

## COVID-19 Pandemic Struggles of Prisoners' Families

Joanne Fry

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Even though it has been some fifteen years since my son was incarcerated and I made my first visits to a Canadian federal penitentiary, I can still well remember the anxiety, fear and intimidation of those first many prison visits. My life had been devastated, my young son taken from his family and home, and I was still in disbelief. I was now living in the Twilight Zone. There is not a lot of sympathy or kindness for the family of the perpetrator of crime.

At the first visits the staff were being reasonable and speaking politely, but I noticed immediately that the other visitors – 90% or more of whom were female, like me – did not make eye contact with each other. They sat quietly, shoulders slumped, no chatting or friendly discourse between them. They all shared some things in common: they looked tired, nervous, possibly close to tears. And they did not offer to help or offer a smile of support or understanding. Those first visits were full of confusion and anxiety, making an already horrific situation feel much more daunting. I had never felt so alone or hopeless in my life.

Whether consciously or not, once I became more accustomed to the process, I would immediately reach out to the ‘newbies’ who stood out so vividly. I would smile, encourage them to follow me, explain the layouts of the visiting rooms, and the like. And as a life-long activist myself, I was shocked that there was little in the way of support groups or ‘committees’ for the loved ones of imprisoned people. CSC discourages any contact between visitors. I soon came to understand the fear and paranoia of the visitors themselves, and why there would be no personal connections.

As COVID-19 started to spread within the outside community, it was clear to anyone knowledgeable of our penitentiary system that we would very soon be in a serious state. While still attending visits I would complain about the most basic safety being absent, such as hand sanitizer. It was painfully obvious that COVID would devastate the prison community. After watching how the prison functions – or not – for many years, it was bound to develop into the worst-case scenario. And I decided that I must start some sort of committee or group as a response to COVID *before* things became dire.

One of my personal character flaws is I am technology-challenged and I do not engage in any social media. None of the visitors knew other family members names or phone numbers. So it was a very difficult and time-consuming process to get Mission Prison Family Association started,

and even so, many of my goals were not easily realized. For example, I contacted the prison administration to see if we could liaise in some way, rather than the families and loved ones desperately trying to get information on their own, phoning the institution over and over with no response. Instead, I proposed that we could perhaps organize a simple plan to communicate with CSC by email or telephone, and I could inform and update the families. While simpler and more efficient for all involved, it might mitigate the terror and desperation felt by many prisoners' families during the early stages of the pandemic. CSC would not agree to co-operate – as was expected. This challenge was further compounded by many of the families being nervous about joining and having their names attached to a group. Several suggested that our list might 'get out' and they worried about retaliation.

In any case, there were many, many times that a distraught family member who had not had contact with their loved one would reach out, begging for help. We also sought legal help and eventually filed the second class-action lawsuit in the country, assisting with the development of the case and the documentation of CSC incompetence and negligence putting our loved ones at risk. This was no small feat. None of us had much experience with the legal system outside of the terrifying experience with our loved ones and none of us understood what a 'class-action' would entail. Fortunately, we managed to eventually connect with Jeff Hartman in Toronto, a prison lawyer who would patiently guide us through the process. Jeff has great interest in 'power discrepancies' within the system and has written exceptional articles that I would later incorporate into my work and lectures. His compassion and knowledge in works such as "The Crisis in Corrections is Social Distancing (but it's not what you think)" have been invaluable. I now understand that class-action cases take many years to come to any resolution, and that in Canada there is little monetary award making it extremely difficult to secure legal assistance on contingency.

A small number of us were interviewed by media or wrote articles for local news outlets. For many, though, their fear of retaliation or 'outing' held them back, as outside scrutiny and the possible re-opening of old wounds and histories was too frightening to consider. In addition, retaliation by CSC is a legitimate concern at all times. My son has been targeted by the prison management in various instances, and his security rating has risen because of his so-called dislike of CSC. It has been used to justify his 'deteriorating

attitude’, a label that has broad toxicity for anyone who desires to one day be free of incarceration or be successful with their future parole.

In the face of these challenges, our group nonetheless persists. The empathy and support that we have offered each other – particularly during the outbreaks and the long periods of lockdowns and isolation – have been invaluable. It saddens me greatly to know that few penitentiaries have a group that can offer that comfort and understanding.

Since the early days of the pandemic, I have become a full-time advocate and activist fighting for prison and justice reform, and some accountability within the massive bureaucracy that is CSC. I lecture about the realities of the Canadian penitentiary system to anyone who wants to listen or interview me. My son and I have partaken in issues both large and small, and we were proud to be part of a case being heard by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, among others. Our passion and commitment to fight the deeply entrenched, corrupted, ineffectual ‘correctional’ system has now become our life’s work, and while it certainly feels like an uphill battle, we have had some successes and we fully expect more to come. We have managed to assist prisoners with file corrections, helped them in their search for mental health care, managed to hold some staff to account and, perhaps most importantly, each lecture provides us with the opportunity to change minds and hearts.

While there are many wonderful advocacy groups here and across the country, working hard to humanize and modernize our prison system, I have seen how that same fear and anxiety that I first witnessed during those early visiting days continues to divide us. It often imitates the David and Goliath story: CSC with the expansive and never-ending budget, both in terms of funds and manpower, and the rest of us, fighting with all we have, but often splintered, small and separated. In addition to access to funding to enable the many legitimate grievances to move forward to the courts, creating invaluable case law in my view perhaps the most important and necessary aspect required is a better co-ordination of the various organizations so that we can all identify each other and build on the wisdom and experience already gained, rather than constantly trying to re-create the wheel. CSC always presents as a unified front-backing each other regardless of the circumstance. The administration does this and the guards do it. The rest of us need to learn from that show of strength and solidarity, and replicate lessons learned in our battle for human decency, as well as prison and justice reform.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Joanne Fry* is a parent of an incarcerated adult, an activist and advocate, and is the founder of Mission Prison Family Association. She lectures on the reality of prison life and our failing 'justice' system.