

Women in prisons rising fast

Andy Blatchford, The Canadian Press

The number of women locked up as federal offenders has doubled in the last 15 years and an advocacy group says the figure will continue climbing if Ottawa focuses on punishment rather than prevention.

The Conservative government, without giving a specific price tag, concedes that implementing its tough-on-crime legislation will cost billions of dollars.

The director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies says these policy reforms will likely incarcerate more women, in what is already Canada's fastest-growing prison population. There are five federal prisons for women, including the Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener.

"We're likely to see disproportionately more women in prisons, particularly indigenous women and women with mental-health issues," Kim Pate said.

In 1994-95, 151 women were handed federal sentences, compared with 313 in 2008-09, according to Correctional Service of Canada statistics. The sharpest increase has occurred in the last several years.

The number of women sentenced federally each year was a fraction of the overall admissions. Still, incarcerations for females have been increasing each year while male incarcerations have decreased slightly since the early 90s.

In 1994-95, 4,635 men were admitted as federal offenders, compared to 4,512 in 2008-09. Prisoners are placed under federal jurisdiction when they receive sentences of two years or more. In April 2009, a total of 500 women were serving federal time.

Pate fears an increased focus on criminalization will take funding away from programs to help marginalized women, such as providing safe housing, jobs and access to health services.

She says 82 per cent of all imprisoned women have histories of physical and/or sexual abuse. "If there are fewer resources in the community, then prisons become a default for homelessness, for mental illness," she said.

"Once you have someone with significant health issues in the prison system, it's hard to get them out."