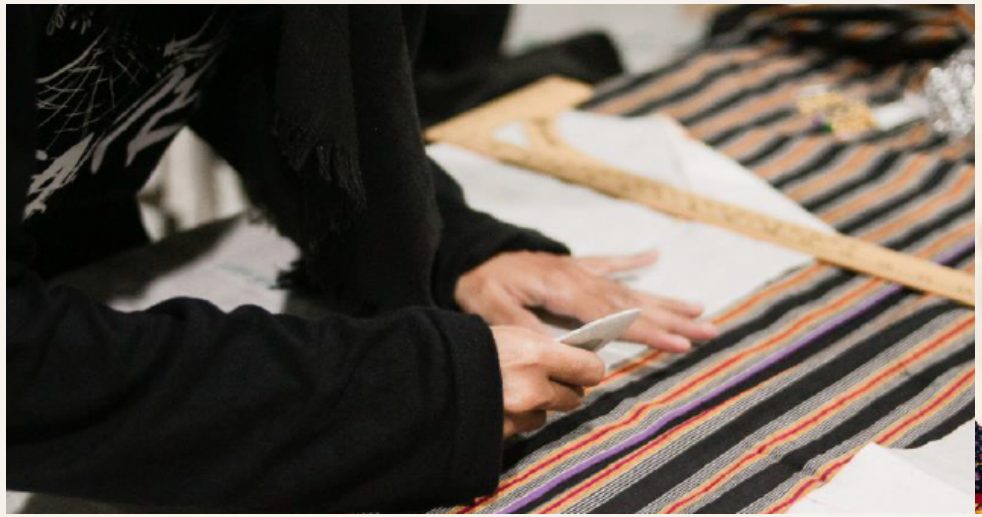
[23] The quality of pre-sentence information and advice provided to courts -2022 to 2023 inspections, HM Inspectorate or Probation, 2024

IsA-K, Integration Instead Of Exclusion

To understand more about how women with fines are supported in the community, I visited the IsA-K project run by AWO Berlin-Mitte, a local branch of the larger AWO network set up in 1919 by social reformer and women's rights activist Marie Juchacz. The IsA-K project works closely with Berlin Probation's women's project, supporting women subject to court ordered fines, and at risk of imprisonment. They also work with the local women's prison in an effort to shorten the sentences of women currently in custody.

They do this by creating a safe and gender responsive environment for women to complete community service to pay off their fines, and build employability skills for the future. I visited them in Wedding, Berlin where they run a clothing workshop which supports women to learn skills around sewing and textile design, and in working in the shop where they sell the second hand and upcycled clothes from their studio. Sophie, the project's manager, tells me that if IsA-K didn't exist there are other ways women could work off their fines, but that it would be a stricter and less flexible form of community service.

She tells me that many of the women they support would struggle with this alternative due to mental health issues, substance use, disability, and childcare obligations – therefore raising their risk of imprisonment for non-compliance. As such, their work aims to be supportive, and take into



account the reality of women's lives. For example, there is no strict time limit on paying off their fine. There is flexibility on how many days they attend based on their other responsibilities.

As well as supporting women to avoid imprisonment, they also offer advice and counselling around a range of needs such as debt, housing, health, employability, domestic abuse, substance use and more. When women leave the project, the team are able to connect them with other services in the community that AWO Berlin Mitte run.

The ethos underpinning IsA-K closely reflects much of what I've witnessed and heard throughout my time in Germany. There is a clear belief that preventing imprisonment and providing robust support for women within the community is not only a far more effective means of enabling them to build positive futures, but also that it can create stronger and safer communities in the long term. This philosophy is evident in IsA-K's approach to measuring success, which is not only done in the number of women who come through their project, but in the number of days they have prevented women being in prison. Sophie shares that, in 2024 alone, IsA-K prevented 4,607 days of imprisonment.

Finland

Helsinki

Weaving a safety net in the community

Vanaja Prison's Open Family House

Finland has one of the lowest incarceration rates in Europe with 54 people in prison per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to the rate in England and Wales of 145 per 100,000, the highest in Western Europe[24]. Although these statistics don't tell the whole story, they point to key differences in attitudes to imprisonment and the role they believe it plays in preventing crime and building stronger and safer communities.

In Finland, I wanted to understand more about how these ideas are put into practice, starting with what happens when people are imprisoned, and what this reveals about Finland's approach to incarceration – and life after release. In particular, I was interested in how time spent in custody is used to prepare people for returning to their communities, rather than isolating individuals from wider society. It is clear that maintaining connections and supporting a return to society after release is a powerful strategy for reducing reoffending and lowering prison rates.

I visited Vanaja Prison's open family house which is often cited as an internationally unique model that integrates child welfare services directly into a justice environment. This approach reflects a strong commitment to safeguarding

[24] Incarceration rate in selected European countries in 2024 (per 100,000 inhabitants), Statista

Play equipment in the grounds of Vanaja Prison. Image property of Kanta -Hämeen ensi - ja turvakoti

the well-being of children and mothers impacted by the justice system, vitally supporting women and babies during the critical first 1001 days of life. The model is operated by Kanta -Hämeen ensi - ja 50 turvakoti, a member organisation of the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters, and is overseen by the National Institute for Health and Welfare. Although the unit is located on the prison grounds, its staff are not part of the Criminal Sanctions Agency, underscoring its identity as an independent welfare service, rather than a correctional one.

Supporting women and children together

The house itself is designed to be homely and a physically and mentally safe environment for children up to the age of three to live with their mother whilst she serves her sentence. Around 15-20 children stay in the house every year, the majority of whom are up to three months old at the time of arrival. Nana Lindholm, Deputy Director of the unit tells me that before the decision is made to place a child in the house their unique circumstances are carefully considered – what is in the best interests of the child? What special needs do they have? What other support networks exist in their life? How can we support their parent to be the best parent they can be to them?

They recognise that the first three years of a child's life are the most important for supporting mental health and wellbeing in the long run, and so when a parent is sentenced to custody the whole family need intensive support during and after the prison term. They believe it works best

Nana Lindholm, Deputy Director, and I in the Family Unit, Image credit: Unknown photographer

when mother and baby are supported together where possible. Nana tells me that in the past in Finland, pregnancy and infancy weren't regarded as especially important times. However, they have worked to change this narrative and highlight that this period is in fact the most critical for offering support – a time which can profoundly shape outcomes for the rest of a person's life.

Pictures taken in the locality of the prison

Life in the house

Nana describes life in the house as 'normal'. The unit provides all the basic necessities for children, and an allowance for mothers to go out into the community to do shopping for groceries so they can cook meals in the shared kitchen. With support from the team on the unit, women look after their children as independently as possible. Whilst there are activities the women will take part in, the main focus is on supporting them to build parenting skills and address any intersecting challenges they may be experiencing. The ethos is that being a parent is an active responsibility, something that can be developed and nurtured with the right support. This approach helps mothers develop confidence and resilience, both during their sentence and for life after release.

The physical environment

Although Vanaja is a prison, it stands in stark contrast to what we might imagine when thinking of a traditional custodial environment. There are no bars on the windows or locked doors. The atmosphere is remarkably 'normal' and home like – this is of course intentional. The prison is surrounded by nature, with access to a lake and sauna, an integral part of Finnish life and culture – there is a saying, "In the sauna, everyone is equal". Driving up to the house, you would hardly realise you were

entering a prison. Despite this, there are challenges to living in the family home as one woman staying there with her baby reminded me. It can be difficult at times living with other women and multiple babies, sharing communal spaces – it's not the same as being in your own home. However, on the other side of that, they are able to relate and support each other. From speaking to women in the home, it was clear that being able to stay with your baby in an environment like this is invaluable.

Their impact

Nana tells me that they are interested in understanding the 'why' behind the crime in order to understand how to support a parent to prevent future involvement in the justice system. They see preventing reoffending as a form of child protection – if they can support that mother to build a positive life in the community after leaving, then they can prevent further harm and trauma to their child later down the line. In the 15 years they have been running the unit, only 32 of the 230 parents who have come through their doors, have reoffended.

Exhibition of Maija Lavonen, acclaimed pioneer of Finnish textile art displayed at Architecture & Design Museum, Helsinki

A Community Network With Rets, Vva, And Supernovat

During my time in Helsinki, I was lucky to be hosted by Sari who leads the women's specific work at RETS Rikoksettoman elämän tukisäätiö – RETS Foundation for a Crime-Free Life in English. RETS offers support and a wide variety of services to people impacted by the justice system and their loved ones, provides support to professionals and decision makers, and aims to influence policy makers on systemic issues.

What's different about Finland?

Before diving into the details of their work, it's important to share more about the social context they are operating in. Finland has one of the most comprehensive welfare systems in the world. People generally pay higher taxes, paying into a system that they trust will provide for them if they get sick, lose their job or their home, decide to have children or experience other kinds of hardship – such as being impacted by the justice system.

According to a new survey commissioned by the country's Tax Administration, more than 90 percent of respondents felt positively about paying their taxes with nearly as many saying it's a necessary part of financing Finland's welfare state. Sari, Lead specialist in RETS's women specific work, tells me that despite the changing political landscape, she feels Finland has a strong social safety net that focuses on the prevention of adversity, and solutions to social need.

This isn't to say the challenges RETS faces as an organisation, or the challenges their clients face, aren't significant. But that they are operating in a system designed to solve challenges. Their work centres on assisting those affected by the justice system to navigate this environment, making sure they can access the benefits of their strong welfare system. In my work in the UK, women with lived experience of prison and the justice system, as well as organisations delivering frontline support, say that it often feels like the system is set up to see people fail. With nearly half of women leaving prison without settled accommodation, and the same amount being reconvicted within one year of leaving custody[25], it's not hard to see why

[25] Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefings Winter Factfile 2025

women feel like they are battling against the odds.

Sari tells me that in Finland, there isn't a lot of homelessness and it is uncommon for people to leave prison without somewhere to live. In 2008 Finland became the first country to adopt the Housing First approach as a national strategy. The Housing First approach prioritises providing permanent, stable housing without preconditions such as being substance free or participation in treatment. It challenges traditional models by asserting that people are best able to address other challenges, such as health, employment, or substance use, when they have a secure home. This approach is both pragmatic and evidence-based – you can't end homelessness without providing homes[26].

Considering the pivotal role housing plays in maintaining or rebuilding your life in the community, providing stable and supportive accommodation can be a powerful tool to prevent further involvement in the justice system. In Finland, this link is well recognised. In England and Wales people released from custody to homelessness were twice as likely to reoffend than those in settled accommodation on release[27]. RETS manages 63 dispersed supported flats for people impacted by the justice system who are in need of housing and support. Working along the principles of the Housing First model, they see providing accommodation as the foundation to providing support for other challenges people impacted by the justice system may be experiencing such as substance use, or poor mental health.

During my time in Helsinki, Sari took me to see a Housing First project run by Vailla Vakinaista Asuntoa Ry (VVa) or No Fixed Abode NGO in English – one of the first projects piloting Housing First when it was adopted in Finland in 2008. Founded in 1986 by people experiencing homelessness, VVa advocates for housing as a human right and provides support services in Helsinki with a strong focus on peer support. Core to their approach is that services, and strategies to end homelessness and housing insecurity must be led by and informed by people with this lived experience. Their Kokema (lived experience) project does just this and visits schools to encourage honest and open discussions around homelessness. As one of the project's Mentors tells me,

"Allowing young people to become homeless is the stupidest thing a society can do."

[26] For more information on the Housing First Model in Finland visit: ysaatio.fi

[27] Proven reoffending statistics: October to December 2023, Ministry of Justice, October 2025

Sari, Lead specialist in RETS's women specific work, and I, Image credit: Unknown photographer

Supporting women

RETS's women specific work starts with the premise that everyone is the expert in their own situation, and that support must be led by choice. They work with women involved in the justice system across the Helsinki Metropolitan area – this can be women returning to the community from prison, or women subject to community-based sanctions. The aim of their work is to support women to build stable and positive lives in the community, to work through any unmet needs they may have, and to increase psychological wellbeing and self-image. They also support women to connect the dots between different services and to navigate social welfare around things such as housing and health. RETS works closely with women's prisons, including Vanaja prison described in the previous section, to help women plan their release. They aim to build trust with women, starting contact with them up to a year before their release. There is no time limit to the support they offer.

Sari describes their work as helping to build a safety net in the community. She says whilst people do need housing, it's creating a sense of home, community and belonging that the women they support also really need. RETS run a community drop-in centre that women they support can visit, a place where they can attend activities, just hang out and have coffee with others - or receive support. RETS support workers come in pairs combining the strengths of both peer mentors with lived experience and professionals who have acquired their knowledge through formal training and study. This ensures that

Amanda, Supernovat project manager, myself, Sari, Lead specialist in RETS's women specific work, Image credit: Unknown photographer

every individual benefits from a blend of lived experience and learned experience. Frequently, these identities overlap, with individuals drawing on both their own experiences and formal training. Being able to bring both these elements is seen as essential, offering an empowering form of support. This model of support doesn't just apply to the women's work at RETS, but represents an organisation wide approach.

The strong focus on peer support, and lived experience leadership is present

across both RETS and VVa. During my stay I also visited the Supernovat project, a collaboration between VVa and Naistenkartano women's organisation, which runs a peer group programme for women on the margins – specifically those involved in the justice system, experiencing homelessness, and substance use challenges. The aim of the project is to break stigma and for women to find commonality with each other, strengthen wellbeing and reduce barriers to accessing support. Amanda, the project's manager tells me that in Finland it's not common to openly speak about your emotions and so a big part of their work is creating a safe and supportive environment for women to share.

The focus of the groups is decided by members and guided by lived experienced mentors and group activity instructors. They go to where women need them – prisons, housing units and other community spaces. Sari says that the Supernovat groups complement their work at RETS, supporting the women they work with to grow their networks and continue building stability in the community.

That's why I've called this chapter 'weaving a safety net in the community' – because the work of organisations and projects like RETS, VVa and Supernovat show it's about much more than looking at women's experiences in isolation. It's about looking at people as whole human beings and creating layers of support that catch people when they fall, and help them rebuild their lives. In Finland, this safety net feels tangible, woven together by organisations and individuals that ensure women do not fall through the cracks.

Key Learning And Recommendations

Reflecting on all I've learnt during my Fellowship, I am struck by the diversity of approaches encountered across different countries. Immersing myself in a range of contexts has been eye-opening, revealing not only the complexity of the issues at hand, but also the creativity and determination of those working to address them. Learning from other countries is invaluable, not because any one place has all the answers, but because it allows us to see familiar problems through a new lens, to question our assumptions, and to imagine new possibilities for change.

Drawing on the experiences and insights of others can help us identify what is possible in our own context. The stories, projects, and people I met along the way have challenged me to think differently about justice, community, and how we create the kind of support systems people need to rebuild and thrive.

Before sharing my key pieces of learning, it's important to acknowledge the limitations of my perspective. The experiences and insights I've gathered during this Fellowship reflect only a snapshot of the systems I encountered, and should not be taken as a comprehensive description or endorsement of any country's approach as a whole. Every justice system and society faces its own challenges and shortcomings, and everywhere can do justice better. My intention here is not to present a perfect model, but to highlight examples of good practice and promising ideas that I observed along the way. These learnings are personal and represent my own experience, shaped by the people and projects I was fortunate enough to engage with along the way.

Stable, safe housing for women should be seen as foundational

Throughout my journey, the lack of stable housing stood out as a critical barrier for women impacted by the justice system. Whether through trauma informed and culturally informed residential projects, permanent supportive communities, or national strategies like Housing First, it was clear that access to secure accommodation is not only vital for women rebuilding their lives in the community, but in preventing criminalisation.

- Thunder Women Healing Lodge Society run a trauma-informed, and culturally rooted residential project and are building a brand new Healing Lodge from scratch, recognising the vital role that accommodation plays in healing and community building for Indigenous women.

- E Fry Toronto has a strong focus on the intersections between homelessness, substance use, the care system, and criminalisation, and is building their own residential community with permanent housing after landlords refused to rent to the women they support.

- Finland's Housing First model, a national strategy since 2008, shows how homelessness can be dramatically reduced when you treat housing as a human right and foundation for solving other challenges. In Helsinki, RETS operate accommodation specifically for those involved in the justice system, informed by the principles of the Housing First model.

- Senator Kim Pate's work on Guaranteed Liveable Basic Income (GLBI) proposes a system which prevents people from reaching precarity, and enables them to afford the essentials of life, including adequate housing.

Learning:

Access to housing must be treated as a justice intervention in itself. Without safe housing for women impacted by the justice system, it is undeniably harder to address substance use challenges, regain custody of your children, secure employment, improve your mental health – and ultimately rebuild your life in the community. In England and Wales, nearly half of women leave prison without settled accommodation, and the same amount are reconvicted within one year of leaving custody[28].

A number of pioneering Housing First initiatives exist across the UK, including in Greater Manchester, which was one of three regions to take part in a government-funded Housing First pilot beginning in 2018. However, adopting the model at a national scale, as is the case in Finland, would have the greatest impact.

Many organisations working in the homelessness and housing sector are calling for the expansion of Housing First, and have made the link between the model and women's reoffending- such as Jigsaw Homes[29] and Homeless Link[30]. Increased collaboration between women's justice organisations and those championing Housing First could be a powerful and effective way to drive change.

Policymakers must also view access to stable housing as a preventative measure considering 15% of those entering prison were homeless before arrival, compared to 4% of the general population[31]. England and Wales is in the grips of a housing emergency – there are 1.4 million fewer social homes today than there were in 1980, with 1.3 million households on social housing waitlists[32].This has pushed millions into the more expensive and insecure private rented sector. According to Shelter, many more people will become stuck in unaffordable and insecure housing, increasing their risk of homelessness. The issues we see in the justice system are often symptoms of crises elsewhere in the community. Understanding this overlap is vital for policymakers, not because one is the primary cause of the other, but because outcomes for women impacted by the justice systems cannot be improved in isolation from the housing conditions that shape their everyday safety and stability.

Access to safe and stable housing can be vital in women keeping custody of their children, gaining employment, and building ties to the community.

When organisations working in women's criminal justice highlight the importance of supporting women in the community rather than imposing short prison sentences, and emphasise the need to meaningfully support women to rebuild their lives in the community post-release, it is essential to talk about housing as a foundation to achieving this. Hope Street, a pioneering residential community for women impacted by the justice system, run by One Small Thing - the charity I work for, recognises the vital role accommodation plays for women impacted by the justice system, and provides flats at the main hub, as well as move on housing dispersed in the community. To complement this work, we need to be championing models like Housing First and partnering with others across sectors who have long advocated for systemic housing reform.

[28] Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefings Winter Factfile 2025

[29] homeless.org.uk

[30] homeless.org.uk

[31] Ibid

[32] shelter.org.uk/

Recommendation 1

Explore opportunities for increased collaboration and knowledge sharing between women's justice organisations and those working in homelessness prevention and housing.

Recommendation 2

Build on existing knowledge to explore how the Housing First model can support women impacted by the justice system.

Recommendation 3

Monitor the implementation of key Government strategies such as the National Plan to End Homelessness, raising how the strategies impact women in the justice system.

Prevention is a mindset

During my travels, I consistently observed an emphasis on proactive measures to prevent harm before it escalates into a crisis. Prevention wasn't treated as a standalone intervention, but as more of a mindset and approach that doesn't see prison as the default and focuses on creating the conditions for safety and stability in the community.

- Berlin Probation Service's Women's Project see it as part of their purpose to prevent women going to prison in the first place. This is reinforced by their belief that supporting someone to break the cycle (or preventing a cycle from beginning) is more effective and sustainable when done in the community, not in a closed environment.

- The IsA-K project in Berlin measures their success in the number of days they have prevented women being in prison – 4,607 in 2024.

- Ontario Native Women's Association, through their Gladue Programme, aims to prevent Indigenous Women, girls and Two-Spirit people from entering cycles of incarceration, and offers wraparound aftercare support to enable women to thrive in the community.

- The Mother Child home in Vechta Prison in Germany, and Vanaja's Family Unit in Finland aim to prevent the harm and trauma of maternal separation. In Vanaja they also see preventing reoffending as a form of child protection.

- CAEFS, led by their abolitionist approach, talk about shrinking prisons out of existence and that in order to do this we need to build a world where everyone has what they need. Integral to this approach is exploring other ways of dealing with harm that can prevent it from happening again.

- Recognising the intersection between care experience and criminal justice involvement, E Fry Toronto's specific focus on providing permanent and subsidised housing for young women aging out of the care system in their new residential project, highlights their prevention-oriented approach.

- Strong welfare systems, like Finland's, play a vital role in preventing adversity and harm by offering solutions to social needs and acting as an essential safety net. Guaranteed Liveable Basic Income, a policy championed by Senator Kim Pate in Canada is also designed to intervene before individuals reach crisis point. This policy is seen by supporters as a part of a robust economic, health and social wellness system that aims to move away from current social welfare assistance programmes that keeps people on the brink of crisis.

Learning:

Investing early in people's wellbeing and social safety nets is a vital part of preventing harm, rather than waiting for needs to manifest as crises – including through the justice system. This goes beyond simply providing specific interventions, but in adopting a prevention mindset that recognises women's needs sit across multiple systems and that preventing harm requires engaging with this wider context.

In England and Wales, the justice system is often described as being in crisis. Indeed, there seems to be a lot more focus on crisis response in the justice system, than in preventing harm from occurring in the long term by investing in community-based systems and services. This can also be seen in the experiences of the women who find themselves in prison, many of whom have been continuously failed by systems that could have intervened earlier. The fact that 31% of women in prison were in the care system as children (compared to just 2% of the general population) is not a coincidence, but a strong indictment of social support systems that leave vulnerable people at greater likelihood of ending up in the justice system.

We see prison being used as a place of safety for women in times of crisis because there are few alternatives or a safety net to fall back on in the community. Women experiencing mental health crises and even women attempting to take their own lives have been remanded to custody as a form of protection, and whilst efforts are being made to limit the ability to remand people solely on mental health grounds, it is unclear whether other laws around antisocial behaviour will continue to disproportionately criminalise women experiencing mental health crises.

In so many of the conversations I had during my travels, we spoke about what women need in the community to build positive lives, and if involvement in the justice system has already occurred, how do we put the brakes on and prevent this reoccurring. In Berlin, they told me that enabling people to rebuild their lives in the community is a task for the whole of society and that a comprehensive network of support is vital to success.

This requires looking beyond the justice system to provide solutions, and ensuring other services in the community are well resourced. And in conversation with Senator Kim Pate from Canada, we spoke about how policies like Guaranteed Liveable Basic Income could form part of a strong social welfare system that prevents precarity, lifting people out of poverty, improving health outcomes, raising employment, and reducing victimisation and criminalisation.

In the UK where the cost of rent, utilities, and basic necessities are at record highs, women continue to be criminalised for acts of survival, with 45% of women's prison sentences of less than six months being for theft from shops[33]. Preventing poverty, inequality and criminalisation related to crisis has never been more important. It's crucial that policy makers acknowledge these intersections and take meaningful action to address these root causes.

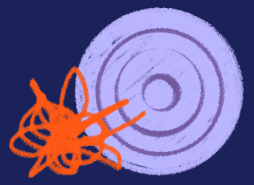
[33] Ministry of Justice Criminal justice statistics quarterly: June 2025. Outcomes by Offence Tool

Recommendation 4

Explore opportunities for increased collaboration and knowledge sharing between women's justice organisations and those working in anti-poverty and social welfare.

Recommendation 5

Explore the impact of guaranteed basic income models on women impacted by the justice system.



Recommendation 6

In influencing communications, focus on policies, strategies, and solutions that prevent crisis, moving away from just describing the problems.

Using prison as a solution to social need harms women

Very much linked to the previous section, a key theme that emerged during my travels is that when prison is seen as the default, often in place of a response to need, women are harmed. Those I visited highlighted how challenges are best met in the community, and that prison can often lead to worse outcomes.

- In Berlin, their probation team told me that supporting change works best in the community. This thinking is backed up by a system where there are opportunities along the road to put the brakes on and prevent someone from going to prison. In this sense, the idea of prison as a last resort is more real in practice – essentially because it isn't seen as an effective solution to crime or reoffending.

- Berlin Probation's commitment to this principle is reflected in their women's project.

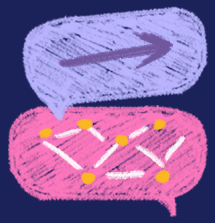
- In Canada, CAEFS's abolitionist approach acts as their guiding light - a constant that causes them to scrutinise how their actions today take them to a future where we don't rely on incarceration.

- Both Ontario Native Women's Association and Thunder Women Healing Lodge Society demonstrate the harms of using incarceration to respond to intergenerational trauma, and how the criminal justice system can be used as a tool of colonialism. Whilst Indigenous People's continue to face disproportionality in the justice system, both these organisations show that moving away from traditional punitive approaches, and instead prioritising healing, cultural connection, and community-led support, is far more effective.

- In instances where women were in prison such as in Vanaja in Finland, and Vechta in Germany, there is a clear recognition that imprisonment is a last resort, and during their sentence they focus heavily on using that time productively for building skills and preparing for life in the community.

Learning:

Prison cannot solve homelessness, poverty, trauma, substance use, or structural inequality – and in many cases exacerbates these challenges. When people experiencing these needs are disproportionately criminalised, unmet needs are not addressed and women are harmed. A justice system that seeks to reduce women's imprisonment must first reduce the social crises that can act as a driver to justice involvement. In many of the places I visited prison is seen as an ineffective response to the social, economic, and structural issues that shape women's lives.



Recommendation 7

Strengthen communication with public and policymakers around the efficacy and benefits of community-based approaches for women.

Recommendation 8

Explore how non-reformist reform strategies can inform influencing work.

Understanding and addressing narratives on crime and punishment is key

Across my travels it became clear that societal attitudes and beliefs play a powerful role in shaping systems. Creating meaningful change not only relies on creating new policies, but also on understanding and challenging underlying views on crime and punishment.

- During my meeting with CAEFS, Emilie – their Co-Executive Director highlighted that in shrinking prisons out of existence, their main task is tackling the 'carceral beliefs' that are present in all their institutions.

- Senator Kim Pate shared that one of the most significant things she feels has shifted policy makers' perspectives has been by taking them into prisons to meet the people their policies affect. Instead of relying on reports and presentations, she has made it a priority to bring senators, members of parliament, and judges face to face with the realities of people's lives.

- In Germany and Finland where incarceration rates are up to 62% lower than in England and Wales[34], I learnt that prison is often viewed as a serious intervention reserved for serious offences, with community-based approaches being generally positively viewed by the public.

[34] Incarceration rate in selected European countries in 2024 (per 100,000 inhabitants), Statista

Learning:

You cannot reform a system without understanding the values, beliefs, and narratives that underpin it. England and Wales is at a pivotal time with the justice system under significant strain. The past year has seen the introduction of the Independent Sentencing Review and the Sentencing Act, alongside the publication of Sir Brian Leveson's review into the criminal courts, commissioned in 2024 in direct response to the mounting pressures facing the system.

A key aim of the Sentencing Act is to reduce our prison population through a variety of measures such as a presumption against short sentences, and expanding the use of suspended sentences. This makes sense considering that England and Wales has the highest imprisonment rates in Western Europe, and our prison system is very much on the brink of collapse. Despite this, the Act has been met with scepticism, with many understanding the idea of sending less people to prison, as being 'soft' on crime, despite evidence that shows custodial sentences are associated with higher rates of reoffending.

Public and political support can make or break efforts to reform systems. A good example of this is in the last year when the Sentencing Council brought in their new guidelines. The section about pre-sentence reports highlighted the importance on providing reports for specific cohorts such as women, primary carers, and people from an ethnic minority, cultural minority, and/or faith minority community, amongst others. This, almost immediately, led to accusations of a 'two tier' justice system that disadvantages people not from those cohorts. The sensationalist way this was drummed up in the media, along with the fear of looking too soft on crime with the public, potentially played a significant role in the Government's decision to push through legislation that ultimately forced the Sentencing Council to revoke that part of their guidelines.

Because public opinion and attitudes don't always align with evidence for what's effective, how do we as those working in the justice sector break through the noise and present a call for change that resonates? There are so many questions, but if my travels have taught me anything, it's that we have to find new and creative ways to engage people on these issues and add nuance to common binary views around right and wrong, victim and perpetrator. Achieving this requires a nuanced understanding of the factors shaping public narratives about the justice system, as well as recognising the pivotal influence the media holds in framing these discussions.

As Emilie from CAEFS highlights, addressing 'carceral beliefs' goes beyond the justice system and encourages us to explore how these attitudes originate and are perpetuated in all our institutions. Senator Pate's work highlights that shifts in perspective often comes when policymakers move beyond relying on reports and statistics, and instead engaging directly with the voices of those with lived experience. And Germany and Finland show us the positive outcomes that can be achieved when community-based, rehabilitative, and preventive approaches to crime are embraced as sensible and evidence-driven, offering a compelling vision for what is possible in England and Wales.

Recommendation 9

Undertake scoping to understand public and political attitudes to crime and punishment, how these differ across key audiences, and the role of the media in shaping and influencing these views.

Recommendation 10

Explore creative ways to communicate justice issues to the public.

Prioritising flexibility, choice and agency is vital for women impacted by the justice system

Across the organisations I visited there was a strong focus on providing choice and building agency with the women they support, moving away from rigid, one size fits all approaches and building independence.

- E Fry Toronto's new residential project, treats community building as a choice. Women are not required to participate in a programme or receive intensive support in order to access housing. Instead, they are empowered to decide what kind of support they want and how they interact with others. By removing mandatory requirements of support, the project helps lower barriers to housing and ensures support is tailored to individual needs.

- In Vechta Prison's Mother - Child House in Germany mothers are supported to care for their children as independently as possible. Creating a stable routine that as far as possible replicates how life might be were they living independently in the community, is key.

- Similarly, in Vanaja Prison's Family Unit in Finland, the focus is on creating a 'normal' environment where women care for their children with autonomy, even going out into the community to get weekly groceries and run errands.

- IsA-K Project in Berlin supports women to work off fines and avoid imprisonment. The support they offer is much more flexible than mainstream community service and gives women the flexibility on attendance that fits around other responsibilities they may have, such as childcare.

- The support that RETS offers in Finland is led by choice. Their work with women is premised by the philosophy that every woman is the expert in her own situation.

- The Supernovat Project in Helsinki runs peer-led groups for women experiencing multiple unmet needs with the aim of breaking stigma and building wellbeing through shared experience. The focus of the groups is decided collectively by members and guided by lived experienced mentors and group activity instructors.

Learning:

Choice and flexibility shouldn't be seen as an exception, but as central to supporting women to thrive in the community. Treating people like adults, who are able to make decisions about their lives is an important part of empowerment. This doesn't mean taking a hands-off approach to support, but one that treats women as decision makers.

In my work at One Small Thing, I have heard how choice and independence can sometimes feel overwhelming for many women who have been chronically prevented from making decisions about their lives – whether that be through abusive relationships, or involvement in other systems that make decisions about your care. That's why it's so vital that women are given flexibility, supported to navigate their choices and build independence safely.

Even in environments where freedom is more restricted, being able to give a sense of autonomy in whatever ways possible is still powerful. For example, in Vechta Prison's Mother-Child House and Vanaja's Family Unit, the focus is on building normality where women are supported to manage every day responsibilities around childcare, preparing them for independence in the community.

Ultimately, embedding autonomy, flexibility and choice into support systems is not just a matter of good practice, it is fundamental to enabling women to rebuild their lives. When women are treated as decision makers and given opportunities to exercise choice, even within more restrictive environments, it lays the foundation for independence and agency. By moving beyond one-size-fits-all solutions we can help create the conditions in which women feel empowered to take their next steps.

Recommendation 11

Ensure service design is informed and shaped by women with lived experience of the justice system.

Recommendation 12

Consider how mandatory programme participation impacts women's sense of autonomy and how women can play a more active role in the type of support given and the way it is delivered.

Understanding the reality of women's lives is essential to effective intervention

Understanding and responding to the unique circumstances of women in the justice system requires approaches that are both personalised and trauma-informed. Organisations I visited across different countries showed the need for systems to centre women's lived experiences to drive more effective support and systemic change.

- The Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) prepares Gladue reports- culturally grounded, individualised recommendations for sentencing - which help courts fully consider the personal histories, family backgrounds, and the effects of intergenerational trauma from racism and colonisation on Indigenous Women, girls and Two-Spirit people. These reports aim to ensure that sentencing decisions reflect the unique circumstances and needs of Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people.

- The Berlin Probation Service's women's project stands out in Germany for its gender-specific approach, working closely with women to understand the underlying causes for their involvement in the justice system. By producing detailed pre-sentence reports for each woman, the team helps courts appreciate the broader context of their lives, with the goal of preventing unnecessary custody and supporting women to thrive in the community.

- The IsA-K project in Berlin provides a safe, flexible environment for women to complete community service to pay off fines, taking into account mental health, disability, and childcare responsibilities. The focus is on preventing imprisonment for non-payment of fines and supporting women's broader needs, such as debt, housing, and employability, with no strict time limits or punitive measures.

- The Supernovat project offers peer-led groups for women facing justice involvement, homelessness, or substance use, focusing on breaking stigma and fostering wellbeing through lived experience leadership. They provide spaces for women to come together to learn more about their own, and other women's experiences.

- The Elizabeth Fry Societies I visited in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto have centred all their services around the realities of women in their local communities and use their platforms to advocate and educate policy makers on the issues that affect the women they support.

Learning:

Effective support for women must be rooted in a deep understanding of their lives and experiences, including experiences of trauma. Whether through the Ontario Native Women's Association's Gladue reports, Berlin's gender-specific probation work, or flexible, supportive models of community service and peer-led groups, the common thread is their prioritisation of personalised and relational interventions, recognising that the pathways into the justice system are often paved with trauma, and multiple unmet needs.

For England and Wales, these lessons are both timely and urgent. Those working in the women's justice sector consistently highlight how systems and services designed for men fail to take women's needs into account, particularly around their children, and can often lead to worse outcomes for women and their families. The evidence from those I visited highlights a need to build into the system processes and interventions that are gender-responsive and trauma-informed by default, and that by doing so better outcomes can be achieved for women.

For example, in both Ottawa and Berlin, practitioners prepare detailed and individualised pre-sentence reports, presenting sentencers with a comprehensive understanding of each woman's circumstances. Berlin Probation's Women's Project can do this for every woman they work with who is coming before the courts. This approach allows for more informed and effective sentencing decisions and, as shown in Ottawa, can contribute to a reduced likelihood of a custodial sentence. It's not simply that these organisations themselves operate in a gender responsive way, it's that they force other systems, such as the court system, to also take into account women's lived experience.

All of the above relies on investing in services (including voluntary sector organisations, and the probation service) that can take the time to understand women's circumstances, offering flexible support, and ensure that the voices of women with lived experience are central to both policy and practice.

Recommendation 13

Centre the voices of women with lived experience in conversations with policymakers.

Recommendation 14

Embed intersectional approaches at every level.

Recommendation 15

Advocate for interventions that aim to increase decisionmakers understanding of women's diverse experiences, such as detailed pre-sentence reports.

Embedding lived experience improves knowledge and supports change

Recognising and valuing lived experience is essential for designing effective support and creating meaningful change in women's justice. When women with direct experience of the justice system are involved in shaping services and policy, interventions become more effective, and policymaking is better attuned to the realities of women's lives.

- Across the organisations visited, staff teams were often made up of people with lived experience of the justice system, from frontline teams to senior leadership positions.

- In Finland RETS support workers come in pairs combining the strengths of both peer mentors with lived experience and professionals who have acquired their knowledge through formal training and study. This ensures that every individual benefits from a blend of lived experience and learned experience.

- The Supernovat project in Helsinki creates spaces for peer groups guided by lived experience mentors. The aim of the project is to break stigma and for women to find commonality with each other, strengthen wellbeing and reduce barriers to accessing support.

- Vailla Vakinaista Asuntoa Ry (VVa) in Finland was founded in 1986 by people experiencing homelessness and today through their Kokema (lived experience) project they aim to ensure that services, and strategies to end homelessness and housing insecurity are led by and informed by people with this lived experience.

Learning:

Across the organisations visited, lived experience is not treated as a tick-box exercise, but as a vital and valued aspect of the work that improves knowledge and supports change. The organisations visited demonstrate that embedding lived experience is far more than simply including a few voices or ticking a box – it is about fundamentally valuing and integrating the insights of those who have direct knowledge of the justice system. When lived experience is woven into the fabric of an organisation, it shapes culture, informs decision-making, and ensures that services are grounded in real-world understanding rather than assumptions.

The key lesson is that lived experience must be embedded as a core value, not an afterthought. This means involving people with direct experience in service design, delivery, and leadership - and recognising their expertise with fair pay and meaningful input.

It's important to recognise that embedding lived experience within organisations should not mean over-relying on individuals to repeatedly share their personal stories or relive trauma. If we reduce the value of lived experience to this, we ignore a diversity of knowledge and ideas. As allies we also need to not expect those with lived experience to do all the thinking and provide all the answers to challenges in the justice system – we need to do this hard work together.

Inclusion goes beyond simply hiring for specifically labelled lived experience roles, it's also about identifying and removing barriers that might prevent people with lived experience of the justice system from applying, progressing, or feeling valued within your organisation. The people I met on my journey showed that there is no single way to value lived experience. What matters the most is creating a culture where these perspectives are genuinely valued as a source of insight and leadership, rather than treated as a token gesture.

Recommendation 16

Ensure women with lived experience are compensated fairly for their time and expertise.

Recommendation 17

Provide development opportunities for women with lived experience.

Recommendation 18

Ensure there is support for trauma at every stage.

Recommendation 19

Examine where in your organisation barriers might exist that prevent women with lived experience of the justice system from applying, progressing or feeling valued.

Recommendation 20

Create diverse opportunities for input, collaboration and leadership- avoiding over reliance on personal storytelling.

Reducing disproportionality and addressing racism is central – and a task for us all

Addressing disproportionality in the justice system means recognising the deep impact racism and colonial legacies have on outcomes today. The following examples demonstrate how culturally informed, community-led initiatives can address systemic inequalities and compel systems to acknowledge the effects of racism.

- Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) prepares Gladue reports – culturally grounded, individualised recommendations for sentencing – which help courts fully consider Indigenous women's personal histories, family backgrounds, and the effects of intergenerational trauma from racism and colonisation, such as residential schools. The Gladue principle itself was introduced to address the crisis of overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples in custody, and ONWA's work is led by Indigenous women for Indigenous women.

- ONWA also provides Gladue Aftercare, offering holistic, culturally sensitive support to help Indigenous Women, girls and Two-Spirit people navigate life in the community and address challenges around housing, substance use, and trauma.

- Thunder Woman Healing Lodge Society (TWHLS) is a community-driven initiative raised out of concern and recognition of the urgent need to break the cycle of Indigenous women's over-representation in Canada's prisons. Indigenous-led, they provide trauma-informed, culturally appropriate services for First Nation (Status and Non-Status), Inuit, and Metis 2SLGBTQIA+ women exiting the justice system.

- A key part of TWHLS's support for Indigenous women impacted by the justice system is their residential project, Niigaan M'Nikeng Healing Lodge. Niigaan M'Nikeng – The Way Forward – supports Indigenous women leaving prison on probation, as well as women on bail awaiting trial who would otherwise be held in custody.

Learning:

Addressing racial disproportionality in the justice system requires more than just acknowledging the problem. It demands listening to the voices and experiences of those most affected, and systemic change that addresses structural violence and racism. A central lesson from both ONWA and TWHLS is the transformative impact of culturally grounded, community-led interventions that aim to actively disrupt cycles of trauma and the legacy of colonialism.

In the UK we must address the legacy of colonialism and institutional racism, and recognise how this legacy influences the justice system we have today – not just in England and Wales but in countries colonised by Britain, including Canada. British colonialism has fundamentally shaped Canada's justice system, facilitating systemic discrimination against Indigenous Peoples, land dispossession, and assimilation policies. Britain's colonialism in Canada has fundamentally contributed to the overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples in the justice system we see today.

In England and Wales people from Black, Asian and minoritised communities are overrepresented in the justice system, and face unequal outcomes and treatment – such as being over policed, being more likely to be remanded, and facing disproportionately higher odds of receiving custodial sentences[35]. Data shows that black women are 25% more likely to be sentenced to custody at Crown Court than white women[36].

Despite this, in 2025 the government brought in legislation to specifically prevent the Sentencing Council's new guidelines from mentioning personal characteristics, in particular race or ethnicity, in whether someone should be considered for a pre-sentence report. This part of the Sentencing Council's guidelines was generally positively received by the justice sector and seen as a necessary and evidence-based way to promote fairer sentencing. Whilst PSR's can't solve disproportionality in the justice system, the situation showed how unwilling the Government is to 'walk the walk' when it comes to addressing racial disproportionality in the justice system.

We can't talk about creating systemic change for women in the justice system, or addressing inequality without acknowledging how structural racism influences criminal justice outcomes.

[35] Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile February 2025

[36] "Double disadvantage" The experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic women in the criminal justice system by Jane Cox and Katharine Sacks-Jones, for Women in Prison and Agenda Alliance

Recommendation 21

Use platforms and privilege to highlight racial inequality in the justice system, in conversations with decisionmakers, in policy work, and through public communication channels.

Recommendation 22

Self-educate on allyship.

Recommendation 23

Show solidarity and allyship with organisations supporting Black, Asian and minoritised women, whether this be supporting a campaign, contributing to policy discussion, or through equitable funding practices.

Key recommendations for policy makers

Resource the women's sector

1. Commit long term funding to community-based specialist women's services, moving away from short-term, competitive commissioning processes.
2. Protect and prioritise smaller 'by and for' organisations, recognising their specialist expertise and reducing barriers that may exclude them from commissioning and funding processes.
3. Support the scaling up of the Women's Centre Model as a core, prevention-led approach, diverting women into trauma-informed, wraparound community support instead of prison.

Strengthen the foundations for stability in the community

4. Tackle housing insecurity by scaling up social housing and strengthening private renters' rights and protections, including introducing private rent controls.
5. Scale Housing First nationally, and evaluate its impact on outcomes for women impacted by the justice system.
6. Commission guaranteed basic income / universal basic income pilots, and evaluate their impact on women.

Build better decision-making

7. Involve women with lived experience of the justice system in policy design, paying attention to diversity and intersectionality.
8. Embed anti-racism across policy-making, with clear accountability for ensuring all policies are anti-racist in practice.
9. Embed trauma-informed, gender-responsive decision-making across the justice system – and seek training, guidance and resources from experts who can support this upskilling.

Conclusion

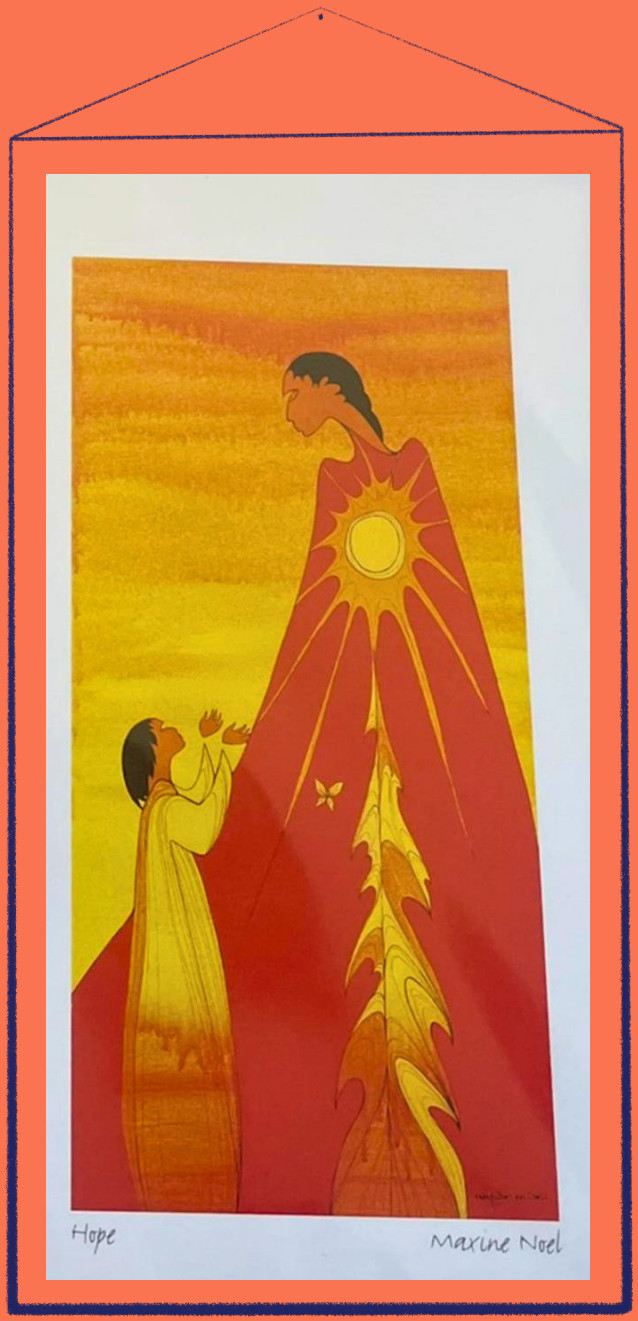
Reflecting on the lessons from this Fellowship, it is clear that transformative change in women's justice requires us to be bold enough to challenge the foundations that our current system is built on and address the deep-rooted harms of poverty, inequality, exclusion, and trauma. These are not issues that can be solved through the justice system, no matter how 'reformed' it is.

The most impactful international work I observed is where practitioners are willing to question whether imprisonment should be used at all, and where the focus shifts towards building strong, supportive communities. In England and Wales, this means moving beyond improving prisons, to actively reducing society's reliance on them by addressing the social conditions that draw women into the justice system in the first place. We must be prepared to challenge carceral logic, persistently advocate for community-based alternatives, and refuse to accept prison as the default answer to harm. A key part of this requires us to understand the factors shaping public narratives around crime and justice, and what levers we can use to influence these discussions.

As those working in the women's justice sector, we have a responsibility to be explicit in naming and addressing systemic inequality. This calls for collaboration with a wide range of organisations including those working in welfare, housing, and anti-poverty spaces. If we are committed to promoting 'community', we must do everything we can to build and sustain those communities, looking beyond the justice system to tackle the root causes of harm and exclusion. By doing this, we hope to create a future where women don't fall through the cracks, are supported to thrive, and where prison is no longer seen as an inevitability.

For those responsible for shaping policy, and those in positions of influence and power, the task now is to match the courage and clarity of those operating on the frontline: this means trusting their expertise, funding what the evidence tells us is effective and being bold enough to back new approaches. This also requires you to adopt a prevention mindset more broadly, shifting resources upstream into stable housing, income security, health and specialist women's services, so that crisis is prevented rather than punished. Look internally at how decisions are made, and embed trauma-informed, gender-responsive and anti-racist approaches to decision making, ensuring they are shaped and led by women with lived experience of the issues you are seeking to address. Importantly, use your platforms to challenge misinformation and divisive narratives around crime and punishment, including 'tough on crime' rhetoric, and to make space for evidence-led conversations about what keeps communities safe.

The learning in this report is not a conclusion, but an invitation to keep having conversations on how we move the dial towards systems that truly support women to thrive.



'Hope' by Maxine Noel. I bought this print whilst I was staying in Ottawa as a gift for the team at Hope Street. It feels a fitting image to end this report with. Find out more about Maxine Noel here

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