

OTTAWA —

The number of women starting federal prison sentences in Canada has grown by more than 50 per cent in the past decade — a “troubling trend” that experts say will only get worse as the Conservative government moves toward harsher laws and order measures.

Most concerning, they say, is that the small pool of incarcerated women share many common traits: They are primarily poor or homeless, undereducated and have addictions or mental-health problems such as schizophrenia, depression and anxiety disorders.

Almost all of them — 82 per cent, according to advocacy group Elizabeth Fry Society — have a history of sexual or physical abuse. That figure rises to 91 per cent for aboriginal women.

“Women who are incarcerated have a particular profile,” said Ivan Zinger, executive director and general counsel at the Office for the Correctional Investigator of Canada, the ombudsman for federal offenders.

“There’s a much larger over-representation of aboriginal women and women with mental health issues than men, so they’re being disproportionately impacted by that lack of preventive measures, and social welfare, and appropriate health-care services,” he said.

There are about 500 women — or almost four per cent of the total federal prison population in Canada — currently serving federal sentences of two years or more, compared with more than 13,000 men.

In 2001-02, there were 202 women admitted to federal custody. Consistent with figures from the two previous years, 313 women were admitted to custody in 2008-09 — a 55 per cent increase since the beginning of the decade.

That compares to a 15 per cent increase for men.

Moreover, the number of aboriginal women serving federal time has jumped 90 per cent since 2001, with aboriginal women now representing 33 per cent of women behind bars, although they make up only three per cent of the female population.

While aboriginal men are also over-represented in federal prisons, their figures have grown 17 per cent in that time, according to Zinger.

Women are twice as likely to have a mental-health-problem diagnosis at the time of admission to custody than men — with 30 per cent of women having been admitted to a psychiatric hospital before being incarcerated, compared to 14.5 per cent of men.

“If the mental-health system, for example, is failing, then some of the behaviour linked to symptoms of mental health are now being criminalized, and that can certainly contribute to the rising numbers,” said Zinger.

Zinger said some new Conservative crime laws, such as ending two-for-one sentencing credit for time served in custody awaiting trial, could have an adverse affect on poor women who will have a tougher time getting bail, or paying for a lawyer while in custody.

“The risk is that (the) legislation . . . may actually exacerbate already very troubling trends, like the increase incarceration of women and women aboriginals, the fastest growing segment of the inmate population in Canada,” said Zinger.

Remand facilities are also overcrowded and lack rehabilitative programs, said Kim Pate, executive director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies.

A spokeswoman for Minister of Public Safety Vic Toews said the small percentage of women offenders in Canada is consistent with international data.

"(Correctional Service of Canada) is recognized as a world leader in the provision of services to women offenders and remains committed to strengthening the system by drawing upon the findings and recommendations of various reviews to enhance services, programs and strategies to meet the specific needs of women offenders," said spokeswoman Christine Csversko.

She said the Correctional Service of Canada has developed a comprehensive mental-health strategy that includes a computerized screening system to identify earlier and more easily offenders who may require mental-health services, allowing for earlier intervention and treatment.

"(The Correctional Service of Canada) also has a recruitment plan in place to find sufficient people in sufficient numbers with the expertise and motivation to work with offenders that have mental-health issues. This can often represent a challenge because many of our institutions and parole districts across Canada are located in smaller or remote communities," said Csversko, adding that the service is working with aboriginal communities as well.

Some argue the problems start before women get to prison.

Pate, who has worked at Elizabeth Fry for more than 20 years, said the rise in women serving federal sentences is directly related to cuts in social services.

"As we've seen cuts to social programs, cuts to health care, cuts to education, those who traditionally had to rely on those for an equal playing field have been most impacted. And that overwhelmingly is, of course, indigenous peoples, women, poor people, and those with mental health issues," said Pate.

About two-thirds of incarcerated women are mothers, she added.

"Sentencing a woman to prison also sentences her children often to social services. The cost of imprisonment is also the cost of the state care of those children. The potential for abuse in those settings also increases the potential for those children to end up in a crisis situation. Once you're caught in that system, it's difficult to extricate yourself," she said.

Pate argues for better services, such as social and affordable housing, to help women in need.

One former inmate, Joanne, was 48 when she was convicted of drug trafficking in Prescott, Ont., south of Ottawa.

It was her first offence and she was sentenced to two years in prison at Grand Valley Institution in Kitchener, Ont.

Joanne, who has two daughters who were 17 and 27 when she went to prison, said she was in an abusive relationship at the time of her arrest. She has a Grade 10 education and had lost her job at a factory when she began selling cocaine. She pleaded guilty to her charges because she could not afford her lawyer, and was expecting house arrest or a conditional sentence.

"I was scared, hopeless, felt I couldn't do nothing," said Joanne, now 50, who suffers from depression. "I was a suicidal person to begin with."

Upon her early release from prison, Joanne spent several months in a halfway house in Ottawa. Now back in her community, she's since gone back to school to finish high school and is looking for a job, but hasn't found one yet.

