

CORRECTIONAL SOCIAL WORK WITH CANADA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents		i
Acknowledgements		iii
Abstract		iv
Chapter One	Introduction	1
	Introduction	1
	Geographic Context	2
	Red Deer Remand Practicum Setting	3
	Previous Social Programs at the Red Deer Remand	4
	Current Social Programs at the Red Deer Remand	4
	Practicum Learning Goals	5
	Positioning Myself as an Indigenous Social Worker	7
	Previous Social Work Practice	8
Chapter Two	The Approaches and Frameworks that Guided my Practice	9
	Social Work Modalities in Practice	10
	Solution Focused Therapy	10
	Cognitive Behaviour Therapy	11
	Strength-Based Approach	11
	Structural Social Work	12
	Indigenous Frameworks in Practice	13
	Interdisciplinary Approaches and Frameworks in Practice	15
	The Canadian Court System	15
Chapter Three	Literature Review	17
	Context of Canadian Prisons	18
	Colonization and its Impacts	19
	Mental Illness Overrepresentation in Prisons	20
	Overrepresentation of Indigenous Offenders in Canadian Prisons	22
	Rehabilitation and Restorative Justice	24
	Social Work in Corrections	25
Chapter Four	Activities, Tasks, Learning	28
	Policies, Procedures and Guidelines of Practice	28
	Guiding Legislation and the “Personal is Political”	29
	Managing Referrals, Caseload and Supervision	29
	Interdisciplinary Team	31
	Community Networks	31
	Assessments and Documentation	32
	Case Examples	33

	Indigenous Females	33
	First Time Offenders	34
	Repeat Offenders	35
	Ethical Dilemmas and Their Implications	36
Chapter Five	Implications for Practice	39
	Learnings from my Practicum Experience	39
	Legislation Changes and Its Impact on Services	40
	Funding	42
	Burnout	43
	Case Management	44
	Short Term Crisis Counselling	44
	Conclusion	45
Appendix A	Learning Contract	47
References		51

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### **Abstract**

This practicum report is a summary of my experience as a Masters of Social Work student at the Red Deer Remand Centre, located in Red Deer, Alberta, Canada, where I provided services and programs for Indigenous persons, with an emphasis on mental health and wellness. Throughout my practicum, I experienced many dimensions of social work, including clinical counselling, case management, and crisis work. Not only did I complete my learning goals, but I also grew both professionally and personally in unexpected ways. In this report, I detail my experiences and contextualize them within the literature to the various topics relating to my practicum.

## **CHAPTER ONE: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

This practicum report describes my learning experiences at the Red Deer Remand Centre, where I completed my practicum via my affiliation with the University of Northern British Columbia as part of my Masters of Social Work degree. I received many opportunities to practice as a social worker within Red Deer Remand during my placement. Despite having previous experience in working within the Canadian correctional system, this practicum was extremely valuable because it helped me further polish my skills as a correctional social worker. Specifically, I sharpened the clinical and crisis skills necessary to be an effective prison social worker. I approached my practicum at the Red Deer Remand Centre with a curious mindset and a desire to better understand the many different aspects of prisons. In this placement, I spent the majority of my time counselling and working with inmates struggling with anxiety, sleep disorders, substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, and other challenges. While most of my time was spent within the jail, I also practiced within the Canadian Court System as a social worker, working with a variety of persons who had come in contact with the criminal justice system. The inmates I worked with had been charged with crimes varying from sexual assault, murder, domestic violence, stolen property, and so forth. In all cases, I sought to help the client understand the factors that had led to their arrest and placement at the Red Deer Remand Centre. In order to create an environment conducive to healing and rehabilitative justice, I sought to build a strong rapport with the inmates. I considered it a privilege to hear their stories; moreover, listening actively to my clients inspired me to improve my practice while reinforcing my passion for being a correctional social worker.

This report is made of five chapters, each providing a unique perspective into my

experiences at the Red Deer Remand Centre. In the first chapter, I describe my practicum setting, the services available at the facility, and my practicum learning goals, and I relate this information to my social location and previous correctional social work practice. In the second chapter, I discuss the variety of approaches that were utilized in my practice, each providing a different perspective into the clinical therapy I provided. The third chapter is focused on academic research, providing a variety of scholarly sources that relate to my placement. In the fourth chapter, I discuss the variety of activities, tasks and learnings that were completed in my placement. And lastly, in the fifth chapter, I relate the experiences of the Red Deer Remand Centre to the future work that I will be doing as a correctional social worker.

### **Geographic Context**

Red Deer is located in Alberta, one of the ten province in Canada. As of 2016, Red Deer had a population of 100,418, with Alberta having a population of 4,067,175 (Government of Canada, 2016; Government of Alberta, 2016). According to Statistics Canada, it is estimated that there are 4,595 persons who identify as being Aboriginal in Red Deer (Government of Canada, 2016). There are currently 1.1 million who identify as Aboriginal people in Canada; this comprises roughly 4% of the overall Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2011). Aboriginal, the collective noun used in the Canada Constitution Act of 1982, refers to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. This term is used commonly in Canada to represent the unique bands, tribes and different groupings of Aboriginal persons who first inhabited the land prior to colonization (Joseph, 2016). The word Indigenous is now also recognized by Canada's federal government to represent First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, acknowledging the many different bands, nations and tribes that identify as Indigenous. In utilizing this term, the Federal Government is now recognizing the international legal right to uphold the United Nations Declaration of the

Rights of Indigenous Peoples towards the First Nations, Métis and Inuit people of Canada (Baskin, 2011). Further, the word Indigenous is used globally to describe people who are Indigenous to any land, but within Canada, the word Aboriginal is used exclusively to refer to the Indigenous people of these lands. In understanding this, one can better understand the historical and political underpinnings of each of these words. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the words Aboriginal and Indigenous interchangeably when referencing the First Nations, Métis and Inuit persons of Canada.

### **Red Deer Remand Practicum Setting**

The Red Deer Remand Centre, or Red Deer Remand, is a provincial jail built in 1987 and is located in downtown Red Deer, Alberta, Canada. This prison serves many surrounding communities, being the largest remand centre within Central Alberta. This Centre is a 146-bed correctional jail that holds both men and women who are serving a sentence of two years minus one day or less, as well as those are waiting for their respective court dates. The Centre offers programs and services to the offenders, including many recreational activities such as an outdoor exercise yard, a small gymnasium, a multipurpose recreation room, and an inmate library. At Red Deer Remand, there are thirty correctional officers, ten nurses, one psychologist, one contracted psychiatrist, and one medical doctor, all of whom comprise the front-line staff who work regularly with the offenders. Unfortunately, the facility lacks many services and supports, often creating difficult situations for the employees and the service they provide to the inmates. For example, due to funding constraints, there is only one on-staff psychologist who must work with all 146 inmates. Psychologists provide short-term crisis counselling and mental health assessment in tandem with doctors and psychiatrists who ultimately prescribe medication, when necessary, for the inmates. The psychologist's role is to counsel the inmates, generally one-on-



one, and support them during their time at the facility. Unfortunately, this means that the psychologist is often overworked by trying to see as many clients as possible in a day, all while attempting to prioritize each case according to its severity. The role of the psychologist at Red Deer Remand is crucial; he assesses the specific situational needs of each inmate while providing rehabilitative services for diverse issues including mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, anger, grief, and loss.

### **Previous Social Programs at the Red Deer Remand**

The Red Deer Remand Centre was built in 1987, serving as a provincial prison for Red Deer and the surrounding area. When the prison opened, it had a variety of social programs, all of which were designed to help offenders successfully reintegrate into society following their sentences. These programs gave offenders an opportunity to finish school, learn life skills, and participate in groups focused on healthy choices, mental health, and overcoming addictions. Moreover, Red Deer Remand formerly had separate units for female and juvenile offenders that further sought to meet the specific needs of each of these unique groups. The unit for female offenders had specific programming focused on cooking, motherhood, healthy relationships, and sewing, while the unit for the juvenile offenders offered services focused on healthy relationships, substance abuse, and the promotion of safe sex. Unfortunately, due to funding constraints there are no longer any specific units for female or juvenile offenders and many of these programs have since been cut. Consequently, the Red Deer Remand Centre no longer offers comprehensive rehabilitative services for its inmates.

### **Current Social Programs at the Red Deer Remand**

Red Deer Remand falls under the umbrella of Alberta Health Services, which funds one psychologist and ten nurses to work at the Centre. The psychologist works closely with the

nurses on a full-time basis while the doctor and the psychologist work four-hour shifts on a bi-weekly basis. The team of nurses includes seven Registered Nurses, one unit clerk, and two nurses with expertise in specialty areas including sexually transmitted infections and mental health. The psychologist provides clinical counselling to the inmates to help them with grief, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and the many other underlying issues that may have led to their incarceration. The Elizabeth Fry society—a non-profit social service agency that works with women and girls in the criminal justice system—facilitates a therapy group session once per month (Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver, 2017). John Howard, an agency that works with male offenders, comes into the jail on a weekly basis to meet individually with the offenders and help with transition and release planning (The John Howard Society of Canada, 2017.) For inmates' spiritual guidance, a Catholic priest provides pastoral care on a weekly basis. Furthermore, Indigenous persons can request medicinal sage for smudging ceremonies. Despite the positive impacts of many of these programs, the Red Deer Remand Centre exclusively focuses on individual counselling and does not currently provide any group therapy or programming for the inmates.

### **Practicum Learning Goals**

I spent 560 hours at the Red Deer Remand Centre during my practicum under the supervision of the in-house psychologist and a clinical social worker, from Red Deer College, who agreed to support my work and practice. This placement enhanced my knowledge of correctional social work, while further polishing my clinical skills in a realm of practice that I am passionate about. I specified fairly simple learning goals for my practicum because I wanted to allow for new experiences that I could not predict in advance. In many ways, this flexibility strengthened my practicum by enabling me to intertwine new experiences within my learning

goals, thereby providing a richer opportunity to learn during my practicum placement than I would have otherwise experienced. My detailed learning goals can be found in Appendix A. In summary, they are as follows:

1) Demonstrate knowledge of formal and informal community resources.

- Do I demonstrate the ability to build partnerships and rapport with other community agencies in Central Alberta?
- Do I have sufficient knowledge and awareness about community resources and services to better my practice?
- Do I know which programs allow Indigenous offenders to rehabilitate back into society?

2) Integrate social work values, ethics and knowledge in accordance with the Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics.

- Do I understand the impact of the CASW and the ACSW within my practice?
- Do I effectively demonstrate these standards in court, counselling, social development programs, meetings, and office time?
- Do I have the ability to reference the CASW when facing an ethical dilemma?

3) Provide clinical counselling sessions.

- Am I practicing regular counselling skills with the inmates?
- Do I demonstrate the professionalism to conduct a successful counselling session?
- Do I effectively ask for constructive feedback and seek advice, when necessary, from my supervisor?

4) Analyze power relations, authority systems and culture of the agency's service delivery system and my ability to work within it.

- Do I understand the structure of the practicum setting and its organizational dynamics?
- Can I identify the strengths and limitations of the service delivery mandate and appropriately question standards and practices?
- Do I practice from an Indigenous worldview?

### **Positioning Myself as an Indigenous Social Worker**

I am a 24-year-old Métis woman from the traditional Plains Cree lands of Mîhk-wâpîsimos, now formally known as Red Deer, located in Alberta, Canada. As an Indigenous woman, the Canadian government's previous policies and practices of cultural assimilation and oppression have heavily impacted my social standing and ideological views. As a result of my worldview, I have many assumptions that greatly impact my practice and experience in social work. Many of my values and assumptions towards social, behavioural, economic, and political processes stem from a decolonized and Indigenized mindset. Those worldviews are threaded throughout the remainder of the document.

I personally recognize and understand that Indigenous persons have experienced cultural genocide resulting from larger colonization projects. The Indigenous people of Canada existed—and, in fact, thrived—prior to colonial contact (Baskin, 2011). Prior to colonization, the Indigenous people of Canada had full autonomy over their mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual practices and methods—we were thriving and flourishing. Since contact, Indigenous persons have been marginalized and ostracized; this oppressive treatment has created untold traumas and grief that our communities are still struggling to reconcile (Baskin, 2011). This government-sanctioned oppression was further perpetuated by government-funded Residential Schools, which were religious schools that sought to “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man”

(Lalire, 2007, p. 1). In operation between from 1895 to 1996, these schools had an explicit mandate to assimilate and marginalize Indigenous peoples and cultures, resulting in Indigenous children being abused in a multitude of ways—mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, sexually, and culturally (Manore, 1998).

In keeping with my worldview, I have sought to understand the correlation between educational systems, policies, the Canadian Government, and the various institutions that have failed Indigenous individuals, families, and communities. Moreover, I recognize how these events have impacted my social location (Baskin, 2011). Based on my lived experiences as a Métis woman and an inter-generational survivor of Residential Schools, my framework in social work is heavily impacted by my underlying values, assumptions, and biases about decolonization and Indigenization. My lived experiences as an Indigenous woman heavily impact my practice, causing me to seek to understand the harmful, inter-generational effects of colonization (Anthias, 2012). While I recognize that my experiences as a Métis women do not represent the lived realities of all Aboriginal persons in Canada, I do believe my lived reality helps me better relate to and understand some of the traumas that other First Nations, Métis and Inuit persons have been forced to go through. In practice, I sought to strengthen my rapport with clients by demonstrating my understanding of the social processes that impact behaviour in Indigenous cultures. During my placement, it was vital to my practice that I broadly understood Indigenous ways of knowing and ensured that I always attempted to approach people and situations with sensitivity to culture.

### **Previous Social Work Practice**

I am passionate about contributing to the changed lived realities of all Indigenous people and embrace the adage that the “personal is political”. Given my desire to contextualize the race-

and culture-based trauma that Indigenous peoples have experienced, I decided to apply my broader passion for policy change within an institutionalized setting that is heavily impacted by previous traumas and current laws and regulations—correction centres.

I formerly worked in Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada, as an Aboriginal Justice Worker. There, I worked with Indigenous inmates in the Kamloops Regional Corrections Centre. I also worked with Indigenous people on probation and parole to ensure that they were following mandates specified by their court orders. In working with First Nation, Métis and Inuit offenders, I quickly learned that this was an area of social work that I am particularly passionate about.

Transferring this experience to my practicum at the Red Deer Remand Centre gave me valuable insight into how Indigenous peoples are impacted by the criminal justice system. This knowledge was important at the Red Deer Remand Centre where I was the only social worker within the facility. Not only did this experience give me the opportunity to grow as a practitioner, but it allowed me to work within a realm of practice that I am passionate about as an Indigenous social worker.

## **CHAPTER TWO: The Approaches and Frameworks that Guided my Practice**

In my practicum, I used a multi-disciplinary approach that borrowed from the best elements of the prevailing frameworks of social work practice. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the approaches that guided my practice as a correctional social worker at the Red Deer Remand Centre. This portion of my report also explains and contrasts Westernized and Indigenized frameworks of practice in combination with decisions that impacted my practicum at the Red Deer Remand Centre.

### **Social Work Modalities in Practice**

There are a variety of frameworks and interventions within the field of social work that can be used in practice. During my practicum, my supervisor often encouraged me to reflect upon my frameworks of practice to better recognize how these approaches could positively or negatively impact my clients. Below, I will discuss the ones I used.

**Solution focused therapy.** Solution focused therapy is used heavily in correctional settings. It is broadly defined as a goal-directed collaborative approach to psychotherapeutic change and relies on direct observation of clients' responses to a series of precisely constructed questions (Alexander, 2000). While this type of therapy addresses the problem, its main focus is on how to properly overcome the obstacle, all while finding the best possible solution to resolve it. Research indicates that this approach is beneficial for prison practice because it is future-orientated, goal-driven, and it focuses on solutions. In prison, solution-focused therapy is positively correlated to lower recidivism rates (Brownell & Roberts, 2002). Given its benefits, I embraced this framework in the counselling that I provided to the inmates.

**Cognitive behaviour therapy.** Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a short-term, goal-oriented psychotherapy treatment that involves a hands-on, practical approach to problem-solving. Although it is used in many settings, this approach is particularly emphasized in

correctional facilities (Barnes, Hyatt, & Sherman, 2016). CBT seeks to understand the correlation and symbiotic nature of behaviour, thoughts, and feelings (Pratt, Tarrier, Dunn, Awenat, Shaw, Ulph & Gooding, 2015). Originally designed as a method to treat anxiety and depression, CBT seeks to change a person's underlying thoughts. This framework has widespread applicability in a prison setting because it helps inmates think differently about their lived realities (Keen, Hunter & Peters, 2017). If an inmate can become more cognitively aware of their own biases, emotions, and actions, they can subsequently implement new strategies that will prevent them from continuing deviant behaviour upon their release (Garrett, 2015). Mothersill (2016) argues that there are four components of CBT that inmates must embrace in order to best benefit from this modality: being learning to pay attention to thoughts feelings, recognizing thoughts/feelings are leading to hurting someone, developing healthier thinking patters and practicing these thinking patterns.

**Strength-based approach.** A strength-based approach focuses on a person's innate skills and abilities. In this approach, the individual seeks to overcome current challenges by reflecting on their strengths and capabilities. The goal of solution-based approaches is to help individuals gain confidence (Oesterreich & Flores, 2009). Furthermore, self-reflection improves problem-solving skills and the capacity for critical self-reflection. Research indicates that a strength-based approach is an effective model of practice in Canadian correctional facilities because, by focusing on the strengths of the individual, it promotes increased self-esteem, which is linked to lower rates of recidivism.

**Structural social work.** The phrase "the personal is political" is crucial in social work because it recognizes how political and legal structures that disproportionately marginalize and oppress certain groups of people can alter how an individual feels about their current lived reality



(Mullaly, 2007). The expression “personal is political”, heavily relating to structural social work, is a feministic phrase which acknowledges how our lived realities are impacted by political, legal and institutional structures (Olivia, 2008). Further, structural social work is a critical framework that focuses on the broader structures of socio-economic and political realms, recognizing how laws and policies impact a person on a micro level (Allan, 2003). A structural approach would argue that the high offense rate of Indigenous persons must be understood within the wider context of their cultures’ oppression and marginality; specifically, these offenders have been impacted by policy changes and legislative acts that are directly correlated with their high rates of imprisonment (Mullaly, 1997). In a correctional setting, both social workers and inmates have the ability to better understand how policies impact practice, or, in other words, to understand how the inmates are impacted by the personal nature of public policy: the personal is political. In applying a structural framework, social workers can contextualize the impact of legislative policies on their clients and apply methods and approaches that are sensitive to oppressions, cultures and lived realities. This approach provides a more ethical standard of care that recognizes the clients’ lived traumas and considers how their current decisions have been impacted by broader race and culture dynamics (Baskin, 2011). Moreover, it also helps connect inmates with culturally-specific support and identifies heightened risk factors that may encourage the offender to re-offend once they return to their community.

**Indigenous frameworks in practice.** In working with Indigenous offenders, it is important to not only acknowledge their histories of marginalization, but also to recognize the unique opportunity to practice from frameworks that are sensitive to culture and oppression (Blackstock, 2009). Indigenous frameworks are holistic in nature and acknowledge spirituality, traditional medicines, relationships, elderly wisdom, teachings, and other cultural components

that can promote healthier lifestyles and more effective thought patterns (Baskin, 2011).

As part of the Federal Government of Canada's efforts to redress their systemic oppression of Indigenous peoples, the government created and funded the Truth and Reconciliation Commission beginning in 2008. This commission was tasked to investigate the impact of policy—both current and historical—on Aboriginal persons. From 2008 to 2015, the Commission gathered research across Canada and met with groups of Indigenous persons to hear about their lived experiences. The final report issued by the Commission includes 94 calls to action, 12 of which refer directly to the impact of the current criminal justice system on Indigenous people (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Below is an excerpt of some of the recommendations for Canada Correctional Facilities. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015):

(31) We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments to provide sufficient and stable funding to implement and evaluate community sanctions that will provide realistic alternatives to imprisonment for Aboriginal offenders and respond to the underlying causes of offending.

(32) We call upon the federal government to amend the Criminal Code to allow trial judges, upon giving reasons, to depart from mandatory minimum sentences and restrictions on the use of conditional sentences.

(35) We call upon the federal government to eliminate barriers to the creation of additional Aboriginal healing lodges within the federal correctional system.

(36) We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments to work with Aboriginal communities to provide culturally relevant services to inmates on issues such

as substance abuse, family and domestic violence, and overcoming the experience of having been sexually abused. (p. 7-8)

As per the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, an Indigenous framework in practice implements the medicine wheel, recognizing how the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of Indigenous peoples are intertwined (Baskin, 2011).

The medicine wheel is an important framework in correctional social work practice because it encourages practitioners to seek to understand the total lived experience of an inmate, including underlying factors that may at first be invisible. The recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission empowered me to practice from a decolonized framework that supports the needs of First Nations, Métis and Inuit offenders. The medicine wheel, being the alignment and interaction of the physical, emotional, mental and spiritualities realities, shows all the aspects of one's being. While the circle, consisting of four separate quadrants, not only represents one's self, it has also been used for healing, consciousness-raising and self-learning (Baskin, 2011). In acknowledging the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of a person, I was then able to offer individual therapy that sought to provide healing from a decolonized framework.

### **Interdisciplinary Approaches and Frameworks in Practice**

Although different approaches and frameworks have various strengths and limitations, I attempted to provide the highest ethical level of practice when I applied an interdisciplinary approach. Firstly, it was crucial I built rapport with the inmates, seeking to understand who each one is as a person. Then, I decided which approach would work best, recognizing they may be more receptive to certain approaches. While I adjusted my frameworks whenever my client seemed resistant, in certain cases it was difficult to find frameworks that challenging offenders

seemed to benefit from. In these circumstances, further familiarizing myself with social work approaches and seeking the guidance of my supervisor allowed me to overcome these obstacles. By emphasizing a client-focused approach, I was able to make assessments about the value of different approaches and frameworks and to provide a higher and more ethical standard of social work practice than if I had used only one framework.

### **The Canadian Court System**

When I was not counselling inmates in the Red Deer Remand Centre, I often worked with my clients at the Red Deer Court House. I chose to support them in this atmosphere because many of the offenders that I worked with wanted the support of a familiar face in the court room. In that setting, I would observe the court proceedings and then attempt to connect afterwards with my clients in the Remand facility to help them debrief their experiences.

I was uniquely suited to support my clients during these court proceedings because I have experience with both First Nations courts and Westernized Government of Canada courts. During my previous social work practice in Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada, I worked in the Cknúcwentn Court—a First Nations Court that serves central British Columbia. While completing my practicum, I frequently compared and contrasted the differences between the two court systems. For example, First Nations courts embrace Indigenous spirituality within their sentencing guidelines. Within the Kamloops First Nation Court, they burn sage, all of the parties—the judge, lawyers, respected Elders, and the perpetrator—sit in a circle, and the judge seeks the elders’ wisdom in sentencing the participant (Aboriginal Legal Aid in BC, 2016). This model embraces Aboriginal ways of knowing within a Westernized system. Although the judges, lawyers and Elders must complete mandatory training on Aboriginal injustices within Canada, they nevertheless seek to create a “healing plan” for the participant that emphasizes the

importance of holistic and rehabilitative approaches to criminal law (Jeffries & Stenning, 2014).

During my placement at Red Deer Remand, I often wondered how my clients' lived realities would change if they had equal access to a First Nations court. The Westernized and colonized court system of the Federal government silences the perpetrator, provides the offender with minimal accountability, and does not promote a culture of rehabilitation and restorative justice (Whonnock, 2011). I discussed these differences frequently with my supervisor; in recognizing my own worldview, I sought to remain critical about both the Westernized and the First Nations courts. Having a nuanced understanding of the relative merits of each system improved the standard of care that I delivered to my clients because it allowed me to better recognize how to effectively work within systems from an anti-oppressive manner.

### **CHAPTER THREE: Literature Review**

The purpose of this literature review is to discuss previous research as it pertains to the practice of social work in correctional facilities. I researched a variety of topics which were intertwined with my practice at the Red Deer Remand Centre including mental health, addictions, the over-incarceration of Indigenous peoples, Indigenous frameworks, and the broader implications of correctional social work. Each of these topics impacted my work at the Red Deer Remand Centre, directly influencing my practice in micro, macro, and mezzo ways. This literature review seeks to contextualize the main concepts that informed my practicum experience: the context of Canadian prisons, the over-representation of mental illnesses in prisons, colonization, the unique cultural needs of Indigenous offenders, the importance of rehabilitation and restorative justice, and the broader field of correctional social work.

#### **Context of Canadian Prisons**

Broadly, Canadian Correctional institutions are defined as buildings that legally hold persons as punishment for committed crimes, or while the possible offender is awaiting trial. (Correctional Service Canada, 2017). The earliest prisons systems, which started in the 1800s, were utilized to separate offenders from mainstream Canadian society (Curry, Wolf, Boutilier & Chan, 2003). They are the main holding facilities for persons who have engaged in criminal activity (Correctional Service of Canada, 2017). The earliest prison systems sought to banish or kill offenders as punishment for criminal activity. Although modern practice no longer considers these approaches as either humane or ethical, it is important to note that the Canadian prison system is rooted in punitive justice. Consequently, the prison system has continued to embrace heavily punitive measures, including the electric chair and other forms of the death penalty (Kelsall, 2014). It was not until the twentieth century that the Canadian Government started to

focus, incrementally, on rehabilitative justice. This structural change meant creating holding institutions with more humane treatment, social programs, and access to medical services than what previously existed.

By the twenty-first century, Canada had two different types of prisons: provincial correctional centres and federal penitentiaries operated by Correctional Service Canada (Correctional Service of Canada, 2017). Currently, if a civilian commits a crime with a sentence of two years minus one day or shorter, they are sentenced to a Provincial Correctional Centre; sentences of two years plus one day and higher remands inmates to a Federal Penitentiary (Baehre, 2013). In both of these types of facilities, inmates have access to doctors, dentists, ophthalmologists, psychiatrists, nurses, psychologists, social workers, and other trained professionals. The Red Deer Remand is a smaller remand facility and has limited resources and programs for the inmates. Currently, Correctional Service Canada has over 200 federal penitentiaries and provincial prisons in active use.

### **Colonization and its Impacts**

Colonization has caused great harm to the Indigenous people of Canada by forcing them into oppression through structural, institutional, and political realms. Blackstock (2009) describes the colonization of Indigenous persons as deliberate acts by the Canadian government to establish dominance over the First Nations people of Canada through violent and oppressive tactics. Although many cultures have experienced the adverse effects of colonization, Indigenous cultures have been particularly hard hit. Colonial practices have impacted Indigenous peoples since Canada was “discovered” in 1492 through to the closing of the last Residential School in 1996; moreover, many argue that the poor conditions on many reserves and the lack of government funding for Indigenous services mean that Indigenous people continue to be

marginalized through colonization. Through colonization, the century-plus of trauma that Indigenous people have experienced means that the intergenerational effects of these policy decisions are still unfolding, generally in ways that negatively impact and marginalize Indigenous peoples (Llewellyn, 2002).

Only through a deeper understanding of the harmful efforts of colonization on First Nation communities and families can scholars fully understand how damaging colonialism has been on Indigenous persons (Llewellyn, 2002). Many ideological perspectives, ideologies, and worldviews that are colonial and/or Westernized in nature are still being forced upon First Nation, Métis, and Inuit persons and their belief systems and practices continue to be disrespected through racist policies, legal systems and structural institutions (Baskin, 2011). This perpetuates oppressive structures and policies, such as laws and regulations, which disproportionately harm Indigenous persons (Bourassa, Blind, Dietrich & Oleson, 2015). Such marginalizing laws have created a strong distrust and reluctance from Aboriginal groups towards non Aboriginal people, governments and institutions. Thus, to fully understand the impact of colonialism on Indigenous cultures, practitioners must take both an inter-sectional and an inter-generational approach. This requires recognizing how the effects of assimilation, racism, and white privilege intersect with current structures, systems, and policies that oppress Indigenous identities over and between generations.

### **Mental Illness Overrepresentation in Prisons**

Given that inmates are likely to experience an exacerbation of their symptoms in a correctional system due to the culture of prison itself, it is crucial for social workers to understand both the prominence of mental illness in prisons and the negative impact that prison culture has on an inmate's mental state (Brownell & Roberts, 2002).



Mental illnesses can include a wide range of conditions and disorders that affect mood, thinking, and behaviour; as such, persons with mental illness are drastically over-represented within the Canadian criminal justice system (Chaimowitz, 2012). According to Correctional Service Canada (2017), there has been an 85 percent increase in the number of offenders with a diagnosed mental health disorder at intake since 1997. Across Canadian society, mental illness is on the rise. Current statistics estimate that one in five persons will experience mental illness in their lifetime. These illnesses impact daily routines, education, work, and personal relationships (Report Summary - Mental Illness in Canada, 2015). In a longitudinal study conducted between 2005 to 2010, Whitley and Berry (2013) found a strong correlation between mental illness and the risk of imprisonment. Thus, it is not surprising that a Canadian Corrections report showed drastic increases in mental health diagnoses between 2008 and 2011, showing a 71% increase in offenders diagnosed with mental disorders and 80% increase in number of inmates on prescribed medication (Sapers, 2011). Further, these numbers correlate to an earlier report by Corrections Canada (2007), which found that 11% of male offenders had a significant mental health diagnosis, over 20% were taking a prescribed medication, and 30% had previous history of psychiatric hospitalization (Officer of the Correctional Investigator, 2011).

Further research suggests that the percentile of individuals in correctional facilities who are impacted by mental illness is likely to be even higher than reported due to the stigma around mental illness (Chaimowitz, 2012; Martin, Wamboldt, O'Connor, Fortier, & Simpson, 2013). Mental illness has several negative connotations in Western culture, which has created a severe stigma that often prevents inmates—particularly Indigenous inmates—from seeking and receiving appropriate care or treatment (Henderson, Evans-Lacko, Flach, & Thornicroft, 2012). In 2011, the most prevalently reported mental illnesses included social phobias, depression, pain

disorders and anxieties (Math, 2011).

Due to the high number of offenders who identify as having a mental illness, some critics allege that Canadian prisons have become warehouses for the mentally ill (Math, 2011). In considering inmates' overall health, mental illness is a significant challenge for correctional staff who lack training and resources to accommodate and support inmates (Davoren, Fitzpatrick, Caddow, Caddow, O'Niel & Kennedy, 2015).

In earlier prison systems—particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries—there was little recognition of mental illness. Inmates were often misdiagnosed, thrown into solitary confinement, and forced to undergo unwanted sterilization or other medical surgeries—all of which exacerbated the symptoms of their illness. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, Canadian prisons began to evolve in their understanding of the relationship between mental illness and incarceration, criminal activity, and overall mental health (Richards, 2015). Psychosocial interventions remain the most prominent way to treat mental illnesses in correctional facilities. Although many inmates request medications, only a small percent of offenders will be referred to a psychiatrist or doctor for psycho-pharmacological intervention. This therapeutic model is used because workers in the correctional system now better understand that there are many other strategies that can improve mental health. This approach emphasizes improved coping strategies and healthier means of decision-making. There are other common interventions to help inmates with mental illness, such as psycho-therapeutic counselling methods, group counselling, adequate recreational activities, relaxation techniques and stress management programs (Prasad, 2017).

### **Overrepresentation of Indigenous Offenders in Canadian Prisons**

Indigenous people are vastly over-represented in the Canadian prison system. As noted

earlier, in Canadian society they comprise roughly 4% of the overall population. Conversely, correctional facilities have disproportionately high rates of Indigenous offenders; although these figures vary by region, Indigenous inmates comprise 23% of the overall prison population in Canada (Corrections Service Canada, 2017). This translates into an incarceration rate that is ten times higher than the rate of imprisonment among non-Indigenous persons. Put another way, Aboriginal people are represented in jails more than five times higher than they are in the general population (Llewellyn, 2002). Of inmates who self-declare as Indigenous, 71% of offenders are First Nation, 24% are Métis, and 5% are Inuit (Government of Canada, 2013). Various factors contribute to this disproportionately high incarceration rate: the impacts of Residential Schools, family/community history of suicide, poverty, addictions, mental health, street gangs and the dispossession of culture through colonization (Correctional Service Canada, 2016). Understanding these factors is important in social work because it helps contextualize the high rates of imprisonment among Indigenous populations.

In addition to a higher overall incarceration rate, research also indicates that Indigenous offenders tend to be younger in age than non-Indigenous inmates, have previous youth or adult sentences prior to their current imprisonment, have been charged and incarcerated for more violent crimes, and have more gang affiliation (Corrections Services Canada, 2014). Although crime rates across Canada have decreased in recent years, hitting an all-time low in 2016, incarceration rates of Indigenous persons increased in this same time period by 112% (Public Safety Canada, 2015). This disproportionate increase has occurred chiefly within the past thirty years (Gobeil, 2008). Moreover, research suggests that First Nation, Métis, and Inuit persons also have drastically higher recidivism rates than non-Aboriginal offenders (Gottschall, 2012). Recidivism rates are an important statistic for correctional systems because they help calculate

the probability that a former inmate will re-engage in criminal activity upon their release (Di Tella & Schargrodsky, 2013). Since the recidivism rates of Indigenous offenders are also disproportionately higher than non-Aboriginal offenders, Indigenous persons have a much higher risk of experiencing the “revolving door” effect, a term that describes the cyclical nature of an inmate’s relapse back into criminal behaviour after their release (Gobeil, 2008). While many inmates are able to successfully re-enter society, First Nations, Métis and Inuit persons have a vastly greater risk of succumbing to the “revolving door” and re-entering the prison system (Di Tella & Schargrodsky, 2013).

This over-representation persists within both federal and provincial jails (Public Safety Canada, 2015). Notably, it is impossible to understand these high rates without considering the broader context of colonial practices that have oppressed Indigenous people through institutional, structural, and political realms (Prairie, 2002). Recognizing that Indigenous people live within a post-colonial landscape of assimilation helps explain why Aboriginal Canadians, on average, spend more time in custody than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Owusu-Bempah, Kanter, Druyts, Toor, Muldoon, Faquhar & Mills, 2014). The inter-generational effects of racism, oppression, and trauma perpetuate trauma through cultural oppression, social inequality, the loss of self-governance, and systemic discrimination (Prairie, 2002).

### **Rehabilitation and Restorative Justice**

Restorative justice is a philosophical and social movement that has emerged within the latter half of the twentieth century (Dhami, Mantle, & Fox, 2009). Rather than using punitive measures to correct wrongful behaviour, restorative justice seeks to rehabilitate inmates back into society through a healing-focused approach (Bazemore, 1998). Restorative justice “emphasizes the importance of working with prisoners and their victims in a way that promotes

healing and encourages reconciliation, elevating the role of victims and community members in the process, holding prisoners directly accountable to the people whom they have violated, enabling prisoners to have access to transformative programs” (Insight Prison Project, 2012, p. 1). More simply, Sharpe (1998) argues in *Restorative Justice: A Vision for Healing and Change* that restorative justice should invite full participation and consensus, heal what has been broken, seek full and direct accountability, reunite what has been divided, and strengthen the community, to prevent further harms. Within the correctional system, some of the programs that are typically identified with Restorative Justice include victim/offender mediation or dialogue, peacemaking circles, victim assistance and involvement, former prisoner assistance and involvement, real restitution and community service (Sharpe, 1998).

Restorative justice is important because it encourages the offender to grow from their experience. Proponents of restorative justice argue that it also provides healing and closure for their victims, their families, and other stakeholders in the crime. Historically, Canadian prisons relied on punitive methods to “fix” wrongful behaviour, believing that punishment was the only way to eliminate deviant behaviour and criminal activity (Ashworth, 2002). Conversely, it is believed that restorative justice is a way of living, living, healing, repairing, and forgiving (Braithwaite, 2000). This is particularly important for Indigenous inmate populations; for these vulnerable persons, restorative justice also promotes inter-generational healing (Baskin, 2011). Restorative justice is consistent with an inter-sectional approach that balances the impact of the offender’s crime against the cultural genocide they have experienced. In other words, restorative justice may offer Aboriginal offenders their best chance at successful rehabilitation and re-integration into society.

### **Social Work in Corrections**

According to Corrections Canada, social workers play a vital role in the prison system. Official literature from the Government of Canada further describes social workers as being part of a multi-disciplinary team that is committed to working with offenders towards rehabilitating them back into the community (Correctional Service Canada, 2017). In correctional settings, social workers are focused on improving the inmates' mental health and helping them successfully reintegrate into society (Correctional Service Canada, 2017). Thus, social workers deliver programs, engage in discharge planning, provide individual counselling, complete comprehensive assessments, and focus on community capacity building (Fox, 1983). Within corrections, social workers seek to practice in a way that provides growth, closure and healing for the victim, offender, and the community. Unfortunately, due to high caseloads and under-funding, social workers often have limited opportunities to implement these frameworks. Moreover, the very culture of the prison-industrial complex is at odds with restorative justice. Whereas restorative justice emphasizes healing and re-integration, correctional facilities are governed by values that emphasize power, control, and authority (Ivanoff, Smyth, & Finnegan, 1993). Given the social worker's responsibility to offer all inmates dignity, respect, and diversity to promote their right to self-determination, the very nature of social work contradicts the punitive history and culture of prisons. To maintain order, correctional officers treat offenders like criminals, which further perpetuates power imbalances that do not recognize inmates' individual dignities (Ivanoff, Smyth, & Finnegan, 1993). When social workers do provide programs and frameworks emphasizing restorative justice, it is often in direct contradiction of the larger culture of the prison. This not only creates challenges for practitioners, but promotes mental distress among inmates. Although many correctional facilities claim to value rehabilitative practices, this is rarely true in practice.

Canada could learn lessons from other countries. In Norway, the Halden Prison has created a culture that emphasizes justice by focusing on retribution, incapacitation, deterrence, restoration, and rehabilitation (Stranberg, 2010). Its prison culture is purported to be anti-oppression, pro-empowerment, and pro-healing. It involves collaboration between prison workers and inmates, which is important because it includes the inmate in their own rehabilitation. By promoting the inmates' dignity, power, and diversity, the social programs that the prisons provide are compatible with the larger culture of the prison (Brownell & Roberts, 2002). Conversely, Red Deer Remand is similar to other correctional facilities in Canada. The demeaning nature of the prison culture challenges social workers who strive to provide restorative justice services in an environment that does not otherwise foster rehabilitation. From a structural point of view, the policies of Red Deer Remand emphasize punishment, under-fund services and programs, and enforce a culture of disciplined power. All of this directly leads to the burn out of social workers who cannot overcome all of these challenges.

Notably, there is increasing emphasis on the value of restorative justice and policies are beginning to change on the macro-level of practice. As legal and political systems adopt better policies, these cultures may change. However, as front-line workers, social workers will always be responsible for managing the challenges that occur on a micro-level—many of which cannot be fixed or overcome from a legislative perspective (Johnsen, Granheim, & Helgesen, 2011). Depending on a social worker's personality, it can be very difficult to challenge the authoritative nature of prison culture. During my practicum, I was encouraged to consider the value of restorative justice against the backdrop of an authoritative environment that undermines its very principles.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: Activities, Tasks, Learning**

Despite previous experience in correctional social work, I experienced tremendous growth at Red Deer Remand. As the only practicing social worker at the facility, I had a unique opportunity to work in a fast-paced yet flexible setting. My experiences at Red Deer Remand exposed me to ethical dilemmas that forced me to confront my biases; thus, not only did my placement help me better understand the dynamics of a remand prison, but it also enhanced my critical thinking skills and improved my self-reflective practices. Throughout my placement, I had numerous conversations with my supervisor to discuss various challenges, receive feedback, and discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of my practice. I further polished my skills as a correctional social worker through supportive conversations with my supervisors, observing prisoners, referencing the Alberta Health Services legislation and Corrections Canada policies when necessary, consistently applying ethical standards to my practice, and debriefing with staff members.

### **Policies, Procedures and Guidelines of Practice**

To work effectively in a remand facility, it became clear that I would need to better understand the policies, procedures, and guidelines issued by Corrections Canada and Alberta Health Services. While Alberta Health Services generally funds social services and rehabilitative programming, it is Corrections Canada that funds administrative, maintenance, and correctional staff. As a direct consequence of this joint funding, there are complicated exceptions and loopholes that impact the implementation of policies and programming within the Centre. These policies not only impact inmates at Red Deer Remand, but also impact how the staff—correctional officers, nurses, managers, the sole on-site psychologist, and so forth—perform their jobs. Although I was required to read these policies during my initial training, I found it useful to



re-reference them at times throughout my placement. This gave me a greater understanding of Red Deer Remand's goals, mandates, and missions; moreover, it also gave me a more nuanced and ethical understanding of my role at the Centre.

### **Guiding Legislation and the “Personal Is Political”**

Within Red Deer Remand, the correlation between regulations and funding recalls the adage that the “personal is political”. In terms of lived experience, this means that both inmates and staff are directly impacted by under-funding, lack of services, and high offence and recidivism rates (Olivia, 2008). For instance, historically the Government of Canada does not invest many resources into inmates in remand centres, as they are only often being held for a brief period of a time such as a couple of weeks. In practical terms, this means that staff must strive to maintain the utmost ethical standards and highest quality of care despite under-staffing, long work hours, and high caseloads that create high turnover rates. Similarly, inmates are also impacted by policies and laws that further force them into marginal positions and increase the likelihood that they will re-offend (Mullaly, 1997). This adage is important because it emphasizes that it is the front-line staff and the inmates who are directly impacted by otherwise faceless legislative policies.

### **Managing Referrals, Caseload and Supervision**

I had a significant amount of flexibility during my practicum to practice. As previously discussed, Red Deer Remand holds up to 146 inmates; yet, there is only one on-site psychologist at the Centre. This creates a challenging and stressful environment filled with high caseloads and crisis work.

In my daily practice, I emphasized ethics and professionalism. Given that remand facilities function chiefly as holding centres for inmates awaiting trial or a court date, many of

the offenders were only at the facility for a short time—an average length of twenty-one days. To help me understand the high turnover rate, my supervisor gave me my own caseload. I worked with clients from the time of their initial remand until their court dates. My supervisor, the correctional staff, and the nurses would frequently refer inmates to my caseload, many of whom struggled with substance abuse, domestic violence, anxiety, sleeping difficulties, and depression. For many of these inmates, these underlying issues directly culminated in their imprisonment. In addition to staff referrals, many inmates specifically requested to see me. In these cases, clients were generally seeking counselling to help them process at least some of the underlying factors that had led to their remand.

Given that I had previous experience as a correctional social worker, my supervisor gave me a significant amount of flexibility to practice, which included allowing me to manage my own caseload through referrals and requests. Nevertheless, I routinely sought guidance from my supervisor because I valued his experience and knew that his perspective and training would improve my understanding of the dynamics at work in a correctional setting. My supervisor was trained in psychology, which is similar yet distinct enough from social work to yield interesting comparative insights. We shared many overlapping values and a shared desire for ethical practice, yet frequently diverged in our practice and reasoning. Nevertheless, I sought input from my supervisor on a near-daily basis on a range of matters, including the specifics of certain cases, ethical challenges, advice on how to best approach a case, and so forth.

Where possible, I also engaged in job shadowing. I learned from a psychiatric nurse, a licensed practical nurse, correctional officers, and case managers. By closely observing how staff worked within these roles, I now better understand the services that the facility provides to the inmates. This improved my inter-sectional understanding of correctional social work, my multi-

disciplinary approach to practice, and my general understanding of how the supervision and referral process works.

### **Interdisciplinary Team**

The Red Deer Remand Centre employs a team of nurses and one psychologist funded by Alberta Health Services. The team consists of several nurses and a psychologist who work together to meet the inmates' physical and mental needs. A Catholic priest also visits the jail bi-weekly to guide inmates of Christian faiths and those seeking to deepen their spiritual beliefs within a Christian framework. Frontline staff frequently collaborated to help inmates achieve their best outcome during daily meetings in which staff discussed specific inmates and case files. These meetings generally occurred at the beginning of the work day and would last for approximately 30 minutes; we also had meetings when crisis situations requiring immediate assistance emerged. In between meetings, we often met informally to update each other on any pertinent changes to an inmate's circumstances.

### **Community Networks**

Many outside community agencies work closely with Red Deer Remand and are vital in preventing high recidivism rates. Alberta Mental Health and Addictions, the biggest agency that has partnered with Red Deer Remand, provides a variety of services for individuals upon release from the Remand Centre. Within this organization, the transitional worker has a significant role: their responsibility is to meet with inmates prior to release and determine which services and programs the individual would best benefit from as they attempt to re-integrate into their community and stay out of jail. This transitional worker attempts to bridge the gap between incarceration and independent living. They connect with the inmates to understand what type of support services they need, particularly in terms of mental health and substance abuse. Given the

over-representation of these illnesses in the correctional system, Alberta Mental Health and Addictions provides counselling and access to other community resources.

Within the correctional system, inmates receive services from the John Howard and Elizabeth Fry agencies. These are gender-specific agencies that work with clients who have recently been released to help them find proper housing, employment, and other basic amenities. Unfortunately, due to lack of funding, neither agency can fully commit to full-service programming since they lack both staff or resources. However, they are valuable agencies that help inmates determine which community resources they would benefit from upon release and they help inmates access and navigate these supports.

### **Assessments and Documentation**

In working with offenders in prisons, clear, precise, and accurate documentation is always necessary, including notes and documents that will be used in court or other legal realms. All staff members are required to document incidents within a timely and thorough manner. When an inmate is remanded, a nurse immediately conducts an intake assessment to determine the individual's physical and mental status. The results of this assessment must be clearly documented so that all staff at the Remand Centre can understand the inmate's current state, determine which factors will affect the inmate's behaviour within the prison, and eventually help the inmate with a discharge plan. Since Correctional Officers work most closely with inmates, they are legally required to fill out documentation and should have a case note for every thirty minutes of elapsed time. Nurses must document each time there is a health complication, medicinal change, or whenever an inmate requests medical care. Similarly, social workers, psychologists, nurses, and doctors must document all incidents relating to mental health, including routine counselling appointments. The more serious the health concern, the more in-

depth the documentation must be. If an inmate is deemed potentially suicidal, further documentation is then required according to correctional policy. This requires a complete mental health assessment to determine the risk of suicide ideation, documentation about previous suicide attempts, and other factors that could be contributing to such thoughts and actions. Often times, suicide ideation is fairly low: heightened emotions due to imprisonment, difficult experiences leading up to the arrest or the circumstances of the arrest itself, and withdrawing from opiates are all factors that can cause an inmate to express temporary suicidal thoughts during the initial intake assessment.

### **Case Examples**

At Red Deer Remand, I worked chiefly with three types of people: Indigenous women, first time offenders, and individuals who had been previously incarcerated, otherwise known as participating in the “revolving door”. The section below comprises a brief case example of each of these populations that I specifically worked with in the prison.

**Indigenous women.** As an Indigenous woman myself, I have a natural desire to work with First Nations, Métis and Inuit persons who have come into contact with the criminal justice system. As a Métis person, my history of oppression has not only created a desire within myself to help other Métis peoples, but also to help other Indigenous persons who may have had similar circumstances of marginality. Whenever an Aboriginal female entered Red Deer Remand, my supervisor would place her on my caseload because of my desire to work with this demographic. Many of these women were experiencing the “revolving door” effect; moreover, they were frequently suffering from feelings of detachment from their culture, land, and traditional teachings. Moreover, many of these women had experienced serious traumas, including sexual assault or domestic violence, and had subsequently used alcohol or substances to help cope with

the trauma. Many women described feeling isolated on the reservation and said they did not have access to professional help, nor enough funds to pursue medical treatment. Hopelessness and fear were prevalent feelings that made many of the women hesitant to speak about their experiences. Some of the women had experienced prostitution and gang violence. Although Aboriginal men are statistically more likely to be incarcerated than women, Aboriginal women are still vastly over-represented compared to non-Aboriginal women in the Canadian correctional system. I provided counselling and resources focused on substance abuse, grief, addiction and trauma. Since Red Deer Remand does not have a female detention unit, I often only saw these women for one or two sessions, as they were sent to a different facility that had specific holding cells for them. Given our limited time together, my practice was very intentional and specific to help ensure that they received the maximum benefit from our sessions.

**First time offenders.** I also worked frequently with offenders who had never been incarcerated before. These inmates had no previous history of incarceration and often described feeling very overwhelmed with the imprisonment process. Since these offenders had no criminal record, they sometimes described their remand as a “blessing in disguise”. I helped these clients reflect on their actions and life choices, recognize how their previous decisions had led to their imprisonment, and help ensure that they learned self-reflective practices that would prevent future recidivism. These inmates often struggled with the prison culture and described experiencing anxiety, depression, and sleeping difficulties as they adjusted to the incarceration lifestyle. Typically, I would meet with these inmates multiple times to provide supportive counselling that addressed chief concerns, usually focused around anxiety, sleeping, and depression. Since many of these individuals would only be remanded for a short time, the majority of our conversations focused on creating action plans for them to follow after their

release. We also discussed support systems, community resources, and substance abuse treatment programs. Where applicable, I provided community resource sheets about local agencies with information about their services and programs.

**Repeat offenders.** I spent the majority of my time with inmates who had been in and out of the prison system, experiencing high recidivism rates, and the “revolving door” effect. These individuals had been incarcerated more than once; moreover, many of the clients had either grown up with criminal activity or had become extremely familiar and comfortable with jail culture as a teenager and young adult. Often these individuals had experienced a traumatic event that had provoked them to live high risk lifestyles as a means of coping. The majority of these offenders had a strong history of drug abuse, generally including daily use. While substance abuse was not always the main factor that led to their imprisonment, drugs were often underlying factors in related crimes-- theft, sexual assault, violence, and murders—that had led to their incarceration. In some cases, it was clear that the inmates preferred being incarcerated; they experienced a sense of pride, accomplishment, and comfort during imprisonment. I typically met only once with these individuals. I sought to understand their situations, advise them about the services and programs that the Red Deer Remand offers, and offer support. Most of the inmates declined these services, although there were a select few that did want to stay out of jail, get sober, improve their lifestyles, and learn coping strategies that would help them work through grief, trauma and loss. I met more frequently with those individuals because of their willingness to modify their behaviour and thought processes. In those sessions, I provided counselling relating to addiction, mental health, substance abuse, grief, loss, and sexual abuse. Our discussions also included information on treatment programs and community resources aimed at preventing future recidivism.

## **Ethical Dilemmas and their Implications**

During my placement, I encountered many ethical dilemmas, further giving me an opportunity to grow as a social worker. In recognizing the population of Red Deer is 100,418, it was quite common for me to see my previous clients in the community (Government of Canada, 2016). In these circumstances, these individuals would engage in casual and pleasant conversation, but in one specific case, a previous inmate had asked if I could still provide counselling to him outside of the jail. During this conversation, I had to explain to him the ethical guidelines of my profession and the policies of the centre, maintaining professionalism and highest ethical standards. Most commonly, it was quite routine for me to know many of the inmates from previous social encounters, recognizing that I was born and raised in the community of Red Deer. In these cases, I would inform my supervisor about previous relationships with certain persons, explaining how it would be unethical for me to provide counselling. In these situations, my supervisor and I would discuss these ethical dilemmas, brainstorming for the best possible solution. While my supervisor has a Bachelor's of Social Work degree like I do, we pursued different graduate degrees: his specific training is a Masters in Science in Psychology whereas I am pursuing my Masters of Social Work. Nevertheless, I was always intrigued to hear his perspective when discussing cases or potentially difficult situations. From this, it was important to recognize that each profession has different praxis and different approaches impact practice. Not only did these ethical dilemmas strengthen my practice as a social worker, but they showed me the value of critical dialogue in challenging situations, correlating to the highest and most ethical level of care.

Although many inmates genuinely did want counselling to help them overcome various obstacles, including substance abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, depression, and other



underlying factors that had contributed to their incarnation, just as many inmates were trying to take advantage of the system. During meetings with either myself or the psychologist, inmates would request specific medications; when staff were resistant to prescribe these medications, these inmates would often become irate. They would argue that they had used such drugs for months—or even years—under the supervision of the doctor. In some cases, the inmates would also try and turn staff against each other or file complaints. This is why transparent communication among the staff was so crucial—by ensuring that we were in constant contact, we could quickly distinguish inmates with a true medical need for a certain drug from those inmates drug-seeking for non-medical purposes. In these situations, I would also reference the Canadian Association of Social Work Code of Ethics, ensuring that I was practicing from the most ethical and professional standards of practice. Overall, this was a comparatively easy ethical dilemma, because the consequences of prescribing unnecessary medication had the potential to create great harm for the staff, the Red Deer Remand Centre more broadly, and jeopardize the services provided. In these situations, and others, I set firm boundaries with the inmates to ensure that our interactions were professional in accordance with the Canadian Association of Social Work Code of Ethics.

During my placement, I also encountered situations where my own biases surfaced. For example, being of Aboriginal ancestry, I tend to work from an Indigenous framework, believing that all inmates will benefit from such an approach. This bias is one that has created challenges, as it became apparent that each person would respond to a different framework best suited to their circumstance and situation. In many ways, this placement brought this bias to the surface, encouraging me to often practice from a more Westernized framework for both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal clients. In having a client-focused approach, recognizing that not all persons are

comfortable in exploring the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of themselves, I was then able provide the most ethical level of care.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: Implications for Practice**

My practicum placement at Red Deer Remand gave me significant insight into the future work that I want to do as a correctional social worker. It also challenged my worldviews, biases, and perspectives while helping me re-consider the broader implications of my chosen career path. In this chapter, I will relate my placement to my future practice in Canadian prisons. Specifically, I will discuss legislative policy, funding, case management, burnout, and short-term crisis counselling. I will first describe what I learned about each of these dimensions and then discuss how it will impact my future practice as a social worker.

### **Learnings from my Practicum Experience**

Working in the Red Deer Remand Centre gave me many opportunities to work in a fast-paced environment and enhance my skills as a correctional social worker. I had many learning experiences, including mental health challenges from clients, team planning, intake assessments, discharge planning, rehabilitative counselling, and the promotion of community resources. Throughout my practicum, it was apparent that the lack of social services for addiction recovery and mental health counselling is a significant problem at Red Deer Remand specifically, and Canadian prisons more generally. For many inmates, the lack of social services offered by Red Deer Remand lowers the likelihood that they will achieve long-term sobriety which significantly increases their risk of recidivism. Waitlists for addiction counselling, treatment programs, and housing options are long. For some inmates, these services are simply too difficult to navigate. I quickly realized during my placement that many inmates who desired treatment did not receive adequate access to services. These challenging situations are largely due to funding gaps that adversely impact social service systems and programs.

During my assessments, it was vital to understand an inmate's history of substance abuse.

As a social worker, I sought to contextualize this substance abuse by recognizing the broader implications of addictions. Substance abuse and mental issues, particularly when they are co-diagnoses, often lead to homelessness, lower education, unhealthy coping skills, and, far too often, incarceration. To provide helpful, empowering, and client-focused therapy, I listened actively to how clients described their history with substances, but also how they described their experiences with social services designed to support and rehabilitate them. I then counselled inmates on underlying issues including substance abuse, mental health, unhealthy relationships, unhealthy boundaries, domestic violence, loss, and grief. I sought to help my clients recognize how these factors contributed to their incarceration and how to resolve these underlying stressors, tensions, and behaviors in order to avoid recidivism. In all cases, I needed to understand each inmate and their own personal story--this helped me work effectively within the realm of their lived experiences and offer targeted counselling and referrals to specific community agencies that would support them after their discharge.

### **Legislation Changes and its Impact on Services**

The administrative and correctional staff at Red Deer Remand are funded through Corrections Canada whereas the medical team, including the nurses and the psychologist, are currently funded through Alberta Health Services. This is a recent policy change; previously, the medical team was also funded by Corrections Canada. As stated previously, prior to this funding shift, Red Deer Remand offered a significantly larger number of social programs than it does at this time. Female inmates could learn skills including sewing and cooking and effective parenting. Similarly, Red Deer Remand formerly offered diverse programming for male inmates, including forms of outdoor therapy such as wood chopping, bark carvings, hiking, and other physical activities that facilitated their rehabilitation. Aside from these programming initiatives,

perhaps the biggest change is that Red Deer Remand used to have separate units specifically for female and juvenile offenders. This was important because it acknowledged their unique circumstances as minority populations within the prison. The legislative shift that saw Alberta Health Services take over funding in some areas from Corrections Canada was significant. Since programs have been cut due to funding, juvenile offenders must now be sent to larger facilities—even if they are far away from the juvenile's support network—and female inmates are held only for short periods of time—until their court date or a larger prison has space to house them. In other words, legislative decisions have had a tremendously negative impact on the quality of programs and services that Centres like Red Deer Remand can offer, which negatively affects prisoners by reducing the likelihood that they will be rehabilitated and increasing their likelihood of recidivism.

Again, the adage that the personal is political applies. This funding change may seem innocuous in text, but it has had real impacts on the services, programs, and experiences that the inmates have at Red Deer Remand. In many ways, this placement made me further appreciate the importance of a structural approach to social work, which is a mode of understanding that emphasizes the broader socio-economic and political dimensions of culture and society. This approach specifically considers the impact of capitalism in creating inequities between cultures and individuals (Wood & Tully, 2006). My placement re-enforced the correlation between policies and the people who are served by human service agencies. In better understanding the relationship between policies and practice, and how they may positively or negatively impact my clients, I saw the effects of marginalization more clearly. This knowledge enables me to advocate more effectively for progressive and anti-oppressive legislative reform that will improve the quality of services offered by correctional centres and improve the inmates' quality of life—pre,

post, and during their incarceration.

## **Funding**

Funding is directly tied to legislation and has a significant impact on the services, programs, and staffing at the Red Deer Remand Centre. As stated previously, the Red Deer Remand is jointly funded by two government agencies: Corrections Canada and Alberta Health Services. This funding enables Red Deer Remand to offer the standard variety of services and programs available in remand facilities. However, Red Deer Remand is a comparatively small centre, especially compared to other facilities in Alberta. For instance, the Edmonton Remand Facility is located in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, has a maximum capacity of 1,195; it is essentially ten times larger than the 146-person capacity of Red Deer Remand. Within this joint funding model, correctional facilities are given money per capita—the more inmates, the more money; the more money, the higher quality (and offerings) of services. While there is no denying that larger centres have larger financial needs and experience larger numbers of patients with mental illnesses and substance abuse issues, among other underlying factors, this funding model creates significant challenges for smaller prisons. Consistent with its smaller population, Red Deer Remand receives less money than other institutions and must therefore offer fewer services. This translates into high case-loads, over-worked staff, and decreased quality of services and care for inmates. I experienced the stress of these types of funding hostages first-hand during my placement. From a political perspective, is also important to acknowledge how governmental laws and policies impacts the services, programs and resources that the prisoners receive. There are four political parties in Canada: the Conservative Party of Canada, the Liberal Party of Canada, the New Democratic Party of Canada and the Green Party of Canada, all having different ideological views towards the funding that should be put towards prisons and inmates.

The federal party that Canadians democratically elect heavily impacts the services and programs available to inmates and the frontline worker's ability to provide services to those remanded. In recognizing how governmental policies impact programming in Canadian prisons, I found that I was better able to understand the effects of funding and how it correlated to the services that I could provide to inmates.

### **Burnout**

Social workers face a high risk of burnout in every field; this risk does not appear to be significantly higher in correctional settings than in other settings. Interestingly, I learned that the majority of the nurses and the sole psychologist at Red Deer Remand had been employed there for seven-plus years. In fact, the staff members experiencing the highest burnout rates at Red Deer Remand were correctional officers. This is consistent with research that has found that correctional officers work in stressful environments that are perpetually under-staffed; as a consequence of this over-work and the impact of general prison culture on the officers, correctional officers generally have the highest level of burnout within prisons (Bonini Campos, Marocoa, Oliveira, Sampaio Bonafé, & Schneider, 2016). In speaking with my colleagues at Red Deer Remand, I was shocked to learn the scale of psychological distress that they had witnessed and experienced as correctional officers. Many of the officers had visible signs and symptoms of their own trauma. Listening to the officers share their experiences not only gave me a more nuanced understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of the correctional system more broadly, but reminded me to engage in my own self-care. Hearing such stories encouraged me to be conscious of my physical, mental, emotional and spiritual state, ensuring that I was in a healthy and well state to provide therapy to the inmates. As the sole social worker at Red Deer Remand, I had to create my own supports and engage in critical self-reflection. Although the correctional

setting has unique challenges and opportunities for burn out, all professionals working in the human service field are at risk of burn-out as a direct consequence of working with marginalized and at-risk clients.

### **Case Management**

Given the small staff at Red Deer Remand, I did not have a formal caseload and thus I had the unique opportunity to work with all clients that were incarcerated. Since the facility can hold a maximum of 146 inmates, my days were often very busy despite the lack of a formal case management system. This gave me maximum flexibility to organize each day depending on what I wanted to accomplish and which inmates I intended to counsel. When an inmate would request or be referred to me, I did an initial priority ranking; this ranking accounted for the fact that some inmates may be experiencing higher levels of crisis and have a more urgent need to speak with someone. My social work is informed by two key beliefs: first, that we advocate for the most marginalized individuals among us; and, second, that we must respond quickly to crisis situations. I recognized that I had an ethical responsibility to prioritize certain cases. In balancing my referrals and requests, I prioritized inmates who seemed to be in the most amount of crisis by seeing them early in the day; I reserved my afternoons for inmates who had more effective coping skills. This process required me to assess and understand my clients' unique circumstances and subsequently respond to their needs in the most professional, ethical, and moral means possible. Thus, this experience greatly improved my assessment skills overall, which will have a lasting impact on my future practice as a social worker.

### **Short Term Crisis Counselling**

Despite having previous experience as a correctional social worker, the nature of Red Deer Remand required me to adopt new frameworks and perspectives. Red Deer Remand is



chiefly a holding facility and I frequently only had the opportunity to see a client for two to six sessions, which gave us very limited time to work on certain goals. I also practiced more crisis counselling, an area of social work that I had previously been vastly unfamiliar with. In my prior practice, many of my clients were more relaxed and settled, having already come to terms with their court orders, probations, and outcomes. Red Deer Remand was unique in that many of the inmates were still processing unwanted and discouraging news; this generally created a whirlwind of negative physical, mental, emotional and spiritual responses. While I found it challenging to practice within this realm at the start of my placement, I became very comfortable and grew into this skill under the guidance of my supervisor. I believe the experiences I had providing this type of counselling have better equipped me for the future therapy that I will be providing to my clients, feeling more confident with this type of practice. In my chosen field of social work, this will be a crucial skill and my practice has been greatly strengthened as a result of experiences at Red Deer Remand.

### **Conclusion**

My time at the Red Deer Remand was deeply significant and will have a lasting impact on my future practice as a social worker. The unique challenges that I experienced encouraged me to grow, develop, and practice new skills. They also reinforced the need for self-care and self-reflective practices. Red Deer Remand fulfilled many of my objectives as a social worker: I worked with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous inmates, saw the impact of legislative changes on inmates and staff first hand, and shadowed other staff members to improve my overall understanding of the correctional system. This fast-paced, crisis-oriented environment helped me better understand the politics of large government organizations and the vast impact of underlying factors that contribute to high incarceration rates. I feel privileged that so many

inmates shared their stories with me. In a micro-level sense, I heard first-hand how withdrawal, mental health challenges, addiction counselling, lack of social services, and prison culture impact individuals seeking recovery. This placement has not only confirmed my passion for working with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit persons, but has further prepared me for being a correctional social worker. My experience at the Red Deer Remand Centre encouraged me to grow and flourish in both professional and personal realms, not only greatly impacting me as a person, but also as a practitioner.

Overall, my experiences with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous clients taught me many things about myself, correctional settings, and systemic inequalities. Although I found many moments challenging, these were significantly out-weighed by the many rewarding experiences that I had. I am incredibly thankful for this placement and to the vast amount of people who supported me in it. As an individual who wants to seek justice for my people, I remain passionate about working with Indigenous persons. This experience strengthened my resolve to practice in a correctional setting and I believe I am now better equipped to advocate for my clients, help develop rehabilitation plans, and provide crisis counselling to those in need. In conclusion, the following quote by Denzel Washington (2008) captures my heart as a correctional social worker who wants to work with Indigenous persons and seek justice for my people:

At the end of the day, it's not about what you have or even what you've accomplished. It's about what you've done with those accomplishments. It's about who you've lifted up, who you've made better. It's about what you've given back. (p. 23)

## APPENDIX A

### Appendix A: Learning Contract

Learning Goals	<b>TASKS, ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES</b> To assist in achieving goal	<b>PERFORMANCE INDICATORS</b> Observable indicators of achievement
<p>1. <b>Demonstrate knowledge of formal and informal community resources.</b></p> <p>Do I demonstrate the ability to build partnerships and rapport with other community agencies in Central Alberta?</p> <p>Do I have sufficient knowledge and awareness about community resources and services to better my practice?</p> <p>Do I know which programs allow Aboriginal offenders to rehabilitate back into society?</p>	<p>I will visit a variety of agencies, speak with the staff, and read brochures to learn about their programs and services.</p> <p>I will build a rapport with professionals who are involved within the court and prison system.</p> <p>I will learn about the agency and understand its mission and mandate to its client.</p>	<p>I will create an eco-map.</p> <p>I will keep a list of community events I have attended.</p> <p>I will identify a variety of social service agencies that work with the Red Deer Remand Centre.</p>

LEARNING GOALS	TASKS, ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES To assist in achieving goal	PERFORMANCE INDICATORS Observable indicators of achievement
<p><b>2. Integrate social work values, ethics and knowledge in accordance with the Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics.</b></p> <p>Do I demonstrate an understanding to the impact that the CASW and ACSW have within my practice?</p> <p>Do I effectively demonstrate these standards in court, counselling, social development programs, meetings and office time?</p> <p>Do I have the ability to reference the CASW if I am facing an ethical dilemma?</p>	<p>I will refresh myself on the CASW Code of Ethics.</p> <p>I will refresh myself on the ACSW Code of Ethics.</p> <p>I will read the First Nations Code of Ethics.</p> <p>I will maintain and respect the confidentiality and self-determination of the clients.</p> <p>I will effectively create positive rapports with clients.</p> <p>I will understand the standards that guide my practice as a social worker.</p> <p>I will engage in active listening with the clients and use empathy to understand their situation.</p>	<p>I will reread the CASW Code of Ethics and refer to if need be.</p> <p>I will sign the confidentiality forms of the agency.</p> <p>I will identify two ethical dilemmas that place within practice (how are they solved).</p> <p>I will read the First Nations Code of Ethics.</p> <p>I will print off the CASW Code of Ethics and keep it at the office.</p> <p>I will print off the ACSW Code of Ethics and keep it at the office.</p>

LEARNING GOALS	TASKS, ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES To assist in achieving goal	PERFORMANCE INDICATORS Observable indicators of achievement
<p><b>3. Provide Clinical Counselling Sessions.</b></p> <p>Am I practicing regular counselling skills with the inmates?</p> <p>Do I demonstrate the professionalism to conduct a successful counselling session?</p> <p>Do I effectively and constructively receive ask for feedback and seek advice from my supervisor (Aaron and Baiju)?</p>	<p>I will talk with my supervisor about my clinical skills.</p> <p>I will seek out supervision or guidance if I am having difficulties in having a successful session.</p> <p>I will regularly seek advice from Aaron and Baiju.</p> <p>I will observe and shadow my field supervisor in clinical sessions.</p> <p>I will be open to receiving feedback from my supervisor and coworkers, with the understanding that it will better me as a social worker.</p>	<p>I will reference theories, models and methods that can be used in counselling.</p> <p>I will create a self-care plan.</p> <p>I will journal the feedback that I receive from my supervisors and coworkers.</p>

LEARNING GOALS	TASKS, ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES To assist in achieving goal	PERFORMANCE INDICATORS Observable indicators of achievement
<p><b>4. Analyze power relations, authority systems and culture of the agency's service delivery system and my ability to work within it.</b></p> <p>Do I understand the structure of the practicum setting and the organizational dynamics?</p> <p>Can I identify the strengths and limitations of the service delivery mandate and appropriately question standards and practices?</p> <p>Do I practice from an Aboriginal worldview?</p>	<p>I will talk with supervisors about the power relationships that impact the agency (decolonizing practice in a colonized system).</p> <p>I will learn about the variety of services and programs that the agency offers.</p> <p>I will learn about the history of the agency, understanding how it came to be.</p>	<p>I will have a list of decolonizing social work skills that I would like to improve on.</p> <p>I will keep a learning journal so that I can think critically about the event when difficult situations occur.</p> <p>I will engage in auto-ethnography each day, writing about my experiences.</p>

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