

# Incarcerated mothers and their children: A complex issue

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Over the past few decades, work has been underway at the Correctional Service of Canada to expand the scope of corrections in order to meet the family needs of incarcerated individuals. In August 1998, the move to allow mothers to live with their children in new regional women's institutions was the culminating point of practices fostering family contact in a prison environment. Although the presence of children in prison may surprise us and raise many concerns about the child's interests, this is a well-established practice in a number of European countries and American states.

## Background

Few studies have dealt directly with this clientele in a Canadian context. To correct this, we conducted a field survey in 1999-2000 in Quebec's main (provincial and federal) women's correctional institutions and community residential centres<sup>2</sup>. By combining various methodologies (questionnaire, interviews and participant observation), we examined the relationships between mothers and their children during incarceration, basing our conclusions on comments made by 99 mothers regarding 203 of their children. This data was supplemented by the stories of a small number of children and various professionals involved with this clientele. In this article, we will be summarizing the key points of our research, which sought, first and foremost, to portray the situation of incarcerated mothers and their children in Quebec.

## Profile of incarcerated mothers

In analyzing our data, we were able to identify some characteristics. Our first observation was that incarcerated mothers share many characteristics with female inmates as a whole, whether in Quebec, Canada or the United States. Based on the results of our survey, a high percentage of our respondents were women aged 31 to 40. On average, these women, many of whom had their first child when they were under 21, gave birth to a little over two children. Often single, over half of our respondents had to take care of their children alone at some point in their life.

Our data further indicates that most of these women are from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. At the time of arrest, approximately two out of three did not have a high school education or job, and

many were receiving social assistance. Their monthly income averages close to \$700, for an annual household income (including all sources of income) of under \$20,000. Our data also indicates that a number of these women had been victims of sexual abuse. Many of them came from families that had conflicts with the law.

Addiction often plays a part in these personal and family problems. Nearly two thirds of the mothers we questioned stated their incarceration is in some way linked to substance abuse, with alcohol and cocaine as the most commonly used substances. This data, combined with our findings and interviews with various individuals, leads us to believe that mothers who have a tendency to abuse drugs often have a history of instability in their life, factors that may affect the type of relationship they have with their children. It also appears that a number of these women resorted to criminal activities to support their addiction.

## Consequences of incarceration

Our results indicate quite clearly that the situation these women and their children face is a rather complex issue that involves a variety of players and has an impact on personal, family and organizational aspects.

For children, being separated from their mother, whether for the first time or not, often leaves them scarred even after the sentence. Children's personal characteristics, degree of family support and relationship with their mother are factors that may affect the way they experience separation. Of course, these children first have to deal with the physical and psychological absence of their mother. Even though incarceration sometimes involves difficulties and difficult relationships, adapting to this type of reality is not necessarily self-evident. Moreover, our respondents say that, after they were incarcerated, more than two thirds of their children had behavioural, school or emotional problems. Most of the children we questioned said they had experienced these problems. They also told us about their emotional distress due to worry, solitude and social isolation, which they had to confront almost daily. In short, for them, nothing can replace a mother's affection and presence.

A number of our respondents told us how difficult it is for them to live apart from their children. They are overcome with worry, sadness, guilt and powerlessness. While guilt is clearly present, we note that it can sometimes lead them to neglect their parental responsibilities or quite the opposite, make them want to make amends.

### Incarceration and family reality

Apart from the bond that exists between a mother and her child, and upon which personal and family factors have a great influence, we note that incarceration creates obstacles that make strengthening a mother-child relationship in a prison environment difficult. Contact difficulties due to estrangement, prison policies restricting visits and communication, security constraints, lack of specialized personnel and inadequate care for pregnant women, among other things, appear to be structural constraints weighing on the maternal relationship. Moreover, our results show that the institutional services mothers use most often to keep in contact with their children during their sentence are limited to phone conversations (43%) and writing letters (25%). Long-distance charges are one of the most frequently identified obstacles to maintaining mother-child contact.

It is surprising to see that prison visiting programs (regular visits, mother-child visits or trailer visits) represent only one quarter of the services used by these mothers. A number of mothers told us how discouraging the rigidity of certain rules and operating procedures were, since they do not take into account their family reality (visiting hours during school hours, non-contact visits, etc.). In addition, the inappropriateness of visiting sites for children's needs in some institutions is criticized, as are problems with transportation.

It should be noted that close to 15% of children do not have any contact with their mother during incarceration. In fact, some mothers prefer not to have contact with their children or receive visits while in prison because they want to protect their

children from the damaging effects of incarceration. We should also keep in mind that the relationships mothers can have with their children while in prison are often limited by the various players involved. Prison authorities and sometimes even workers from the *Direction de la protection de la Jeunesse* (DPJ) are called on to determine the benefits of mother-child visits on the basis of notions that are often very vague, given the lack of specific policies.

### Conclusion

Our results clearly indicate that the situation these women and their children face is not that simple and presents a complex problem. It is one thing to provide an appropriate environment for children of incarcerated women, but quite another to foster their relationship, rebuild it and meet their multiple needs. This is where we believe the greatest challenge lies for correctional services and other departments. It would be to the advantage of the various departments to work together and opt for a reform that takes into account the complex, but vital, relationship between the family, offender and correctional process.

Perhaps we should take inspiration from foreign practices, such as those of the *Association Relais Enfants-Parents*, which is active in French and Belgian prisons. This association consists of a network of professionals and volunteers who provide various services to establish quality relationships between incarcerated parents, children and their foster families. To achieve this, an organizational structure would have to be put in place, allowing for the centralization of the workforce and resources involved with the families, to ensure the development of a strategy on joint actions and policies that would look after the best interests of the children, mothers and society in general. ■

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<sup>2</sup> Blanchard (2002), "Incarcerated Mothers and Their Children in Quebec."