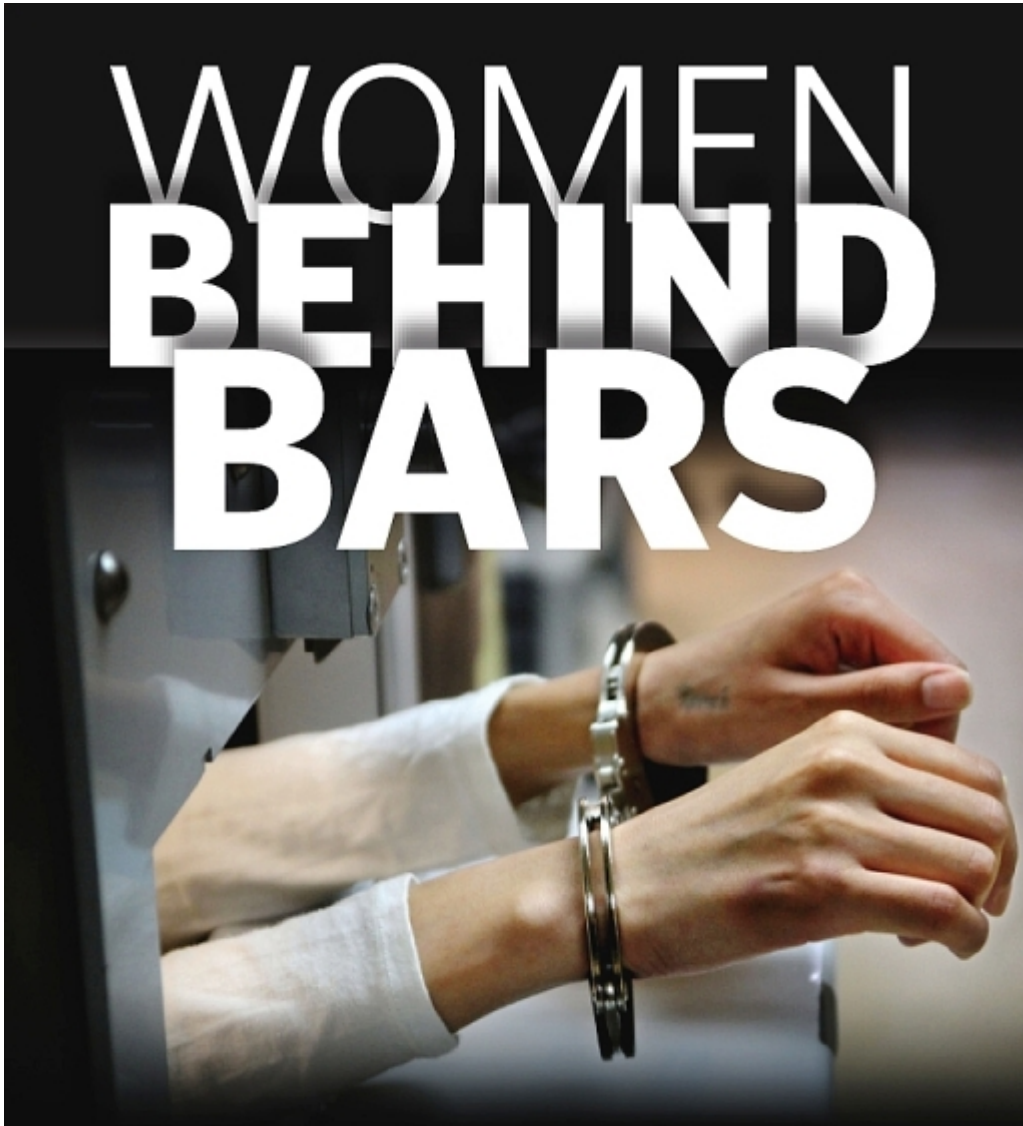


Turning inside-out: Female prisoners struggle after release

BY LAURA STONE, POSTMEDIA NEWS OCTOBER 14, 2011



UNDATED -- Women Behind Bars graphic. For Laura Stone (Calgary Herald) PRISON-1-INTRO WOMEN BEHIND BAR SEIRES

The night before she was getting out of prison, Carol Ann Borrens lay on the twin bed in her empty room and waited.

She'd already said goodbye to her librarian friend at Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener, Ont., where the 62-year-old inmate had served six months on a drug conviction.

She'd already dropped off a small box of possessions at the federal prison's reception, to be retrieved on her way out.

There was nothing else to do but close her eyes, and let time pass.

"I didn't sleep much," recalls the blond-haired, blue-eyed Borrens.

"I was a little nervous, actually quite a bit."

The following morning, May 7, 2010, Borrens put on her black velour jogging suit — the same one she wore at Christmas inside the penitentiary — and walked to the prison's main door.

She signed her discharge papers. A guard accompanied her to a taxi, which took her to a nearby bus station for a 10-hour journey home to Ottawa.

"I didn't feel good until I was actually out of the taxi waiting outside the bus terminal, standing there by myself with my suitcase," says Borrens.

"I just felt relief."

Over the past five years, about 2,250 women were released from prison back into the community. They are far more likely to be on day or full parole than male offenders, according to the Parole Board of Canada.

They live in halfway houses or on supervision orders and adhere to strict conditions while trying to get their lives sorted out.

For many women, prison is punishment; life afterwards is the struggle.

At the J.F. Norwood House in Ottawa, a 15-bed transition centre for women on parole or with other problems, Bryonie Baxter laments the lack of services available for female offenders.

"The system doesn't support reintegration," says Baxter, executive director of the Elizabeth Fry Society in Ottawa, which operates the halfway house.

She points to stable housing, education and mental-health issues as the biggest barriers for women's rehabilitation.

"You see them being released into the community with nothing. And how surprised should we be that they reoffend?"

The Correctional Service of Canada doesn't officially track annual rates of reoffending for female inmates, but a 2007 government report showed more than one in three women, or 38 per cent, would eventually return to custody.

For almost 30 per cent, it's because the women committed a new crime, as opposed to breaching parole conditions. About five per cent are violent offences.

This comes as the number of women behind bars has surged 40 per cent in the past decade, to about 500 inmates, and the population continues to grow as a result of new tough-on-crime laws, such as mandatory minimum sentences.

The challenges of a growing and increasingly troubled female inmate population are not lost on Carol-Ann Reynen, warden at the federal Fraser Valley Institution for Women in Abbotsford, B.C.

Reynen says about 80 per cent of female offenders arrive at her institution with substance-abuse problems, and almost one in three have mental-health issues.

"They come in broken, right, and they have problems," she says. "And our job is to help them help themselves, via programs and employment and psychology and support. Often they're complex."

Prison programs for women touch on areas such as substance abuse, education, employment, parenting and social reintegration.

Tanya, an inmate who served a six-month sentence at Joliette Institution in Quebec for attempting to import hashish, says prison programming is inadequate for life outside the prison walls.

She took a CPR course and some sewing classes during her stint but couldn't take college-level courses because they weren't offered to her during her short stay.

"The system undermines the education of the women that (pass) through. Their view of the ideal criminal is so outdated," says the 37-year-old single mother of two, who was released on parole in July.

"There's nothing constructive to do."

Yet the biggest roadblock to women's success after prison may be the community itself, criminologists say.

Jane Miller-Ashton, former director of native and female offender programs at the Correctional of Service Canada, says incarceration doesn't answer to the root causes of women's involvement in crime, which range from poverty to abuse.

She says society needs to be more receptive to convicted offenders returning to the community, in finding jobs or places to live.

"It's not just CSC's responsibility to tackle those lack of services and supports in the community," says Miller-Ashton, now a criminology professor in B.C.

Public Safety Minister Vic Toews said his priority is keeping Canadians safe by putting criminals behind bars.

But he acknowledges many offenders in the federal prison system have never been integrated into broader society.

"Some of these individuals don't have the basic tools," he says.

For her part, Borrens spent years in and out of provincial jails, mostly for fraud, which she says she did to support her six children. The Grand Valley sentence was her first in federal prison.

The grandmother of 12 also claims she took the fall for drug possession to protect someone in her family.

After being released on accelerated parole last spring, Borrens spent two months at the Ottawa halfway house and will be on parole until November, while living with her son in subsidized housing. She meets with her parole officer every two weeks and is still forbidden from travelling more than 50 kilometres from home.

She suffers from osteoporosis and has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of distressing experiences in her life, including a violent ex-husband.

Borrens receives \$1,100 a month in disability and pays her son a portion of the rent, since she says she couldn't afford to live on her own. She spends her days doing housework, swimming at a local recreation centre and visiting regularly with four of her grandchildren.

"At 62, with no history of working and all the issues I have, I'm not that employable," she says. "There's not many people that would hire somebody with the criminal history I have."

As for her future, Borrens' only plans are to stay with her son.

"It is still difficult," she says. "I'm very isolated. I think it's my age, I can't go out and meet friends now at this point in time."

As for a return to prison, there are no guarantees.

"I can't see it happening. I hope it never does. I don't plan on being in a situation where I would get in any trouble."

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