



FASTFACTS



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Stop Warehousing Women

Last October the *Winnipeg Free Press* reported on the overcrowding at Manitoba's provincial jails. The Remand Centre, with an official capacity of 289 inmates, had a count of 352, which put it at 122 percent of capacity. Headingly was holding 562 inmates or 122 percent of its official capacity, while the Brandon facility was at 118 percent of capacity and housing men in its gym.

No mention was made of the situation for women incarcerated in the province. This oversight is not uncommon. Media and government alike too often neglect women in prison. They are deemed to be "too few to count."

The Portage Correctional Centre is the main facility for women in Manitoba. Around the time the *Free Press* article was written, there were 55 women being held at the prison – 157 percent of its official capacity of 35.

Built in 1893 for male prisoners, the Portage jail has long passed the point of being an adequate place for housing humans. Some 15 years ago, the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry (AJI) declared the prison to be an "inappropriate facility" that should be closed. The Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission reiterated this recommendation in 2001. When Justice Minister Gordon Mackintosh announced in July of 2002 that Portage would be closed, it appeared that action was finally being taken.

It was not until December of 2004, however, that the Minister appointed a consultation committee to hear input from community stakeholders about the direction to be taken in fashioning a new approach to women's imprisonment in this province. The committee held consultations in Portage, Winnipeg, and Thompson in February 2005, and submitted its report to the Minister at the end of

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March 2005. The report has not been made public. Now, almost one year later, there is still no word from government officials as to what is in store for women in conflict with the law.

Meanwhile, Manitoba women continue to be held in a crowded facility with poor heating, persistent problems with mice and bugs, and inadequate programming and facilities. Many of the women held at Portage have not been convicted of an offence. They are there on remand, waiting for their trial dates. Lawyers report that they are forced to meet with clients in the foyer of the building, which doubles as the visiting area. Discussing the sensitive details of a case under such conditions does not make for the kind of justice we expect our society to deliver.

Women held on remand that are taken to Winnipeg for their court hearings and then subsequently released are left to their own devices, as their belongings remain back at the prison. Recently, an Aboriginal woman from the North (and unfamiliar with the city) was left to find her own way to a treatment facility where she had been sent as a condition of her release.

In its submission to the consultation committee, the Elizabeth Fry Society pointed out that cuts to the social safety net (social programs such as social assistance, health care, and education) have led to the increasing criminalization of the most marginalized in our society – including young, Aboriginal and poor women and those with mental and cognitive disabilities.

Research reveals that most women who are imprisoned do not pose a risk to community safety. In the words of Justice Louise Arbour, they are “high needs but low risk.” Yet due to their small numbers, women often serve their sentences in even harsher conditions than men, suffer greater family dislocation, and have access to fewer programs and training opportunities and more limited community release options.

Because of these serious deficiencies, the Elizabeth Fry Society reports that some women in Manitoba request a federal sentence (two years or more) rather than a provincial sentence (less than two years) because they view provincial incarceration as even worse than serving federal time.

The situation of women prisoners in Manitoba is not only distressing; it may amount to discrimination. Complaints about the facilities and conditions at Portage filed by the Elizabeth Fry Society are currently before the Manitoba Human Rights Commission.

Over 70 percent of the women incarcerated in Manitoba are Aboriginal. These women face some of the most severe hardships in our society. By all accounts, incarceration only compounds their troubles. The AJI took an innovative approach to this issue, advocating the use of community-based alternatives to incarceration developed and led by Aboriginal people. Building on the AJI's legacy, the Southern Chiefs' Organization, Manitoba Keewatinook Ininew Okimowin, and the CCPA-MB have called for a holistic strategy that includes healing lodges as an alternative to the traditional prison regime.

It's time for this vision to be put into action. Women in Manitoba have been warehoused for too long.

- Elizabeth Comack

Elizabeth Comack is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Manitoba and a Research Associate with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (Manitoba). She is co-author with Nahanni Fontaine and Charlene Lafreniere of a report entitled “The Challenge for Change: Realizing the Legacy of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry Report” can be downloaded by going to: www.policyalternatives.ca.

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