Growing Great Kids (GGK) out of Homelessness: An Evaluation Using Participatory Health Research

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**BACKGROUND**

High numbers of men, women, and youth are incarcerated in Canada each year many of which have a higher prevalence of illness and disease. Incarcerated mothers often suffer a loss of identity as mothers as they attempt to reunite with their children following release from prison. Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver (Efry) has implemented Growing Great Kids (GGK) as a unique support system to help mothers meet the needs of their children and maintain custody. GGK is an evidence-based curriculum that mitigates health disparities for mothers who have been criminalized or at risk of homelessness and their children by:

- Securing attachment
- Strengthening parenting skills
- Fostering resiliency

**PURPOSE:** Collaborate on a 12-week participatory health research project to evaluate GGK, at UBC’s Collaborating Centre for Prison Health and Education

**RESULTS**

**HOPE/SELF-ESTEEM**
- Happier parents, improved self-esteem and confidence
- “Sense of freedom”

**SOCIAL INCLUSION/EXCLUSION**
- From support groups

**EDUCATION**
- Priority for children to attend school
- Some mothers want to pursue further education

**MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES**
- Addiction for parents
- Traumatic experiences for children (ex. abuse)

**SYSTEMIC ISSUES**
- Wait lists, referrals, cost, access to transportation
- Lack of trust in Ministry of Child and Family Development
- “Spend less money on jails and put more money into helping kids before they go into jail”

**GENDERED ROLES**
- Women feel the burden as primary caregiver
- Need for gender responsive support (financial, community, respite)

**EARLY CHILDHOOD**
- GGK teaches participants about tricks for engaging with their children

**STRATEGIES**

- Conducted a scoping review of internal literature and a grey literature search of issues related to the GGK initiative
- Assisted in the development of qualitative and quantitative research instruments
- Administered surveys and conducted focus groups with previously incarcerated women to understand their perspectives regarding the GGK program
- Synthesized findings and created a briefing report

**CAPSTONE IDEAS**

I am interested in exploring the use of participatory health action research in the prison health setting. This semester, I will continue to work with CCPHE to conduct additional focus groups, engage stakeholders through advisory circles, and possibly even create a publication. I would like to explore new themes that arise from these focus groups focusing on three main topics: participation in GGK, participation in other programs, and impact of GGK on future thinking. My capstone paper will take form of a qualitative research project and centre around themes that arise from the focus group. These will be compared to themes that have arisen from the prior focus group during the summer. Through this project I would like to further explore participatory methods that can be used to successfully evaluate future programs both in and out of the prison setting. Additionally, I hope it can inform future programs that are developed to assist incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals (re)integrate back into the community.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am grateful to the many individuals at the Collaborating Centre for Prison Health and Education, Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver, and Growing Great Kids program. Special thanks to my preceptors Dr. Ruth Martin and Melinda Markey, my research team member Zahra Dhanji, and my senior supervisor Dr. David Whitehurst for their guidance, support, and mentorship throughout the practicum experience.

**BACKGROUND**

**OBJECTIVES**

- Collaborate on a program evaluation of the GGK curriculum
- Gain insight from GGK participants to support long-term planning for community-based services and funding proposals
- Use participatory methods to engage, collaborate and empower the community, as well as inform stakeholders, research, innovation, and future policy decisions
- Develop a briefing report to share with the community
- Reduce disparities that negatively affect those who are in custody or in the process of re(integrating) into society

**REFLECTIONS**

Found poem from focus group (reprinted with permission from Zahra Dhanji)

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