



Laura Toney, a member of Annapolis Valley First Nation, shared her story of being incarcerated in a Nova Scotia jail in 2017.

Photo by Brooklyn Connolly.

The number of Indigenous women in Nova Scotia jails rose last year

While Indigenous peoples make up less than five per cent of Canada’s population, their representation in federal prison has long been on the rise. Last year, Indigenous peoples accounted for over 30 per cent of federal inmates – although, the populations within provincial jails haven’t been made so public. After discovering that Indigenous women accounted for 18 per cent of all female inmates in Nova Scotia jails – the highest proportion since at least 2016 – the question of who makes up provincial jail populations all across Canada is one that looms. While the data remains hidden for most provinces, behind layers of undisclosed information, another question begged my reporting: why is the province of Nova Scotia, one that deems to be committed to reconciliation, not taking action towards undoing this overrepresentation? And what actions do Indigenous women want to see being taken? How can Nova Scotia best support these underrepresented yet overly incarcerated women?

In 2019, 59 Indigenous women were incarcerated at some point in a Nova Scotia provincial jail. That’s 18 per cent of all female inmates, in a province where Indigenous women make up less than six per cent of the total female population. In total, there were 128 admissions involving Indigenous women, including some who were admitted more than once.

While the Mi'kmaq Legal Support Network can sometimes offer alternatives to custody with a Gladue report, it does not adequately help to address factors that may have led to incarceration. A solution that some sources in the story advocated for were healing lodges, which focus on solutions-based rehabilitation. Currently, healing lodges are only offered for those with federal sentences.

The full report covers a wide range of perspectives to wholistically capture the issue of overrepresentation, largely with affected voices. It can be found here:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/indigenous-women-jail-nova-scotia-1.5759994>