

Prison staff still mishandle mentally ill, ombud finds

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Six years after the death of Ashley Smith, an investigation by the federal prisons watchdog says guards and managers are still taking a dangerously wrong approach to troubled women offenders.

The damning report is the result of an investigation by the office of Howard Sapers, the federal corrections ombudsman.

Entitled "Risky Business," it says the prison system still deals with women offenders who harm themselves with an onslaught of security measures focused on controlling and punishing them, which escalates tensions and leads to greater harm.

Prison guards continue to use pepper spray, segregation, physical restraints, disciplinary and sometimes criminal charges and institutional transfers to control the most chronic and complex offenders who have untreated mental health issues, says Sapers.

The report by the Office of the Correctional Investigator was released Monday even as a coroner's inquest into 19-year-old Ashley Smith's death in 2007 is still in the midst of hearing testimony from key witnesses. Yet Sapers has independently reached worrisome conclusions about the fate of other women like her in the federal system.

"The investigation raises ongoing concerns and questions about the capacity of the Correctional Service of Canada to safely and appropriately manage the most acute cases of mental illness and chronic self-injury," said Sapers.

Over the past five years the number of self-injury incidents in federal correctional facilities has more than tripled, with a disproportionate number of those committed by a small number of women within the penitentiary system. And within that group aboriginal women are a particular concern – making up nearly half the inmates who may bite, cut or suffocate themselves.

Sapers says he doesn't question the "integrity, commitment or professionalism" of federal efforts, but he says there are a "handful of mentally disordered women offenders whose "symptoms, behaviours or severity of illness" are beyond the capacity of CSC to manage.

Resorting to punitive or restraint measures tends to make matters worse, he said; it exacerbates the frequency and severity of self-injury and may escalate the situation, with the inmate resisting or becoming combative.

Other approaches, such as segregation of self-injurious offenders "is counterproductive to therapeutic treatment aims and potentially unsafe," the report says.