

RESPONSE

On Self-injurious Behaviour in Prison

Jennifer M. Kilty

Women and girls in prisons around the world have a long history of engaging in self-injurious behaviour. That they cut, tear, rip, lacerate, burn, mark, scar, scratch, and bruise their skin and body is not a new phenomenon. It is however, one that correctional authorities and researchers continually fail to acknowledge (Kilty, 2006). In Canada, there is a long and blood stained trail of political ignorance of the self-inflicted harm many incarcerated women exact upon themselves. The aim of this brief response is to highlight how the correctional mistreatment of and failure to respond to the needs of incarcerated women and girls perpetuates, and at times aggravates, self-injurious behaviour. By drawing on the facts of three of the more well-known and thus documented cases of self-injurious behaviour amongst incarcerated women and girls in Canada, the goal of this entry is to re-centre self-injurious behaviour as a focal point in the fight against the abuse, marginalization, oppression and punishment of our sisters inside.

CASE 1: THE GRANDVIEW TRAINING SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

One of the first legally documented and most pronounced accounts of institutional self-injurious behaviour as a systemic issue emerged as a result of the abuses that took place at the now closed Grandview Training Centre for Girls. At Grandview, girls aged 12-17 were physically, emotionally, and sexually abused and assaulted during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970's, until the institution's closure in 1976. After a courageous group of women formed the Grandview Survivors Support Group (GSSG) and came forward with their stories of abuse, they were able to successfully negotiate the terms of the *Agreement between the Grandview Survivors Group and the Government of Ontario* (Feldthusen *et al.*, 1999; Shea, 1999; Kaufman Report, 2002). The adjudication process revealed that correctional staff participated in the abuse of the young girls. While the survivors also accused the chief psychologist at Grandview, Dr. Robert Ross, of participating in the abuse, in the end eleven charges against Ross were stayed and the rest were dropped (Shea, 1999; Graycar and Wangman, 2007).

Part of Ross' work involved studying the prevalence and severity of the self-injurious behaviour exhibited by the girls at Grandview. In his book, *Self-Mutilation*, Robert Ross and co-author Hugh McKay describe Grandview's atmosphere as oppressive and harsh, with discipline being the paramount concern, second only to custody:

Speaking was forbidden, crying was punished. Self-mutilators had been counselled, punished, lectured, cajoled, reprimanded, educated, and isolated to no avail. The staff had made them hide their scars by wearing extra clothing. They had punished them for carving by reducing the limited number of privileges which they had, or by disallowing visitors, or by assigning extra work, or by delaying their release from the institution. If there is any substance to the reports communicated to us, at one point in the institution's history a standard response to carving was the application of salt directly to the wound with a toothbrush (Ross and McKay, 1979, pp. 2-3).

The women of the GSSG claimed to have been physically beaten – including being dragged down stairs by their hair – and made to perform fellatio and engage in sexual intercourse, sometimes for different 'privileges' (Kaufman Report, 2002). Ultimately, two guards were convicted of physical and sexual assault in 1999, and the Ontario government issued a formal apology to the women who were incarcerated at Grandview as young girls as part of a legal compensation package that awarded victims a total sum of \$16,400,000 (Shea, 1999; Kaufman Report, 2002).

CASE 2: THE 'INCIDENT' AT THE KINGSTON PRISON FOR WOMEN

In 1990, feminist psychologist Jan Heney published her account of self-injurious behaviour at the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario (P4W), then the only federal prison for women in Canada. Heney (1990) found that over half of the federally sentenced women had engaged in self-injurious behaviour and that the vast majority (92 percent) engaged in self-inflicted cutting. One of the fundamental points of Heney's report is that segregation, which was at that time and which continues to be the institutional policy protocol response for self-injurious behaviour (Kilty, 2006), is inappropriate and even harmful. Interestingly, 97 percent of the prisoners interviewed by

Heney argued that segregation was an inappropriate response, while 77.5 percent of correctional staff viewed it as the correct way to respond to and as “a necessary action” in cases where prisoners engaged in self-injury. Heney (1990) recommended the need for several correctional policy and protocol changes in order to try and prevent self-injury, and better help women who succeed in harming themselves, some of which included: do not segregate women following a self-injurious incident; invoke the use of trained peer support teams and allow women to communicate with friends and loved ones to generate support rather than punishment for the behaviour; ensure that psychological, counselling and nursing staff are always available for women to speak to; and finally, self-injury is not a matter of institutional security, but rather of the women’s mental health needs – which should always be of primary importance.

The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) failed to incorporate Heney’s recommendations into correctional policy, and in 1994, what is now referred to as the “incident at P4W” where eight women were stripped, searched, shackled in the nude by a male Institutional Emergency Response Team, and left in segregation – some for up to nine months – resulted in a string of harmful consequences, including an increase in self-injurious behaviour (see Frigon, 1997). Like the abuse that occurred at Grandview, the correctional mistreatment of the women in P4W was found to be criminal (Arbour, 1996). Ultimately, the ‘incident’ in conjunction with Madame Justice Louise Arbour’s (1996) scathing report of the abuses of power and violations of law, as well as correctional policy that gave rise to it were the impetuses for closing P4W and the creation of six regional prisons for federally sentenced women in Canada. Little to no documentation of self-injurious behaviour in the new federal prisons exists. It is as though by not speaking of it correctional officials and researchers can pretend it no longer takes place. In fact, Jan Heney’s 1990 report remains the last detailed examination of self-injury by women in prison in Canada.

CASE 3: THE PREVENTABLE DEATH OF ASHLEY SMITH

Despite the dearth of literature investigating the frequency and severity of self-injury in prison, many former prisoners disclose that they cut (Kilty, 2008; Kilty, in press). This fact was recently evidenced by the tragic 2007 death of 19 year old Ashley Smith at the Grand Valley Institution for

Women in Kitchener, Ontario. Smith attempted suicide several times and was a chronic self-injurer – to the point that she had amassed hundreds of institutional charges related to this behaviour (Richard, 2008; Sapers, 2008). Smith's death, found to be preventable by Howard Sapers (2008), the Correctional Investigator of Canada, refocused a spotlight on the issue of self-injurious behaviour, the correctional mistreatment of women who engage in it and the tragic consequences of continuing to place security ahead of addressing a prisoner's mental health needs.

Ashley Smith was initially imprisoned as a youth at the New Brunswick Youth Centre (NBYC) but was transferred to adult custody in the Saint John Regional Correctional Centre (SJRCC) after she turned 18. In October 2006, Smith was sentenced as an adult for criminal charges laid while she was still at the NBYC. When added to her existing sentence, Smith's custodial time exceeded two years meaning she was to serve the remainder of her sentence in a federal prison (Richard, 2008; Sapers, 2008). Smith's eleven and a half month stay in federal custody was marred by 17 transfers between and amongst institutions, including transfers across five provinces (Sapers, 2008). Sapers (2008) identifies a lengthy list of individual and systemic failures that led him to declare Smith's death preventable, some of which included: illegally keeping Smith in administrative segregation throughout her entire time in federal custody (11.5 months); lack of proper documentation of the extent and severity of Smith's self-inflicted injuries; failure to respond to Smith's repeated formal complaints and grievances in a timely manner – one of which was not opened until two months after her death; lack of timely and complete communication between all levels of staff and institution; failure to provide adequate medical and mental health care, treatment, and support; inappropriate use of force including taser use on two occasions; failure to develop a comprehensive treatment plan; and a failure of staff to properly intervene by removing items Smith used to self-harm, to arrest her self-injurious behaviour, and ultimately to stop her from asphyxiating herself as correctional officers watched from the hall.

CONCLUSION

The three cases briefly covered here illustrate that various forms of correctional mistreatment of women and girls persist, and that abuse and

neglect at the hands of their keepers can perpetuate self-injurious behaviour among those who are already marginalized. In fact, when considering the cases of the Grandview Training Centre for Girls, the ‘incident’ at the Kingston Prison for Women and the preventable death of Ashley Smith, the term ‘correctional mistreatment’ appears to be a vast understatement as each case speaks to actions that led to criminal investigation. As long as we continue to imprison women and girls we accept that they will never receive adequate assistance regarding their personal needs and the structural barriers that coalesce to bring them in conflict with the law in the first place. Self-injurious behaviour remains a destructive way for prisoners to cope with the stress and harm associated with the pains of imprisonment, and failing to respond or responding in ways that cause greater harm violates their rights to safe, secure and humane treatment that is guaranteed under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Kilty, 2006). As such, we must reconsider community based forms of support and supervision in order to combat, as opposed to perpetuate, self-harm by women and girls in prison.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Kilty is Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. Her primary area of research interest is criminalized women – their experiences of incarceration and reintegration, their adoption of self-harming behaviours, and their construction as ‘violent’, ‘dangerous’ and/or ‘risky’. Using identity and citizenship theories, Professor Kilty examines how different health and mental health statuses come to affect the construction, maintenance, and negotiation of identity in prison and post-incarceration. Much of this work is based on discussions of rights and ethics of care, and is framed by a prison abolitionist standpoint.