

Participatory health research: women inside prison develop and evaluate their nutrition and exercise intervention.

{names removed for privacy}

Background. Women in prison throughout the world experience higher rates of mental and physical illness compared with the general population and compared with men in prison. We found no published studies that report on men or women in prison engaging in participatory health research to address their concerns about nutrition and fitness. The objective of this paper is to describe a pilot nutrition and fitness program, which resulted from a unique prison participatory health research project.

Methods. This study was conducted in a minimum/medium security women's prison in a western province. A 6-week pilot program was designed and led by inmates. The program included nutritional and fitness (daily gym circuit classes) components. A pre and post program assessment was done to evaluate the personal fitness component, including a self-administered questionnaire and anthropometric measures. Open-ended questionnaire responses were used to illuminate the findings.

Results. Sixteen incarcerated women completed the program. There was a decrease in weight (mean, 2.80 pound loss; $p=0.25$), BMI (mean, 0.73 loss; $p=0.11$), waist to hip ratio (mean, 0.02 loss; $p=0.06$), and chest (mean, 0.98 inch loss; $p=0.002$) anthropometric measures. There was also an improvement in self-reported health measures: an increase in energy (by 100% of respondents), and sleep (81%), and a decrease in stress (94%). Some women continued their exercise program in the community after their release from prison.

Conclusions. An inmate-designed and led physical fitness program is feasible in a prison setting and resulted in improvement in both anthropometric measures and self-reported health measures. Imprisonment can be viewed as an opportunity to introduce women to beneficial health options as a means to 'healing'.