

Exploring Canadian News Media's Portrayal of Federal Penitentiaries and Prisoners During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT The media have often portrayed prisons and prisoners in a distorted manner. Prisoners are often portrayed as more dangerous and violent than they typically are, and prisons as necessary institutions that function effectively. Using a qualitative content analysis of 84 newspaper articles published online by Canadian news outlets, this study explores how the news media portrayed Correctional Service Canada (CSC) federal penitentiaries and prisoners detained in these institutions during the first 11-months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results reveal that the media portrayed prisoners as human beings that are entitled to exercise their rights until they were prioritized for vaccinations, at which point there was a shift towards their portrayal as an undeserving dangerous underclass. CSC was portrayed as having failed to address and protect prisoners' needs and rights during the pandemic. The media ultimately portrayed federal imprisonment as a system that is broken and incarceration as an ineffective response to criminal behaviour. The implications of these findings – including the need for a “radical rethink” of federal imprisonment – and suggestions for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In mid-March 2020, COVID-19 was declared a global health pandemic: as of September 20, 2022, 609 million cases have been detected and 6 million people have died worldwide (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020a). As these numbers indicate, COVID-19 represents a serious threat to the health and safety of the public; however, according to the WHO (n.d.), the most at-risk group for contracting COVID-19 is prisoners. Prisons house many health-vulnerable individuals, many of whom suffer from compromised health profiles that put them at risk of getting seriously ill from the virus; for example, the elderly and those who suffer from human immunodeficiency virus (Sapers, 2020). Further, prisoners' living conditions are often substandard and by their nature preclude social distancing, as prisons are often overcrowded and unsanitary (Burki, 2020; Sapers, 2020). Prisons have been identified as “hotspots for COVID-19” (Burki, 2020, p. 1411).

Previous research explains the critical role media play in shaping the public's knowledge and understanding of the criminal justice system (CJS) and its key players (Marsh, 2009). During the pandemic, 75% of Canadians reported using the Internet more frequently, allocating most of their time to following the news (Statistics Canada, 2020). Given the media's presence in Canadians' lives, it is important to understand how the media communicates information about COVID-19, including how the virus affects vulnerable populations such as residents in long-term care facilities, homeless individuals, and prisoners.

Previous studies have found that the media have portrayed crime and offenders in a distorted manner, as the media tend to report only the most heinous crimes (Jewkes, 2006). By depicting the most gruesome crimes, the media present offenders as a homogenized group: as extremely “dangerous” and “violent” beings (Boyle & Stanley, 2019, p. 80). According to Garland (2012), this “dangerous other” narrative distorts the audience's perception of offenders by evoking negative feelings among viewers, playing on their fear of crime and resentment towards the criminal “other” (p. 158). Thus, the media can sway the public's opinion, creating opportunities for penal reform, especially in response to high-profile cases. To illustrate, Garland (2012) argued the media's depiction of high-profile crimes (e.g., sexual assault and murder), contributes to the public's fear of crime. Politicians then play on the public's fear by using the media as a political platform to advocate for tough on crime policies to win votes (Garland, 2012).

Scholars have also found the media negatively portray certain subgroups of offenders. For example, research examining media portrayals of Black male offenders has found the media are more likely to portray them negatively, as criminal “thugs” (Hall, 1993, p. 245), with media images typically showing them dressed in jail or street clothes (Entman, 1990). In contrast, other research suggests that White male offenders are rarely shown looking disheveled and are usually presented as sophisticated, white-collar criminals (Colburn & Melander, 2018; Entman, 1990). Further discrepancies exist regarding the portrayal of female offenders with some research demonstrating the media attribute a more positive outlook to female offenders. For example,

Landor and Eisenclas (2012) found that female sex offenders were portrayed as “lovers” whereas male sex offenders were portrayed as “pedophiles,” casting women as less dangerous (p. 499). However, other scholars have not reached similar conclusions, finding instead that the media portray female offenders as “cold” (Christensen, 2018, p. 182; Collins, 2016, p. 305) and violent people (Cecil, 2007; Clowers, 2001).

While much of the existing literature examining the media's portrayal of prisons is outdated, what is known about these media portrayals is that they too are distorted, rarely discussing the typically routine and boring nature of prison (Chen et al., 2016; Welch et al., 2000). For example, Marsh (2009) and Mason (2006) found the media present two extreme depictions of prison life. One portrayal includes prisons being luxurious spaces where prisoners receive amenities, whereas the second portrayal includes prisons being dangerous and violent spaces. The media have also been found to depict prison as a necessary component of the CJS: as a “what works” solution to crime (Mason, 2006, p. 253).

Chartrand (2021) notes that abolition groups (e.g., Abolition Coalition) have utilized the media as a political platform to raise awareness about various issues prisoners are experiencing amidst the pandemic and to pressure the Canadian government to release prisoners. However, very little is known about how the media have portrayed prisoners and incarceration throughout this time. Liebrez et al. (2020) suggest there may be a “blind spot in the media regarding the spread of COVID-19 among prison inmates” (p. 2). As such, the current study contributes to the gap in the literature by exploring how the Canadian news media portrayed the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), the agency responsible for people sentenced to a term of imprisonment of two years or more, and prisoners detained in CSC penitentiaries during the first 11-months of the pandemic.

METHODS

The Canadian Newsstream database was used to identify newspaper articles for inclusion in the analysis because it only includes Canadian newspapers, provides full-text access, and offers a breadth of coverage from multiple news sources. Boolean search terms were used to minimize the risk that relevant articles would be excluded and to help generate accurate and relevant results. Different combinations of keywords were used to capture the different ways newspaper articles presented COVID-19 in Canadian federal custody and/or among federal prisoners. The search terms used were: (“Correctional Service of Canada” OR “Correctional Service Canada” OR “CSC” OR “Corrections Canada” OR “federal prison” OR “federal prisoner” OR “federal prisoners” OR “federal prisons” OR “federal corrections” OR “federal institutions” OR “federal custody” OR “federal penitentiaries” OR “federal penitentiary” OR “federal inmates” OR “federal inmate”) AND (coronavirus OR covid-19 OR pandemic OR virus OR COVID). Articles were selected from between March 11, 2020, when the WHO (2020b) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, and January 31 2021, to meet the requirements of the Honours program the author was participating in.

The use of these search parameters generated a total of 860 articles. A random number generator was then used to narrow the purposive sample down with a goal of retrieving 10 articles for each of the months, as there was “no obvious reason to choose one case over another” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 249). Fewer than 10 articles were published for some months, so all articles were included for analysis (i.e., June (5), July (4), September (4), and October (6)). This process resulted in a purposeful random sample of 84 online newspaper articles.

Articles were uploaded to NVivo 12, a qualitative data software analysis program, for analysis purposes. Given the open-ended, exploratory nature of the research question, inductive coding was

used to identify emergent themes (Saldaña, 2013). The first stage of the coding process involved reading the articles to understand the subject matter. The second stage included assigning codes and placing the references in the appropriate nodes folders. The third review included reviewing each of the references in the folders to ensure they accurately reflected each theme. During the final review, codes were condensed into major themes and sub-themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION—MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF PRISONERS AND CSC

Four key themes emerged from the data regarding how the media portrayed prisoners and CSC institutions during the first 11-months of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, prisoners were portrayed as “human beings” entitled to exercising their rights. Second, prisoners were portrayed as an undeserving “dangerous” population, though this narrative only emerged during the second wave of the pandemic. The media portrayed CSC institutions as “failing” to address and accommodate prisoners' needs and uphold their rights during the pandemic. The final theme which emerged was that CSC institutions do not work in response to criminal behaviour.

Prisoners are Human Beings

Chaimowitz et al. (2020) predicted that the Canadian media would portray prisoners negatively during the pandemic. However, the media portrayed prisoners positively in that they were typically presented as human beings. This theme emerged when journalists referred to prisoners as people or noted their occupational role in the family unit, such as being a “grandmother” (Baranyai, 2021, para. 7). Incorporating these humanistic identifiers is a unique finding in this study, as existent literature has typically found that these identifiers were only shared when talking about female offenders (Brennan et al., 2015; Carlyle et al., 2014; Cecil, 2007; Landor & Eisenclas, 2012). In addition, these identifiers move away from the “dangerous other” narrative. For example, referring to a prisoner as a “grandmother” may imply that she is a person incapable of committing harm as she may pose a lower risk and does not need to remain incarcerated during the pandemic. This humanistic and non-dangerous narrative runs contrary to the existing literature of offenders being presented in the media as the dangerous ‘other’ (Boyle & Stanley, 2019; Christensen, 2018; Entman, 1990; 1992; Garland, 2012; Oliver, 2003; Welch et al., 2000).

Prisoners' Rights are Human Rights

Earlier studies found the media tend to be unsupportive of human rights for prisoners, claiming that because they are “dangerous” people, their rights should be forfeited (Boyle & Stanley, 2019, p. 80). This theme did not emerge in this study: the media portrayed prisoners' lives as valuable and prisoners as people entitled to exercising their section 7 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms right (the right to life, liberty, and security). Journalists presented advocates' arguments that exercising this right could be achieved by providing prisoners with access to medical treatment and facilitating their early release to protect them from the virus. To illustrate, Jeaurond, the wife of a prisoner, explained:

“These people are serving time for a crime, but they don't deserve a death sentence because of a virus that could potentially have been contained if efforts had been made to protect the inmates [by releasing them], who are still Canadian citizens with rights...” [emphasis added] (as cited in Macalpine, 2020, para. 22).

Prisoners are the Undeserving “Dangerous” Population

There was a major shift in the narrative starting in December 2020

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when the media started to talk about vaccinations and people started to debate who should be prioritized to receive the vaccine. At this time the media's narrative shifted to the portrayal of prisoners as not deserving of vaccinations because they are 'dangerous criminals.' This theme emerged when journalists highlighted politicians' and the public's pushback to prisoners being prioritized for the vaccine. The adjectives used to describe prisoners were no longer humanistic. Journalists applied the criminal 'other' label as justification for why prisoners should not be prioritized. For example, Mandel (2021) wrote that it is outrageous that an "axe murderer" is going to receive the vaccine first and incorporates Freeman's (the victim and a victims' advocate) Facebook post to highlight the graveness of the situation: "Not one inmate should receive the vaccine before the vulnerable residents ...[and] all healthcare and front-line workers who ...put themselves at risk every single day" (p. A8). This phrase is in-line with previous research that the media portray offenders as the "undeserving underclass" (Jewkes, 2006, p. 138) who should not be afforded any protection.

CSC Failing to Meet and Uphold Prisoners' Needs and Rights during the Pandemic

Examining how the media portrayed CSC during the pandemic provides insight about key issues that plague Canada's federal correctional system. One theme that emerged was that CSC "failed" (Palmer, 2020, p. A13) to protect its residents because they did not take adequate steps to manage COVID-19. One article cited Dr. Ivan Zinger, Canada's Correctional Investigator responsible for investigating prisoners' complaints, who summarized CSC's COVID-19 response protocols as "slow, contradictory, confused, and deficient" ("Inmates Were Not Released Early," 2020, p. A4). For example, many journalists noted that CSC did not offer prisoners basic necessities, such as adequate food, hot water, and personal protective equipment. The media also reported that the cleaning services CSC offered were generally inadequate. Quan (2020) noted that a prisoner contracted a respiratory infection from being exposed to the cleaning chemicals.

Journalists also documented how CSC failed to offer prisoners adequate medical services. To illustrate, one article shared Boutilier's, a prisoner at Mission Institution, experience of contracting COVID-19 and how CSC dealt with the situation: "Chunks of blood [came] up from my lungs and they...finally came and...tested me...they came back and said, 'Yeah, you do have it.'" He was given Tylenol and toughed it out inside his cell (as cited in Bolan, 2020, paras. 5-7).

A handful of news articles argued that depriving prisoners' access to health care constitutes a rights violation. The United Nation's (2005) manual, which sets out international guidelines for supervising incarcerated individuals, explains that prisoners have the right to attain the "highest standard of physical health." a standard the media portrayed CSC as having failed to uphold for Boutilier (alongside other prisoners) (p. 61).

The media argued that rights violations have been a pertinent issue during the pandemic. To illustrate, the media described CSC's isolation practices to curb the spread of the virus as "very backward" (Macalpine, 2021, para. 28). They reported that CSC was not isolating infected prisoners in a separate quarantine range but keeping them in close contact with non-infected prisoners. Mussell and Rampersaud (2020) reported that CSC kept prisoners in their cells for 23 hours a day as a tactic to minimize their movements to manage the "security and order" of the prison, (para. 6). Journalists contended that these "solitary-like" (Penner, 2020, para. 3) conditions continued to exist even after there were no more positive cases inside CSC's institutions, thus depriving prisoners of their liberty.

CSC Institutions Do Not Work

Mason (2006) found that the media typically portray prisons as "what works" as a response to people who engage in crime and the only practical solution to crime (p. 253). Given the media's portrayal of CSC failing to protect prisoners during the pandemic, it is not surprising that this "what works" narrative did not emerge in this study. Instead, the final theme identified the need to move away from incarceration, with the media calling to "defund" prisons (Mussell & Rampersaud, 2020, para. 24). Many journalists questioned Canada's over-reliance on incarceration as the primary mode of punishment, especially for non-violent offenders ("The Pandemic Forces Us to Rethink Prison," 2020).

While CSC's (2018) mandate is to help prisoners become law-abiding citizens, the media portrayed CSC as doing anything but: many journalists discussed the flaws surrounding incarceration, positing that it holds little rehabilitative potential. For example, many journalists identified barriers prisoners experience upon release, such as finding employment and affording basic necessities. Because of these issues, many journalists argued that now "is [the] time for a radical rethink of a prison system" ("The Pandemic Forces Us to Rethink Prison," 2020, p. A10). As one article argued:

The goal [of incarceration] is not to coddle criminals or ignore crime. It's to find better ways to help offenders - many of whom come out of difficult circumstances - become law-abiding citizens, find employment, and live as good neighbours... What about sentences whose "punishment" includes the obligation to graduate from high school, get a postsecondary degree or apprentice in a trade? ("The Pandemic Forces Us to Rethink Prison," 2020, p. A10).

Indeed, studies have shown that educative and community-based alternatives are more effective in rehabilitating offenders and decreasing recidivism than incarceration (see e.g., DeMatteo et al., 2013; Marion, 2002; Zhang et al., 2006).

LIMITATIONS

This study is the first to examine Canadian news media portrayals of prisoners and federal penitentiaries during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results reveal that COVID-19 has made it difficult to protect some of our most vulnerable citizens: incarcerated individuals. Exploring the media's portrayal of key issues plaguing Canada's federal correctional service may help to mobilize public support, contributing to the creation and implementation of solutions that lead to systemic changes. For instance, advocacy groups can use the narrative that prisoners are human beings to push for a radical rethink of incarceration.

However, the study is not without limitations. This research lacks generalizability. Analysis was limited to online news articles and federal incarceration. Future research should examine how other forms of media portray Canadian prisoners and correctional institutions. Further, future research should examine media portrayals specific to the provincial/territorial system of corrections responsible for people sentenced to less than two years of imprisonment in Canada, and correctional services and prisoners internationally. Although importantly, the goal of any qualitative study is not to generalize, but to explore and to deeply understand the subject matter, which this study has achieved through the analysis of rich data.

CONCLUSION

The current study makes a critical contribution to the existing literature as it explores Canadian news media portrayals of prisoners and federal penitentiaries during the first 11-months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Contrary to the existing literature,

prisoners were portrayed as human beings that are entitled to exercise their rights. However, once vaccination rollouts ensued, prisoners were portrayed as the "dangerous other" (Garland, 2012). The media also portrayed CSC institutions as failing to meet and uphold prisoners' needs and rights, which is contrary to Mason's (2009) findings, as the media did not portray prisons as "what works."

As Dr. Justin Piché explained, "Canada can do better" (as cited in Powell, 2020, p. A24). The results indicate that CSC can improve their practices to meet prisoners' needs and uphold their rights. As the data suggest, many journalists questioned Canada's reliance on incarceration, contending that it does little to help prisoners. Therefore, the findings of this study shed light on the need for a "radical rethink" of federal imprisonment.

The media have the potential to play on the public's perception and "act as a catalyst for penal reform" (Jewkes, 2006, p. 142) as the media offer politicians a platform to promote their punitive agenda. As such, the theme found in this study that prisoners are "human beings" may serve to dispel the criminal label as it reminds the public that not all prisoners are dangerous, and further, that they are people worthy of protection. This humanistic narrative may allow the public to view prisoners differently, potentially allowing viewers to feel sympathy towards prisoners. The public must however act on these sentiments to push for change. Advocacy groups, non-governmental organizations, and the Canadian government could try to mobilize and use the narrative that CSC is not sufficiently caring for prisoners to introduce and implement evidence-based reforms to federal correctional policies and practices.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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