



WOMEN IN CONFLICT WITH THE LAW SOME FACTS

In Canada, 2.6 million people have criminal records.
On average there are 32,951 adults imprisoned in Canada each day.

FACT WOMEN ARE A SMALL MINORITY OF THOSE WHO COME INTO CONFLICT WITH THE LAW.

A woman can be charged under the criminal code, other federal statutes, provincial statutes, and municipal by-laws.

When charged, she is formally accused of having acted in a way defined by our laws as socially unacceptable. In 1998, according to Statistics Canada, a total of 507,355 people over 18 were charged, of whom 83,334 were women. In other words, women accounted for 16.4% of adults charged during that time. In Ontario, 177,344 adults were charged, of whom 31,395 - or 17.7% - were women.

A charge may lead to bail in the community or detention (custody) at a remand centre prior to trial. Custody can run from a few days to years depending on the charges. Trial may result in acquittal or two or more years (federal time). Other alternatives include fines, probation, community service orders or other community programs.

Most of those who are sentenced to two years or longer serve time in one of the federal prisons for women across Canada. However, a few may serve time in one of Canada's provincial institutions through an agreement with the federal government to house federally sentenced women. Correctional Service Canada reports that as of March 31, 1999, there were 305 women serving federal sentences in institutions, as compared to 12,837 men. This means that only about 2% of people serving federal time are women. Of the 305 women serving federal time 210 had no previous term of incarceration.

Probation and parole allow women to live in the community under supervision instead of being confined in an institution. In 1998-99 of the 197 federal female offenders who completed their day parole, 162 or 82.2% were successful according to the National Parole Board of Canada.

FACT WOMEN'S CRIMES SELDOM INVOLVE VIOLENCE

Social, economic and political realities still prevent women from having equal opportunities in our society. This is reflected in the types of crimes for which women are charged, convicted and sentenced:

- In 1998, as reported by Statistics Canada, women accounted for only 13.8% of those charged with violent offences.
- The same source states that in 1998, shoplifting accounted for 51.6% of all property related charges against women.
- Correctional Service Canada reported that of all crimes that women were serving federal time for in 1998-99, 23% were drug-related. Many of these charges were for drug trafficking brought about most often due to severe financial hardship.

The Ontario Ministry of Corrections also revealed that during 1998-99, of the 3,073 women who were sentenced to provincial jails:

- 348 were drug related
- 923 were admitted for theft and fraud
- 128 were for prostitution related offences
- 272 offences were for minor assault offences
- 316 were for homicides and other serious violent offences.

FACT EACH WOMAN IN CONFLICT WITH THE LAW IS A UNIQUE INDIVIDUAL WHOSE LIFE EXPERIENCE AND CURRENT SITUATION RESULT IN NEEDS — AND OPPORTUNITIES — THAT ARE SPECIFIC TO HER.

For many women in conflict with the law, arrest, conviction and imprisonment, are the culmination of poverty, neglect, physical and sexual abuse, racial discrimination, family breakdown, limited education, unemployment and drug/alcohol difficulties.

- According to the Ministry of Correctional Services, 82% of women sentenced to imprisonment in 1998-99 received a sentence of 3 months. The average sentence to provincial time for a woman was less than two months. But even a short sentence can cause a woman to lose her job, her home and her children.
- Of adult women admitted and sentenced to provincial prison in 1998-99, according to the same source, 71% were 25-44 years old, with the average age being 30-34 years.
- Of women who are serving federal sentences, according to Correctional Service Canada, 56% are between 20-34 years and 69% are serving their first federal term. Of the 305 women serving federal sentences, 52 or 17% are serving life sentences for murder. Many are there for killing their abusive male partners.
- Native women make up about 18% of federally-sentenced women and 13% of provincially sentenced women, although native people represent only 3% of Canada's population. They have experienced a devaluation of their culture that is reflected in difficulties that have led them into conflict with the law.

FACT WOMEN IN CONFLICT WITH THE LAW NEED COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE.

Correctional Service Canada informs us that in 1998-99 the average cost of keeping one federally sentenced woman in prison for one year was \$61,000. Add to that, lost income and child care expenses, and the cost easily exceeds \$100,000.

Imprisonment often leaves a woman no better prepared for life in the community. In fact, when women are returned to society from prison, punished but without new skills or resources and with the stigma of a criminal record, they often find themselves trapped in the same painful and wasteful cycle that can lead them once again into conflict with the law.

Release programs and community-based alternatives to incarceration are needed to help resolve the personal and societal issues that bring women into conflict with the law.

Community support is essential to help women integrate into the community and achieve a life that is personally productive and beneficial to family, friends, co-workers and society.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT WOMEN IN CONFLICT WITH THE LAW CALL
THE ELIZABETH FRY SOCIETY OF TORONTO AT (416)924-3708.**