

# Canada's New Residential School: Exploring the Impact of Cultural Racism on Federally Imprisoned Aboriginal Women

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## Introduction

Historically, the main objective of the residential school system was to assimilate Aboriginal children into mainstream Canadian culture. The government had enforced a number of strict policies in this system, and today, similar power and control are being applied through the federal prison system, with Aboriginal women facing the greatest number of risks.

## Argument

Similar to the Indian Act and residential school system, prisons are a contemporary colonial strategy that works to isolate Aboriginal women from their culture and families, while upholding the white Canadian "norm".

## Method

This research takes a comparative approach starting with a historical overview of the Indian Act in terms of the cultural racism it entails and proceeds to analyze the impacts of cultural racism in both residential schools and the federal prison system. Data have been collected from a range of recently published articles ranging in the fields of social science, women's studies, sociology and criminology, along with a debate (Bill C-10) and case study (Ashley Smith).

## Results

- #1** Parents of Aboriginal children were depicted as savages and the government saw children as risks to dominant culture. Children were brainwashed into believing their culture was barbaric. Similarly, Aboriginal women in prisons are labeled as "maximum security", as well as a war party that could potentially band together and overthrow the "goof order of the institution". Further their risk is categorized by marital status, education, employment, etc. The result is solitary confinement, causing Aboriginal women to lose connection with each other and their culture.
- #2** Residential schools removed culturally appropriate programs in favour of ones that drew upon mainstream values. Children did chores based on their gender and were punished for speaking their mother tongue. Similarly, prisons provide programs that reflect hegemonic values. The staff has little expertise in Aboriginal identity, making it hard to administrate rehabilitation programs. Aboriginal women lose visitation rights, telephone calls, and with prisons located far away from Aboriginal communities, they are lucky if they get any visitors.
- #3** Violence in residential schools was made "normal" in schools. Children suffered physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Children were afraid to stand up to authority, and if staff were found abusing them, they would simply relocate to another school. Similarly, Aboriginal women are dehumanized based on gendered and racialized stereotypes such as the "drunken squaw", implying their sexuality is dangerous. Solitary confinement destroys women, allowing guards to view them as non-humans, with no rights to infringe upon.
- #4** The purpose of Bill C-10, "The Safe Streets & Communities Act", is to lessen crimes and consider the needs of victims. The Bill creates an increase of incarceration rates among Aboriginal people. Further, minimum sentencing does nothing to address overrepresentation, leading to more Aboriginal people in prisons, a decrease in pardons, and more out of the economy and in prisons.

## Data/Statistics

"Aboriginal people make up roughly 3-4% of the Canadian population" (Duncan, 2011)

"46% of maximum security prisoners are of Aboriginal heritage" (Duncan, 2011)

"The government of Canada spends about \$600,000 per high security cell, with less than half being spent on each Aboriginal student in Canada" (Duncan, 2011)



## Conclusion

Through storytelling and more money spent on Aboriginal education, there is room for Aboriginal women to resist oppression and make room for meaningful social change. With the recent passage of Bill C-10, Aboriginal women will be incarcerated longer, with the risks being far too great for the community. It is important for this issue to be recognized, as maybe then prisons will reclaim their true purpose of rehabilitation rather than "suicide machines".

