CRADLES IN PRISON CELLS: MOTHERS BEHIND BARS

BY CRAIG AND MARC KIELBURGER

Amid the constant crackle of radios and chatter of inmates, surprising sounds linger in the prison halls.

A baby’s coo. A mother’s gentle soothing. The creak of a rocking chair, rhymes recited from a children’s book, scratches of a crayon.

Behind the barbed wire fence at Alouette Correctional Centre for Women, 50 kilometres east of Vancouver, is a state of the art nursery. It’s one of the only mother-child units in a Canadian prison system that leaves many children without mothers.

In fact, Alouette is the only mother-child unit in the provincial system, where 6,000 women serve time in 18 facilities across the country (there are others in federal prisons, but the vast majority of women are sentenced provincially). Experts estimate 20,000 Canadian children are separated from their mothers because of incarceration every year.

“We judge these women. We say, you’re a bad woman, you must be a bad mother, so we punish the child as well,” says Dr. Ruth Elwood Martin, director of the Collaborating Centre for Prison Health and Education at the University of British Columbia and a former prison physician.

Children behind bars may sound like fodder for a juicy story or a bad comedy. But over 90 countries around the world—including Canada, the United Kingdom and Germany—have laws allowing prison childcare in some form. Eligible women undergo rigorous screening to ensure their children aren’t at risk, and the programs have proven benefits.

At Alouette, inmate mothers raise their children under supervision, receive parenting and first aid classes and babysitting support. At age four, children transition to living there part time as they begin school.

Medical studies show that keeping newborns with their incarcerated mothers is the best thing for the baby’s health. Time together leads to improved social and emotional growth, limits anxiety and depression, and boosts immune system development.

It’s also good for the mother’s wellbeing and rehabilitation. Time with their children is incentive for women to turn their lives around and leads to lower recidivism rates.

Bonding time can also heal societal trauma and familial wounds, says Martin, but for most inmate mothers without access to facilities, that opportunity is lost.

Critics say prisons are the new residential schools, contributing to the breakup of Indigenous families as the number of Indigenous women in Canadian prisons has grown over 100 per cent since 2001.

Healing family ties is a major part of reconciliation, and prisons offer a unique opportunity to address some of the residual trauma by supporting family bonds.

“We’re dealing with tragically high numbers of Indigenous women, many who experienced trauma or substance abuse themselves,” says Martin. “We have an opportunity to break that cycle.”

For two decades, Martin has been advocating for mothers and babies behind bars, calling for mother-child units in all Canadian correctional facilities.

On Mother’s Day, we’re echoing her call. Our prison system is meant for rehabilitation, not punishing Canada’s most vulnerable families.

The damaging effects of separation can be permanent, Martin says. “Once you take a baby away from its mother, there’s no going back.”