

# Impact of incarceration on the mothering role

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**W**omen serving sentences in the federal correctional system pose a particular challenge for the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC). In 1990, a Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women examined the situation of women offenders in an attempt to design a women-centered approach to address the particular needs of women offenders.

This provided the base for ongoing and additional work to be done to better serve this population's specific needs. Other reviews conducted in the early 1990's revealed that approximately two-thirds of this population are mothers, most of who are heading single-parent families. This raises important questions for CSC and for the community regarding the welfare and best interests of these children during the mother's incarceration.

Perhaps a more significant aspect to be considered is the image of a mother serving time. In Canada, federally sentenced men far outnumber federally sentenced women. Women committing crimes are often seen as being "more criminal" than men since the act of committing crime goes against our social views of a woman. This is exacerbated when we consider a mother committing crimes, especially crimes of a violent nature. There exist social values and a certain prestige associated with the status of being a mother. It is this subjective social image of a mother as being a nurturer and a caregiver that makes it easy for the community to question the criminalized woman's capabilities of raising her children, hence, shaping the citizens of tomorrow.

The objective of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of the Canadian federally sentenced mothers' experiences while in custody and upon their return to the community, as well as to uncover any changes to their own perceptions of themselves as a "mother" in the social sense.

## Methodology and profile of participants

In-depth one-on-one interviews were conducted with mothers released back to the community. Questions were non-directive in order to allow the participants to recollect their experiences with little restrictions. This technique allowed for a wealth of information to be collected in order to enhance our

awareness of the experiences of mothers who serve Canadian federal sentences. Participants' comments were then compared and analyzed in order to draw similarities and divergences in experiences.

The selection criteria for participation required that the women had custody of children, under the age of 18, prior to serving a federal sentence and that they had been returned to the community for a minimum period of 90 days.

The final sample included eight women residing in Quebec, Ontario and Alberta. Participants had between one and five children whose ages ranged between 2 and 24 years at the time of sentencing, and one woman being pregnant. Crimes for which participants had been convicted included importing illegal drugs, possession of illegal drugs with the intent to traffic, involuntary manslaughter and first-degree murder with sentences ranging from two years to life.

## Anticipating custody

All participants reported that the most emotionally distressing time was the period following their arrest and prior to sentencing. This period was marked by a state of uncertainty, powerlessness and a dawning recognition that they would not be the only ones to suffer the consequences of their actions, but that their children would also be greatly affected.

Making alternate care arrangements in the event of incarceration became a dreaded but necessary task. Family members were the ones most commonly relied upon. Finding an alternate caregiver financially capable of caring for the children was but one component of the decision. The mothers were well aware that the fate of the mother-child relationship would be entirely dependent on the alternate caregiver and therefore, it became necessary to choose a person whose support could be counted on. Unfortunately, this was not always possible. For example, two women reported being aware of family members' plans to permanently remove custody of the children once the mother was sent to the institution. In three other cases, fathers who had not been previously involved in the lives of the children suddenly appeared, wanting temporary custody of the children.

The common trend that characterized this period is the fear of the unknown. Interestingly, no participant reported ever worrying about her own future. All concerns were in relation to the consequences for their innocent children.

### Managing the relationship from inside

All participants in the study maintained contact with their children during the period of incarceration. Three methods were available to them and each had specific rewards and pitfalls.

The most rewarding and yet, disconcerting method of contact available was the visit. Although all mothers expressed having desperately wanted to see their children, they were equally concerned about the possible repercussions of the children being brought inside a penitentiary. The distance between the institution and the location of the children, the quality of the mother's relationship with the caregivers and the reactions of the children during the first visit were all factors determining the frequency of visits. Overall, visits were the preferred method of maintaining contact with the children despite the fact that they were seen as a double-edged sword combining the sheer joy of seeing their children and sadness and guilt associated with having children pay the price along with the mother.

Through the period of incarceration, mothers coped by working on themselves. Many revealed that being in isolation from their family and friends forced them to confront their problems and concentrate on their weaknesses. Interestingly, many women reported finding the isolation unbearable at first given that they were accustomed to living in relation to others. The introspection inherent to the setting and the programs made them evaluate themselves, their actions and their future.

### Resuming the "mothering" role

All participants resided in a halfway house after leaving the institution. Although it was a welcomed change for them, the women began worrying about financial, housing and childcare issues. Having been on their own for so long, they reported beginning to wonder if they were still capable of taking care of their children.

Three participants expressed relatively few troubles resuming their lives with their children. Incidentally, they were the ones with the most solid family support. Others have reported never having known that it would be this difficult. The prominent feelings were incompetence and not belonging. This was exacerbated for the women who ended up living with the alternate caregivers and noticing that their children were turning to the caregivers rather than to them.

Discipline was another problematic issue. There was a loss of parental authority for all participants to the study. In fact, not only was it difficult for the mothers to bring themselves to discipline the children they had missed but, the children themselves often did not consider the mother as being worthy of reprimanding them for a wrongdoing. At the time of the interview, most mothers reported that the situation had improved following some in-depth discussions and in some cases, some counseling.

### Perceptions of motherhood

When asked how they perceived themselves after having lived through a federal sentence, six out of eight participants revealed that they considered themselves to be "good mothers". Although they quickly acknowledged that their perceptions fluctuated through their experience, they now believed that they fully understood what it took to be a good mother to their children.

All mentioned that the isolation allowed them to rectify the problems that were barriers between them and their children. In some cases, this meant reducing or ceasing their drug use. For others, it simply meant that they were now able to recognize what was important and how to be more attentive.

### Conclusion

Mothers who have custody of minor children and who face a federal sentence are confronted with the reality that the consequences of their actions are borne by both themselves and their children. Guilt is overwhelming but many careful plans need to be made to ensure that their children will be cared for adequately in the interim.

Incarceration generally results in a removal of responsibilities by providing a strict routine whereby the individual has very little control. The federal centres for women have managed to reinstate some degree of control. Much work is being done in terms of the mother-infant relationship by allowing qualifying mothers to temporarily keep their infants in the centres. However, more thought needs to be given to ways of enhancing the quality of the relationships between mothers and their children both during the sentence and upon return to the community. Although it can be difficult and time-consuming to implement changes within penitentiaries, perhaps there are ways for the community to get involved in helping families through such situations. ■

1 Abstract of Fournier, J. J. (2000) *L'expérience des mères justiciables : Leurs perceptions de leur rôle de mère lors de l'incarcération et du retour en communauté*. Master's Thesis, University of Ottawa.

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