

ABSTRACT

Purpose. This paper describes the development of a unique prison participatory research project, in which incarcerated women formed a research team, the research activities and the lessons learned. **Methods.** The participatory action research project was conducted in the main short sentence minimum/medium security women's prison located in British Columbia, Canada. An ethnographic multi-method approach was used for data collection and analysis. Quantitative data was collected by surveys and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data was collected from orientation package entries, audio recordings and written archives of research team discussions, forums and debriefings, and presentations. These data and ethnographic observations were transcribed and analyzed using iterative and interpretative qualitative methods and NVivo 7 software. **Results.** Up to 15 women worked each day as prison research team members; a total of 190 women participated at some time in the project between November 2005 and August 2007. Incarcerated women peer researchers developed the research processes including opportunities for them to develop leadership and technical skills. Through these processes, including data collection and analysis, nine health goals emerged. Lessons learned from the research processes were confirmed by the common themes that emerged from thematic analysis of the research activity data. **Conclusions.** Incarceration provides a unique opportunity for engagement of women as expert partners alongside academic researchers and primary care workers in participatory research processes to improve their health.