



Barriers on the road to redemption

Eleven years after prison system reform, many problems persist, and new ones have surfaced

BY LAURA STONE, POSTMEDIA NEWS OCTOBER 12, 2011



Ted Rhodes-Postmedia News Catherine McKenzie creates artwork while serving a sentence at the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, a prison for aboriginal women in Saskatchewan. Now 28, McKenzie was incarcerated for murder at age 15 after she and a friend killed their group home's owner.

Photograph by: Ted Rhodes, Postmedia News Files, Postmedia News

In the middle of the lonely prairie, up a bumpy road that curves high above the dusty plains, a bright spring sky leads visitors toward redemption.

The winding path climbs to the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, a federal penitentiary for aboriginal inmates nestled among 65 hectares of sparse lodgepole pine in southern Saskatchewan.

In a light-filled gymnasium, prisoner Catherine McKenzie shows off her artwork.

A moody black-and-white portrait depicts the haunting face of a dark-haired girl - not unlike the artist herself. The painted figure looks both sinister and sad, a mirror image of her creator.

After displaying her prison artistry, McKenzie hands a stranger the typewritten story of her life.

"At first glance you might say that I sunk myself with my attitude, I'm a lifer," she writes. "I can sit here and serve out my sentence in silence, or I can use my experiences to help others.

"People need to know that change is possible, no matter what."

The minimum-security prisoner knows all about prison. She has been incarcerated for almost half of her own life after taking the life of another more than a decade ago.

When she was 15, McKenzie and a friend killed their grouphome's owner, Helen Montgomery, in the small Saskatchewan city of North Battleford.

McKenzie bashed the 58-year-old woman over the head with a frying pan and stopped her from escaping while the other teenage girl stabbed the helpless victim 15 times.

The day after the murder, Valerie Montgomery-Bull discovered her mother's bloodied body, slumped in an armchair. "I found my mother in the worst mess you could ever possibly imagine a person, except being blown up," Montgomery-Bull says from her home in North Battleford.

"Just because you're a woman ... doesn't mean that you can't do horrible things. All that matters to me is she's not out."

In her life story, McKenzie insists she's haunted by what she's done.

She appeared before the parole board this spring to ask for temporary passes to leave the prison, but was denied.

The board wanted more proof her change in attitude was genuine.

"I live every single day with guilt and regret and there is absolutely nothing I can do to make amends for what I have done," McKenzie, now 28, wrote. "There is nothing that makes living with what I did any easier. All I can do is strive to make positive choices."

SYSTEM REFORM IN 2000

If Canada's prison system for women is supposed to represent rehabilitation and change, this is it.

The healing lodge on Saskatchewan's Nekaneet First Nation was built in 1995 to help aboriginal women, a group that is vastly overrepresented in Canada's penal system.

The origins of the lodge go back to the landmark 1990 report Creating Choices, which called for separate women's corrections - a document that still guides the system today.

The recommendations gained further urgency after a riot at Ontario's decades-old Kingston Prison for Women broke out in 1994, finally raising public and political interest in the plight of female inmates.

After a subsequent inquiry, former Supreme Court Justice Louise Arbour issued a scathing report, calling for faster changes to women's corrections.

Arbour's inquiry solidified the planned closure of the country's only female penitentiary and the creation of new regional prisons across Canada.

In 2000, the aging monolith in Kingston - known as P4W - finally closed, after six decades of calls for its destruction.

It was replaced with regional prisons in Edmonton, Truro, N.S., Kitchener, Ont., Joliette, Que., and Abbotsford, along with the innovative healing lodge.

With it came a greater focus on programming and community, and real signs of progress throughout the country.

But a little more than a decade after Canada's female prison system was turned on its head by the ugly sins of the past, old concerns linger and new problems are surfacing: a rapidly growing prison population, a disproportionate number of aboriginal inmates, overcrowding, more inmates harming themselves, increased violence inside the institutions, and troubling signs of gang activity.

Prisoner fights, disciplinary problems, assaults on guards and other incidents have shot up more than 50 per cent in a one-year period ending April 2010, according to data obtained through the access-to-information system.

A majority of the "incidents" in the Correctional Service of Canada documents were self-inflicted injuries, which more than tripled to 260 during the past two years. Assaults on staff more than doubled, while fights and assaults among inmates went up.

"We're seeing a hardening of the institutional environment, and we're seeing conditions becoming more harsh," says Howard Sapers, Canada's prison ombudsman.

"There are also a handful, over the years, of very challenging female offenders that account for a disproportionate number of these incidents."

Sapers points to the death of teenage prisoner Ashley Smith as one such tragic case.

The 19-year-old prisoner at Grand Valley Institution in Kitchener, Ont. accrued so many charges while in youth custody that she was given an adult sentence. She quickly turned into a troubled prisoner who repeatedly harmed herself and lashed out, triggering 150 security incidents and a sentence that escalated to four years.

Smith, who went into the system for throwing crabapples at a postal worker, was transferred between federal institutions 17 times in just one year and spent much of her sentence in segregation, at times without a mattress or blanket.

On Oct. 19, 2007, the young woman tied a ligature around her neck and strangled herself while under 24-hour prison surveillance.

In Arbour's view, Smith's death reflects many of the concerns investigated in her original report, including the effects of prolonged segregation and the tie between mental health and prison.

"You have to ask yourself, well, has anything seriously been done to deal with these kinds of issues? Because it's so reminiscent," Arbour said in an interview from Belgium, where she works as president and CEO of International Crisis Group, a non-profit organization committed to resolving deadly conflicts. "Clearly a failure of the system, with catastrophic consequences."

A STEP UP FROM P4W

Proponents say Canada's prisons for women, while not perfect, are still far better than the antiquated Kingston facility.

For example, the bars and locked cells of Kingston have largely been replaced by cottage-style dormitory homes, where women in minimum and medium security live.

They share a living room, cook in a communal kitchen and decorate their own bedrooms. In facilities such as the one in the Fraser Valley, houses are surrounded by green grass and tidy gardens.

For visitors, the only sign of prison life is a barbed wire fence in the distance.

"We are miles ahead of where we were 15 years ago," says Don Head, commissioner of the Correctional Service of Canada. "The disadvantages to a place like Prison for Women outweigh very clearly the disadvantages that we're facing right now."

Head acknowledges the challenges posed by population growth, the disproportionate number of aboriginal women, and mental health issues, but says the service now has more tools for helping inmates.

Since the closing of P4W, women's prisons offer a range of specially designed programs, a more humane environment and a community-style atmosphere to encourage reintegration for inmates.

But the outcome doesn't seem so different for Ashley Smith's mother.

Coralee Smith says she believes Ashley was "tortured out of her mind" by her inhumane treatment in the correctional system, a sentence that was supposed to change dramatically after the Arbour report.

"What I gave to them when she was 15, that's not the girl they sent back home in a box. They sent their Ashley Smith back home in a box, what they did to her," Smith says from her home in Dartmouth, N.S.

"That Arbour report, it didn't do her any good."

Her daughter's death is now the subject of an Ontario coroner's inquest.

PRISON 'UNFIT FOR BEARS'

For the women who walked through the gates at P4W, the memories haven't crumbled.

"It looked like a dungeon," recalls Ann Hansen, who served seven years for her role in bombings and arson that perpetrated by the anarchist group Direct Action in the 1980s. "You had two tiers and barred cells, and a little catwalk along the top, and two-storey windows, and 50 women all in this one great big sort of cavernous area."

It was here on April 22, 1994, that a brief but violent encounter between six inmates and several guards - many of whom were assaulted - culminated in events that Arbour would later call "cruel, inhumane and degrading."

After the fighting was quelled, the offenders were placed in segregation, strip-searched by an all-male riot squad, given body cavity searches and denied their legal right to a lawyer, exercise, books, showers and cleaning for several months.

Paula, who doesn't want her last name used, was one of the six inmates involved in the P4W riot. Today, the 40-year-old mother of two recalls the riot and aftermath with haunting clarity.

"It was the scariest thing in the world," she says. "All these big men dressed in black. And you could tell they were men because they were talking to you, and they told us to lay down and a lot of us refused to lay down. ... So they threw us on the ground. And they took our clothes."

Arbour's major recommendations included the breakup of P4W and building of regional facilities, as well as creation of a deputy corrections commissioner for women.

The report flagged problems with prisoner suicides, self-harm and segregation, and slammed the overly harsh conditions at P4W - once dubbed "unfit for bears."

That was going to change.

HARPER BILL DRAWS CONCERN

Since the closure of P4W, the number of women serving federal sentences of two years or more has ballooned by 40 per cent.

Today, more than 500 women are incarcerated.

Aboriginal women such as McKenzie represent the fastest-growing prison population in Canada.

In the past decade, the number of incarcerated aboriginal women has increased almost 90 per cent, compared with 17 per cent for aboriginal men.

But that growth in the number of female prisoners is expected to accelerate with the Harper government's new tough-on-crime laws, such as the cancellation of double credit for time served in remand, as well as mandatory minimum sentences for violent offences.

Experts predict more people behind bars will exacerbate problems, leading to more prison violence and less opportunity for rehabilitation.

In the end, society will lose, says Kelly Hannah-Moffat, a sociology professor at the University of Toronto who worked as a research and policy adviser on the Arbour report.

"Where I see it going is ... the production of a group of people who are just revolving through the doors," she says.

Concerns have also been raised over issues such as double-bunking, where two inmates share a cell designed for one.

The union representing Canada's prison guards predicts this will make penitentiaries much more dangerous.

"Being overpopulated means less leisure time, less jobs to work at because they're all taken, less programs - so that makes it a more hostile environment," says Amanda McQuaid, national vice-president of Union of Canadian Correctional Officers.

"The problem is going to get more and more out of control." But Public Safety Minister Vic Toews doesn't take issue with double-bunking or the expansion plans.

"Some are concerned about prisoner-on-prisoner violence inside prisons. I'm concerned about that, but my primary concern is public safety," Toews said.

"Once these individuals are off the street and in prison, my second concern becomes the safety of the guards, and thirdly, is the interest of the prisoners."

CONVICTIONS CLIMBING

Bridgette Bruyere walks with ease along a path inside the Edmonton Institution for Women, past a cottage where two female inmates are in the midst of an embrace.

She is comfortable here, having been in and out of prison for almost two decades - the result of "a night gone bad" when she was a 20-year-old prostitute in Winnipeg.

High on drugs and drink, Bruyere stabbed a client to death and was convicted of second-degree murder in 1992.

The Edmonton prison represents a number of the challenges facing the service today: overcrowding, mental health problems and, on occasion, violence.

Across Canada, the number of serious institutional convictions laid against women already incarcerated - for issues such as breaching security or violence - has jumped 60 per cent in just under a decade.

Guards believe some of the maximum-security women should not be kept on the same property as the general population of lower-risk minimum and medium-security inmates. But Canada's prisoner ombudsman isn't convinced.

For women in higher security levels, the ideals of change introduced a decade ago are fading, Sapers says.

"Conditions in the regional women's facilities, especially the maximum-security units, are looking and feeling a lot like those that prevail within the male penitentiaries," he cautioned in his 2010 annual report.

Bruyere actually spent time at a men's prison - the Saskatchewan Penitentiary in Prince Albert.

She lived there for three months in 2001 for fighting, before the maximum units were opened at most women's institutions in 2003.

"That was an eye-opener for me. It was enough to straighten me out," she says.

"I was down that road before where I was on the path of destruction and then turned it around.

"I wasn't that monster."

TODAY: Road to redemption

Thursday: Babies behind barbed wire

Friday: Female inmates: victims or offenders?

Saturday: Women in gangs

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