



Back to [Mentally ill female prisoners treated cruelly, inhumanly, report finds](#)

## Mentally ill female prisoners treated cruelly, inhumanly, report finds

May 09, 2012

Diana Zlomislic

Canada's treatment of mentally ill female prisoners amounts to "cruel and inhuman" punishment, a new [report](#) finds.

"It is shocking to see the extent of human rights abuses against women at home," said Renu Mandhane, director of the [International Human Rights Program at University of Toronto](#), which published the [report](#).

"I think, with the [Ashley Smith story and the ongoing inquest](#), everyone assumed that no one is currently in that situation," said Mandhane, who co-chairs the Advocacy Committee of [Human Rights Watch Canada](#).

"The fact is there are still women imprisoned who are subject to long periods of segregation and uses of force despite their mental health status. That is quite disturbing."

**More:** [Read the report](#)

Smith died at [Grand Valley Institution](#) in Kitchener in 2007 after tying a ligature around her neck — a habitual behaviour that was considered a dangerous coping mechanism to deal with prolonged periods of isolation. She was 19 and had served nearly a year in federal custody. A report by the [Office of the Correctional Investigator](#) found her mental health issues, which went unaddressed in the system, were exacerbated by 17 institutional transfers and continual segregation.

**More:** [Ottawa endorses overhaul of mental-health services but funding still a question](#)

Smith entered the youth justice system as a teen after throwing crabapples at a postal worker in her hometown of Moncton, N.B. Her time in custody grew with the number of institutional charges laid against her for bad behaviour.

Nearly five years after Smith's death, Canadian prisons are still relying on segregation, force and chemical restraints to manage mentally ill inmates.

"This report confirms that what happened to (Smith) could and will happen again," said Bonnie Brayton, national executive director of [DisAbleD Women's Network Canada](#).

At least one in three federally sentenced women suffers from a mental health issue and nearly half have tried to harm themselves, the report states.

The [Correctional Service of Canada](#) in a brief statement Tuesday night said that "addressing the mental health needs of offenders, including women offenders, is a priority for the Correctional Service of Canada."

In her research, Mandhane visited the Kitchener prison where Smith died to gauge how inmates there are coping today.

On the maximum security unit, she met a mentally ill, 35-year-old Aboriginal woman described as "K.J." in the report who had been subject to extensive segregation and institutional transfers.

Accompanied by University of Toronto law students Elizabeth Bingham and Rebecca Sutton, the report's authors, Mandhane sat down with K.J., who has spent the last 14 years in prison on what was originally a six-year sentence.

It's not uncommon for the sentences of mentally ill inmates to balloon in custody because of additional institutional charges often brought on by disruptive behaviour.



Ashley Smith died at the age of 19 at the Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener, Ont. Correctional Investigator Howard Sapers says a host of "serious failures" at the institution set the stage for the troubled teen's death.

Handout photo

K.J. came prepared for the interview with a list of diagnoses she has received and the medications she has been given to treat her mental illnesses.

"The list was more than a page and a half long," Mandhane said.

K.J. said she sees a psychologist twice a week for about 10 minutes per session. The inmate said the therapist uses the time to ask questions about other women on the unit, which K.J. sees as an attempt to gather information that will be passed on to correctional staff.

"There's no real provision for treatment," Mandhane said.

"There's a reliance on medication rather than therapy or treatment and when women are given access to psychologists or psychiatrists, it's really about an assessment of risk or time in segregation, not engaging their needs."

Kim Pate, a longtime prisoner rights advocate, said she is not surprised by the report's findings.

Pate is executive director of the [Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies](#), an umbrella group that supports women and girls in the justice system. Pate worked with Smith while she was incarcerated at the Grand Valley Institution for Women.

Canada, she says, needs more mental health units in hospitals rather than prisons attempting to provide mental health services, "which, I think, everybody is acknowledging now cannot be done."

A hospital in Brockville has opened a unit for mentally ill female inmates.

Just before Christmas in 2010, the unit accepted its first and only federally sentenced woman.

Prior to her transfer, the inmate was injuring herself almost daily in segregation at the [Regional Psychiatric Centre](#) in Saskatoon, which is designated as a psychiatric hospital and prison.

"She was in confinement most of the time," Pate said. "She was often being strapped down in the same way Ashley had been."

Pate said staff refused to follow the psychiatry chief's advice that the woman be released from segregation and offered support and treatment.

When the inmate was finally transferred to the Ontario hospital, her self-harming behaviour decreased dramatically.

"I think she had one incident of self-injury in about four or five months, which was unheard of," Pate said.

She wants to see more shared service agreements between the federal prison service and provincial and territorial ministries of health.

Pate hopes prison officials and politicians will learn from this success story.

Until then, Canada's blatant and continued violation of the rights of federally sentenced women with mental health issues has sweeping implications for civil and political rights around the world, Mandhane said.

"Canada is seen as a global leader in corrections and disability rights," she said. "When Canada fails to show leadership, we set the bar far too low."

#### **Also on The Star:**

[Star challenges secrecy around teen's death in jail](#)

[Health board criticizes Ashley Smith's prison treatment before death](#)

[Embattled Ashley Smith coroner replaced](#)

[Ottawa endorses overhaul of mental-health services but funding still a question](#)