

Indigenous women account for almost half of Canada's female federal inmate population

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Recently released figures from the Office of the Correctional Investigator show that indigenous women comprise almost 50 percent of Canada's female inmate population in federally run prisons. Indigenous men are also grossly overrepresented among Canada's prison inmates, albeit not to the same degree. Overall, indigenous people account for 37 percent of the federal prison population despite comprising just 5 percent of the Canadian population.

The report notes that the indigenous inmate population has risen by some 18 percent over the past decade, even as the number of non-indigenous inmates dropped by 28 percent during the same period as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rates of indigenous incarceration are even higher than the average in Ontario and Canada's western provinces. In the period from 2011 to 2012, for example, indigenous inmates comprised 78 percent of the total prison population in Saskatchewan, while the indigenous population comprises only 12 percent of the province's inhabitants.

These tragic figures underscore the savage mistreatment of indigenous peoples by the Canadian capitalist state for over a century and a half, beginning with the forcible dispossession of the native people and the destruction of their communal forms of property. Historically, Canada's ruling class ruthlessly cleared the native populations from their land to make way for capitalist economic development and suppressed native culture in an effort to transform them into a docile workforce. The most notorious method employed was the state-created, church-run residential school system, which forcibly separated indigenous children from their families for long periods of time and sought to erase their cultural and linguistic heritage. The inhumane conditions within the residential schools led to the deaths of as many as 6,000 indigenous children, while tens of thousands of others were physically and sexually brutalized. The last of such institutions closed as recently as the late 1990s.

The intolerable social conditions which Canadian capitalism has meted out to the indigenous peoples have created generations of mentally distressed individuals living in extreme poverty. Figures from a Statistics Canada study based on 2016 data found that as many as 44 percent of residents on native reserves live in low-income households, standing in stark

comparison to the 14 percent of Canada's total population living in poverty. The reserves themselves often lack basic social infrastructure, including things as fundamental as access to clean drinking water. Today, 32 long-term boil water advisories remain in effect across Canada's indigenous reserves, including the Neskotanga First Nation in Ontario, which has been without clean water for over 25 years.

The deepening of Canada's social crisis has pushed more vulnerable sections of society into the desperate conditions that increase incarceration rates. Many indigenous women relocate to cities to escape the poverty rampant on the reserves, leaving their families and communities behind. Once in an urban environment, they often face problems in securing housing and employment, which are exacerbated by the lack of social supports and isolation from their culture and family. The rampant opioid epidemic, expressed above all in the deadly wave of fentanyl overdoses, has also devastated many urban indigenous communities. Both on- and off-reserve, the lives of many indigenous people, have been scarred by the residential school system—either having lived through the traumatic experience themselves, or having been raised by parents and family members who did. These conditions of social deprivation also make indigenous people even more likely targets for discriminatory practices by law enforcement and the Canadian judicial system.

A 2004 Correctional Service Canada (CSC) Research Branch report titled "A Needs Assessment of Federal Aboriginal Women Offenders," assessing indigenous women during incarceration and post-release, found that over two-thirds (69 percent) were rated at a "high needs" level for programming, whereas 29 percent were rated at moderate and only 2 percent at low-level needs. Noted among the most pressing needs were personal and emotional orientation, substance abuse treatment and securing employment. Figures from 2009-2010 showed abysmally long wait times for gaining access to such rehabilitative programming. For Métis women, indigenous peoples with mixed native and French ancestry inhabiting Canada's western provinces, the average wait time took 264 days. For a First Nations woman the wait time was 238 days, and no Inuit women were receiving program support at all.

The 2004 CSC report noted that the vast majority of

indigenous women have become entangled in Canada's criminal justice system for "more serious offences." Between 2009 and 2010, the average sentence length for incarcerated indigenous women was 3.52 years, and the majority (68.08 percent) were serving sentences ranging between two to five years. Indigenous women inmates generally had low levels of education and employment. Many had a previous criminal history, often involving youth convictions that led to their being ensnared in the penal system at an early and especially vulnerable age. In a further reflection of the social misery imposed upon Canada's indigenous reservations, most women endured some form of childhood dysfunction and difficulties within their family or community.

As among all sections of the working class, the growing social crisis resulting from increased economic insecurity and the evisceration of public and social services has been particularly hard on native young people. On average, incarcerated indigenous women were younger than the average Canadian inmate. As of 2010, roughly 50.9 percent of new admissions were under the age of 30 (as compared to 37.8 percent of non-indigenous incarcerated individuals) and the average age of all female indigenous inmates was 34 years old. By 2016-17, indigenous youth aged 12-17 accounted for 46 percent of youth admissions to correctional services in 10 jurisdictions while comprising on average only 8 percent of the general young population within the same jurisdictions.

The conditions of incarceration for indigenous women are also typically worse than that of their non-indigenous counterparts. They are segregated more frequently and for longer periods of time than non-indigenous women. One woman was reported in 2003 to have been held in segregation for 567 days, for example. In 2006, another report showed an indigenous woman actually spent the majority of her sentence in isolation—for a period of over 1,500 days. Isolation or solitary confinement is known to have serious deleterious effects on psychological well-being, especially for individuals with prior mental health issues. The United Nations considers more than 15 consecutive days of 22 hours or more of confinement "without meaningful human contact" to be torture.

Reports note that due to a lack of resources, the CSC often responds to mental health issues (including acts of self-harm) by segregating inmates rather than providing them with treatment.

Indigenous prisoners are less likely to be granted either day or full parole. In the period of 2009-10, over 75 percent of all indigenous inmates remained incarcerated until their release date—a number over 10 percent higher than their non-indigenous counterparts. Indigenous individuals also comprise 33.42 percent of total overall detentions past their statutory release date, a number disproportionate to their population size. Overall, only 1.2 percent of indigenous inmates were granted full parole during the 2009-10 period compared with 3.8 percent of non-indigenous ones.

The massive over-representation of indigenous people in Canada's prisons is yet another example of the fraudulent character of the Trudeau Liberal government and ruling elite's policy of "nation to nation" "reconciliation" with Canada's native people. This policy is not aimed at addressing the urgent social and economic needs of the native population, but at advancing the predatory interests of Canadian capitalism. Through the cultivation of a tiny petty-bourgeois native elite and its incorporation into the structures of bourgeois politics, Canadian capitalism seeks to gain a fig-leaf of legitimacy for socially and environmentally destructive resource development projects on historic native lands, and to suppress opposition among the native population and segregate it from the rest of the working class

"Native reconciliation" is enabling a privileged minority to become business owners, government officials and judges, as exemplified in the person of Governor General Mary Simon, the King's representative in Canada, while the vast majority of indigenous people live in abject misery akin to social conditions in the lesser developed, historically oppressed countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau—now approaching the end of his seventh year as prime minister and the most conspicuous proponent of "reconciliation"—proposed a palliative measure to the imprisoning of large numbers of native people in the form of a bill to do away with mandatory minimum sentences. Even were Bill C-5 to be adopted by parliament, it would only repeal "certain" minimum penalties and is difficult to enforce by design. Critics of the bill have made clear that the bill will do nothing to reduce the number of indigenous women housed within federal penitentiaries.

Trudeau's government has failed to fulfill any of the promises it touted, in the name of "reconciliation" on coming to office, including doing away with boiled-water advisories and lifting indigenous reservations out of poverty. As the political representative of the Canadian capitalist class, the Trudeau government is far more concerned with defending the wealth of the super-rich and waging war and aggression around the world than securing the needs of the indigenous, as all working people.



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