BRANCHING OUT: EXPLORING THE STORIES OF FEMALE YOUTH IN CUSTODY

by

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ABSTRACT

Female youth in custody are a marginalized population. The majority of research on the topic of risk factors for female youth in custody is quantitative in nature. There has been a lack of opportunity for female youth in custody to tell their own stories in their own words within a research setting. The primary research question was: What are the stories of female youth in custody? This research question was approached through a post-modernist perspective and used a social constructionist epistemology. A narrative methodology was employed. Participants completed a timeline of life events during a pre-interview, and the timeline was used as an elicitation device during the interview. The interviews were transcribed using Mikel Brown and Gilligan’s (1992) Listener’s Guide. The participants were asked to check their transcribed interviews for completeness and accuracy. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) Thematic Analysis Method. Within this method, the findings were coded and seven themes were identified. The themes included: Family Life, Peer Relationships, School Experiences, Substance Use/Mental Health, Childhood Trauma, Misbehaviour/Criminality, and Future Plans. The findings of the research study have provided invaluable information for future prevention efforts for at-risk children. The findings have also helped to inform counselling psychology practice for the population of female youth in custody.
This thesis is an original intellectual product of the author, S. Sammartino. The Behavioural Research Ethics Board approved the research study titled Branching out: Exploring the stories of female youth in custody. The certificate number is H15-03470.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ..................................................................................................................... ii

Preface ....................................................................................................................... iii

Table of Contents ....................................................................................................... iv

Chapter One: Introduction ....................................................................................... 1

  Background ............................................................................................................... 1
  Statement of the Problem ....................................................................................... 3
  Purpose of the Study ............................................................................................... 4

Chapter Two: Literature Review ............................................................................... 5

  Introduction ............................................................................................................. 5
  Procedure for Article Selection ............................................................................. 5
  Women in Prison ..................................................................................................... 6
  Aboriginal Women in Prison .................................................................................. 8
  Youth in Custody: The Youth Criminal Justice Act ............................................. 8
  Youth in Custody .................................................................................................... 9
  Aboriginal Youth in Custody ................................................................................. 11
  Female Youth in Custody ...................................................................................... 13
    Mental Health ..................................................................................................... 16
    Physical/Sexual Health ....................................................................................... 17
    Family and Friends ............................................................................................. 17
    Substance Use ..................................................................................................... 19
  Youth and Trauma ................................................................................................. 19
  Protective Factors ................................................................................................. 22
    Family and Adult Influence ............................................................................... 22
    Peer Influence ..................................................................................................... 22
    Positive School Experiences ............................................................................. 23
  Future Aspirations ................................................................................................. 23
  Resilience ................................................................................................................ 24
  Narrative Research ................................................................................................. 25
  Summary ................................................................................................................ 26
  Rationale and Purpose ......................................................................................... 26

Chapter Three: Methods ......................................................................................... 28

  Ontology and Epistemology .................................................................................. 28
  Procedural Steps .................................................................................................... 29
  Ethical Considerations .......................................................................................... 29
  Subjectivity ............................................................................................................. 32
  Recruitment ............................................................................................................ 33
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Four: Results</th>
<th>..........................</th>
<th>42</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Research Narratives</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah’s Story</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexis’ Story</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah’s Story</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kylie’s Story</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica’s Story</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie’s Story</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren’s Story</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle’s Story</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic Analysis of Results</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Life</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Relationships</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Experiences</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance Use/Mental Health</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood Trauma</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misbehaviour/Criminality</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Plans</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Insights</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Five: Discussion</th>
<th>..........................</th>
<th>98</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Life</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Relationships</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Experiences</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health/Substance Use</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood Trauma</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Plans</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Research</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| References | .................................................... | 109 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendices</th>
<th>....................................................</th>
<th>117</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A: Letter of Permission from BYCS</td>
<td>....................................................</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B: Advertisement to Recruit Participants .................................................................118
C: Informed Assent Form ..........................................................................................119
D: Timeline Diagrams ...............................................................................................127
E: Interview Script ....................................................................................................129
INTRODUCTION

Background

My specific research interest is in the female population of youth in custody. I have developed this area of interest through my diverse array of academic, work and volunteer experiences, especially my work for the Elizabeth Fry Society. The Elizabeth Fry Society is a non-profit organization which focuses on support services for vulnerable populations, including women, girls and children at risk of involvement, involved in or affected by the justice system. I am currently employed at a Youth Custody Center in Western Canada as the Youth Advocate for the female residents. The experience of working at a youth custody center has exposed me to aspects of the life stories of numerous female residents, which include experiences before they became involved in the justice system. Statistics Canada (2012) reported that in 2010, nearly 153,000 youth were accused of committing a crime and in 2009, females accounted for approximately one-quarter of youth accused by police of having committed a Criminal Code offence. An exploration of the stories of female youth in custody would add to the knowledge base of risk factors for at-risk female youth. As more knowledge is uncovered regarding past life events that have been important to female youth in custody, additional knowledge will be gained to better inform future prevention efforts for at-risk children. Furthermore, sharing the stories of female youth in custody with professional helpers will provide important knowledge for those working with this population.

Research has shown that there are often commonalities between the life histories of youth who reside in custody. Chesney-Lind and Shelden (1998) outlined a variety of risk factors that impact youth involvement in the juvenile justice system. These risk factors
include poverty, living in violent communities, substance abuse, and academic failure.

Additional risk factors that female youth may experience include sexual abuse, negative self-esteem, and overwhelming responsibilities for the care of others. Corrado, Odgers, and Cohen (2000) conducted a study with 67 female youth in custody in Vancouver, British Columbia. The female youth took part in two hour semi-structured interviews, where they answered questions about numerous topics including their past social and criminal histories. Their histories included severe family dysfunction, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, and early-onset drug use. Borduin and Ronis (2012) conducted an experimental study with three groups of female youth: violent juvenile offenders, nonviolent juvenile offenders, and non-delinquent youth. The results were that both violent juvenile offenders and nonviolent juvenile offenders had increased behaviour problems, increased difficulty with familial and peer relationships, and less academic success than the non-delinquent youth did. Demuth and Brown (2004) stated that evidence suggests there is a higher risk for childhood delinquency if the child comes from a single-parent home, especially a single father, compared to married parents. They suggest possible reasons for this finding including: less supervision, monitoring, involvement, and potential closeness, possibly due to work and other commitments compared to homes with two caregivers. Indeed, in my own discussions with female youth in custody, many of these risk factors have been identified as having a significant impact on their lives prior to residing in custody.

Another pattern I have observed while working at the custody center is the prevalence of female youth who have been placed in alternative living situations to promote their welfare. The Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth reported that children placed in foster care may be separated from their siblings, experience multiple moves between homes,
experience less academic success, may have difficulty developing an emotional connection with their foster parent(s), and may develop mental health issues (as cited in McCormick et al., 2014). The Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy interviewed 250 youths in open custody and open detention facilities in Ontario, and out of the 240 youth who answered the question about previous welfare history, 48% said they had a previous history of child welfare (Statistics Canada, 2012). Further, Artz, Blais and Nicholson found that only one in seven girls in custody interviewed had lived at home throughout her childhood on a consistent basis. The remaining female youth in the study experienced multiple caregivers and multiple moves. All seven of the female youth in the study reported exposure to familial violence, and three out of seven of the female youth reported prior sexual abuse (as cited in Chesney-Lind, Artz, & Nicholson, 2002).

The Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth reported that the high school graduation rate for children in the foster care system is less than fifty percent, and as adults they are more likely to experience homelessness, live in poverty, experience mental health issues and become involved in the criminal justice system (as cited in McCormick et al., 2014). Residential instability is a key factor that impacts the lives of youth. I am interested in the role that different risk factors play in the lives of female youth in custody.

**Statement of the Problem**

Research on female youth in custody is present in the literature; however, there is a lack of research dedicated to understanding the delinquent behaviour and symptoms of conduct disorder in female youth (Podgurski, Lyons, Kisiel, & Griffin, 2014). The majority of research on female youth in custody is quantitative in nature, which provides important information for prevention efforts and the creation of policy. However, throughout the
research process I have found a lack of the voice of female youth in custody within the literature.

**Purpose of the Study**

The presence of risk factors within the childhood experiences of female youth can be linked to their subsequent incarceration, which has been demonstrated repeatedly throughout the literature. The value of listening to stories of personal importance directly from the girls is invaluable. Once we can learn more about what life events were pivotal to them, we will have additional knowledge to better inform future prevention efforts for at-risk children. Furthermore, the stories of female youth in custody will also provide additional knowledge for professional helpers working with this population.

I intended to address this problem within counselling psychology by asking the question, *‘What are the life stories of female youth in custody?’* With this as my guiding question, I was able to explore and co-construct with female youth in custody an understanding of important childhood experiences that have impacted their lives today.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Within the exploration of the stories of female youth in custody, it is important to consider the overall context of the Canadian justice system. Therefore, the literature review will largely focus on Canadian literature. The main sections of the literature review will include: women in prison, youth in custody, female youth in custody, protective factors for at-risk youth, future aspirations, and narrative research. Identified risk factors for these populations will be the main focus of the literature review. Furthermore, categories of risk factors will be divided into distinct sections in the female youth in custody section. The literature review will also include some literature from the United States and Australia to compliment the Canadian focus.

Procedure for Article Selection

Potential research articles were selected by searching the University of British Columbia library search engine. The search keywords included women in prison, youth in custody, female youth in custody, at-risk youth, and Aboriginal youth. Over time, the terms expanded to include youth and addictions and youth and trauma. The focus was on Canadian literature during this search. Furthermore, articles that contained research studies conducted in youth custody centers in British Columbia were especially favoured. A small number of American and Australian studies were also included to compliment the Canadian studies obtained.

The majority of the studies were quantitative. Qualitative studies about youth in custody were difficult to find. Additionally, studies using a narrative method in the prison context were very sparse. The article selection criteria were mainly limited to include only
studies from the year 2000 onwards, with the exception of one study that was historical in nature. Books were consulted in this thesis, but journal articles were used as the primary resources for this review.

**Women in Prison**

According to Statistics Canada, in 2009 approximately 233,000 females (both adult and youth) were accused of committing a crime in Canada compared to 776,000 adult and adolescent males (as cited in Hotton Mahony, 2011). The types of offenses that adult females and female youth were most likely to have involvement in were: property offenses, crimes against the person, and administration of justice offenses. The high rates of these offenses have remained the same over the last five years (as cited in Hotton Mahony).

Between 1999-2000 and 2008-2009, the proportion and number of adult females admitted to both provincial and federal Canadian custody has increased. According to Hotton Mahony (2011), a 2008-2009 snapshot of women in both federal and provincial custody showed that women in custody are younger, are less likely to be single, are less likely to have graduated from high school, and have a higher likelihood of being unemployed than women in the Canadian population in general. When women enter custody, they are assessed for rehabilitative purposes. Almost all of the adult females in custody were identified as having multiple needs. The areas of need most commonly identified in provincial custody were: personal/emotional problems, substance abuse, employment problems, and community functioning problems (Hotton Mahony). The identified areas of need of women in prison are often related to their childhood and adolescent experiences.

Buchanan et al. (2011) conducted a participatory action research study in a provincial minimum-medium security prison in a Western Canadian province. The objectives of the
study were to gain an understanding of the women’s perspectives on their drug use, why they kept using, the ramifications of using drugs, and their own suggestions for how they could change course. The data was collected through a ‘drug of choice’ survey and qualitative open-ended interview questions regarding the women’s drug and alcohol use. The women’s narratives contained childhood and adolescent experiences that provided information about risk factors for female youth in custody. For example, Buchanan et al. reported that 69% of respondents first used drugs between the ages of 11-20. For many women in the study, drug use began through involvement in social situations when they were adolescents and continued into young adulthood. Many of the women used drugs to numb themselves from the experience of grief. The vast majority of women wrote that using drugs helped take away sad childhood memories and numb emotional pain by suppressing their emotions. Furthermore, a lifestyle involving drug use necessitated a way to continue obtaining drugs, and this often led to quitting school and leading a criminal lifestyle. Family influence was found to often be an initial catalyst for drug and alcohol use among women in prison, while family support was also an important motivation and source of support for women aiming to stop using substances (Buchanan et al.). Family instability and substance use during adolescence are important aspects of these women’s narratives. Furthermore, family instability and substance youth are also both documented risk factors for female youth in custody (Leve, Chamberlain, & Kim, 2015).

Hotton Mahony (2011) emphasized that the involvement of women in the criminal justice system has been largely as the victims of crime and not as perpetrators. She highlighted the importance of this point by stating that females encompass approximately half of violent crime victims, and at the same time females represent a minority of criminal
Aboriginal Women in Prison

There is an overrepresentation of Aboriginal individuals in the Canadian criminal justice system compared to the general population. Hotton Mahony (2011) stated that the number of Aboriginal women in Canadian prisons has increased over time. In 2008-2009, 35% of adult females in custody identified as Aboriginal compared to 2006 Census data that reported Aboriginal women and men make up 3% of the adult population in Canada (Hotton Mahony, 2011).

A larger proportion of Aboriginal women compared to non-Aboriginal women were evaluated as having multiple rehabilitative needs when entering custody. These included marital and family relationships, substance abuse, social interaction, and employment (Hotton Mahony, 2011). Furthermore, an evaluation of women’s rehabilitative needs in federal custody resulted in 66% of Aboriginal women having five or more needs compared to 38% of non-Aboriginal women (Hotton Mahony, 2011).

Youth in Custody: The Youth Criminal Justice Act

The law that governs the youth justice system in Canada is called the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) (Youth Criminal Justice Act, 2015). The YCJA was implemented in 2003, and underwent amendments by the Canadian Parliament in 2012. The YCJA jurisdiction is for youth between the ages of 12 and 18 years old who have allegedly committed criminal offenses, and sentences in custody are given to youth who are 14 or older. Serious delinquency for children under the age of 12 years old is placed under the legal jurisdiction of children and family welfare laws and ministries, as well as government and non-governmental agencies (Corrado, Kuehn, & Margaritescu, 2014).
The purpose of the YCJA was to create a more effective and fair youth criminal justice system in Canada, which had previously been under the legislation of the Young Offenders Act (YOA) (Youth Criminal Justice Act, 2015). The YCJA aims to decrease the incarceration rates for less serious offenses, improve the fairness in sentencing, improve the reintegration of youth in custody back into their communities, and better address the needs of victims (Youth Criminal Justice Act).

Canada possessed one of the highest youth incarceration rates in the Western world prior to the implementation of the YCJA. The number of youth charged with offenses has decreased since the YCJA came into effect. Instead of laying charges, informal methods have been used to address concerns with youth (Youth Criminal Justice Act, 2015). Furthermore, custody sentences under the YCJA are reserved mainly for serious repeat offenders and for youth who commit offenses involving violence. The numbers of youth in custody in Canada have decreased by approximately 50% between 2002-03 and 2008-09 (Youth Criminal Justice Act). Despite the decrease in numbers of youth in custody, the needs of the youth are salient. The YCJA reserves incarceration for the most serious and violent youth cases; therefore, the current rates of conduct disorder among youth in custody are higher than in the past (Gretton & Clift, 2011).

**Youth in Custody**

Statistics Canada (2012) reported that 153,000 youth were accused of committing a crime in 2010. According to Smith (2013), in the fiscal year 2004/2005 the average number of youth in custody in British Columbia each day was 153. In 2012/2013 the average number of youth in custody in British Columbia each day was 85. This decrease is due in part to the implementation of the YCJA because only youth who have committed the most
serious offenses or who have the most serious offense histories are sentenced to custody (Smith, 2013). Despite the recent decrease of youth in custody, the literature concerning youth in custody in British Columbia is still important to consider.

The following two studies provide important background information for the proposed research study. Smith’s (2013) report and Gretton and Clift’s (2011) research study both focus on British Columbia’s youth in custody population. Both Smith (2013) and Gretton and Clift (2011) found that many youth in custody have a diagnosed learning disability or mental illness, have issues with substance abuse, and have experienced major trauma. Prior to entering custody, many youth deal with family criminal involvement, unstable living conditions, and school disengagement (Smith, 2013; Gretton & Clift, 2011). The details of these two studies are provided below.

The McCreary Centre Society conducted research with 114 youth in custody in British Columbia between August 2012 and January 2013 (Smith, 2013). This is the third time the McCreary Centre Society has conducted research with the youth in custody population. Youth from the Victoria, Burnaby and Prince George custody centers in British Columbia took part in the research study. The sample was 81% male and 19% female, and the majority of the youth were between the ages of 16 to 18. The majority of youth identified as Aboriginal and/or European. The youth completed surveys in groups of 4-8 people in a time frame of 30-60 minutes. The results of this research are compared with the 2008 BC Adolescent Health Survey results so that youth in custody can be compared to peers of the same age in mainstream schools across British Columbia (Smith). One important limitation of this research is the low number of female participants (19), so gender differences need to be noted with caution. However, the gender differences will be noted
through the literature review because of the relevance to the proposed study and the proposed population.

Gretton and Clift (2011) aimed to identify the prevalence of mental disorders and mental health needs among both male and female youth in custody in British Columbia, Canada. The sample consisted of 140 male youth in custody and 65 female youth in custody from the three youth custody centers in British Columbia, Canada. Data collection was based on self-report data from the youth and file information. The results were that almost all of the youth met the criteria for one mental disorder (91.9% of males and 100% of females). Gretton and Clift (2011) provide a comprehensive, recent, and relevant picture of the mental health needs of youth in custody in British Columbia.

**Aboriginal Youth in Custody**

There is an overrepresentation of Aboriginal youth in custody compared to the general Canadian youth population (Gretton & Clift, 2011; Smith, 2013). In the year 2013/2014, nine jurisdictions reported their admission rates and Aboriginal youth consisted of 41% of all admissions of youth (Youth Correctional Statistics, 2014). Despite the decrease in admission to youth custody since the implementation of the YCJA in 2003, the decrease has been greater for non-Aboriginal youth than for Aboriginal youth (Hotton Mahony, 2011). Furthermore, the over-representation of Aboriginal youth in custody is more pronounced among female youth than male youth. Aboriginal females made up 53% of all female youth admissions to the justice system, while Aboriginal males made up 38% of all male youth admissions to the justice system (Youth Correctional Statistics, 2014). La Prairie (2002) aimed to explore the impact of specific large Canadian cities on the overrepresentation of Aboriginal individuals in the criminal justice system. She used the
Statistics Canada Aboriginal People’s Survey as data. In the nine large Canadian cities La Prairie studied, the Aboriginal populations were disadvantaged in general compared to the non-Aboriginal populations. La Prairie found great variance between the degrees of disadvantage. She also found a direct significant relationship between the degree of disadvantage and the level of over-representation in the criminal justice system in that region.

Corrado, Kuehn, and Margaritescu (2014) examined the YCJA in order to explore whether this initiative has counteracted the over-representation of Aboriginal youth in custody in Canada. They also explored whether the risk factors and offense profiles of Aboriginal youth in custody differ from Caucasian youth in custody. The sample consisted of 404 youth in custody, which was split into one group of 154 Aboriginal youth and one group of 250 Caucasian youth. The sample was made up of 21.5% female youth and 78.5% male youth, and the mean age of the group sample was 16. The method used in this research study was a series of semi-structured interviews, and the results of the study were that the Aboriginal youth scored significantly higher on the family profile index than Caucasian youth (one or more family members had problems with substance abuse, abuse problems, mental health issues, and criminal records). Furthermore, Aboriginal youth in custody were more likely to have been in foster care and to have been placed in foster care earlier than Caucasian youth in custody. Aboriginal youth in custody were significantly more likely than Caucasian youth in custody to report that at least one of their biological parents had a criminal record, and they were also significantly more likely to report that a biological parent had been a victim of abuse compared to the Caucasian youth in custody group (Corrado et al., 2014). Importantly, even after the implementation of the YCJA in 2003, incarcerated
Aboriginal youth continue to be over-represented in youth custody. Corrado et al. hypothesized one reason for this could be that while the risk factors for the groups were the same, specific risk factors such as substance abuse and lack of educational attainment were more frequent for Aboriginal youth in custody than for non-Aboriginal youth in custody.

**Female Youth in Custody**

Female youth in custody are a marginalized population. The crime rate of female youth is triple that of adult women on average (Statistics Canada, 2012). In 2009, one-quarter of youth accused by police of having committed a Criminal Code offence were female (Statistics Canada). Hotton Mahony (2011) reported that females account for 20% of the youth admitted to custody centers in British Columbia. In British Columbia (as well as Ontario, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador), there was a greater likelihood that female youth in custody were serving time for “other” Criminal Code and federal offenses (54%) than for violent offenses or property offenses, at 27% and 20% respectively (Hotton Mahony).

Female youth spend shorter amounts of time in custody than male youth on average (Youth Correctional Statistics, 2014). For example, 51% of female youth sentenced to custody served one month or less compared to 41% of males. Furthermore, 11% of male youth spend six months or more in custody compared to 6% of female youth (Youth Correctional Statistics). Corrado et al. (2000) explored the contrast between the media’s interpretation of young female offenders as violent and dangerous, and the author’s contention is that the majority of offenses that female youth are serving time for are administrative in nature. The authors assert that female youth are placed in custody primarily for their own safety and not for the safety of society. The authors delved into the
offending patterns of female youth, their social histories, and the response of the criminal justice system to the female youth offenders. Sixty-seven female youth in custody were interviewed between April 1998 and October 1999 from a custody center in Vancouver, British Columbia. The female youth took part in semi-structured interviews lasting approximately two hours. They answered questions regarding their current custody situations as well as past social and criminal histories. The results of the study emphasized that the majority of the female youth’s criminal history offenses were minor in nature. On average, females were spending more time in custody for administrative offenses than for substantive offenses. The results also highlighted distinct needs/risk factors that contributed to the substantive time the female youth spend in custody for relatively minor offenses. These multi-problem compositions included histories of severe family dysfunction, which included physical abuse, sexual abuse, and early-onset drug use (Corrado et al., 2000).

Research by Borduin and Ronis (2012) looked at three aspects of three groups of female youth. They examined individual functioning, interpersonal relations, and academic performance. The sample of 142 female youth was divided into three groups that were demographically similar. The three groups consisted of violent juvenile offenders, nonviolent juvenile offenders, and non-delinquent youth. The methods were parent and youth self-report, behaviour rating inventories, and a video-recorded interaction task. The results of the study were that both violent juvenile offenders and nonviolent juvenile offenders had more behavior problems, more difficulties in family and peer relationships, and a lower academic performance than the non-delinquent youth did. There were no significant differences between the two juvenile offender groups, which suggests that regardless of the type of crime committed the female youth retain the same risk factors in the
areas of individual and interpersonal functioning.

Gretton and Clift (2011) found that female youth in custody in British Columbia, Canada had significantly higher odds than males of being identified as presenting with: substance abuse/dependence disorders, symptoms of depression and anxiety, current suicide ideation, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, sexual abuse, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, and multiple mental disorder diagnoses. Smith (2013) also found that female youth in custody were more likely than male youth in custody to have two or more mental health diagnoses. These two pivotal studies both found that female youth in custody often report higher rates of abuse, trauma, victimization, and substance use than male youth in custody (Smith, 2013; Gretton & Clift, 2011).

Leve, Chamberlain, and Kim (2015) compiled a review of American literature that focused on predictors of juvenile justice involvement for female youth. Studies with two distinct types of samples were eligible for this review. The first type of study included female youth involved in the juvenile justice system who had retrospective records to inform about risk and protective factors earlier in life. The second type of study focused on cases of high-risk girls for which prospective data existed linking risk and protective factors early in life with later outcomes that involved delinquency. Leve et al. (2015) compiled the risk and protective factors into three main categories: Family Characteristics, Contextual Factors, and Individual Characteristics. A comparison was made between the rates of risk factors for girls versus boys. The results showed that the rates of risk factors was largely parallel; however, certain risk factors were found to differ in terms of rate of exposure and weight of association (Leve et al. 2015). Specific studies from this review will be discussed in the next four subsections.
The remainder of the female youth in custody section in this literature review will focus on specific categories of risk factors that have likely impacted the lives of female youth in custody. This section will be organized into four sub-sections: Mental Health, Physical/Sexual Health, Family and Friends, and Substance Use.

**Mental Health**

A significant amount of research suggests that mental health disorders are prevalent among female youth in custody (Espelage et al., 2003; Gretton & Clift, 2011; Smith, 2013). Gretton and Clift (2011) reported high rates of mental disorders among both male and female youth in custody. Almost all youth (92% of males and 100% of females) met the criteria for at least one mental disorder. Furthermore, Gretton and Clift reported that female youth in custody had significantly higher chances than male youth in custody of presenting with the following: substance abuse/dependence disorders, current suicide ideation, sexual abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety symptoms, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and multiple mental disorders diagnoses. Espelage et al. (2003) used the MMPI to compare the psychiatric profiles of males and female juvenile offenders in California and determined that females had more severe internalizing and externalizing profiles than males did. Smith (2013) reported that female youth in custody were more likely than male youth in custody to have an emotional or mental health condition. Females were also more likely than males to have multiple conditions. Smith stated that 52% of females reported a diagnosis of depression compared to 19% of males. Furthermore, Smith found that the female youth in custody were more likely to have self-harmed six or more times than the male youth in custody. Importantly, Johansson and Kempf-Leonard (2009) reported that the presence of mental health problems increased the chances of violent re-offending in female youth by 2.2
times in relation to female youth in custody who do not have mental health concerns.

**Physical/Sexual Health**

Engagement in risky sexual behaviour is prevalent among female youth in custody (Cosby et al., 2004; Kann et al., 2013; Lederman et al., 2004; Leve et al., 2015; Smith, 2013; Teplin et al., 2003). Teplin et al. (2003) stated that female youth in custody were more likely than male youth in custody to have unprotected sex, to engage in sex with high-risk partners, and to trade sex for money. Lederman et al. (2004) reported that 76% of female youth in custody stated they were sexually active, and on average their first sexual experience occurred before the age of 14 years old. Smith (2013) stated that more than half of the female youth in custody who were surveyed reported being physically abused by a romantic partner. Crosby et al. (2004) conducted a study with female youth in custody that indicated the average number of sexual partners the participants had in their life was 8.8. Furthermore, this study suggested a high rate of sexually transmitted infections among the female youth, with 20% testing positive in the study. In comparison, Kann et al. (2013) reported that among a sample of population-based high schools, 48% reported having had sexual intercourse, and 13% reported having four or more partners.

In regards to physical health, Leve et al. (2015) reported that numerous studies suggest that female youth in custody are likely to have physical health conditions. These include obesity and higher likelihood of injuries, perhaps due in part to their family context.

**Family and Friends**

Research suggests that parent criminality increases the likelihood of their daughters’ involvement with the juvenile justice system (Lederman et al., 2004; Leve et al., 2015). Lederman et al. (2004) found that 61% of their female youth in custody sample had a parent
or close family member involved in the criminal justice system. Furthermore, many studies show that a key factor associated with girls’ involvement with the juvenile justice system is caregiver transitions (Leve et al., 2015). Leve et al. reported that girls involved in the juvenile justice system have higher rates of involvement with the foster care system than the general population.

Multiple studies have found that harsh parenting and punishment has been associated with multiple mental health problems (Hipwell et al., 2008; Leve et al., 2015; Loeber et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2009). Williams and Steinberg (2011) found that harsh parenting and punishment was associated with delinquency in samples of female youth in custody. Johansson and Kempf-Leonard (2009) found that girls run away more often than boys, which is due in large part to maltreatment by caregivers. Furthermore, Smith (2013) reported that female youth in custody were three times more likely than male youth in custody to have been kicked out of their homes at least three times. In summary, the risk factors of maltreatment, placement changes, and runaway behaviour often occur together. This results in caregiver transitions and placement instability which are important risk factors for female youth’s involvement in the juvenile justice system (Leve et al., 2015).

Peer relationships are one of the most widely studied areas associated with adolescent delinquent behaviour, and two key aspects of peer relationships are choice of friends and how encouraging friends are towards delinquent behaviour (Leve et al., 2015). Soloman (2006) reported that females involved in the juvenile justice system were more likely to report that males were their closest friends compared to a control group. Furthermore, multiple studies have pointed to the prevalence of female youth in custody being romantically involved with older boys (Cauffman, Farruggia, & Goldweber, 2008; Lederman
et al. 2004; Leve et al., 2015). There is some uncertainty regarding whether it is the older age of the boys that leads to this association, or the extent to which the boys encourage the girls to engage in delinquent behaviour.

Substance Use

One of the most common problems among female youth in custody is the use of substances such as alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit drugs (Gretton & Clift, 2011; Leve et al., 2015; Smith, 2013; Teplin et al., 2005). Smith (2013) reported that female youth in custody were more likely than their male counterparts to have drunk alcohol every day prior to entering custody. Gretton and Clift (2011) reported that 100% of female youth presented with a substance abuse/dependence disorder compared to 85% of male youth. Teplin et al. (2005) reported that approximately 50% of a sample of female youth in custody in Illinois was engaged in substance abuse when arrested, and 22% of the girls in the sample were using two or more substances. The most common substance use disorders were with alcohol (25%) and marijuana (41%). It is important to note that comorbidity with mental health problems may be increased for girls who have problems with substance use (Leve et al., 2015).

Youth and Trauma

The information in this section will integrate general information about trauma, youth in custody and trauma, female youth in custody and trauma, and women in prison and trauma.

The effects of trauma early in life can be devastating. Coates (2010) stated that trauma in childhood can have a large impact on the cognitive, emotional, behavioural, social, and physical functioning of children and this impact can continue into adolescence and
adulthood. The age at which children experience trauma may also impact their future development. Marsiglio, Chronister, Gibson, and Leve (2014) analyzed the relationship between traumatic events and delinquency for girls involved in the juvenile justice system. The sample consisted of 166 female youth, and the results differed by age. A prospective predictive relationship was found between previous trauma event exposure and future delinquency for pre-high school entry girls, while the results for female youth in high school suggested that previous trauma experiences were predictive of future trauma experiences, but not predictive of future delinquency.

Research shows that many youth in custody have experienced trauma in their childhoods (Borduin & Ronis, 2012; Gretton & Clift, 2011; Smith, 2013). There is a well-established association between child abuse and neglect and mental health problems in adulthood (Coates, 2010). Health concerns that are sometimes related to traumatic childhood experiences include: anxiety disorders, depression, physical health problems, addictions, eating disorders, personality disorders, sexual disorders, and suicidal behaviour (Coates).

Multiple studies show that youth in custody are often subjected to physical/emotional abuse (Borduin & Ronis, 2012; Gretton & Clift, 2011; Smith, 2013). Gretton and Clift (2011) reported that 54% of female youth in custody were exposed to physical abuse at some points in their lives. Smith (2013) reported that 63% of youth in custody in British Columbia reported that they were a victim of physical abuse or had been mistreated at some point in their lives. Herrera and McCloskey (2001) found that girls who were exposed to interparental violence or child abuse were more than seven times as likely as the control group to engage in violence that lead to involvement with juvenile justice. The control group was matched on age, and had not been exposed to familial violence. Borduin and Ronis
(2012) stated that 72% of female violent offenders and 57% of female non-violent offenders had documented histories of physical or sexual abuse by caregivers (determined through court records). Furthermore, the authors stated that these percentages are likely low because many instances of abuse go unreported.

Youth in custody are often victims of childhood sexual abuse (Gretton & Clift, 2011; Smith, 2013; Zlotnick, 1997). Gretton and Clift (2011) reported that 42% of their sample of female youth in custody had been victims of sexual abuse. Smith reported that 41% of youth surveyed reported past sexual abuse, which was four times higher than the comparison group in mainstream school. Furthermore, females were more than twice as likely than males to report sexual abuse. The perpetrators were identified as being strangers, parents, partners, or friends/acquaintances. Zlotnick (1997) acknowledged that childhood sexual abuse is a significant factor in the development of numerous psychological problems for incarcerated women, including anxiety and relational problems, substance use, and posttraumatic stress. Smith reported that 12% of youth in custody reported they had traded sex for shelter, money, or drugs in the previous year before entering custody.

Additionally, research has shown that young female offenders are more likely than young male offenders to have been victims of physical and/or sexual abuse (Cauffman, Feldman, Waterman, & Steiner, 1998; Moore, Gaskin, & Indig, 2013; Zahn et al., 2010 as cited in Leve et al. 2015). Studies consistently show that rates of physical and sexual abuse are 3.5 - 10 times higher for females involved in the juvenile justice system than for males (Johansson & Kempf-Leonard, 2009; Leve and Chamberlain 2005a as cited in Leve et al., 2015). Also, numerous studies indicate that female young offenders who have been victims of sexual abuse tend to have more extreme delinquency outcomes than those female youth
who have not experienced sexual abuse (Goodkind, Ng, & Sarri, 2006; Wareham and Dembo, 2007).

It is difficult to ascertain whether stories about trauma will be shared within the female youth participants’ personal narratives. In Buchanan et al.’s (2011) study, one participant stated: “It takes a lot of work to recognize your trauma. We are accustomed to changing our story as a form of coping.” (p. 91).

**Protective Factors**

Protective factors identified by at-risk youth and youth in custody fall under three broad themes: family and adult influence, peer influence, and positive school experiences.

**Family and Adult Influence**

Leve et al. (2015) identified parental warmth as a protective factor for at-risk female youth. Studies have shown that higher levels of maternal warmth resulted in less disruptive behaviour and conduct problems in at-risk female adolescents (Hipwell et al., 2008; van der Molen, Hipwell, Vermeien, & Loeber, 2001). In Smith’s (2013) survey, male youth in custody who reported having three or more caring adults in their lives were almost twice as likely to rate their mental health as good or excellent compared to male youth in custody who had two or fewer caring adults in their lives. The presence of caring adults in one’s life appears to make a marked difference in childhood outcomes.

**Peer Influence**

Prosocial peer relationships can also serve as a protective factor for at-risk youth (Kim & Leve, 2011; Leve et al., 2015; Smith, 2013; Taussig, 2002). Taussig reported that social support among preadolescent girls and boys in foster care was linked to a decreased likelihood of risk behaviour six years in the future. Kim and Leve reported that prosocial
peer relationships among girls in foster care entering middle school was associated with a decrease in internalizing and externalizing problems later on in life. Youth in custody reported that participation in an alternative social group would help them keep from re-offending in the future (Smith, 2013).

**Positive School Experiences**

Positive school experiences can also serve as a protective factor for at-risk youth (Leve et al., 2015; Smith, 2013; Zingraff, Leiter, Johnson, & Meyers, 1994). Zingraff et al. reported that the following factors were associated with decreased delinquent behaviour for a sample of at-risk children: low rates of school behaviour problems, good attendance, and good grades. Youth in custody reported that better or more school programs in custody and job training or job opportunities would help prevent re-offending in the future (Smith, 2013). Youth in custody also identified a sense of competence and community connectedness as protective factors (Smith).

**Future Aspirations**

Future aspirations are an important topic to explore because they help provide a more balanced view of youth in custody. Smith (2013) reported that over half of the youth who completed her survey stated they had educational plans for after high school. When youth respondents were asked where they saw themselves in five years time, the majority of youth reported foreseeing a positive future. A positive future included aspirations such as having a job and having their own home. More than a third of the respondents saw themselves in school or with a family (Smith). Wagland and Blanch (2013) aimed to explore the extent to which youth in custody rated different life goals as important and likely to happen, possessed strategies to achieve their goals, and could identify barriers that may hinder the achievement
of their goals. A sample of 107 youth in custody from Juvenile Justice Centers in Australia was interviewed regarding their life goals. The results of the study indicated that the majority of the youth rated specific life goals as ‘very important’ or ‘quite important’, such as avoiding trouble with the police and having a well-paying job. The participants also believed these goals were likely to be achieved. The most well-mentioned strategies for having a job that pays well were to obtain the necessary educational qualifications, and to start with a junior position and work their way up. Barriers that were commonly reported included engagement with antisocial peers, and drug and alcohol use. The most commonly identified strategies for avoiding getting in trouble with the police were obeying the laws and not giving in to peer pressure (Wagland & Blanch). Overall, most youth in the study stated that specific life goals were important to them and they could name both strategies and barriers that would effect the likelihood of achieving their goals.

**Resilience**

Resilience refers to the ability of individuals to thrive despite high levels of adversity (Ungar, 2015). Resilience is a human capacity that can be strengthened in all people, despite genetic and biological components that may also exist (Taket, Nolan, & Stagnitti, 2014). Previous research shows that resilience is promoted by protective factors and inhibited by risk factors (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Risk factors are situations that increase the chances of a poor outcome, while protective factors can help change responses to adverse events so that negative outcomes can potentially be avoided (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Protective factors that contribute to resilience in children include: positive family supports, community supports, and individual characteristics such as personality, temperament, a positive self-concept, and internal

**Narrative Research**

The narrative research methods focus on the stories of individuals. When participants tell their story, this provides them with the opportunity to make sense of past life events (Riessman, 2008). Mahoney and Daniel (2006) proposed that narrative therapy with incarcerated women is an effective method to inspire self-compassion. The authors explain that language in narrative therapy can become a source of empowerment and can help increase women’s self-esteem. Language can be used either to describe a life event or to detail a future plan for change (Mahoney & Daniel). Furthermore, attaining a sense of personal power is beneficial for women who have experienced abuse. Women who have experienced abuse may feel negative emotions such as shame and hopelessness, and they may try to numb these feelings through substance use. Narrative approaches provide women with an avenue to share their experiences with others, which could be a positive alternative option to internalizing negative emotions (Mahoney & Daniel).

There is a lack of research on youth in custody using a narrative method. Sparse literature was available which demonstrated the use of a narrative method with women in prison and with young adult males in prison. Enck and McDaniel (2014) presented a narrative analysis of three oral history interviews conducted with female inmates in a women’s education and empowerment program in Texas. The authors’ objective was to explore the lived narratives of these women in terms of cultural expectations of race, class, and gender. The study also aimed to explore the re-narratization of the women’s stories to help create improved futures. Corey’s (1996) historical article examined young males in prison through a narrative methodology. Corey aimed to analyze the complexity of identity
with this group of individuals through a communication education course in performing personal narratives. Buchanan’s (2011) participatory action research study also used a narrative method that invited the fellow action researchers to share their stories. In summary, there is a lack of research using narrative methods with incarcerated individuals.

**Summary**

In conclusion, there is a limited amount of research on female youth in custody in Canada. The majority of this research focuses on facts and statistics of the female youth’s lives thus far, which provides important information for policy creation and general knowledge. However, through my research I have found a lack of focus on the voice of the female youth. Their stories are not presented in their own words. It is important for this marginalized population to have an opportunity to tell their story in their own words.

I chose to address this gap in the research. A narrative methodology is appropriate for learning about the life stories of female youth in custody. Narrative methods allow space for marginalized groups to potentially experience agency and empowerment. The employment of a narrative methodology could yield further important insights into the lives of female youth in custody.

**Rationale and Purpose**

The presence of risk factors within the childhood experiences of female youth can be linked to their subsequent incarceration, which has been demonstrated repeatedly throughout the literature. The value of listening to stories of personal importance directly from the girls is invaluable. Once we can learn more about what life events were pivotal to them, we will have additional knowledge to better inform future prevention efforts for at-risk children. Furthermore, the stories of female youth in custody will also provide additional knowledge
for professional helpers working with this population.

I intended to address this problem within counselling psychology by asking the question, “What are the life stories of female youth in custody?” With this as my guiding question, I was able to explore and co-construct with female youth in custody an understanding of important childhood experiences that have impacted their lives today.
METHODS

Ontology and Epistemology

In order to work effectively within my role as researcher, it is critical to identify my ontological assumptions (the nature of reality) and my epistemological orientation (how we come to knowledge). I approach research from a postmodernist perspective, which rejects the idea that there can be one ultimate truth (Burr, 2003). Within the postmodernist perspective, the world cannot be “understood in terms of grand theories or metanarratives” (Burr, 2003, p. 9). Instead, postmodernism emphasizes the co-existence of a variety of context-dependent ways of understanding life.

Within the ontological framework of a postmodernism, my beliefs connect with the social constructionist epistemology. The following tenets encompass social constructionism: a critical stance towards knowledge assumptions, historical and cultural specificity, the belief that social processes sustain knowledge, and the belief that social action and knowledge go together (Burr, 2003). Importantly, there cannot be any objective facts within social constructionism. Knowledge is created from looking at the world from different perspectives. Within the epistemological stance of social constructionism, I plan to utilize the narrative research method.

Narrative research refers to any study that analyzes narrative materials (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The term ‘narrative’ means story, and the human experience is essentially a storied one (Kohler Riessman, 2008). Lieblich et al. stated that “[stories] provide coherence and continuity to one’s experience and have a central role in our communication with others” (p. 7). Identity is constructed through storytelling, and narratives are purposeful, functional, and strategic (Kohler Riessman). Additionally, Kohler
Riessman stated that telling stories about difficult life events allows space for connection with others and a search for meaning through containing emotions and creating order. Lieblich et al. emphasized that “[people] are storytellers by nature” (p. 7). This makes the narrative methodology an opportune choice for the population of female youth in custody. Furthermore, Lieblich et al. identified stories as one of the best ways to learn about the inner world of individuals and explore how they experience reality.

**Procedural Steps**

The following is a descriptive outline of the procedural steps I took throughout the development of the research study, including ethics, subjectivity, recruitment, the methodology I used, as well as the representations of findings and considerations of validity.

**Ethical Considerations**

I managed dual roles throughout the course of the research project. Due to the nature of my research questions, Burnaby Youth Custody Services (BYCS) is the only facility where I can realistically conduct the research. In British Columbia, BYCS is the sole custody center with female youth residents. I have been the female youth advocate at Burnaby Youth Custody Services (BYCS) for the past one and a half years. My current role as the youth advocate entails helping female youth solve a variety of problems they may face while residing in custody. Conversely, in the role of researcher I aimed to co-construct the narratives of female youth. My objective was not to change their current situation in any way, in contrast to my position as youth advocate. I informed the female youth prior to their agreeing to take part in the study that no actions regarding their living situations would be undertaken as a result of the research interview. It was important to make these dual roles explicit to both the participants and the staff at BYCS throughout the course of the research.
I made a clear distinction between the two roles I encompassed at BYCS throughout the research process. The youth advocate role is under the jurisdiction of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver. The Elizabeth Fry Society contract with BYCS is for ten hours per week. I continued to work for ten hours per week in the role of female youth advocate while conducting the research project, and I came to BYCS on my own time to conduct data collection. Furthermore, I clearly told the female youth that participation in the research project was not associated in any way with their ability to obtain advocacy services. However, I was aware that youth may still feel pressure to agree to participate, especially due to the nature of my current role at the center. Freeman and Mathison (2009) stated that children might interpret the participation option from many different standpoints, ranging from feeling powerless to decline to feeling empowerment from being asked to participate. I tried to be cognizant of the multitude of ways the option of participation could be interpreted by the female youth. Since the youth may already feel a sense of powerlessness due to the institutional environment they currently reside in, I was very careful to not add to this possible pre-existing sense of powerlessness. In addition to the ethical issues inherent in the recruitment process, there were ethical issues to consider within the context of the data collection process.

The prior relationships I have forged with female youth likely impacted the interview process in regards to how we co-constructed the narratives. The impact was dependent on the nature of my prior relationship with each individual participant. Many older adolescents have been entering and exiting youth custody for the duration of my position as youth advocate, while other youth may be entering custody for the first time. My prior relationship
with youth could have lead to an increased comfort level when sharing their stories, or youth may have found it difficult to share their experiences with me due to feeling uncomfortable about my dual role. Furthermore, female youth participants who were new to custody may have been hesitant to tell their story because I am essentially a stranger to them; however, they may also have felt open to sharing their experiences because they have not been desensitized by continual involvement in the youth justice system. It was difficult to hypothesize how previous relationships or lack of relationships with participants would affect the comfort level of the female youth and the data collection process. Prior relationships with participants could also have impacted the stories they chose to share.

Female youth in custody are a highly vulnerable population. The participants did choose to share life events that were focused on pasta trauma. Therefore, it was vital that I used the skills I have developed as a counsellor to gauge the welfare of the female youth. I planned to stop the interviews and use calming and grounding techniques if any of the female youth showed signs of risk. All youth were offered the option of a phone call with Dr. Marla Buchanan if they felt additional support was necessary after the conclusion of the semi-structured interview. Furthermore, prior to the engagement of female youth participants in the research study, the staff (including youth supervisors and mental health staff) was all informed about the nature of the research, and were asked to be extra attentive to any youth who may need additional support. Additionally, I sent the research proposal to the Director of Programs at BYCS and to the Aboriginal Liaison Workers. I discussed safety steps with each of these individuals.

An additional ethical concern was my role as an outsider within the youth custody context and the nature of cross-cultural exploration. I work at BYCS, but I have never been
a resident of youth custody. Also, there is an overrepresentation of Aboriginal youth in custody compared to the general Canadian youth population (Gretton & Clift, 2011; Smith, 2013). Aboriginal females consist of 53% of all female youth admissions to the justice system (Youth Correctional Statistics, 2014). I have discussed the research study with the Aboriginal Liaison Workers at BYCS. The Aboriginal Liaison Workers suggested that one of them could do an introduction between the Aboriginal youth participants and myself before their interviews. Below, I will reflect on my own subjectivity and how this may have affected my ability to understand the female youth in this study.

**Subjectivity**

Subjectivity is an important part of the research process. Riessman (2008) stated that self-awareness of the researcher in regards to their identities and preconceptions are essential, especially when one is interviewing across divides such as race/class, religious, and age difference. Furthermore, the narrative approach advocates for subjectivity (Lieblich, et al., 1998). Peshkin (1988) argued that researchers should actively embrace their subjectivity prior to and while engaged in the research process, because this will allow researchers to be able to reflect on how their own subjectivity impacts their research project and outcomes. Subjectivity can be a starting point for reflection and for the creation of a deeper understanding throughout the research process.

My role as a researcher within this project was to create a relationship with the female youth in which they could safely share their stories in an environment free of judgment, and where we could co-construct an understanding of their past experiences. I cannot understand what it is like to be a female youth in custody. I can understand what it is like to be a female adolescent. Furthermore, my own background from an upper middle-
class Caucasian family does limit my ability to take the perspective of the female youth in custody. Many of the participants come from backgrounds which encompassed challenges that I have not experienced. It was vital for me to reflect on my own assumptions around female youth in the justice system, and also to reflect on how my current role as youth advocate has affected these assumptions.

**Recruitment**

I obtained a letter of permission to recruit participants from BYCS (See Appendix A). I recruited eight female youth between the ages of 13-18. Narrative studies typically recruit approximately six to eight participants (Riessman, 2008). I planned to welcome any of the female youth that wished to participate regardless of their sentence length and prior experience in youth custody. If there were differences, I would reflect these in the findings, just as I would reflect on the unique experiences of each of the female youth.

I completed the online application process to obtain approval from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board for this research study. I obtained a Certificate of Approval on February 1, 2016 and I began recruitment for the study on February 4, 2016.

Recruitment was conducted through advertisements (i.e., posters) (See Appendix B) and word of mouth within the custody center. I put up posters in the two female units, and I also explained the project to the female youth. The female youth were able to ask any questions they might have regarding the research project. I left the posters up for three days before recruiting participants. This period of time gave the female youth the opportunity to consider whether they would like to participate in the study. I was on site approximately twice per week for my job as the youth advocate, so I was available to answer any questions about the research project during these times.
Once youth indicated their interest in participating in the study, I completed the pre-interview and interview process with approximately four youth per week for a total of two weeks. The pre-interviews were conducted prior to the interviews, and both were completed within one session. The pre-interviews and interviews were conducted in the visiting facilities at BYCS.

**Narrative Methodology: Interviewing**

Within a narrative methodology, I used semi-structured interviews to explore the stories of female youth in custody. The purpose of the semi-structured interview was to elicit stories from female youth about their experiences in their childhood and adolescent years in order to uncover themes within their stories. Mikel Brown and Gilligan (1992) stated that the interview is “… of a different sort from the conversations we are used to in everyday life; it is both private and public, informal and formal, lived in the present but preserved for the future” (p. 25). Freeman and Mathison (2009) asserted that individual interviews are an effective method for delving into personal and sensitive topics, and for going into depth about an experience. Alldred and Burman (2005) discussed how interviewing consists of a collaborative relationship between the participant and the researcher in which a narrative is co-constructed from within a social constructionist perspective. Mishler (1991) described the narrative interview as containing two participants who are working together to co-construct the narrative and meaning. Furthermore, Reissman (2008) described how encouraging participants to explain their stories in their own way could help to diminish some of the power inequity in the interview. This could be beneficial for the marginalized population of female youth in custody because they are currently living in a very controlled environment. Additionally, the research relationship will benefit if the researcher is emotionally attentive
to the participant, asks open ended questions, and allows the participants to construct answers in personally meaningful ways (Riessman). Elliott (2005) emphasized that “[respondents] are likely to find it easier to talk about specific times and places rather than being asked about a very wide time frame” (p. 31). Therefore, I employed the lifeline activity from the life review method. This activity was completed in the pre-interviews.

Research Steps

Once participants were recruited to take part in the study, the timeline of the research endeavor was as follows: (1) The participant signed the informed assent form (See Appendix C). (2) The researcher and participant engaged in a pre-interview right before the interview. Two timeline diagrams were available for the participants to choose from. The participants were asked to select a diagram that resonated with their life experiences (See Appendix D). The researcher provided writing materials and kept track of the number of materials as per center policy. The researcher was available during this process to answer any questions and provide support. (3) The semi-structured interview was conducted after the timeline was completed. The events on the timeline acted as an elicitation device throughout the majority of the interviews. Sample questions for the interview are provided (See Appendix E). The interviews ranged from twenty minutes to one hour and twenty minutes. There was no time limit for the interviews. Both the pre-interviews and interviews were conducted in the visiting facilities at BYCS. I gave each participant three peanut-free mini chocolate bars after their individual interview to thank them for their participation. The data was kept in a locked filing cabinet after the interviews and throughout the course of the research project, and a pseudonym was used for each participant. The student picked a pseudonym for each participant. The data will be stored on a memory stick in Dr. Marla Buchanan's research lab
for five years after the study has been completed. (4) The data was analyzed using the
Thematic Content Analysis Method (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Thematic Content Analysis Method**

The Thematic Content Analysis Method is a “method for identifying, analyzing and
reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 79). Within Thematic
Content Analysis, the researcher plays an active role in identifying themes (Braun & Clarke).
A theme is defined as something captured within the data that is relevant to the research
question, and that is found as a pattern within the data set. Braun and Clarke argued that
Thematic Content Analysis is a foundational method for qualitative analysis. Within
psychology, Thematic Content Analysis aligns with a constructionist paradigm. Importantly,
Thematic Content Analysis within a constructionist perspective focuses on theorizing the
structural conditions and sociocultural contexts that enable the individual accounts, instead of
focusing on the individual aspect of the narrative (Braun & Clarke).

**Six Phases of the Thematic Content Analysis Method**

The Thematic Content Analysis Method involves six phases within the data analysis
of the research process, including the following: (1) familiarizing yourself with the data, (2)
generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and
naming themes, and (6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The initial stage of Thematic Content Analysis consisted of immersing myself within
the data through ‘repeated reading’ of the data in an active fashion (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
The transcription of the verbal interview data was conducted by following Mikel Brown’s
and Gilligan’s (1992) steps as explained in *A Listener’s Guide*. Mikel Brown and Gilligan
guide the researcher to listen to each participant’s story at least four times using the voice-
sensitive method. I followed the different voices that ran through the narrative in order to create a holistic picture of each participant’s story.

There are four steps to the Listener’s Guide process, including (1) the story, (2) the ‘self’, (3) interpersonal connections, and (4) disconnection from others (Mikel Brown and Gilligan, 1992).

The first time I listened through the recorded interview, I listened to the story the participants told. The purpose of the first time listening through is to gain an understanding of the plot and how the story unfolds. I took note of metaphors, central images or words, contradictions, and gaps within the story. I reflected on my own response to the story in order to be aware of potential biases that could affect my interpretation (Mikel Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

The second time listening to the story, I aimed to channel and connect with the voice of the participant. This relationship between the researcher and the participant allows for a deeper form of knowing than taking an objective stance (Mikel Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

The third time listening to the story, I listened for how the participant experiences interpersonal relationships. This reading guides the researcher to pay close attention to interpersonal relationships that allow the participants to freely express their authentic selves (Mikel Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

The fourth time listening to the story, I listened for evidence of relationships which do not invite individual authenticity, and which are based on cultural and societal norms which can “silence one’s voice, and can lead to exclusion, violation, and at times even violence” (Mikel Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 29). Mikel Brown and Gilligan asserted that girls are particularly susceptible to relationship conventions such as purity, self-silencing,
and self-sacrifice due to living in a patriarchal society. This was important to consider when transcribing the interview with the female youth participants.

A narrative account of each participant’s story was created after the *Listener’s Guide* process was completed. The participants were then asked to read over the narrative accounts and make any changes they liked. Once the youth completed this member check, the narrative accounts were analyzed using the Thematic Content Analysis Method.

The second stage of the Thematic Content Analysis Method was to produce initial codes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes are defined as simple elements of the raw data that the researcher finds interesting and that can be assessed in a meaningful way. In this stage, I carefully worked through the entire data set coding the information (Braun & Clarke).

The third stage involved tentatively identifying themes and sub-themes within the coded data. I divided the coded data into relevant thematic categories, and did not discard any data at this point that did not fit into identified themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The fourth stage consisted of reviewing the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This stage consisted of two phases. In the first phase, I read the collated extracts that encompassed each theme, and contemplated whether they appeared to form a logical pattern. If the themes did not work, I reviewed and refined the coding until a satisfactory thematic map was created. The second phase of reviewing the themes consisted of re-reading the entire data set in order to determine whether the themes were valid within the context of the whole data set. Additionally, I also coded any other data that may have been missed throughout the process (Braun & Clarke).

In the fifth stage, I took the thematic map of the data and identified the essence of
each theme individually as well as the themes overall (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I strove to identify what was of interest about each theme. Furthermore, I wrote a detailed analysis of each individual theme in order to consider the story of each theme and the relation between them. Additionally, I began tentatively naming the themes (Braun & Clarke).

The sixth and final phase of Thematic Content Analysis consists of a final analysis and writing up the report. This stage commenced when I had produced a set of fully worked-out themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The write-up included poignant extracts from the data to validate the themes (Braun & Clarke).

The Thematic Content Analysis Method offered an accessible and flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data from within a social constructionist epistemology. This method enabled me to form an understanding of the stories of female youth in custody through the development of themes.

**Representation of Findings**

Prior to the thematic analysis the findings were documented, with each story kept as complete as possible according to Mikel Brown and Gilligan’s (1992) *Listener’s Guide*. I met individually with all of the female youth participants in the youth custody center. The stories were presented to the participants for feedback and possible changes. I always offered to read the story out loud, or the participants read the story silently to themselves. I gave the female youth participants a pen and encouraged them to make changes to their stories throughout this process. The participants were asked to consider resonance and comprehensiveness. Specifically, the participants were asked to consider the following three questions while they read or listened to their narratives: (1) Does this story resonate with what you told me? (2) Does this story resonate with what you experienced in real life? (3) Is
the story complete? All eight of the female youth participants answered the first two questions affirmatively. Six out of eight of the female youth participants answered the third question affirmatively. Kylie and Jessica both stated that their stories were not complete, because there was additional information about past life events that they chose not to share during their interviews. The participants each received a copy of their story in their personal boxes.

In order to create a deeper understanding of the research findings, I shared my findings with one expert peer reviewer who works in the youth custody center. I asked the expert peer reviewer to comment on whether the themes resonated with her own experience of working with female youth in custody and whether she thought anything was missing from the themes. I asked the peer reviewer to comment on the resonance, comprehensiveness, and pragmatic value of the findings. I asked her the following three questions: (1) Do these themes resonate with your experience of working with female youth in custody? (2) Is anything missing from the themes? (3) How do the themes help inform us about the stories of female youth in custody? The expert peer reviewer stated that the themes did resonate with her experience of working with female youth in custody. In regards to whether anything is missing from the themes, the expert peer reviewer commented that she often notices when female youth leave custody they try to reconnect with their biological family because they are seeking a stable home base; however, they often re-enter an unstable environment. In terms of question three, the expert peer reviewer stated that the Future Plans theme was informative because it highlighted the hobbies, interests, and future aspirations of the female youth participants. She discussed how these areas are important to explore during the rehabilitation process with female youth in custody.
**Trustworthiness of the Study**

It is very important to reflect on the validity of qualitative research. For this research project, I am especially interested in the criteria of credibility and situational ethics (Tracey, 2010).

Credibility, how trustworthy the findings are, focuses in part on triangulation (Tracey, 2010). Triangulation assumes that if two or more sources of data converge on the same conclusion, the conclusions are more valid (Tracey, 2010). I included one peer reviewer with expertise on female youth in custody within BYCS and conducted participant member checks to help create a deeper understanding of the findings.

Situational ethics suggest that researchers need to continuously reflect, critique, and question their ethical decisions throughout the research process (Tracey, 2010). Due to the nature of my proposed study, its’ ethicality is very situation-dependent and I needed to be both reflective and adaptive throughout the research process.

**Limitations**

Limitations of the study include the cross-cultural nature of the study due to the researcher being a Caucasian woman with an outsider perspective of the youth custody culture. The sample size is small, and the findings are not replicable because every time a story is told it changes. Furthermore, the findings are descriptive and therefore not generalizable. However, this research still contributes knowledge about the stories of female youth in custody and it is up to the reader to determine what resonates with them as they read the findings, and how the findings challenge or compliment the reader’s current understanding of the topic.
RESULTS

There were eight female youth participants in this narrative study. The age of the participants ranged from fourteen to seventeen years old. Four of the participants were sixteen, two of the participants were seventeen, one of the participants was fifteen, and the final participant was fourteen. The ethic background of the participants were as follows: four participants had an Aboriginal background, four participants had a Caucasian background, one participant was born in a country in South America, and one participant was unaware of her background as she was adopted at birth and does not know her birth parents.

The interviews were completed over a period of two weeks at Burnaby Youth Custody Center. Half of the female youth participants were interviewed on February 5, 2016 and the remaining four participants were interviewed on February 12, 2016. I initiated the recruitment process by putting up a poster on the two female units (See Appendix C) and talking to individual female youth about the project. Once the first two participants were interviewed I received participation requests from many girls from both female units at the custody center due to word spreading between the female youth. The female youth in custody population indicated that they were interested in taking part in this study primarily to share their stories with others who may have been through similar situations, and to give back to the community in general. The female youth participants each filled out a timeline prior to their interview (See Appendix G) and they referred to their timelines throughout the interviews as a guide. The interviews were written into stories using Mikel Brown’s and Gilligan’s (1992) *A Listener’s Guide.*
The Research Narratives

Hannah’s Story:

“I feel old for some reason ‘cause I’ve been through so much, you know what I mean? Like a lot of experiences” [0:33].

Hannah was born in a country in South America. She lived with her biological mother; however, her biological mother struggled with drug addiction. Hannah does not know her biological father. Hannah lived with her Grandmother a lot of the time because of her mother’s challenges; however, when Hannah was around three and a half years old her Grandmother died. Hannah lived with her mother full-time, and she experienced domestic violence between her mother and men she remembers being in the home, who may have been her mother’s boyfriends. Hannah has memories of men beating her mother and Hannah screaming for them to stop fighting. She also remembers the police arriving and pulling the men away from her mother.

Hannah was often at home by herself when her mother went to work. One day, when Hannah was approximately three and a half years old, Social Services came to her house and removed her and placed her into an orphanage. Hannah remembers being very angry, upset and confused when this event happened. She asked the Social Service workers if she could search for her mother, and they drove her around for awhile so that she would calm down. They offered her teddy bears to comfort her.

Hannah had a difficult time finding words to describe the orphanage. She described it as a “mean” [2:05] and “bad” [2:07] place. The orphanage consisted of one large house with about twenty kids who lived in it, as well as staff. Hannah felt a lot of pressure to take
care of the younger children at the orphanage. She described herself as being a role model for them, as well as physically taking care of them. She did the dishes, washed the floors, and ironed the school uniforms. Hannah explained that the orphanage staff were not very nice, and punishments were harsh and cruel. For example, whenever Hannah misbehaved the staff would shave her head. Hannah stated that “Self-esteem was never really there from a very young age” [4:01], and she explained that having her hair shaved off contributed to her low self-esteem. Hannah’s mother visited her once or twice at the orphanage, and then she stopped coming to visit. Hannah never saw her biological mother again. She reflected, “My world crashed as soon as I stopped getting visits from her. I was watching every other kid get visits from their parents and mine would never come” [5:32]. Furthermore, Hannah said that she would never forgive her mother for abandoning her.

Hannah’s school experience was mixed. She excelled in academics and in sports. Hannah enjoyed playing American kickball, dodge ball, tennis, soccer, and basketball. Socially, Hannah did not have a positive school experience. She explained that she was bullied every day because she looked like a boy due to her shaved head. Hannah said that this experience in elementary school still has an impact on her today. She stated, “I used to be victimized a lot, but now I’m the victimizer because I got victimized so much” [12:37], and “If you hurt me I’m hurting you twice as hard” [13:26]. Hannah also said, “All the hurt and the anger it turned around and now I know how to stand up for myself and it’s not just standing up for myself it’s out to hurt you; I don’t know I’m a bad person” [13:02].

When Hannah was nine, a Canadian family adopted her. She felt excited to have a chance to start over again in Canada. Hannah explained that at first she enjoyed her new family and had fun with them. Hannah stated, “From nothing to a rich family is just like
whoa I had everything. I thought I had the world” [16:43]. However, as time went on trouble began to surface. Hannah explained that she found it difficult to get along with her adopted mom, because deep down she felt like her adopted mom was trying to replace her biological mother. Hannah also expressed confusion about how to fit in with her new family, stating: “I don’t know how to be part of a family” [15:41]. Hannah found it difficult to connect with her adopted mom, and described their relationship as switching from love to hate quite quickly. Also, her adopted mom’s method of discipline was to hit her and put her down. Hannah explained that she has now internalized her mom’s insults and believes these things about herself. For example, her adopted mother used to often call her “vindictive” [20:00] often, and now Hannah frequently refers to herself as being vindictive. Hannah also believed that her adopted parents loved their two biological children more than her, and it was difficult for Hannah to watch her adopted parents show affection towards their biological children because she did not feel loved. Hannah described often feeling like she was held at fault when things went wrong with her family. Hannah said, “Sometimes I would take all the blame and it was never good enough. I was never good enough” [24:50].

The difficult relationship between Hannah and her adopted mother came to a head when Hannah decided she did not want to get hit anymore. Once when she and her mother had an argument that Hannah was afraid would become violent, she picked up a knife so that her mother would not hit her. Hannah chased her adopted mother around the room with the knife, but this was in self-defense and she did not intend to hurt her mother in any way. Hannah was put into the hospital and also arrested because of this incident. Hannah’s parents lost legal guardianship of her when Hannah was thirteen years old, and Hannah was placed into foster care. Hannah said, “I felt like I was thrown away this time – like a piece
of shit, like a piece of garbage” [30:06]. Her adopted parents had three chances to go to
court and fight for guardianship of Hannah, but they did not show up on any of these three
occasions. Hannah’s social worker was a huge support for her during this time period, and
Hannah said she couldn’t thank her enough for all that she’s done. Hannah called her
adopted mother for one year multiple times per day after her adopted parents lost legal
guardianship of her. Hannah said,

I called her six or seven times a day. I cried every time she didn’t answer that phone
and I kept calling… She [adopted mom] answered the phone once, and I accidently
hung up because I was shocked that she answered finally... That hanging up the
phone was the worst mistake of my life. I haven’t heard her voice for years now.

She wants nothing to do with me. [25:41]

Hannah said, “I guess I turned out to be everything they didn’t want” [20:48]. Hannah
added, “To this day I am like why am I so easy to give up on?” [30:18].

Hannah’s experience of the foster care system was like a rollercoaster. She stated, “It
was hard not having anybody. I felt like I was all alone again” [29:53]. She isolated herself
by staying in her room and only coming out to eat meals. Furthermore, Hannah described
missing her adopted parents every day.

Hannah tried smoking weed for the first time when she entered foster care at thirteen
years old. She also started drinking alcohol. Hannah stated that her drug of choice was
MDMA, and that she hit rock bottom at thirteen years old. Hannah said she felt confident,
strong and powerful when she used drugs, like she was “on top of the world” [30:05].
Hannah further described her drug use: “I went out and looked for meth. It didn’t come to
me. I liked it as soon as I did it. I am going through what she [biological mother] went
through” [31:57]. Hannah spent her time partying, running away, and hanging out with older guys while she was in the foster care system.

When Hannah turned sixteen years old, she entered the Independent Living Program. In order to live independently, Hannah had to hide her drug use from the ministry. She continued to secretly use drugs while living independently and also developed an eating disorder. Hannah described experiencing depression and suicidal thoughts during this period in her life. She stated, “I thought that independence would be like the best thing ever and I could start a life but I felt alone” [34:29].

Currently, Hannah is working through her addiction, eating disorder, and mental health issues. She seeks out support both within custody and in the community. She is going to enter a treatment center once she leaves youth custody, and then continue to live independently. She enjoys sobriety for the most part; however, Hannah explained that it can be really hard to experience her feelings. She said, “Feelings are frequent. I’m always really sad, really happy, really something” [37:56].

Hannah described feeling powerful because she is now able to handle her feelings without masking them with drugs. She said, “I can tell my story and I feel strong about it” [39:52]. Hannah said she enjoys being a role model and being seen as a leader by her peers.

In the future, Hannah would like to attend university and pursue a career where she can help others. She is considering becoming a social worker, a youth worker, or a marriage counsellor. Her goal is to help kids who have been through situations similar to her own. Hannah concluded, “My life it’s been a journey, but I’m just getting started really” [38:17].
Alexis’ Story:

Alexis was born in a Northern Territory in Canada. She was born in a small town with a population of less than 800 people. The majority of the people that live in the town are related to Alexis by blood.

Alexis entered foster care when she was approximately one and a half years old. Both Alexis’ mother and father had serious drinking and drug problems. Social Services became involved when Alexis’ mother’s friend came over to their house and saw Alexis was there alone, crying and hungry. Her parents had not been home for a day and a half. Alexis moved around a lot from foster home to foster home while she was a baby and a toddler. Alexis described constantly moving as confusing, because she just thought she was going to visit different peoples’ houses. Many of the houses she was moved into belonged to her relatives. Alexis was moved back in with her mother when her mother became sober, but when her mother started drinking again Alexis re-entered foster care.

When Alexis was three years old, Sandra became her new foster mom and Alexis moved from a Northern Territory to British Columbia. She lived in another small town. Alexis enjoyed living in a good neighborhood that was near both an elementary and high school. She felt very loved by Sandra. Alexis said, “Sandra, she’s absolutely beautiful. Her love is unconditional for me” [4:25]. Furthermore, Alexis is very thankful to Sandra for having an open adoption so that Alexis is able to go and visit her biological parents and has the opportunity to get to know them. Alexis described a childhood that included many happy events. She remembers attending church regularly while growing up. When Alexis turned eight years old Sandra legally adopted her on Valentines Day, which was a very special event
for both of them. Sandra’s birthday is in March, so she says that Alexis is her “early-girl birthday gift” [4:15].

In contrast to many happy childhood memories, Alexis also has darker memories. She said, “When I was three something really bad happened” [12:49]. Alexis’ foster brother, who was sixteen years old, raped her over and over until she was seven years old. Alexis said, “That’s the type of shit that I had to grow up with” [15:15]. Alexis felt confused about what was happening to her, and she didn’t know it was wrong until she was older. Alexis said, “There’s nothing I could do about it when I was three” [16:26]. Alexis told Sandra what happened when she turned twelve years old and her foster brother moved to a different province. Alexis expressed that she has a difficult time with intimacy now because of the molestation that occurred when she was younger. Alexis explained, “I still can’t forgive my brother but I still love him. ‘Cause what he did was wrong and he knew it” [16:06]. Alexis also said, in regards to why she wants to be interviewed, “I want other people to know they aren’t alone” (18:09).

In Grade 7, Alexis was homeschooled. She got B’s and A’s in school. Alexis said, “From ages twelve to fifteen that’s when it all started to crumble. That’s when I started noticing drugs, smoking cigarettes, and smoking weed because I thought it was cool” [5:52]. Smoking weed and cigarettes became a habit for Alexis, and she has been smoking for four and a half years now.

When Alexis became a teenager she drank often, and she overdosed on alcohol when she was fourteen. Alexis explained that she stole alcohol from a house and drank it all. Sandra found Alexis in her room with alcohol poisoning, and Sandra called 911. Alexis was taken to the emergency room at the hospital. Alexis explained,
I remember waking up and the first thing that came to my mind was that I wanted my mom. I haven’t been so scared in my life. My heart stopped and I would come back again. I died at least three times. [8:00]

Sandra’s love and support during this experience was very important to Alexis. Alexis added, “When I sobered up, I noticed the dark bags underneath my Mom’s eyes. She was beside the bedside table waiting for me to wake up” [9:27]. In describing Sandra’s unconditional love for her, Alexis said, “It’s a kind of love you don’t find everywhere” [12:40].

Alexis explained that she was an “out of control” [9:47] teenager. She spent her time partying, doing drugs and robbing houses. She couch surfed and did not go home much, and she stopped attending church with her mom. These changes occurred when Alexis started hanging out with older people. Alexis said, “It felt good to be free, like not having a curfew or anything. Being able to have a cigarette, being able to walk around high, and like have a good time. But sooner after later it gets boring” [10:40].

When Alexis was around thirteen years old she started entering youth custody. She described not getting along with the girls in youth custody. She explained that she was “New, young, and would do anything to fit in with the top girls” [7:11]. Alexis said that she has been in custody for many holidays between the ages of fifteen to eighteen, including Christmas, New Years Eve, and her birthday. She has not been home for longer than one month because she has been in youth custody and in treatment centers. Alexis explained, “I’m kinda sick and tired of this lifestyle. Jail has taken up a big part of my life, and I’ve lost so many years that I could have been sober, healthy, clean” (10:56).
Alexis has many plans for the future. She wants to go back to her hometown to reconnect with her family members. She wants to continue being clean and sober, as she has been for the past six months. She also plans to graduate from high school, and she will be the first person in her biological family to graduate. Alexis said,

I want to go to college, I want to go to university, I want to have kids, and fall in love, just everything. I want to go skydiving. I want to go to Egypt. Like travel a lot. But until then I’m gonna just do me for now. [17:21]

**Sarah’s Story:**

Sarah’s childhood was chaotic. Sarah explained that when she was three weeks old she went into a coma because her biological Dad dropped her on her head onto a coffee table. Sarah said, “I was rushed to the hospital” [0.54]. She was three years old when her mother and father got divorced. The divorce was confusing for her because she did not understand what was happening at the time. Sarah kept going back and forth between living with her mother and living in foster care because both of her parents struggled with drug addiction. Sarah explained that when she was four years old she was raped by her mom’s boyfriend, and this makes it hard for her to trust people now. Regarding the rape, Sarah said,

It was really difficult for me because I didn’t know who to trust and who to speak my mind to and who to talk to. Plus I was very young and I didn’t really understand what was going on at the time. [22:09]

Sarah moved around to many foster homes throughout her childhood. Sarah said, “By the time I was five I was in thirteen different foster homes which was really difficult for me” [5:50]. Up until now, Sarah has lived in nineteen foster homes. She has had to move to
multiple towns and this has also been challenging for her. When Sarah was five years old she moved in with two foster parents, Donna and James, who took care of her for seven years. They also got legal guardianship of her.

Sarah expressed that she had a good childhood while living with Donna and James. Sarah explained, “I was a good kid; I was a straight A student, I was in violin, I was so spoiled” [2:11]. Sarah’s school experience was mixed. She was not popular, and she used to get bullied at school. Sarah said, “My whole entire life people have always tried to change me, like no matter what I would want to be” [23:56]. The kids at school would bully her for wearing frilly dresses to school, and Sarah internalized this bullying experience to mean that the other students wanted to change her. In Grade 6, she hesitantly took on the identity of a rebel, but people still did not like her. Sarah said, “I just wanted to be liked my whole entire life” [24:31]. She explained she used to be a compulsive liar. Sarah would lie about having money and going on trips because she wanted to be popular, but this backfired on her because people would know she was lying. Sarah has recently realized that she tries to be tough but she is actually very softhearted, and again she is trying to be something that she is not.

Sarah went traveling a lot with Donna and James between the ages of six to nine. They travelled to Jamaica, Mexico, Hawaii, and Disneyland. These traveling experiences were new to her and she really enjoyed them. Disneyland was her favorite out of all of the trips because she got to meet all of her favourite characters.

However, Sarah’s life changed when she turned eleven. The house she lived in with Donna and James burned down, James suffered numerous head injuries, and Donna developed a mental illness. Donna and James got a divorce, and Sarah re-entered the foster
care system. Sarah explained, “When things get difficult for me to handle, I usually tend to leave. And that’s what I did; I left” [4:55].

Sarah moved to a new town and began to live with a new foster mom. Her foster mom had dementia and she would often forget to take care of Sarah. For example, she would leave Sarah locked out of the house, and Sarah would not be able to get back in. Sarah explained,

Practically since I was twelve I’ve been raising myself. It was really hard [taking care of myself] because I was practically couch surfing between all these homes. I felt like I didn’t really have a home… I mean it was really difficult for me because, I guess, kinda skip back here [referred to timeline], to when I was little, by the time I was five I was in thirteen different foster homes. [5:14]

This experience of not really having a home reminded her of when she was a child and she moved from foster home to foster home.

Sarah moved to a new town when she was thirteen years old. She moved in with two new foster parents, who are currently her foster parents. She started out doing well in this new foster home; however, she ended up getting kicked out of school and she started entering youth custody centers. Sarah also began doing drugs during this time period, including cocaine, methamphetamine, ecstasy, and acid. Sarah said, “I couldn’t handle my life. I couldn’t take it” [23:09]. She tried to commit suicide when she was thirteen years old and she was revived. Sarah explained, “I’ve think I’ve been in a depression stage since then. I can’t really emotionally be there without balling my eyes out” [23:30]. Sarah added, “I ended up not going to school, I ended up hanging out with the wrong crowd, I ended up getting pregnant when I was only thirteen, like a lot of stuff happened” [7:20].
School has always been challenging for Sarah. She got kicked out of school in Grade 9. She said, “I didn’t like school then. I was always getting bullied. People didn’t like me” [12:02]. Sarah got put into an Option-Focused Program, which she is still in today. She doesn’t usually go, but she wants to try to start going again. The program is for one hour two days per week, and she has a hard time going to this but she acknowledges that this option is better for her than going to a school with regular hours. Sarah said, “It’s mainly the bullying and stuff. Ever since I was twelve I was called a whore and all of these bad names and I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve that” [12:30]. Sarah said that she is more solitary and likes to keep to herself now because of her past experiences of being bullied.

The experience of pregnancy was both happy and difficult for Sarah. It was hard for her to physically carry the baby because she has a small frame. Also, she endured fifteen hours of labor when the baby was born. Sarah gave birth to the baby when she was fourteen years old, and she felt really excited to become a mother. Noah, her baby, is ten months old now and lives with her boyfriend. Sarah said,

I guess that kind of changed my life, like even though I was still getting in trouble, I want to do better for my son. Because I don’t want him to think of me as a bad person when he gets older. [8:53]

She added,

Noah honestly means the world to me. If I didn’t have him I don’t know what I would do with my life. I think ever since I had him my life has been a little bit difficult but it’s brought me closer to who I am. It’s brought me closer to him. And I’m more protective now. [34:20]
Currently, Sarah is still in foster care but she also has regular contact with her biological mother. Her biological mother has been clean for nine years now. Sarah talks with her mother constantly and visits her almost daily. She has been with her boyfriend David for six months, and right now she is seven months pregnant with twins. Her boyfriend is taking care of Noah right now, and Sarah spends the majority of her time at her boyfriend’s house. Sarah does not communicate regularly with her biological father because he is still struggling with drug addiction.

Sarah discussed how she has a difficult time trusting people. She has a hard time trusting both men and women, but she ended up preferring the company of men because girls bullied her continuously while growing up. She mainly has male friends, and she has a couple of girlfriends. She explained that she doesn’t like the girl drama. Sarah said, “Now I have more people that want to be my friends” [19:50]. Sarah said she has mixed feelings about this because “I have very bad trusting skills” [19:58]. Sarah explained that she has never been able to express her feelings, and that she is a “people-pleaser” [32:33]. She has wanted to be accepted by people her whole life. Sarah said,

"I think it’s hard for me to express how I’m feeling because I’ve never been able to talk about my feelings properly, like I’ve always held them in, I’ve never really been able to say how I feel because I’m always worried about other people more than I worry about myself." [32:26]

Sarah explained that she tries to give other people what they want, but if they don’t like it she becomes upset. Throughout her adolescence, Sarah has tended to isolate herself at times. Sarah said,
The funny thing is, when I would do that [isolate myself] I would get so upset that I was all alone. I would have people over and then I would freak out at all of them because they were over! [29:22]

Currently, Sarah has a positive support network that consists of her two current foster parents, her biological mother, her boyfriend and her best friend Kaylee. In regards to Kaylee, Sarah explained, “We’re best friends; we do almost everything together. Like she always comes over, we always make time for each other” [19:22].

Sarah has many hopes for the future. In regards to her past, she said, “I just kinda wanna get over it” [30:12]. She acknowledged her growth over the last few years by saying, “I know I can my handle my own now, and I’m more stronger than I was. Now I can defend myself, I can speak my mind freely, and I’ve grown into a person that is very outgoing” [21:05]. Sarah said, “My biggest goal right now is to get off probation, stop getting in trouble, and be there for my family” [13:43]. Sarah plans to move back in with her biological mother once she gets off probation. She said,

I hope to actually get out of the ministry, I hope to move in with my boyfriend or something, I hope to get a job, I hope to finish my schooling, I hope to have a bright future for myself. I’ve lived in so much chaos in the last five years that my life went so downhill and I think that I dragged myself downhill so now I think it’s just time to move on. I know I messed up, but you can only move forward. You can’t really change the past. [38:22]
**Kylie’s Story:**

Kylie lived in an Eastern Canadian province from birth until the age of three years old with her mother and older brother. When Kylie turned three her mother drove out to British Columbia with Kylie and her brother. Kylie’s mother was a single mom on welfare, and the family moved to different houses often. Kylie explained, “She [mother] didn’t really have much money all the time so we got evicted from places lots of the time” [1:08]. Kylie’s biological father has never been in her life, and she doesn’t know anything about him. When Kylie was about nine years old he was charged with a serious criminal offense. Kylie’s family changed during this time period, and her mother became depressed. Kylie added, “With [my mom’s] depression came me spending a lot of time on my own. I was pretty young though I didn’t really know what was going on; didn’t really know what it meant” [1:50]. For example, Kylie’s mom would leave her at home alone while going to Salt Spring Island for the weekend when Kylie was nine years old. At the time, Kylie thought this was normal behaviour. Since her mom was often away, Kylie began to hang out with her older brother’s friends. They smoked weed, and Kylie began to smoke weed with them. She was ten years old and thought smoking weed was cool.

Kylie’s mom kicked her out of the house when she was ten years old. Kylie explained this happened because she was misbehaving, hanging out with older people, and getting into trouble at school. Kylie added, “By eleven yeah I was smoking pot everyday, drinking everyday” [3:02]. Kylie hung out with her brother’s friends who were four years older than her, and they would party on a daily basis.

Kylie started stealing from stores at this time. By the age of twelve, Kylie was stealing from stores every day. Kylie would steal everything she needed to survive; for
example, food, clothes, and tampons. She ended up meeting drug dealers during this time period. She explained,

They [the drug dealers] took me and all my friends under their wing, I guess you could say, and as long as we stole them everything they wanted, we got a place to stay, food, drugs, money, booze; we got everything we wanted. [4:19]

Kylie used this opportunity as a means of survival. Kylie added, “In a way they were like family to us but, yeah I guess they were kind of just using us because we’d hit up ten stores a day, maybe five to ten stores a day” [4:41]. In regards to her feelings on stealing, Kylie explained, “I was in a mind state that anything I wanted it was mine.”[5:00]. Kylie stated that this was a “pretty stupid mind state” [5:13] because it didn’t last long, due to having many run-ins with the police.

When Kylie was eleven years old she was placed in the care of her aunt. The aunt was busy taking care of a four-year-old child, and Kylie didn’t want to stay there. Kylie ended up moving into a foster home. She didn’t want to stay there either, but the police would always find her in downtown Victoria and bring her back there. Kylie had numerous charges by the age of thirteen.

Kylie had a difficult school experience while growing up. In Grade 7 she was expelled from three different schools in one year. Kylie said, “I kinda gave up on going to school after that” [8:17]. She explained that she would try to make it to school every day (whether she was living on the streets or at a friend’s house), and she would usually succeed but would leave by lunchtime everyday. She was permanently kicked out of her classroom and had to do her work in the office every day. She would get irritated with the principal, teachers, and the secretary and she would constantly yell at them. This behaviour led to her
expulsion. She was put into a Behaviour Program and she didn’t get along with the teacher there. She would make bongs out of pop cans at school. She got expelled from the Behaviour Program as well. Kylie returned to treatment, and she was placed in an Alternative School when she finished treatment.

When Kylie was thirteen years old, she starting coming in and out of the youth justice system. She was sent to a treatment center after she had been put into youth custody on three separate occasions. She completed a six-month treatment program because she was determined to get off probation. Kylie explained, “Probation pissed a lot of my friends off. Cops would always go to their places looking for me” [7:25]. Kylie continued to smoke and drink every day after she completed treatment.

The day after Kylie finished her probation, she met an older man who had a huge impact on where her life went over the next few years. She got drunk and partied with him for about a year. Kylie said,

My life changed then. I don’t know if I didn’t meet him I probably wouldn’t be where I am today. He taught me a lot. I learned how to sell drugs, I learned how to hustle people, I learned how to punch people out, I learned everything. I learned how to lie. I learned how to lie and manipulate people. I liked the adrenaline rushes from the crazy shit; it was all fun and games in my mind. I didn’t really know much about it I was young and naïve. [10:36]

Kylie talked about her run-ins with the police,

I actually kicked one of the officers in the face one time, and he fractured my jaw and he beat me up pretty bad. He didn’t charge me for kicking him in the face because he beat me so bad. I blacked out after the first couple punches. I woke up in
excruciating pain, my face was all bruised up, and I had goose eggs on my head.

And I remember I was laying on the ground when I kicked him in the face.

[1:04:53]

She explained that these types of run-ins with the police led to her developing an even deeper hatred of authority figures.

By the age of fourteen, Kylie’s boyfriend was in jail and she was selling dope on her own. She had her own block that she took care of herself. She added,

Since I was young I’ve been taking care of myself. I had everything I wanted. I had all the money, all the drugs, all the food, even though I wasn’t eating much food, I had nice stuff, nice clothes, I was lovin’ life, and everybody respected me.

[12:41]

When reflecting back on this, Kylie acknowledged, “Well, a lot of people probably didn’t really actually respect me, they were probably just scared of the older guy in my life. There was lots of power involved and I loved it” [13:07].

Around the time she turned fourteen years old, Kylie also started smoking crystal meth. She tried crystal meth for the first time at a meth shack with her best friend. She intended to try it one time and never do it again. Kylie explained,

There was a lot of peer pressure involved in it. I said, “Ok, let’s do it”, and then yeah I ended up staying in that house for eight days, up for eight days, didn’t sleep.

Messed up on crystal meth. I was like I love this, this is my drug. [15:47]

Kylie ended up selling weed to support her drug habit, buy everything she needed, and help support her friends.
Kylie has mixed feelings about her friendships. She said, “My friendships were more, people would hang around me because I’d buy them stuff, I’d give them money, I’d give them dope, I’d smoke lots of dope with them” [16:53]. Her friends would have her back, look out for her, and punch out people who tried to mess with her. She added, “I guess in the end they were using me more though” [17:19].

Kylie explained that she tried to reconnect with her mom: “I’d try to involve her in my life, but she would end up leaving shortly after. She would leave me for guys, she would leave me, yeah mainly just for guys” [35:34]. Kylie’s mom tried to come back into her life, and she tried to stab the guy Kylie was dating. Kylie became really upset. She explained,

You [her mother] have no right to come into my life and just assume that you can try and do anything like that. You left me in foster care. You left me to do all this fucking bullshit. Like, who do you think you are? Pretty much. [36:23]

Kylie pushed her mother away after this incident. Additionally, she was getting influenced from her boyfriend who was pressuring her into pushing her mother away. She explained,

He kinda talk me- he said like “She’s a goof; you’re going to let your mom do that?”

He manipulated me into thinking that she’s a fucking goof, she’s a rat, she’s a piece of shit. He manipulated the shit out of me. I believed him obviously because he was always right, he knew what was best, he knew everything. [37:09]

Kylie hasn’t really talked with her mom since this incident happened when she was fourteen years old.

Kylie ended up back in youth custody, and when she left youth custody she was given very strict conditions. These conditions included a red zone for downtown, a 6 pm curfew, no contacts with older men who were involved in her life, and no drug possession or
consumption. Kylie was fifteen years old at the time. By this point, Kylie was addicted to drugs. Kylie tried hard to stick to this order, and she made it for three days. Then she ran away and hid from the police at her friends’ houses. She had many older men involved in her life that would give her money, buy her things and give her free drugs. She further explained, “Most of them I wouldn’t have to do anything with, I usually didn’t, but they were friends who obviously wanted something from me but I just wouldn’t give it to them” [19:22]. Kylie was arrested again and went back to youth custody.

Kylie got arrested with her boyfriend. She was placed in custody for one and a half months, and when she was released she moved to another province with a previous foster mom. Kylie’s foster mom played an important role in her life, and was a big support for Kylie during her early teenage years. She was Kylie’s foster mom for four years. Kylie said, I’m really thankful she didn’t give up. She cared. I appreciated that because nobody else really did care, or showed me that they cared. It was her birthday and she sat at court all day until I got released, She actually went out of her way to get me out of here; to be there for me. [1:10:01]

Kylie was clean, sober, and happy for a period of time while living in this new province. She had a full time job at a fast food restaurant, and she even worked overtime. Kylie requested for a worker to take her out and show her places where she could meet friends. After awhile, she began to feel bored because she did not have anyone to hang out with. Kylie had a difficult time finding other youth who could understand her.

Two months later, Kylie ran away to the Downtown area of the province she was living in. While on the run, Kylie used drugs and broke into buildings. Kylie was still working full-time at this point. She started using methamphetamine, and she met a dope
dealer who she began to date. She found out later on that he was also a registered gang member. Kylie explained, “It was crazy, dating him. There was obviously lots of gang involvement. Stolen cars from dealerships, we were driving around in a really nice car and it was stolen of course. We’d be in high speed chases with cops” [32:35]. She added, “It was a fucking crazy level, like it was so crazy, but I loved the adrenaline rushes I got from it. We’d be chasing people down, like shooting at them, it was insane [33:06]”. Reflecting on this experience, Kylie said, “At the time I was like, this is so cool. Like, he is so cool. I love him. This is amazing. But now I think like, what the fuck, like I could have died, that’s some sketchy, sketchy shit” [33:41]. Kylie ended up getting gunned down by the cops in a car with her boyfriend. Kylie added,

That was the only time I was actually scared to be in the car, or worried about being in the car. When the car was stopped. Because I trusted him [boyfriend] enough not to crash. The only time [I was worried] was when the cops could catch us. [34:09]

A few months into this new relationship, Kylie’s boyfriend broke up with her. Kylie did not know where to go, because all the places they had lived in together belonged to her boyfriend. He paid the rent, and the guys they hung out with were his friends. Kylie added, “I just walked out, I didn’t really have anything to walk out with, just the sweater off my back” [38:50].

Kylie walked through downtown, and she saw a guy that was friends with her ex-boyfriend. They ended up taking off together, and they stole from stores together. They would use gun intimidation to prevent anyone from coming after them. Then they would switch the license plates on their car and continue on. Kylie explained that the guy she was hanging out with and the gang member she used to date got into a fight over her, and they
used bear mace on each other and batons to hit each other with. They both ended up getting arrested.

Kylie saw a guy who used to be a customer of hers, and he injected meth. Kylie became curious about injecting meth because smoking meth did not get her high anymore. He gave her some, and she injected it. She thought, “This is so amazing. Like I’m so happy; why am I so happy? I’m actually high. This is awesome” [41:20]. Kylie tried it a couple of more times. She said,

I don’t even really remember being not high since I was young. Since I started using meth, I was high everyday. The only time I wasn’t high was when I was in custody, or when I was out with a full time job – other than that I’ve been really fucked up on drugs. [41:45]

Kylie started snorting and injecting heroin mixed with speed. Kylie got back together with the registered gang member for one week, but then the cops arrested them and she got sent back to a Youth Custody Center. She was released and put back on probation.

At this point, Kylie’s older ex was released from jail, and he convinced her to move to a new town with him. With regards to the age of the older guy, Kylie stated, “He was a lot older actually. He wasn’t quite old enough to be my dad but he was pretty darn close” [44:26]. When Kylie was fifteen years old she ended up seeing another guy who was a drug dealer with lots of money, but when her ex-boyfriend got out of jail he tried to rob her because she sold all his stuff while he was in prison. Her new boyfriend smashed a bottle on the side of her ex’s face. He had to get stitches and still has a big scar from it.

Kylie’s ex-boyfriend got put into jail, and when he was released Kylie let him talk her into moving to a new town with him. She explained that this was a scary time because she
was injecting meth and heroin at this point, and she said to her boyfriend that she wouldn’t stop so he had to do it with her or lose her. He ended up doing it with her. She explained, “I ended up getting him really bad into it; we both we were really bad into it, it was really bad” [46:33].

When Kylie moved to a new town with her boyfriend, she had nobody and pushed everyone away. Kylie explained in regards to friendship, “I’ve always gotten along better with guys than I do with girls, mostly because girls would always – I lost a lot of my friends, pretty much all my friends actually, for this one guy” [46:56]. Kylie explained that he isolated her from others. She said, “I pushed everyone away, everybody that I cared about, everybody that cared about me. I didn’t mean to, but I did” [47:16]. Kylie explained that her boyfriend talked her into it. Kylie said that she and her boyfriend ran three crack shacks, and did not have to do anything. They had all the money they wanted, did all the drugs they wanted; they had a place, a car, food in the fridge. She explained, “It was always clean and nice and like a home” [1:13:47].

Kylie’s boyfriend was an alcoholic, and whenever he drank he would become very abusive. Kylie did more and more dope to get through this difficult time. Kylie explained, “It was a really scary place, because I honestly didn’t care if I lived or died. At the time, part of me wished I had died” [4:30]. Kylie tried to get away from her boyfriend, and he held a knife to her throat and wouldn’t let her leave the house. She explained, “He said the only way out of this relationship is ten feet under” [49:57]. Kylie said that she didn’t care about anything at the time except the drugs; however, the drugs would only help for a moment. The older guy was involved with sex trafficking girls and was affiliated with high-end gang members. Kylie explained that the police were trying hard to find her, and this publicity may
be why she wasn’t sex trafficked. Kylie explained, “I was really fucked up on dope. I was like a hundred pounds, I was a mess, I couldn’t leave the house without doing 8 points of meth first” [52:30]. She added, “It was really really scary, I was really depressed, I was really unhappy, and I was really hurt [52:44]”. Kylie said that no one there cared if her boyfriend was abusive towards her. She explained, “He would grab me by the throat and chuck me out of the apartment; nobody would care. My only regret is that I went back” [53:01]. Kylie added, “It was really hard to leave but I’m glad that I did” [53:23]. On explaining why it was so hard to leave, Kylie said, “After everything he’d say I’m so sorry I’ll never do it again and I believed him every time” [53:36].

Kylie eventually turned herself in to the police. She had to detox off methamphetamine and heroin in cells. She was in cells for four days, waiting to be sent back down to the youth custody center. Kylie felt that she wanted to die at this point. She was depressed, drug sick and hurt. She said,

I felt like it was me against the world, and at least before I had drugs to help me through it. I can’t trust anybody. I can’t trust my workers, I can’t trust my lawyer, I can’t trust my PO, I can’t trust my foster mom, I can’t trust anybody. [54:52]

When Kylie was released from youth custody she moved back to a previous town she used to live in. Shortly after, Kylie overdosed on heroin while in a bathroom of a coffee shop. She came out of the bathroom and everything went black. She slipped and fell and hit her face on a windowsill. When she woke up, paramedics were there and all these people were sitting around her and she didn’t know what was going on. They told her she had just died. She didn’t have a pulse for six minutes. The lady at the coffee shop gave her CPR until the paramedics arrived. Kylie said, “It [the experience] was traumatizing” [59:02].
Kylie is very thankful for the woman who gave her CPR; she said “I’m thankful to be alive” [59:35]. She ended up using drugs when she got out of the hospital. Approximately one week later, Kylie and two of her friends overdosed on fentanyl. They all survived the experience. Kylie said, “I knew I needed help. I knew I needed treatment, but I wasn’t ready to do it on my own” [1:00]. Kylie decided to wait it out until the cops found her. She started smoking heroin and crystal meth instead of injecting, and then she started injecting it again.

The police picked her up on Christmas Day because she was missing and high-risk. Kylie felt that the police were determined to arrest her because she was so high-risk. The police found drugs on her, and she spent Christmas Day in city cells. She got released the next day on bail. Kylie was on probation, and she went on the run again. She would hide at her friends’ houses and jump out of the windows before the cops could catch her. Kylie ended up getting arrested again and is currently in youth custody.

Kylie has hopes and dreams for the future. She is determined to be independent. Kylie stated,

Group homes don’t work for me, foster homes don’t work for me, I’m used to living on my own, I’m used to taking care of myself, and to this day I’m not gonna go to no foster home, I’m not gonna go to a group home, because that’s not where I wanna be and it’s not where I’m gonna stay. I’m used to taking care of myself; I’m used to living on my own. [1:13:11]

Kylie really wants to go treatment. She explained,

I really want to go to treatment, because I know I need it. I knew I needed it last time and I’m beyond ready to go now. Me od’ing really opened my eyes, and made me realize what the fuck is going on in my life. I haven’t had it easy growing up, but I
really would love the opportunity to travel when I’m older, I’d love the opportunity to have a nice job that I enjoy, I would love the opportunity to be clean and sober and like I want to go to treatment, I want to get clean, and I want to change my life around. I’m sick of this life, I’m sick of everything that comes with it. I feel like I’ve lived this kind of lifestyle to the fullest and I’m really thankful to be alive and I would love to travel when I’m older. I have no idea yet [where to travel to], but I’d like to go somewhere nice. [1:07:25]

Jessica’s Story:
Jessica doesn’t remember much of her childhood. Jessica’s birth mom did drugs and drank alcohol while she was pregnant, and she put Jessica up for adoption when she was born. Jessica was adopted when she was eleven months old. She does not know the exact reasons that she was placed up for adoption. Jessica does not feel a strong connection with her adopted parents.

When Jessica was eight years old she attended Respite in a group home to give her adopted parents a break. Respite is a group home where one goes for a short time to give both parents and their children a break from one another. Jessica began smoking cigarettes when she was eight years old, because her dad smoked and this made her curious about what it would be like.

Jessica recounted an impactful event that occurred at Respite when she was eight years old. Jessica met a girl who was smoking meth out of a pipe at the group home. The girl offered Jessica a hit of the drug. Jessica explained, “I’ve always been an outsider trying to fit in kinda, so I would do anything to kinda fit myself into whatever is popular” [3:52].
Jessica thought [in regards to taking a hit of meth]: “Maybe this will make me cool, maybe this will get me more popular. But no, it didn’t. It messed my life up” [4:03]. The girl promised Jessica she wouldn’t get addicted. Jessica was young and naïve, and believed her. Jessica explained that she had to have meth again after she took that first hit. She did not do the drug often because she did not have access to it after the girl moved away.

When Jessica turned eleven, she moved into the group home full time because something happened where she could not be at home. Jessica explained that she was not allowed to be around her father. Her mom had to pick between Jessica and her dad, and her mom picked her dad. Jessica said, “I admit it hurt a lot ‘cause for me I think you should always pick your daughter or your son, not your husband, boyfriend, whoever” [5:59]. This is when she started distancing herself from her parents. Jessica added, “I just wish it didn’t happen really” [6:26].

When Jessica was twelve years old a foster mother came to the group home and Jessica ended up going home to live with her. Jessica lived there for six months. She had two foster sisters and a foster brother at the home. She became very close with one of her foster sisters, and Jessica looked out for her. She liked all of her foster siblings and her foster mother. In regards to her foster mom, Jessica said, “She treated me better than my adopted parents” [7:40]. Jessica started to call her foster mom ‘mom’, and her adopted mom would get angry with her for this. Jessica told her adopted mom that her foster mom was a better mom than her, and this hurt her mom’s feelings. They ended up getting into a screaming match. Jessica explained that it was overwhelming and scary to have two women trying to be her mom, and she ended up running away often and hanging out with older guys. She started hanging out with a guy who was twenty-four years old when she was twelve years old, and
the guy ended up getting into trouble with the law for this. She also smoked weed and did ecstasy occasionally.

When Jessica was thirteen years old she started smoking pot and drinking a lot. She started doing meth again when she was about thirteen and a half years old. Jessica explained why she felt pulled towards drugs:

Before I always felt like an outsider, a monster. I felt like everybody else had a manual to their life, but I somehow missed it. When I started drugs that was my manual. And it took away those feelings I had. A certain numbness I guess. My mood is level, but it’s numb. [10:58]

Jessica explained that her mood and feelings started going up and down once she entered foster care. Jessica added, “Everything was falling apart, and I remembered the feeling of when I tried meth. It took away all my feelings, so I’m like I’m gonna go try it again” [11:54].

When Jessica was fourteen years old she had a break down and started throwing stuff around her room. Her foster mom called the cops on her, and she went to the hospital overnight. Her adopted parents picked her up the next morning, and she saw a big garbage bag full of her clothes when she got home from her foster mom. Jessica explained,

I knew that I wasn’t going back. It hurt a lot, ‘cause I really did like them ‘cause they treated me well. They didn’t buy me everything I wanted but they got me gifts a few times and they treated me well. [13:02]

Jessica also appreciated how her foster parents treated her like she was a grown-up and let her make her own decisions.
Jessica explained, “I felt like I always had to grow up fast, so I don’t know. I had to be more mature for my age than I was supposed to be” [13:34]. Jessica stayed at her adopted parents’ home for a couple months, but something happened again and she had to leave there. At this point, Jessica entered an independent living program with a worker. Jessica would cook and clean and take care of the house, except her room which would always be messy. Jessica would even cook for her worker sometimes. She liked this living arrangement because she got to be quite independent.

Jessica attended school regularly until Grade 7. In Grade 7 she started skipping classes, and in Grade 8 she was skipping all the time. Jessica passed until Grade 10, but she explained that up until Grade 10 the teachers pretty much pass the students automatically where she was from. If this did not happen, she explained, she would still be in Grade 7. Jessica described herself as being the quiet one at school. She is a tomboy, and wears guy clothes and skateboards.

She explained, “I was the quiet one. I always had my headphones in. Too much drama. I’m not the drama type, I just like quiet” [7:06]. Jessica said she gets along much better with guys than girls, and that all her friends now are older guys. She said, “I get along better with guys because there’s less drama. The reason why I hang out with older guys is ’cause they are more mature. They [the guys] treat me like an adult. I like that” [17:35].

When Jessica was fourteen years old, she moved to a new duplex with her worker while she was still in the Independent Living Program. Jessica had been chatting online with a guy from another province for about a year, and around that time they arranged that he would come and pick her up. She met him in an open area so that she could get away if she needed to. She ended up going to stay in Alberta at his house. Jessica said that he kept her
clean because he did not use any drugs. Jessica said they were just friends. He gave her a roof over her head, and let her use his computer while he was at work so she wouldn’t get bored. She admitted, “I ended up really bored, though” [19:34]. She climbed out the window of the basement suite (because she didn’t want to lock herself out of the house via the door), and explored, walked around and smoked a cigarette. Jessica walked around and came home before the guy got home. She didn’t want him to know she went out. Jessica said she was not scared of the guy, but she just did not want him to know that she had been leaving the house. She did the same thing a couple of days later, and he somehow found out that she had left. He told her to go out the front door from then on. She went out again and explored a trail in the forest late at night. She explained that she is curious and likes to explore places. She passed a group of guys playing football at one in the morning. They whistled at her, and she fingered them and walked away. She ended up coming back up that way, and they asked her for her number and she didn’t give it to them. They smoked a cigarette together. She started walking back again because she noticed that she had dropped her pack of smokes. She retraced her steps. She saw a different guy in a black car. He pulled up beside her twenty minutes later and put his arms around her. He tried to pull her towards the car. He tried to pull her in, and assured Jessica that it was ok, they weren’t going to hurt her. There were three other guys in the car. They offered her alcohol and drugs. Jessica explained that she felt the situation was, “… a little scary, but I was bored. And they offered me alcohol and drugs” [23:11]. She wanted the alcohol and drugs so she went with them. She got blackout drunk, and woke up in the hospital with four IVs in her arms. Jessica does not remember what happened.
Jessica was arrested while in the hospital for being a runway. The police tried to send her back to the town she was living in previously, but she ran away from the airport. Jessica did not know where she was.

She started walking along the highway, but in the wrong direction from where her guy friend lived. She did not know where she was going. The police came, and she had nowhere to run so she gave herself up. They put her in a paddy wagon and took her a youth custody center.

Jessica entered youth custody, was released for a few months, and then got sent back to youth custody again. She turned fifteen years old, and for the next year she was in and out of youth custody a lot. Jessica kept using drugs and drinking alcohol while she was in the community. Currently, Jessica is back in youth custody.

Jessica expressed uncertainty about what she wants for her future. She explained,

I honestly don’t really know. When I was younger, I always thought I wouldn’t make it past fifteen, and once I hit fifteen I thought I wouldn’t make it past sixteen, but here I am, I’m sixteen. The lifestyle I’m in; it’s gonna end up getting me killed eventually, I don’t know when. I’m just trying to get myself through this [youth custody] first so I’m not really thinking of the future. [28:11]

Jessica explained that she has not had supportive adults in her life while growing up. She said,

I’ve learned that I have trust issues, so I don’t trust people a lot… just saying this [my story] is hard for me. I’ve had people who say, “Oh I’ll always be there for you, you can always come and talk me, I’ll listen. I go up to them and try to talk to them and they ignore me. [29:10]
Jessica concluded, “I’ve given up on people, on humanity. I just rely on myself now, to get myself through this” [29:42].

**Natalie’s Story:**

Natalie was born in a western Canadian province. She grew up with her grandma and mom for the first three to four years of her life. Natalie moved with her mom and sister to a nearby town so that they could be closer to her dad. Natalie’s dad was very abusive towards her mom, and Natalie remembers that he was also physically abusive towards her when she was young.

Natalie described one event that sticks out in her memory. She was three years old and stirring a pot of soup on the stove. She spilled the soup all over herself, and got first and second degree burns. Her dad yelled at her, slapped her across the face, and threw her into the bedroom. She didn’t get to eat and she had to wait there for her mom to get off work. She was in a lot of pain from the burns on her body.

When Natalie was four years old, she moved with her mom and sister into a basement suite. Her dad had left the family at this time and disappeared for the next ten years.

Natalie entered Kindergarten when she five years old. She remembers having a hard time at school since Kindergarten. Natalie described friendships as being “difficult” [7:41]. Natalie explained, “I was bullied, I was picked on”[2:46]. She described constant bullying in school when she was young and also when she grew older. Natalie changed schools after Grade 1, and switched to another school a few years later because she and her sister could not be in the same school. They did not get along and they used to physically fight with one another often.
Natalie discussed how she gets along better with males than females. Natalie said, I get along better with guys because there’s less drama. A lot of girls that are clique-type and mean-girl type I don’t particularly like, and I don’t get along with. Because I was bullied by those girls when I was younger, bullied by those girls in jail. I don’t like them. I don’t hang around with them. I don’t like victimization. And I don’t like bullying. [20:44]

Natalie added, But I will admit, in here I have been bullied but I have also done some bullying myself. I will admit that, and I’m not proud of it. It makes me feel shitty and I shouldn’t do it. It’s not the right thing to do. And I don’t think I will continue with that either. It’s just best to be nice to people. And I feel horrible. [21:28]

Natalie described her bullying experience as: Traumatizing. I suffer from PTSD from physical, verbal, mental, and emotional abuse. I’ve been taken advantage of emotionally, physically, and verbally by pimps, people in the drug life, I’ve been taken advantage of physically by my Dad when I was younger, verbally assaulting my sister and her doing the same to me. Now when stuff happens to me, I have flashbacks about what has happened in the past to me. [23:14]

Natalie has vivid memories about being removed from her mom’s home and placed in the foster care system when she was eleven years old. Natalie said, All I remember [from] the day I got taken away was crying, freaking out, trying to leave the ministry’s building. I remember one of the social workers put their hands
on me trying to stop me from leaving to go find my mom. I didn’t know how to deal with it. [3:44]

Natalie was placed in her first foster home at the age of eleven. She said that her foster parents called the police because she was crying due to missing her mom. Natalie was taken to the hospital. She fainted at the first hospital, and was moved to a hospital in a different city. Natalie explained, “I was scared. I didn’t know what to think” [3:49]. Natalie was placed in a second foster home when she was twelve years old. She got along very well with her new foster mother. Natalie said, “I was always by her side. She was like a mom to me. She treated me like her own kid” [5:10]. When Natalie was thirteen years old, she was moved out of her foster mom’s house because she had assaulted her sister’s counsellor. Natalie was placed in a new foster home in a different city, and she began getting involved with the police. She spent the night in cells for the first time when she was thirteen years old. Natalie remembers feeling scared. She stated, “It was scary I didn’t go pee. I wouldn’t do it because I thought the camera was watching me” [6:27].

Throughout Natalie’s early teenage years, she would often go missing and stay at friends’ houses. Natalie explained,

She [foster mom] was always scared for me. She should have been. The situations I put myself in aren’t good. And I didn’t even know they were dangerous. That’s the fucked up part. I thought it was normal, I thought it was okay. [10:06]

Natalie described how she was forced into human sex trafficking. She survived this situation by using drugs. Natalie said, “I would use more and more. I couldn’t stop. It was getting harder for me to stop using drugs. They [the drugs] made me feel distracted” [11:17].
When Natalie was thirteen years old, she moved back in with an old set of foster parents. She described her experience of the foster care system: “It’s like a yoyo situation. It’s not good. It’s difficult and hard on the youth, and the people around the youth that care about them” [7:26].

An event occurred that had a huge impact on Natalie’s life. She was walking in the park when she was six months pregnant. She was attacked and raped while walking. She was hit over the head and lost the baby she was carrying. Natalie said, “I didn’t talk to anyone about it. I just turned to drugs” [8:54]. She began using MDMA and drinking alcohol. Natalie did not know how to tell her mother that she had lost her granddaughter. Natalie felt lost and like she had no one to turn to.

Natalie discussed how she finds the past confusing to reflect upon. She stated, “I wasn’t myself, I was someone different [when I was on drugs]. That’s what drugs do to you. You have different motives, different drives, different everything” [14:54]. Natalie explained that she used drugs for ten months about once every day or two. She attempted to get clean twice. Currently, she is on her third attempt at getting clean. She has now been clean for 93 days from methamphetamine.

She explained that she has been able to stay clean for this length of time because she has been attending NA meetings and AA meetings while she is in the community. Also, when she is in custody this helps her stay off drugs. Natalie has gone through another breakup recently, but she said,

I’m not tempted to use again. I’m tempted just to get better, and stay better, and do better. Because if I use, what’s good in it for me? Nothing. I’ll lose everything again. I’m not going to gain anything. Even though I feel sad. [19:03]
When asked how she handles the sad feelings, she explained she works out, writes in her journal, and talks to people about how she is feeling. Natalie added, “Now I try to talk to someone because that’s the best thing for me to do personally” [19:42].

Natalie has a support network in her life which includes one previous foster mom and her current foster mom. Natalie described her current foster mom as:

Caring, loving, and supportive. I put her through my entire drug addiction. I put her in unsafe situations, and she’s come out of it, gone to counselling for it, but she’s still there. She’s still lives with me. She still takes care of me. She’s seen me at my worst conditions and my best, and she’s loved me through all of them. She’s been with me through everything. [12:37]

Natalie’s current foster mom was also supportive when Natalie broke up with her boyfriend for the first time. Natalie added, “Heartbreak still sucks but it’s not the end of the world” [13:58].

In the future, Natalie hopes to not return to youth custody. She said, I hope I can do better. I really want my life to work out. I want to do good. I want to have a job. I want to finish my schooling and one day have a family of my own, again. [24:46]

**Lauren’s Story:**

Lauren described her childhood as chaotic. Lauren’s mom drank alcohol and did drugs while she was pregnant with Lauren, and also while she was breastfeeding her. Additionally, Lauren explained that from a very young age her dad was a negative influence.
on her. When she was around five years old, her dad would encourage her to drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes.

Lauren’s biological parents got divorced, and Lauren’s mom married Dennis, who became her stepdad. Lauren explained, “They weren’t really together for that long; they just kinda got married” [0:25]. Lauren’s mom and stepdad had a few other children together. Lauren described her relationship with her stepdad as abusive, and that he hated her. Lauren said, “[He] pushed me away a lot” [0:48]. When Lauren was six years old, her stepdad convinced her mom to put Lauren into Respite Care part-time. Lauren stated, “I had a lot of abandonment issues when I was young” [1:28]. Lauren added that her mom thought that, “I [Lauren] was going to turn out like my dad” [19:48], because Dennis continually told her this would happen.

Lauren enjoyed taking dance lessons and horseback riding lessons while she was growing up. She lived on a horse ranch with her mom and her stepdad, and she became very good at horseback riding. Lauren even jumped horses and entered rodeos. Lauren explained, “It [horseback riding] was something I was really passionate about; same with dancing” [40:58]. When Lauren was seven years old the Ministry entered her into dance lessons. She said, “I’ve always been really into dance. I could just get lost in the music and forget about everything that had ever happened” [2:20].

When Lauren was eight she moved into her grandma’s house. Lauren expressed that she had a lot of abandonment issues and behavioural problems; therefore, she had a difficult time listening to her grandma. Lauren said, “If I didn’t get my own way I would throw a temper tantrum, when I was like eight through eleven” [3:52]. Due to these temper tantrums, Lauren’s grandma put her back into Respite Care and the police would be called
whenever she had a tantrum. Lauren added, “I thought they [the police] were scary and I was like “Okay I’m never gonna do it again”, but it would happen like two weeks later” [4:28].

Eventually Lauren’s grandmother was no longer able to care for Lauren, so Lauren entered foster care full time. Lauren stopped horseback riding when she got put into foster care. She was constantly moving homes because home after home would give up. She lived in a small town, and over time all the available foster homes in the town had housed Lauren and had given up on her. Lauren reflected on one very bad foster home experience:

She [the foster mom] was very abusive. She would hit us with broomsticks. And when her husband came home he was an alcoholic and he was very abusive too. She had her own kids but she treated her own kids very, very nicely, and loved her own kids. She [the foster mom] treated me and the other three foster kids like shit. [5:26]

Lauren explained that the foster mom made them clean, and they were not given proper necessities, such as clothes and adequate bedroom space. Lauren’s foster father sexually assaulted her when she was eleven years old. Lauren said, “[the sexual assault] was very traumatizing. That’s one of those things that’s always gonna be there” [6:45].

When Lauren was twelve years old she began doing drugs and drinking alcohol. She smoked marijuana often. She explained, “Weed was like my gateway drug to everything else” [8:02]. She also began using hard drugs, including meth and heroin, when she was thirteen years old. Lauren overdosed multiple times, and still continued using drugs. She explained, “I thought it was cool, everyone else thought it was cool, we all loved it, we all loved forgetting, like, that’s what I loved” [8:07].
Lauren discussed how she has struggled with suicide ideation throughout her life. She said “I have always wanted to end my life at a very young, young age” [6:17]. She first tried committing suicide when she was eleven years old because she didn’t want to deal with her life any longer. Additionally, Lauren stated that she often has flashbacks of past events. She added, “I get night terrors and I wake up screaming” [2:50].

Lauren was moved into a group home when she was twelve years old and stayed there until she was fifteen years old. The children were not allowed to leave the premises, and all the residents had to do online school on computers. Lauren said this experience messed up her social development skills. She explained,

You just don’t have friends. So it fucks you up socially because you don’t know how to make friends. You’re at this age where you are supposed to learn how to make friends at school and you just don’t make any friends because you are stuck there [in the group home]. [11:09]

Lauren attempted to run away from the group home with four of her friends. However, the staff knew ahead of time about their plans and blocked off their escape route (a bridge). The youth attempted to swim across a dangerous river with a strong current in order to escape. Lauren said, “We were feeling really desperate to leave, and one of my good friends ended up almost drowning” [14:11]. Lauren and her friends narrowly escaped death. The group home staff called the police, and the police came on their boat and brought all the youth to the hospital.

Lauren was moved to a cabin in the forest where she lived in isolation. She lived with one staff member and no other children. Lauren explained, “They [staff] thought that I was the problem causing people to run away so they separated me from every other resource
they had and moved me out there” [16:00]. Lauren described the environment as having a lake, a dock, an outhouse, and one small cabin. She ate hot dogs a lot of the time, and felt bored because there was nothing to do there and no one to hang out with. Lauren was initially told she would be staying at the cabin for one week, but one week turned into two months. At this point, Lauren drank bleach and attempted to drown herself in the lake. Lauren said, “I was just done. They had drained me. Every little bit of confidence that was left in me was gone and I just wanted to fade away” [16:59]. Lauren swam out into the middle of the lake and was coughing up blood. A woman who lived in a cabin on the other side of the lake happened to see Lauren, and she came out on her boat and saved Lauren by pulling her out of the water. Lauren said, “I don’t know. I feel like it’s meant to be that I’m still alive” [17:34]. The ambulance came, and Lauren was brought to the hospital. She was in a coma for three weeks at the hospital and almost died.

Lauren recovered, and then was placed in a different group home where she lived with one male staff. The male staff sexually assaulted her. Lauren told her mom but she did not believe her. Lauren’s stepdad convinced Lauren’s mom that Lauren was lying, and she believed him. Lauren said, “It was really terrible. I started actually getting scared of male figures, like I was actually scared of them. Like when I saw a male walking down the street it fucking scared me ” [19:30].

Lauren moved to a new town and started living with her biological dad six months ago. Lauren became friends with a bad crowd when she moved to this town because of her stepsister’s connections. When describing her relationship with her dad, Lauren explained, “When he was sober he was a great dad, but he wasn’t really ever sober” [23:26]. Lauren’s dad is middle aged, and has a girlfriend in her twenties named Ashley. They have a baby
boy together named Liam, and Ashley was using heroin during her pregnancy and while breastfeeding him. Lauren observed that Ashley did not take very good care of Liam, so she started taking care of him. Lauren started dating a guy named Mark who she had been friends with for three years, and they moved in together. Lauren and Mark took Liam to live at their house, and he started calling them mom and dad. Ashley would leave Liam for many days in a row at Lauren and Mark’s house.

Lauren described her relationship with Mark as unhealthy. They both worked full time jobs with opposite schedules, so they did not get to spend much quality time together. When they had the same time off, they would do family activities with Liam such as taking him to the park or to the swimming pool. Lauren explained, “It was never, really, like anything romantic” [36:59]. Mark also cheated on her at one point with her best friend. Lauren stated, “Yeah [he betrayed me], not like I haven’t been betrayed before!” [38:13]. Lauren explained that she has not had anyone loving and supportive in her life except for Mark. She said, “He’s been really good” [39:39].

A few months later, Lauren had to leave town to attend court. Due to the outcome of court, Lauren moved into a homeless shelter for a period of time. She relapsed on meth, and was put back into a one-on-one group home with the same male staff that had sexually assaulted her in the past. Lauren went on the run, and returned to live with her boyfriend. She was considered missing during this time period. Lauren went to visit her dad, and learned that Mark had returned Liam to Ashley’s care instead of continuing to take primary responsibility for him like she had asked him to before she left for court. Lauren was furious about this, and after becoming increasingly concerned about Liam’s welfare, she called the
Ministry and Liam was placed in foster care. Lauren hopes to adopt Liam when she turns nineteen years old.

Currently, Lauren does not have a good relationship with her mother. Lauren said to her mom,

I have given you chance over chance over chance over chance, and you haven’t helped me, you haven’t been there for me, you haven’t believed in me. Everything I do you criticize. Everything good that I do you criticize. So I eventually was like you know what? I’m done. [35:22]

Lauren convinced her mom to sign over her last bit of guardianship rights. Currently, Lauren refuses to enter another foster home. She wants to return to her dad’s house so that she can then move back into her place with Mark.

In the future, Lauren does not want to re-enter youth custody. She is very passionate about horseback riding, and hopes to spend more time doing this activity in the future. She wants to attend university and become a horse veterinarian. Lauren said, “I love horses. Horses are my life. I’ve been horseback riding since I was young. It’s a huge part of me. I always feel like something is missing [when I don’t ride]” [40:33]. When Lauren is horseback riding, she feels amazing. Lauren exclaimed, “I feel like I’m on top of the world” [41:31]!

**Michelle’s Story:**

Michelle was born in North America. She lived with her mom for a little while. Michelle’s mom was addicted to drugs and taking part in violent crimes, so Michelle was removed from her care. Michelle moved to Canada to live with her auntie on her dad’s side.
Michelle’s mom kidnapped her from Canada, and Michelle was not allowed to live with her at all after that. Her mom went to jail for six years, and her dad was rarely in her life. She met her dad, and she saw him a couple of times when she was little. Michelle’s mom and dad are both currently addicted to heroin.

Michelle remembers being sexually assaulted numerous times by her auntie’s husband when she was around the age of three. When Michelle was five, her grandma asked her auntie if Michelle could go and live with her. Michelle remembers packing up her belongings. Michelle moved in with her younger sister and her grandma. Michelle felt like her grandma favoured her sister. She explained, “I was always the odd one out. My grandmother wanted me because of the money” [2:41].

Michelle witnessed violence during her childhood. She started misbehaving and felt angry and confused throughout her childhood years. Michelle began stealing when she was around five years old. She remembers her grandma pushing and shoving her for stealing small toys from a store. Michelle also remembered beating up her grandma when she was seven years old because she “hated her” [3:32]. Michelle said, “She tried to sabotage my life. She would push me, she would call me stuff, and she would treat me like [I was] her slave” [3:38]. Michelle remembers constant conflict between the two sides of her family. She explained, “It’s like my dad’s side and my mom’s side just at war 24/7. I was horrible I guess. I just never knew family, my mom’s side of the family, I still don’t; I’m starting to get there” [4:02]. Michelle began smoking weed when she was eight years old and she also started to feel depressed.

When Michelle was nine years old her grandma’s boyfriend molested her. The sexual abuse continued until Michelle was twelve years old. At this point, Michelle told her
counsellor about the abuse. Michelle’s grandma did not believe her, and she accused Michelle of lying about the abuse. At this point, Michelle moved back to Canada to live with her auntie. She started running away and misbehaving, and Michelle soon entered the foster care system. Michelle described her foster care experience: “It was hell. But eventually all of us go through hell and we come out” [6:54]. Michelle was placed in group homes mainly because she was not allowed to be around men as she would get them in trouble. Michelle explained, “They made it sound like I’m lying about it [sexual abuse]… No one believes me so it’s hard” [7:12]. She admits that she did make up some incidents when she was between the ages of six and nine, but most of the time she was telling the truth and her grandma made her sound like a liar. Michelle added, “She made me sound like the bad kid. No. I was going to school everyday, I was trying, and she just made it look like…eventually I started just giving up” [7:32]. Michelle’s grandma made Michelle attend counselling, and also made her take pills for many different mental disorders. Michelle did not believe she needed the pills, and she said they made her feel worse.

Michelle described her auntie and uncle as being supportive adults in her life while she was growing up. She would go to their house all the time because they “treated me like they did their [five] kids” [13:52]. They would not give her the pills because they knew she didn’t need them. Her auntie would throw the pills away, and then Michelle would return to her grandma’s house where she was expected to take the pills regularly. Her grandma would get angry at her because she thought Michelle took all her pills, and she would call her a “druggie” [15:02]. Michelle explained that going on and off the pills really upset her bodily systems, and she currently still has problems from this, including bladder infections and menstruation issues.
Michelle was charged with criminal offenses when she was a teenager, and she entered youth custody when she was twelve years old. She was doing a lot of drugs at this point, including weed, alcohol, and crystal meth. Michelle is now fourteen, and described herself as: “just sitting in jail waiting to change” [6:45].

Michelle hopes her future will be “not like this” [12:12]. She acknowledged that her family has experienced many problems. She explained that the problems within the family have been passed down from “generation after generation after generation after generation” [11:22]. Michelle stated, “This is going to be the last generation. I’m going to change and prove all of them wrong” [11:28]. Michelle said, “I have a lot of faith. I used to have a lot of hope when I was little but hope just wasn’t my word so, so faith is my word. It helps me get through stuff” [12:42]. Michelle explained that she does not want to be in youth custody in the future, but right now she doesn’t mind being in youth custody because “it’s more clean time and more thinking to do and more planning. It’s all good, I’m just doing my time” [16:07].

**Thematic Analysis of Results**

I used the thematic content analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyze the stories. The stories were coded, and the codes were organized into categories. The categories were sorted into overarching themes. I utilized numerous sticky notes and large sheets of poster paper to organize the coded data. The data was organized into seven overarching themes.

**Family Life**

The first theme is Family Life. Family life was discussed by all of the female youth participants within their interviews. Within this theme, four main categories emerged. The
first category is *Removal*, the second category is *Familial Relationships*, the third category is *Where is Home?* and the fourth category is *Parental Struggles*.

The experience of *Removal* was discussed by all of the female youth participants. All of the participants were removed from their original homes and placed into alternative care. All of the female youth participants were placed in the foster care system, one participant was adopted at birth, one participant was placed in an orphanage, and two participants were placed with family members. In general, the participants described the experience of removal from their homes as being upsetting and confusing. Natalie discussed being removed from her home by Social Services. She stated,

> All I remember [from] the day I got taken away was crying, freaking out, trying to leave the ministry’s building. I remember one of the social worker’s putting their hands on me trying to stop me from leaving to go find my mom. I didn’t know how to deal with it. [3:44, p. 72-73]

The second category, *Familial Relationships*, contains two sub-categories: Biological Family Relationships and Foster/Adopted Family Relationships. Within the sub-category of Biological Family Relationships, all of the female youth participants discussed these relationships. Five of the eight female youth participants described either not knowing their biological mother or not having a positive relationship with their biological mother, while three out of eight participants reported having a positive relationship with their biological mother. Kylie discussed how she would try to reconnect with her biological mother:

> I’d try to involve her in my life, but she would end up leaving shortly after. She would leave me for guys, she would leave me, yeah mainly just for guys…You [mother] have no right to come into my life and just assume that you can try and do anything like that
[take on mothering responsibilities]. You left me in foster care. You left me to do all this fucking bullshit. Like who do you think you are? Pretty much. [35:34, p. 59]

Additionally, seven out of eight of the female youth participants discussed not knowing their biological father at all or not having a positive relationship with their biological father.

The second sub-category of Familial Relationships is titled Adopted/Foster Family Relationships. All of the female youth participants discussed these relationships. Many youth described having numerous experiences with foster/adopted families with both positive and negative outcomes. Two main points were highlighted throughout the interviews. The first one was that all of the female youth participants described having negative foster/adopted family relationships. Hannah discussed her relationship with her adopted mother after her adopted parents lost legal guardianship of her:

I called her six or seven times a day. I cried every time she didn’t answer that phone and I kept calling. She [adopted mom] answered the phone once, and I accidently hung up because I was shocked that she answered finally… That hanging up the phone was the worst mistake of my life. I haven’t heard her voice for years now. She wants nothing to do with me. [25:41, p. 46]

The second main point was that four out of eight female youth participants described having relationships with other adopted/foster family members that were caring, supportive, and essential for their health and well-being. For example, Alexis described her relationship with her adopted mother:

Sandra [adopted mom] is absolutely beautiful. Her love is unconditional for me. [4:25, p.48] It’s a kind of love you don’t find everywhere. [12:40, p. 49] When I sobered up [recovery from alcohol poisoning] I noticed the dark bags underneath my
mom’s eyes. She was beside the bedside table, waiting for me to wake up. [9:27, p. 49]

The third category, *Where is Home?*, emerged throughout the data. All of the female youth participants described moving multiple times throughout both their childhood and adolescent years. Commonly, this lack of a stable home base led to feelings of confusion and sadness among the female youth participants. Sarah described her experience of not having a stable home environment:

Practically since I was twelve I’ve been raising myself. It was really hard [taking care of myself] because I was practically couch surfing between all these homes. I felt like I didn’t really have a home… I mean it was really difficult for me because, I guess, kinda skip back here [referred to timeline], to when I was little, by the time I was five I was in thirteen different foster homes. [5:14, p. 52]

Furthermore, seven out of eight female youth participants discussed running away numerous times from where they were supposed to be living. All of the female youth who ran away stayed at friends’ houses while they were on the run. Additionally, two out of eight participants reported moving to a new province, and two out of eight participants reported moving to a new country.

The fourth category within the theme of Family Life is *Parental Struggles*. Seven out of eight of the female youth participants stated that their biological parents struggled with substance use issues. As Lauren described the relationship with her biological dad: “When he was sober he was a great dad, but he wasn’t really ever sober” [23:26, p. 79].

**Peer Relationships**

The second theme is Peer Relationships. Two patterns emerged within this theme. The
first pattern was that all of the female youth participants described having older male
friends/boyfriends. Kylie described meeting an older man the day she got off probation, and
the huge impact this had on her life:

My life changed then. I don’t know, if I didn’t meet him I probably wouldn't be
where I am today. He taught me a lot. I learned how to sell drugs, I learned how to
hustle people, I learned how to punch people out, I learned- I learned everything. I
learned how to lie. I learned how to lie and manipulate people. I liked the adrenaline
rushes from the crazy shit; it was all fun and games in my mind. I didn’t really know
much about it, I was young and naïve. [10:36, p. 58]

The second pattern that emerged was that six out of eight female youth participants discussed
not getting along well with females, and having few female friends. Jessica stated, “I get
along better with guys because there’s less drama” [17:35, p. 69].

**School Experiences**

The third theme is School Experiences. Seven out of eight of the female youth
participants described having negative school experiences. Negative school experiences
included: skipping school, getting expelled from school, and being a victim of bullying
(mainly by other female students). Three of the female youth participants described how
they became bullies as a result of being victims of bullying. In regards to bullying Natalie
stated,

A lot of girls that are clique-type and mean-girl type I don’t particularly like, and I
don’t get along with because I was bullied by those girls when I was younger in school,
bullied by those girls in jail. I don’t like them. I don’t hang around with them. I don’t
like victimization and I don’t like bullying. But I will admit in here [youth custody] I
have been bullied but I have also done some bullying myself. I will admit that, and I’m not proud of it. It makes me feel shitty and I shouldn’t do it. It’s not the right thing to do and I don't think I will continue with that either. It’s just best to be nice to people and I feel horrible. [20:44, p. 72]

However, three out of eight youth participants described positive school experiences. Positive school experiences included: playing sports and earning high grades. Sarah said, “I was a good kid, I was a straight A student, I was in violin, I was so spoiled” [2:11, p. 51).

**Substance Use/Mental Health**

The fourth theme is Substance Use/Mental Health. These two topics are combined because female youth participants’ stories described how mental health struggles often resulted in increased drug use, and how increased drug use in turn led to more mental health issues. In terms of Mental Health, seven out of the eight female youth participants discussed struggling with mental health challenges. Furthermore, six out of eight female youth participants talked about feeling sad/depressed. Additionally, two out of eight female youth participants discussed previous suicide ideation and the same proportion mentioned previous suicide attempts. Sarah talked about a previous suicide attempt at thirteen years of age: “I couldn’t handle my life. I couldn’t take it. I think I’ve been in a depression stage since then [suicide attempt]. I can’t really emotionally be there without balling my eyes out” [23:30, p. 53].

In regards to the co-category Substance Use, all of the female youth participants shared that they smoked cigarettes, drank alcohol, and smoked weed. Furthermore, seven out of eight female youth participants talked about using hard drugs, such as methamphetamine, ecstasy, heroin, and fentanyl. Three out of the eight female youth participants discussed
overdosing on alcohol or drugs. Participants specified that drug use led to feeling numb, being distracted from reality, forgetting about past events, and feeling accepted by peers. Lauren stated, “Weed was my gateway drug to everything else. I thought it was cool, everyone else thought it was cool, we all loved it, we all loved forgetting, like, that’s what I loved” [8:02, p. 77].

**Childhood Trauma**

The fifth theme is Childhood Trauma. There are two categories within this theme. The first category is *Emotional/Physical Abuse* and the second category is *Childhood Sexual Abuse*. All of the female youth participants described experiencing emotional and/or physical abuse. The perpetrators included their biological parents, stepparents, extended relatives, foster parents, adopted parents, and significant others. Lauren reflected on one foster care experience:

She [the foster mom] was very abusive. She would hit us with broomsticks. And when her husband came home he was an alcoholic and he was very abusive too. She had her own kids but she treated her own kids very, very nicely and loved her own kids. She treated me and the other three foster kids like shit. [5:26, p 76-77]

Additionally, five out of eight female youth participants described experiencing neglect, which included being left at home alone for days at a time, being locked out of the house and not being able to get in, and having to take on adult roles as children. Three out of eight of the female youth participants described witnessing domestic violence in their homes while growing up.

In the second category, *Childhood Sexual Abuse*, five out of eight female youth participants described being victims of sexual abuse as children. Three of these youth stated
that they were victims of childhood sexual abuse prior to four years of age. The perpetrators included caregivers’ boyfriends, a foster brother, and a male staff member at a group home. In two cases, the female youth stated they were not believed when they told an adult. Alexis said,

> When I was three years old something really bad happened [her foster brother raped her continually until she was seven years old]. [12:49, p. 48] That’s the type of shit I had to grow up with. [15:15, p. 48] There’s nothing I could do about it when I was three. [16:26, p. 48]

Alexis told the researcher after the interview that she participated in the study so that “other girls could know they aren’t alone”. Additionally, one female youth participant reported being forced into sex trafficking.

**Misbehaviour/Criminality**

The sixth theme is Misbehaviour/Criminality. All of the female youth participants described engaging in misbehaviour, including activities such as lying, stealing, and drug use. Over time, childhood misbehaviour led to criminality and entry into the youth justice system, where all of the female youth participants currently reside. Kylie talked about one of her many run-ins with the police:

> I actually kicked one of the officers in the face one time, and he fractured my jaw and he beat me up pretty bad. He didn’t charge me for kicking him in the face because he beat me so bad. I blacked out after the first couple punches. I woke up in excruciating pain, my face was all bruised up, I had goose eggs on my head. And I remember I was laying on the ground when I kicked him in the face. [1:04:53, p. 58]

On the flip side, misbehaviour/criminality were often used as a means of survival in the
environments the female youth participants were living in.

**Future Plans**

The seventh theme is Future Plans. The female youth participants mainly discussed positive future plans, which included getting clean and sober, finishing high school, attending college/university, getting a job, having a family, and traveling. Sarah stated,

I hope to actually get out of the ministry, I hope to move in with my boyfriend or something, I hope to get a job, I hope to finish my schooling, I hope to have a bright future for myself. I’ve lived in so much chaos in the last five years that my life went so downhill and I think that I dragged myself downhill so now I think it’s just time to move on. I know I messed up, but you can only move forward. You can’t really change the past. [38:22, p. 55]

A small subsection of the female youth, two out of eight participants, voiced uncertainty, a hopeless feeling for the future, and a lack of belief that things will change from how they currently are. Jessica said,

I honestly don’t really know [what I want for the future]. When I was younger, I always thought that I wouldn’t make it past fifteen, and once I hit fifteen I thought I wouldn’t make it past sixteen. The lifestyle I’m in, it’s gonna end up getting me killed eventually, I don’t know when. I’m just trying to get myself through this [youth custody] so I’m not really thinking of the future. [28:11, p. 70-71]

**Additional Insights**

There were additional insightful thoughts shared by the female youth. Many of the female youth participants alluded to the fact that trusting other people was very challenging for them due to past life events. Jessica said:
I’ve learned that I have trust issues, so I don’t trust people a lot. Just saying this story is hard for me. I’ve had people who say, “Oh I’ll always be there for you, you can always come and talk to me, I’ll listen”. I go up and talk to them and they ignore me. I’ve given up on people, on humanity. I just rely on myself now, to get myself through this. [29:10, p. 71]

Another noteworthy point that stood out within the stories of the female youth was the importance of having an activity, hobby, or future dream that one is passionate about. For example, Hannah is passionate about pursuing a career where she can help others, and Lauren is passionate about dance and horseback riding. Lauren said, “I love horses. Horses are my life. I’ve been horseback riding since I was young. It’s a huge part of me. I always feel like something is missing [when I don’t ride]” [40:33]. I feel like I’m on top of the world [when I’m riding]!” [41:31, p. 80-81].

The importance of acceptance and belonging was highlighted within the stories of the female youth participants. The intrinsic human need to belong and to be accepted by other human beings sometimes led to choices with negative consequences. Jessica explained, “I’ve always been an outsider trying to fit in kinda, so I would do anything to kinda fit myself into whatever is popular” [3:52, p. 66]. Jessica thought [in regards to taking a hit of meth]: “Maybe this will make me cool, maybe this will get me more popular. But no, it didn’t. It messed my life up” [4:03, p. 66].

Importantly, the female youth participants have also exhibited an extraordinary amount of resilience throughout their lives. All eight of the female youth participants have survived very difficult life circumstances. Furthermore, they were brave in telling their stories and allowing their stories to be shared with others. In general, the female youth participants also
voiced hope for a future that will be brighter than their past. Hannah said, “I can tell my story and I feel strong about it” [39:52, p. 47]. She concluded, “My life, it’s been a journey, but I’m just getting started really” [38:17, p. 47].
DISCUSSION

The experience of exploring the stories of female youth in custody was enlightening. There were many ways in which my results were similar to previous research studies and there were also ways in which my results were different from previous research studies. I will go through my results and discuss the ways in which they were similar and different from previous research that I reviewed in Chapter 2. Additionally, I will discuss the implications of my research study and I will highlight ideas for future research in the field.

Family Life

The first overarching theme that I discussed in Chapter 4 was Family Life, and there were many similarities and some differences between the results of my study and previous research in regards to this theme. The first category within Family life was Removal. The experience of removal was discussed by all of the female youth participants because all of the participants were removed from their original homes and placed into alternative care. All of the female youth participants were placed in the foster care system, one participant was adopted at birth, one participant was placed in an orphanage, and two participants were placed with family members. Previous research stated that girls involved in the juvenile justice system had higher rates of foster care placement than the general population (Leve et al., 2015); however, the experience of removal itself does not appear within the literature. In general, the participants described the experience of removal from their homes as being upsetting and confusing. The participants felt a sense of betrayal and abandonment. It is important for individuals who work with female youth in custody to be aware of these types of experiences the female youth have undergone, so that they can be sensitive towards potential needs of the youth and understanding of youth behaviours.
The second category within Family Life was *Familial Relationships*. Previous research suggests that dysfunctional familial relationships are a common occurrence among female youth in custody (Borduin & Ronis, 2012; Corrado et al., 2000). Similarly, in my study under the sub-category of Biological Familial Relationships, five out of eight of the female youth participants described either not knowing their biological mother or not having a positive relationship with their biological mother and seven out of eight of the female youth participants discussed not knowing their biological father at all or not having a positive relationship with their biological father. The second sub-category within Familial Relationships was titled Adopted/Foster Family Relationships. All of the female youth participants discussed these relationships, and all of the female youth participants described having negative foster/adopted family relationships.

The presence of positive family and adult influences were found to be a protective factor for at-risk youth in previous literature. Specifically, studies have shown that higher levels of maternal warmth resulted in less disruptive behaviour and conduct problems in at-risk female adolescents (Hipwell et al., 2008; Leve et al., 2015; van der Molen, Hipwell, Vermeien, & Loeber, 2001). In my research study, three out of eight female youth participants reported having a positive relationship with their biological mother currently. Furthermore, in Smith’s (2013) survey, the presence of caring adults in the lives of at-risk youth made a marked difference in the self-reported mental health of the youth. In my research study, four out of eight female youth participants described having relationships with adopted/foster family members that were caring, supportive, and essential for their health and well-being.

The third category within Family Life was *Where is Home?* In Leve et al.’s (2015)
review, a key factor associated with girls’ involvement with the juvenile justice system was caregiver transitions. Furthermore, Leve et al. (2015) reported that girls involved in the juvenile justice system had higher rates of foster care placement than the general population. My study results were similar because all of the female youth participants described moving multiple times throughout both their childhood and adolescent years. Furthermore, all of the female youth participants described experiences within the foster care system. This lack of a stable home base commonly led to feelings of confusion and sadness among the female youth participants in the study. Additionally, previous literature reported that girls who are involved in the youth justice system are more likely than the boys to have run away from home (Johansson & Kempf-Leonard, 2009; Smith, 2013). In my research study, seven out of eight female youth participants discussed running away numerous times from where they were supposed to be living and staying at friends’ houses while they were on the run.

The fourth category within the theme of Familial Life was Parental Struggles and seven out of eight of the female youth participants stated that their biological parents struggled with substance use issues. Similarly, results from previous research suggest that parent criminality increases the likelihood of their daughters being involved with the juvenile justice system (Lederman et al., 2004; Leve et al., 2015).

Peer Relationships

Peer relationships are a widely studied aspect of adolescent delinquent behaviour. Numerous studies have pointed out that female youth in custody are often linked romantically with older boys (Cauffman, Farruggia, & Goldweber, 2008; Lederman et al. 2004; Leve et al., 2015). The second theme in my study was titled Peer Relationships, and two patterns emerged within this theme. The first pattern was similar to past literature,
because all of the female youth participants described having older male friends/boyfriends. The second pattern was different from the previous literature, because six out of eight female youth participants discussed not getting along well with females, and having few female friends. Past literature has also shown that prosocial peer relationships can also serve as a protective factor for at-risk youth (Kim & Leve, 2011; Leve et al., 2015; Smith, 2013; Taussig, 2002). Furthermore, youth in custody reported that participation in an alternative social group would help them to avoid re-offending in the future (Smith, 2013). These are important protective factors to be implemented by youth custody personnel/programs.

**School Experiences**

Previous literature shows that positive school experiences can be a protective factor for at-risk youth (Leve et al., 2015; Smith, 2013; Zingraff, Leiter, Johnson, & Meyers, 1994). The third theme in my research study was School Experiences, and three out of eight youth participants described positive school experiences, which included playing sports and earning high grades. However, seven out of eight participants described having negative school experiences. The participants’ negative experiences included: skipping school, getting expelled from school, and being a victim of bullying (mainly by other female students). Therefore, in general the participants had a lack of positive school experiences and multiple negative experiences. School personnel could help make a positive impact on the lives of children by facilitating a variety of positive school experiences for children and youth.

**Mental Health/Substance Use**

A significant amount of research suggests that mental health disorders are prevalent among female youth in custody (Espelage et al., 2003; Gretton & Clift, 2011; Smith, 2013).
Additionally, two health concerns that can be related to childhood trauma are depression and suicidal behaviour (Coates, 2010). In my own study, the fourth theme was Mental Health/Substance Use. In regards to Mental Health, seven out of the eight female youth participants discussed struggling with mental health challenges. Furthermore, six out of eight female youth participants talked about feeling sad/depressed. Additionally, two out of eight female youth participants discussed previous suicide ideation and the same proportion mentioned previous suicide attempts. My findings indicate that mental health challenges are prevalent among female youth in custody, and additional mental health support in youth custody centers would be beneficial.

Previous research shows that substance use is one of the most common problems among female youth in custody (Gretton & Clift, 2011; Leve et al., 2015; Smith, 2013; Teplin et al., 2005). Furthermore, previous research suggests that the most common substance use disorders were with alcohol and marijuana (Leve et al., 2015). Similarly, in my research study all of the female youth participants reported that they smoked cigarettes, drank alcohol, and smoked marijuana. Additionally, seven out of eight female youth participants talked about using hard drugs, such as methamphetamine, ecstasy, heroin, and fentanyl. My research study results were different from previous research in that they delved more deeply into why the female youth used drugs. Participants specified that drug use led to feeling numb, being distracted from reality, forgetting about past events, and feeling accepted by peers. These comments indicate that drug use became a coping strategy for the participants.

Childhood Trauma

Previous research shows that many female youth in custody have experienced trauma
in their childhoods (Borduin & Ronis, 2012; Gretton & Clift, 2011; Smith, 2013).

Furthermore, there is a well-established link between childhood abuse and mental health problems in adulthood (Coates, 2010). Multiple studies show that youth in custody are often subjected to physical/emotional abuse (Borduin & Ronis, 2012; Gretton & Clift, 2011; Smith, 2013) and to childhood sexual abuse (Gretton & Clift, 2011; Smith, 2013; Zlotnick, 1997). In my own research study, the fifth theme was childhood trauma. Two categories emerged from within this theme: Emotional/Physical Abuse and Childhood Sexual Abuse. All of the female youth participants described experiencing emotional and/or physical abuse, which is similar to previous research results. In the second category, Childhood Sexual Abuse, five out of eight female youth participants described being victims of sexual abuse as children, which is also similar to previous literature. Three of the female youth participants stated that they were victims of childhood sexual abuse prior to four years of age, which is different from previous research results where the age of occurrence was not discussed.

Additionally, two of the female youth participants reported not being believed when they told an adult about sexual abuse, which was also not reported in previous literature. Furthermore, multiple studies have shown that young female offenders who have been victims of sexual abuse tend to have more extreme delinquency outcomes than female youth who have not been victims of sexual abuse (Goodkind, Ng, & Sarri, 2006; Wareham and Dembo, 2007). This finding is reiterated in my own study. Due to the implementation of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) in 2012, only the most serious cases of delinquent behaviour are placed in youth custody centers to serve sentences. In my own research study, the research participants were all in a youth custody center and the majority of the participants (five out of eight) reported being victims of childhood sexual abuse.
Future Plans

Previous research shows that youth in custody generally envision a positive future which may include educational plans for after high school, having a job, owning their own home, and having a family (Smith, 2013; Wagland & Blanch, 2013). My research results were similar. The seventh theme in my research results was Future Plans. The female youth participants mainly discussed positive future plans, which included getting clean and sober, finishing high school, attending college/university, getting a job, having a family, and traveling. A small subsection of the female youth, two out of eight participants, voiced uncertainty, a hopeless feeling for the future, and a lack of belief that their lives will change from their current situation. The importance of these future plans cannot be overstated. The expert peer reviewer also commented on the importance of these future plans, hobbies, and interests of the female youth in the study because these are the avenues that are explored throughout the rehabilitation process. The expert peer reviewer made an important distinction between what the girls have experienced, and who the girls are. Although the stories of the female youth share many similarities, each female youth is also a unique individual. The fact that the majority of youth in custody look positively towards the future and have specific aspirations speaks to their resiliency and their individuality.

Implications

There are multiple implications from the results of my research study when they are considered along with previous literature. One implication is the importance of providing support for the biological parents of at-risk children and youth. Support could entail counselling services, parenting courses, employment services, and substance misuse programming. Furthermore, early intervention and support would be beneficial so that at-
risk children could be provided with the best care possible during critical developmental periods early on in their lives. Positive family supports serve as a protective factor that contributes to resilience in children (Ungar, 2015; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). According to the peer expert reviewer, youth in custody often return to their biological parents when they are released and look to them to provide a stable base despite who is legally responsible for their care. Previous literature points out that positive support from family members is a protective factor for at-risk female youth (Leve et al., 2015). Therefore, support for parents is essential in regards to the health and well being of their children.

A second finding of my research study was the importance of future goals and aspirations of female youth in custody. Therefore, increased availability of programs for at-risk children and youth would be beneficial so that they could pursue their interests. More specifically, increased funding for sports participation for at-risk children and youth would be beneficial. Children and youth could also benefit from increased access to activities such as: art, photography, drama, dance, music, creative writing, outdoor education, and gardening. These activities could also provide avenues for children and youth to potentially increase their friendship circles and to enhance their self-esteem. Furthermore, increased programming in the community to equip youth with employable skills would be helpful. The youth in custody have access to programs such as serving it right, forklift training, and barista training and it would be helpful to provide these types of opportunities in the community so that at-risk youth could build up a skill set to help them find employment.

The results of my research study also highlight the prominence of negative school experiences among the female youth participants, while previous research suggests that positive school experiences can serve as a protective factor for at-risk children and youth.
Therefore, it would be beneficial for school personnel to continue to focus on providing at-risk children and youth with positive school experiences. One common negative school experience was bullying, so schools could continue to focus on social-emotional development and bullying prevention and awareness with their students. Additionally, professional development tailored specifically towards the needs of at-risk children and youth could be offered to school staff.

Social justice implications stem from my research results. There are trails of injustices throughout the stories of the female youth participants. For example, all of the participants talked about having older male boyfriends who were too old to legally date them; however, the female youth rarely talked about these males being punished for their crimes. The participants’ stories also show how the Ministry of Children and Family Development can fail children. All of the female youth discussed being placed in foster care where they endured negative experiences. Furthermore, the youth criminal justice system also fails to rehabilitate youth in a warm and caring environment. Youth custody facilities truly have the potential to be a place of healing, and they are currently not being utilized this way. Youth custody facilities need to exude more warmth and caring and less detachment towards the female youth. Female youth are often placed into youth custody facilities in order to keep them safe from the dangers of the outside world, but there should be more accessible resources in the community to help keep at-risk female youth safe. These social justice issues need to be addressed in order to create a safe and healing environment for at-risk female youth.

**Future Research**

I have many ideas for future research studies that could be conducted with the youth in
custody population. I believe that another narrative study within the youth custody setting would be valuable. Due to my past experience of working with female youth in custody, I was uncertain whether the youth would be interested in participating in the present study. The narrative study I conducted was very popular within the female youth, and they virtually recruited one another to take part in the study. There was a clear desire among the female youth participants, who are a marginalized population, to reap the personal benefits of telling their story as well as to give back to the community and to help other people through sharing their stories. A future narrative research study could focus on male youth in custody, and could also include a component of sharing their stories with one another and/or with community members. The female youth in my research study often wanted to share their stories with friends on their units; however, due to the current structure of the youth custody system confidentiality is paramount and youth were not able to share their stories within the youth custody setting. However, the youth custody center is currently in the process of adopting a trauma-informed practice model so perhaps in the future sharing stories would be a possibility. An indigenous program using culturally appropriate methods is also needed.

Future research with youth in custody could also focus on the effects of the implementation of the trauma-informed practice model within the youth custody setting. This research study could include the effects on youth, staff, and management within the center. This type of exploratory study could also pinpoint aspects of the trauma-informed practice model that were currently working well, and aspects of the model that could be reconfigured in order to produce the most effective results.

The implementation of a bullying prevention program within the youth custody setting and tracking the results would also be an interesting future research study. The female youth
participants in my research study often discussed bullying that occurred in the school environment in their stories; however, many of the youth participants also stated that bullying often occurs among youth in custody. The implementation of a bullying prevention program within the youth custody setting and an analysis of its’ results could greatly benefit the quality of life of female youth while they are in custody, as well as providing them with valuable skills for when they reintegrate into the community.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, my exploration of the stories of female youth in custody has been illuminative. The strength and resilience of these female youth, despite extremely difficult life events, is both inspirational and informative. The stories of the female youth in custody highlighted the strength of the human spirit and the resilience that is present within all people. The female youth participants also shared their future goals and dreams, and voiced hope for a future that will be brighter than the past. As Hannah concluded, “my life, it’s been a journey, but I’m just getting started really” [38:17, p. 47].
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A - LETTER OF PERMISSION FROM BYCS

October 27, 2015

To the Behavioral Research Ethics Board,

I am Andrew Cronkrite, the Director of Programs at Burnaby Youth Custody Services. I have met with Stephanie Sammartino to discuss her research proposal. It is my understanding that she will be conducting a narrative study with six to eight female youth in our center. She will be conducting narrative interviews with female youth in custody between the ages of 13 and 18 years old. The youth will give their assent. Stephanie will guarantee anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality. I have the authorization to grant her permission to conduct research at this site.

If you have any further questions, please contact me at 778 452-2265.

Sincerely,

Andrew Cronkrite
Director, Programs
APPENDIX B: ADVERTISEMENT TO RECRUIT PARTICIPANTS

Branching Out: Exploring the Stories of Female Youth in Custody

University of British Columbia (UBC)

Co-Investigator: Stephanie Sammartino, Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education (UBC)

Would you like to share your story? If you are a female youth between the ages of 13-18 and are interested in dedicating 1.5-2 hours of your time to participate in this research study, please speak with Stephanie Sammartino. Stephanie will be at Burnaby Youth Custody Services on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Principle Investigator: Marla Buchanan

2125 Main Mall, Scarfe Library Block, Faculty of Education, UBC, Vancouver, BC, V6T 1Z4
APPENDIX C: INFORMED ASSENT FORM

INFORMED ASSENT FORM

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT: Branching Out: Exploring the Stories of Female Youth in Custody

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Marla Buchanan, University of British Columbia in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education.

CO-INVESTIGATOR (INTERVIEWER): Stephanie Sammartino, University of British Columbia in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education.

Who is conducting the study?

The principal investigator of the study is Marla Buchanan, Ph.D. Dr. Buchanan works at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education. The co-investigator of the study is Stephanie Sammartino. Stephanie is a student at UBC working on her Master of Arts degree in Counselling Psychology in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education.
Stephanie is also the female youth advocate at BYCS. She will be doing this project as a student of UBC, and it is outside of her paid employment with the Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver (EFry). Participating or not will in no way compromise your involvement with EFry or the youth advocate.

The information from the research study will be written up into a thesis. A thesis is a paper that is written about a question a researcher asks and then investigates to find the answer. The thesis will be a public document, and it will be available for staff and students at UBC to read.

**Why are we doing this study?**

We are doing this study to learn more about the past experiences of female youth who are in custody. Our goal is to talk to female youth in custody and to find in their stories things that are common. We will call these things common themes. We will use these themes to help identify some ways in the future that programs can be developed to reduce the risk of similar things happening to children. The themes can also help inform adults who work with female youth in custody and in the community.

**How will the study be conducted?**

If you say ‘Yes’, here is how we will do the study:

• You will do a private pre-interview with Stephanie in an available space at BYCS. In the pre-interview, we will go over this consent form and then you
will be invited to fill out a timeline of past life experiences you have had. You can decide which experiences you want to write down. This part of the study will take approximately thirty minutes to one hour.

• The next day you will do a private interview with Stephanie in an available space at BYCS. You will be asked to tell Stephanie the stories of events on your timeline. Stephanie will ask you questions to learn more about your experiences. This part of the study will take approximately one hour, but there is no time limit. The interview will be audio-recorded.

• Stephanie will type up and create your individual story within the next few days. Stephanie will give you your story to read so you can make any changes.

• Once Stephanie has 6-8 stories she will consider all the stories of the participants and look to identify common themes.

• Stephanie will meet with two individuals who work at youth custody facilities and ask each one their thoughts on the themes she has identified.

**What will happen to the study results?**

The results of this study will be reported in a graduate thesis and may also be published in journal articles and books. You will not be identified at anytime. Your legal guardian will not be able to see your individual research results.
Is there any way this study could be harmful?

We do not think there is anything in this study that could harm you. Since we will be talking about life events from your childhood, the material could bring up feelings. Some of the questions I ask may seem too personal; you do not have to answer any question(s) if you do not want to. If you become upset during the study or after the study from talking about past life events, you can talk to the youth supervisors about how you are feeling. These arrangements with the youth supervisors will be made prior to the interviews. You can also telephone the principal investigator, Dr. Marla Buchanan, and talk to her about how you are feeling. You can also telephone the Vancouver Crisis Center if you feel upset.

What are the benefits of participating?

You may be helped in this study because sometimes talking about past experiences can lead to feelings of empowerment, including believing in yourself and believing in your ability to take control of your life and future experiences.

In the future others may benefit from what we learn in the study. The results of the study could help inform future programs for at-risk children.
Also, the results could help inform adults who work with female youth in custody and in the community.

**How will your identity be protected?**

Confidentiality will be respected. Information that discloses your identity will not be released without your consent unless required by law.

**Are there limits to confidentiality?**

Yes, there are legal limits to the protection of information.

- If you say that you are going to hurt yourself or hurt someone else we are required to report your name and what you said about hurting yourself or someone else. The definition of you hurting someone else includes sexually touching or neglecting to care for children and the elderly or the risk of it occurring. Neglect means failing to do something that can be foreseen to have negative consequences on another person.

- If you say that you have committed a crime or plan to commit a crime we are required to report your name and what you said.

- Lastly, a judge can issue a subpoena if she or he feels there is a legal reason the information is needed. If a subpoena is issued we have to turn over our record for the person named in the subpoena.
How will the Data be Stored?

The data will be collected as an audio recording. A transcript will be made of your interview soon after the interview has happened. Stephanie will remove identifying information and destroy the audiotape once the transcript has been completed. The transcript will be kept on Stephanie’s computer. The security of the data will be maintained by keeping the computerized information password protected and encrypted. The data will only be downloaded onto a secure computer, and the back up files will be kept on a USB drive and kept in the locked cabinet with the other study documents. Stephanie and Dr. Buchanan will have access to the data. Both the back-up USB drive and the one to be left at UBC will be encrypted.

All documents will be identified only by the chosen pseudonym and will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. The consent forms will be kept in a different locked location from other study documents so that you will not be able to be identified. Participants will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study.

The data will be stored at Dr. Buchanan’s laboratory on a memory stick at UBC for at least five years, and then the data will be destroyed within five years. The data will not be used for anything other than this research study.
Who can you contact if you have questions about the study?

If you have any questions or concerns about what we are asking of you, please contact the principal investigator or the co-investigator. The names and telephone numbers are listed at the top of the first page of this form.

Who can you contact at UBC if you have complaints or concerns about the study?

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.
Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact on your ability to access EFry advocacy services.

- Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.
- Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

__________________________________________
Participant Signature                                      Date

__________________________________________
Printed Name of the Participant signing above

__________________________________________
Researcher’s Signature                                    Date
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW SCRIPT

(1) What did that event mean to you?

(2) How did you experience that?

(3) Can you expand on that?

(4) What did you take away from that experience?

(5) How did you get through that experience?

(6) What kinds of support helped you through that experience?

(7) What type of support may have been helpful for you when you were going through that experience?

Additional Interview Question:

(1) What do you hope for in the future?