

When prison workers fall in love with inmates—the taboo of hybristophilia

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Falling in love with an inmate is more common than you think – among correctional workers. This type of affair, which, with few exceptions, usually ends in tragedy, attracts more women than men among prison staff.

This is what Philippe Bensimon, PhD in Criminology and lecturer at the University of Montreal's Faculty of Continuing Education, explains in an article he signed in the journal *Déliquance, justice et autres questions de société*.

A poorly documented phenomenon

Attraction for offenders in [correctional facilities](#) – or hybristophilia – is poorly documented, except in the United States, where it is punishable by law.

We know, for example, that hybristophilia affects nearly 4% of prison workers south of the border, including prison guards, psychologists, social workers, nurses, teachers, and other professionals.

"For example, in 2006, among the nearly 1.6 million Americans in prison, 60,500 cases of [sexual misconduct](#), assault, and abuse were reported to authorities," said Bensimon. "Over 20 years, there were more than a million cases."

Enshrined in US law, the concept of sexual misconduct is broad and includes any indecent or sexual behaviour involving romantic relationships, harassment, or obscenity directed toward an inmate "by an authorized employee, supplier, contractor, volunteer, or visitor."

In Canada, such a law does not exist: sanctions fall under the code of discipline or ethics of each profession.

"It's taboo. All penal institutions, without exception, are affected by this phenomenon, but prison administrators try to deny its existence: they don't even talk about it in staff training." said Bensimon.

As proof, he identified more than 300 case in the US and European media, from 2005 to 2015. "All were severely punished with permanent dismissal from the public service and, where applicable, their profession," he said.

A mostly female phenomenon

For Bensimon, an employee's attraction for an inmate is not unusual in itself. "For a population faced with solitude beyond words, bonds are inevitably created," he said. "Among a hundred if not a thousand inmates, there will always be one that stands out from the others."

And the phenomenon affects women more than their male co-workers, according to the dozens of studies on the subject analyzed by Bensimon.

Thus, in the United States, over 70% of cases of sexual misconduct involve female personnel, although women represent only a third of the workforce in correctional facilities.

"This is possibly explained by the fact that women occupy mainly professional positions," noted Bensimon. "For example, in Canada, many

correctional facilities for men are mostly made up of women clinicians, including criminologists, psychologists, and nurses."

For him, it is this type of therapeutic setting that can lead to the development of emotional bonds between employees and inmates.

"For inmates who idealize women, it's a gift to be able to open up to the nurse or psychologist they're having deep discussions with, which can create risk areas," said Bensimon. And, as professionals, there are times when these women are more vulnerable and more likely to be attracted by an incarcerated person.

Unequal relations doomed to failure

Romances between prison employees and inmates cannot last because they are inherently unequal. "One is in charge of a criminal file, while the other is a convict held to account," said Bensimon. These relationships always end up falling apart."

Because there are no secrets in prison: the scandal eventually erupts and leads to professional, family, and mental consequences. "The inmate involved is usually transferred to another facility with the label 'manipulator' and 'possible threat to the institution's security' on his record," writes Bensimon in his article.

For the staff member, besides being fired, "the worst is family break-up and the stigma the person suffers," he added.

How to prevent these situations

According to Bensimon, the physical and mental attraction of an employee toward an inmate "above all reflects a profound imbalance

rooted in the employee's personality."

And, to limit its impact, failing to contain it, prison administrators "should recognize the problem instead of ignoring it, and review the quality of their recruitment and the training they provide their staff."

Preventing hybristophilia also requires better knowledge of one's self and one's work environment.

"Feeling attraction for an inmate is not an ethical transgression in itself, but responding quickly and appropriately to control it is the ethical and professional responsibility of all correctional workers," concludes Bensimon. "You have to be attentive and not be afraid to talk about it as a team to break the isolation."

Provided by University of Montreal

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