A new national strategy for high-risk women

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BACKGROUND

The events that occurred in April 1994 at the Kingston Prison for Women played a key role in changing the attitudes and perceptions that pervaded the official policy regarding female inmates at that time. However, although the consequences of these events were not auspicious, new “events” occur regularly and they too have consequences.

Indeed, violent incidents in the institutions still give rise today to the prolonged segregation of inmates, to regular disturbances in the segregation area, to the withdrawal of inmate rights and privileges, to interventions of the emergency response team, and to periods of segregation that can last up to eight months in certain cases.

Meanwhile, the direct impact of these violent events (hostage-taking incidents, assaults, etc.) on staff should not be underestimated or neglected. These events that recur year after year have invalidated the notion that the new models and new institutions would by themselves resolve most of the problems that were common in previous penitentiary approaches. Even if the correctional model described in the report remains an attractive alternative, we have to deal with the punitive disciplinary reality of sanctions that persist, while women continue serving long terms of imprisonment in segregation pursuant to the offender management protocol.

Over the past few years, numerous women have been kept in segregation for months, because no other alternatives existed. Today, we still have to deal with this same reality, yet with a clientele that has different needs and that requires greater supervision than women in maximum-security institutions. The task force was criticized for not paying enough attention to the question of violence involving women.

Today, in light of the incidents that occur in the various regional institutions for women, we have no choice but to conclude that a certain percentage of the female inmate population represent an unacceptable threat to security in the maximum-security units. We cannot turn a blind eye to the needs of women who make regular use of violence and we have to find a response to this phenomenon.

The April 1994 events also brought to the fore the negative consequences of traditional punitive measures. Still today, the same kinds of approaches are being used to deal with a segment of the female prison population. We thus believe that a new national strategy regarding high-risk women must be put into place. This strategy, which should be elaborated by the CSC in partnership with the Union, should include the creation of a more secure unit that can accommodate female inmates who pose a higher risk. We are suggesting here that living environments with heightened security be
established in Canada for those women who require more intensive supervision than what is currently deployed vis-à-vis maximum-security inmates. Since the fundamental principles of the Creating Choices Task Force Report are currently not being applied very extensively to the situation of female inmates under the offender management protocol, we believe that the new strategy would be a more human alternative for dealing with high-risk women. In addition to better meeting the needs of this group of women, this strategy is likely to have a considerable impact upon the environment and daily routines in the segregation areas and the Secure Units of the regional institutions for women.

**THE TRUE IMPACT OF THE MANAGEMENT PROTOCOL**

Currently in the regional institutions for women, four female offenders are being guarded in accordance with the national management protocol. Amongst these women, some of them have been guarded under the protocol for several months now. Notwithstanding the fact that they’re being guarded under the protocol, these women have committed violent acts and new victims amongst the personnel have resulted. We thus can’t help but conclude that the protocol has its limits, since we’re not succeeding in dealing adequately with the considerable needs of these women.

At the moment, we are thus dealing with four violent women who have been transferred from one institution to the next, since the only possible solution is to pass the buck rather than take any decisive action. Meanwhile, the receiving institution is no better equipped to deal with the inmate than the institution in which the incident originally occurred. Another institution is thus exposed to the model of violence embodied by these women. These multiple transfers between penitentiaries lead us to speculate about an escalation in the violent acts committed by these inmates. Examples of some of the violent incidents are listed in the Appendix.

The current procedure for handling the protocol cases has a direct impact upon the daily operations of the Secure Units. When the inmates are being managed according to level 1 of the protocol, three correctional officers supervise their daily movements in the segregation area. This completely mobilizes the total number of officers assigned to the Secure Unit sector during the week.

For all other periods (holidays, weekends), these daily activities require the enlistment of a correctional officer from another sector. With regard to regular movements in segregation (showers, walks, interviews), security in the Secure Unit rests entirely upon the officer on duty in the enclosed control room of the Secure Unit. While this officer is keeping an eye on inmate movements in segregation, she must also watch over the movements and security in the Secure Unit sector, where certain spots are not visible from her control room. During movements or incidents in the segregation sector, we are thus allowing our clientele to avoid our dynamic security and accordingly,
compromising sooner or later our own security, as well as theirs and that of the unit, indeed of the entire institution.

In order to somewhat defuse this problem and when there is a planned intervention, the inmates in the Secure Unit have to be asked to get back into their module or their cell. Terminating their activities in this way and limiting their movements, often over a long period, creates dissatisfaction and increases the level of tension amongst the inmates.

In addition, one can’t neglect the fact that in the Secure Units we’re dealing with inmates with various problems (anti-social personality or severe mental health disorders) requiring closer supervision and that the simple fact of isolating them from interaction with the personnel can lead to an increase in their level of anxiety. We can then be confronted with aggravated situations, with a nonetheless limited capacity to take action.

Taking charge of the protocol cases also has an impact upon the quality of the interactions between the personnel and the inmates. For example, in order to properly manage the risks, interviews take place regularly in the presence of two correctional officers in the interview room, and with one officer on the outside who is equipped with pepper spray.

It should be noted that the quality of an intervention carried out by a psychologist, psychiatrist, nurse or a member of the sisterhood will not be the same in the presence of two strangers and that the degree of the inmate’s candidness will be directly proportional to the confidentiality available to her. We are thus responding, in a certain sense, to the CSC’s obligation to provide certain services to the inmates in prolonged segregation, but we should also be evaluating the quality of the services and interventions we are offering to these inmates, who nevertheless have considerable needs.

Thus, to sum up, in order to properly manage the risk that these women pose, we have to reduce the quality of the services to a minimum, while the exact opposite should be the case.

**OUR PROPOSAL**

We thus conclude that the management protocol is not producing the anticipated results. Notwithstanding long periods of segregation, these inmates are regularly put back to level 1 of the protocol, because each time that they go out into the maximum-security population, they provoke a serious incident, thereby creating other victims. One can’t help but conclude that the Secure Unit, as well as the management protocol for maximum-security inmates who have provoked violent incidents does not provide a structure that can adequately deal with certain particular cases of women who manifest recurring problems of violent behaviour.

We are well aware of the fact that segregating these women for very long periods of time does effectively provide a means for managing the risk that
they represent, but in no way responds to their considerable needs. The fact that these inmates cannot work and be remunerated entails problems at other levels as well.

In addition to being in a restrictive milieu, we decrease their autonomy by impoverishing them and preventing them from treating themselves to miscellaneous canteen, hygiene and clothing items. The benefits of their involvement in the psychological therapies they require are compromised by the numerous transfers from one penitentiary to the next and by the presence of officers in the interview rooms. The case management process is automatically undermined. The failure to offer programs or access to education likewise undermines the inmate’s self-esteem and eventually subverts their ability to reintegrate into the community.

In order to foster a secure, yet human approach to dealing with these high-risk inmates, we propose the elaboration of a new national strategy for high-risk women. First of all, we are asking for the addition of a fortified secure area in all the current regional institutions. These areas would have to be independent and separate from the currently existing segregation sectors and Secure Units.

The needs that we have identified for an effective operation are as follows:

- The sector would have to consist of at least two cells with electrically-operated doors and an integrated wicket;
- A enclosed shower with a wicket in the door;
- An interview room with a fortified window that separates the inmate from the frontline worker with a secured letter slot;
- A common area with a sofa, TV and washer-dryer;
- Access to the outdoor yard of the segregation area.

In our opinion, the establishment of such a unit would help us to more effectively deal with certain women who have been on the protocol for several months. We could put them in two cells, thereby accommodating the transit cases, the court appearance cases or have room should the number of protocol cases increase.

The interview room would be practical for all the meetings with psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, teachers, members of the sisterhood, the chaplain, behaviour therapists and for all the interviews with the case management team. In addition to establishing an acceptable degree of security, this interview room could guarantee the confidentiality of the interactions that take place there.

The common area would enable the inmate, depending upon their level of security, to enjoy additional activity time, and accordingly to do their wash, to work at the upkeep of the sector and thus enable them to gradually assimilate a structure that is less restrictive than their cell. Hence, we believe that by offering these inmates the possibility of receiving psychological therapy, less restrictive programs and activity schedules, we will be helping them to
eventually reintegrate into the maximum-security population in a healthier and more secure fashion.

However, once this sector is up and running, the work team will have to be a permanent one and whatever additional resources are necessary for the proper operation of this unit should be provided.

**BENEFITS FOR THE INMATES:**
- Reduce the recourse to long-term administrative segregation;
- Possibility of support from various caregivers (psychologists, behaviour therapists, Life Line, chaplain, etc.) being provided in a more confidential manner in a secured facility;
- The inmates could work or go to school;
- They could also pursue their programs (DBT, PSR, WOSAP, and others);
- They could have access to common areas and the outdoor yard during activity time;
- Possibility of a gradual integration into a more open milieu, rather than going directly from administrative segregation to the module;
- Possibility of leaving segregation to integrate into a module that meets the special needs of this clientele.

**BENEFITS FOR THE PERSONNEL:**
- A team that is trained and specialized in this kind of intervention, thus less likely to generate situations giving rise to incidents;
- A decrease in the number of incidents;
- Overall more secure (rooms, cells, facilities, etc.) thus less likely to give rise to violent incidents where the institution's material is used;
- If there are fewer incidents, less likely that the personnel will suffer from burnout;
- Less overtime, if the team is not exhausted.
- No direct contact with non-CX staff, thus assaults against personnel or hostage takings will be less likely;
- Lower risks of contamination between inmates with a “super-max” security rating and inmates with a maximum-security rating;
- More administrative segregation places made available, since these cells would no longer accommodate these “super-max” inmates.

**CONCLUSION**

We believe that a new national strategy for high-risk women must be implemented. This strategy should be elaborated in partnership by the CSC and UCCO-SACC-CSN and should include the creation of more secure and human units that can accommodate inmates who require greater supervision. The violent events that have occurred over the past year in the regional
institutions have demonstrated the importance and urgency to formulate a plan to deal with these special cases.

We are aware that the establishment of a new strategy will require time to be implemented. Given the increase in violent events in the institutions for women, action must be taken immediately to protect the personnel in these units. We believe that any delays in establishing such reinforced units could lead to other violent incidents initiated by these inmates whose history of violence could fill up several pages and which would thus again produce new victims amongst the CSC's personnel.

This is why we are proposing that a reinforced unit be opened in the short term at the Quebec Regional Reception Centre. We have been able to observe the efficacy of such a unit for women in this penitentiary. This was the case during an emergency transfer that followed a major event at the Joliette Institution in October 2001 and more recently, during the transfer of an inmate who was receiving extensive media coverage in June 2005.

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