

Worsening conditions in prisons during COVID-19 further marginalize criminalized women

October 19 2020, by Linda Mussell, Martha Paynter



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In August, the [Fraser Valley Institution for Women](#) federal prison in Abbotsford, B.C., closed the Annex, its minimum security unit. This closure forced the transfer of all prisoners into higher security units, showing just how much the carceral system fails to create choices for

women experiencing criminalization.

We see this failure firsthand: co-author Wendy Bariteau was imprisoned in the Annex and is now a member of the [prison](#) abolition collective Joint Effort, Linda Mussell works alongside women who were confined in the Prison for Women (P4W) in Kingston, Ont., and other newer women's prisons, and Martha Paynter is a nurse who volunteers inside and outside of prisons with [Wellness Within, an organization for health and justice](#).

Closures and consequences

Thirty years ago, Correctional Service Canada (CSC) published [Creating Choices: The Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women](#). The report recommended closing P4W in Kingston, Ont.—at that time the only federal prison for women in Canada—and the creation of regional prisons to bring federally sentenced women closer to home communities. The Task Force presented a "new vision" of empowerment, respect and dignity, and recognized the role that societal barriers play in women's experiences of criminalization.

[#ThankYouThursday](#) to our staff who continue working at our women's sites during [#COVID19](#). You are key in encouraging women to keep up with their correctional plans and reintegration efforts. pic.twitter.com/kOgHqMxQ4X

— Correctional Service (@CSC_SCC_en) [May 28, 2020](#)

Scholars such as [criminologists Stephanie Hayman](#) and [Kelly Hannah-Moffat](#), and [sociologist Paula Maurutto](#), have reflected on this legacy and its failures. CSC's "Creating Choices" promised "cottages" with plenty of outdoor time and space, training, support for mothers, education, health care and trauma counseling.

After [P4W closed 20 years ago](#), six new prisons for women opened.

Despite the promises, prisoners such as [T.A. Glaremin](#) write that the reforms were pointless, and [former prisoner](#) and prison abolition activist [Ann Hansen](#) explains that the changes disappeared "like bunnies in the magician's hat—an illusion."

Broken systems

In these new prisons, women are incarcerated at an increasing rate; Indigenous and Black women are imprisoned in [shocking numbers](#). Canada locks up nearly 40 percent more women now than a decade ago, in lockstep with cuts to social services nationwide and [over-policing of racialized communities](#). Between 2002 and 2012, the number of Indigenous women in federal custody doubled.

Prisoners have said the system is broken for a long time, as in this narrative from a prisoner at the Fraser Valley Institution: "[Is prison meant to not just punish us for our crime, but to give us the opportunity to live a better and healthier life upon release?](#)"

With each attempt at reforming prisons, the system regresses. This is evident yet again during the pandemic.

Closure of the Annex

The Fraser Valley Institution (FVI) was designed to [house 50 people across three levels of security](#). The Annex has 20 beds, outside the perimeter fence. Participants in the [Mother-Child program](#) live there with their children.

Incarcerated women such as Stephanie Deschene have [shared](#)

[experiences](#) of "pleading out" to be placed there, "in hopes of not being separated from my child once he was born."

On Aug. 26, all the people in the Annex were transferred to medium security units without advanced notice or explanation. The Annex is the only minimum security unit for women in the Pacific region, and no minimum security units for men were closed.

Wardens determine a prisoner's security level classification based on [eligibility criteria and conditions outlined by the parole board](#). The mass security level escalation at FVI violates CSC's own policies.

According to members of [Joint Effort](#), who are in contact with FVI prisoners, FVI states one of the reasons for the move had to do with staffing issues. But these operational challenges translate into human rights violations for women inside: assessed at the same security level as before, the [women](#) no longer have the advantages of minimum security. This includes mothers with children. Nearly two months later, the Annex has only begun to reopen.

The new normal

Before COVID-19, people in prison expressed how difficult it was to maintain connections with their children, families and communities, and to access health care, education and meaningful training. All of this negatively affects transition back to community.

COVID-19 has worsened living conditions inside prisons, which CSC describes as "[the new normal](#)."

In response to COVID-19, CSC modified or suspended many aspects of its operations- including visits and volunteer support. Legal scholar [Debra Parkes and Senator Kim Pate](#) noted issues with accountability and

oversight years before the pandemic. The new restrictions allow for less accountability and more isolation than we have seen in decades.

Volunteer groups already experienced access [barriers](#). They have yet to regain entry since March 2020.

New rules specify a [maximum of three visitors](#) per visit, only two of which can be children. This means parents may not see all of their kids. No physical contact is permitted, visitors must be two meters away and children's play areas are closed. [Private Family Visitation](#) has not resumed, and prisoners will likely face two weeks of isolation if it does. Visits are completely suspended in [federal prisons in Québec](#) and [Manitoba jails](#).

People inside say they still don't have masks or gloves, are given little access to water or soap and are experiencing crippling isolation. At least [3,000 prisoners](#) have been placed in isolation within their cells since March.

In June, the Correctional Investigator of Canada issued a report [criticizing the practice of isolating prisoners during the pandemic](#). Prisoners have gone on [hunger strikes](#) at multiple prisons in response to harsh conditions.

Moving forward

Challenges with safely detaining people during a pandemic should never be met with escalation of security, but rather with a critical examination of whether incarceration is acceptable at all.

With a [new outbreak](#) in Manitoba jails threatening the safety of those inside, the need for alternatives is apparent.

Despite ever-declining [rates in crime](#), and ever-increasing needs for social services in communities hit by COVID-19 and economic collapse, incarceration is an enormous and rising public expense. We must pause and ask if this is the right choice to "create choices" for the most marginalized people in our society.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Worsening conditions in prisons during COVID-19 further marginalize criminalized women (2020, October 19) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-10-worsening-conditions-prisons-covid-marginalize.html>

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