



NEWS RELEASE

CAEFS' Response to The OCI's Investigation into Sexual Coercion and Sexual Violence in Federal Correction

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

OTTAWA, TUESDAY OCTOBER 27TH, 2020 - Today, the Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI) released their annual report, which includes "A Culture of Silence: National Investigation into Sexual Coercion and Sexual Violence in Federal Corrections". This investigation affirms the position of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) that the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC)'s response to sexual assaults in the Federal Institutions for women has been insufficient and detrimental to the wellbeing of prisoners.

For years, CAEFS has been calling attention to how the power structures inherent to the prisons make those held inside incredibly vulnerable to sexual coercion and violence. The OCI investigation found that the most marginalized people are often most frequently targeted for sexual violence behind bars, particularly: women; individuals who identify as, or are perceived to be, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or, transgender; and people with histories of trauma and mental illness - a longstanding CAEFS position. We agree with the OCI that Canada is behind when it comes to addressing sexual violence behind bars and applaud the OCI's initiative in taking the first ever systemic look at the long-ignored issue of sexual coercion and violence in Canadian federal prisons – and more must be done.

CSC has an obligation under the Corrections and Conditional Release Act to provide 'safe and humane custody and supervision' of incarcerated people - an obligation that they have failed to fulfill time and time again. The OCI makes clear recommendations to start to address the pervasive issue of sexual coercion and violence inside federal prisons, which were not accepted by the Minister of Public Safety. This lack of commitment to meaningful action demonstrates an ongoing apathy to the seriousness of the harm caused - what the OCI describes as "organizational indifference" and a lack of leadership. There is an urgent and overdue need for action.

"This investigation is further evidence that prisons are not – and never will be – safe places. The persistent and inescapable danger of sexual violence and coercion in federal prisons, emphasized by the OCI report, is appalling. Now that this report reveals what happens behind prison walls, we anticipate public outrage." - Emilie Coyle, Executive Director of CAEFS

As ground-breaking as the report's findings are, largely absent from the data presented is the violence perpetrated by staff on incarcerated people. For example, there are multiple cases against Correctional Officers for sexual assaults in several of the prisons designated for women - most of which are not reflected in this

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investigation. A public inquiry that focuses specifically on the issue of staff to prisoner sexual coercion and violence - including the state sanctioned sexual violence experienced by those subjected to strip searches - is necessary to understand the full scope of the issue and to prevent the harm from continuing.

“Given the oppressive culture of silence in the prisons described to us by incarcerated people, and documented in this report by the OCI, we are also confident that there are many more incidents of violence that remain unreported and under-investigated.” - Emilie Coyle, CAEFS Executive Director

Recognizing the vast overrepresentation of Indigenous people in federal prisons as a result of historical and ongoing colonial violence, CAEFS calls upon the government to implement the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action (in particular numbers 30, 31, 32, 35) and the recommendations put forth in the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls to end the victimization and criminalization of Indigenous women.

Finally, CAEFS calls for:

- The elimination of strip searching;
- Access to external counselling and treatment options for trauma and abuse for incarcerated people;
- Oversight and accountability mechanisms for CSC that are fully independent and enforceable;
- A reduction to the number of people in prisons through legislative reform;
- The redirection of funds away from CSC and towards communities and services working to prevent and repair harm;
- And a continued focus on the specific issues faced by people incarcerated in the federal prisons for women.

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For comment:

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