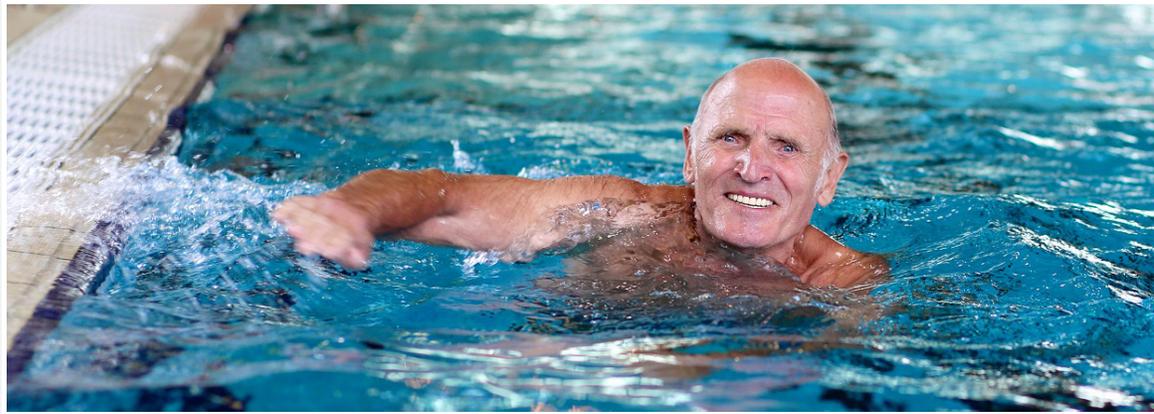


“TIME” LASTS FOREVER: CRIMINAL RECORD LIMITS COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION



Recreation for Mental Health is an initiative designed to strengthen partnerships, enhance capacity, and create supportive environments to enable all Nova Scotians to have opportunities to experience the mental well-being benefits of recreation, physical activity, sport, and play.

This project is a collaboration between Recreation Nova Scotia (RNS), Dalhousie University and the Canadian Mental Health Association (Nova Scotia), which was funded by the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness.

To view this and other research project summaries online, visit:

recreationns.ns.ca/mental-health-and-recreation

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This project was funded in part by the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness

WHY WAS IT IMPORTANT TO DO THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Engaging in social/leisure/recreational and volunteer activity has many recovery benefits, including improved health, physical functioning, and overall quality of life (1), but people with a mental illness (and, it seems even more so, people with the added barrier of a criminal record) often face personal, social and environmental barriers to accessing such activities. They “experience societal, political, economic, and cultural powerlessness... as systemic reinforcement to their marginality and vulnerability” (2), and the resulting social exclusion places them at risk for relapsing or reoffending.

WHAT WAS THE PROJECT GOAL?

The goal of this project was to explore the role of leisure/recreation as a medium for mental health recovery, and to better understand barriers faced and facilitators that could better support community-based leisure participation, social inclusion and mental health recovery. Having a criminal record emerged as a barrier, and will be further explored in future research.

HOW WAS THE PROJECT DONE?

Four focus groups (based within existing meeting places for mental health service users throughout Nova Scotia) used open-ended questions with prompts to enquire about what participants consider to be meaningful community participation, welcoming and non-welcoming environments, and facilitators and barriers to increasing community-based leisure/ recreational participation.

WHY SHOULD YOU KEEP READING?

This brief summary provides a succinct review of the findings, which are clarified using the participants’ own words.

WHAT WERE KEY FINDINGS?

There are many barriers to community participation in leisure/recreational activities for people with mental health challenges. Having a criminal record creates a particularly challenging barrier (i.e., policy implications that limit opportunities to engage in volunteering and to secure employment). Participants in this research talk about how challenging it is for them to access community recreation and leisure services because of their criminal record. Many felt they would always be seen as a "criminal" and found it hard to move past their crime and their time.

“You’ve done your time, and you’ve paid society for your bad choice then they should let it go. But they don’t”

‘Paying your debt to society’ does not equate to being free of the consequences. Participants felt constantly judged because of the criminal history.

“Well, you pay society by doing your time, but society ... they still hold it against you”

Rather, “time lasts forever” resulting in limited ability to secure employment, and to be welcomed in some social/leisure/recreational settings, such as volunteering, which resulted in social exclusion. Participants perceived there were “no second chances” to contribute positively to society. This rejection limits ability to regain self-esteem and self-worth, and blocks access to other benefits commonly afforded by community participation.

These findings were preliminary, and will form the basis for a more detailed study which will further explore how “time” limits participation in community-based activity, as well as the challenges faced by support workers in various disciplines who strive to assist them with meaningful community reintegration.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS?

By being aware of such environmental barriers, program planners and support workers in various disciplines can serve as partners and advocates to those struggling to overcome these barriers, and create welcoming spaces where people can feel valued and included.

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