

## NEWS RELEASE

### For immediate release

#### **Forty per cent of female prisoners enter correctional system with a traumatic brain injury**

**TORONTO, July 17, 2014** – A study published today found that almost 40 per cent of Ontario female prisoners have a history of traumatic brain injury (TBI). Unlike the men participating in the study, half of these women sustained a TBI before committing their first crime.

The [study](#), led by Dr. Angela Colantonio, senior scientist, Toronto Rehabilitation Institute, was based on a survey of men and women in Ontario correctional facilities. Published in the *Journal of Correctional Health Care*, it is the first Canadian study of its kind.

Typically caused by a blow to the head, TBI is a leading cause of death and disability worldwide. It kills 11,000 Canadians every year. TBI is commonly caused by falls, motor vehicle collisions, physical assault or sports injuries.

“We observed a striking gender difference. Female inmates with a TBI, compared to males, were much more likely to have suffered physical or sexual abuse as children,” said Colantonio, Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Research Chair in Gender, Work, and Health, University of Toronto. “Our research suggests the need to screen offenders and others with a history of abuse for TBI.”

Dr. Colantonio highlights the need to identify inmates or others at risk of incarceration with a history of a TBI so they can receive appropriate support and treatment. This will allow the system to help prevent future offences by better assisting with the transition back into society. For example, helping individuals secure and maintain employment.

“Right now, we don’t know very much about how brain injuries affect women in the correctional system,” said Colantonio. “This study indicates a need for more research, and for programs that address TBI and mental health problems among people at risk of incarceration.”

Such programs should include training for correctional staff to help them recognize TBI symptoms in inmates, such as slowness to act or a failure to respond to directions. This behaviour may be misinterpreted as defiance, resulting in punishment instead of treatment.

A report last year from the Office of the Correctional Investigator showed the number of women in Canadian prisons had increased 40 per cent since 2008. The same report also found that 85 per cent of incarcerated women said they had a history of physical abuse.

“Now that we have identified this as an issue, we need to work with community organizations and correctional systems to prevent inappropriate incarceration of females with traumatic brain injury and to provide treatment so they have a better chance when they return to society,” said Dr. Geoff Fernie, institute director, research, Toronto Rehabilitation Institute.

The study was supported by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care in Ontario, Health Canada, the Ontario Neurotrauma Foundation, the Saunderson Family Chair, the Canadian Traumatic Brain Injury and Violence Research Team, and CIHR.

### **About Toronto Rehabilitation Institute**

One of North America’s leading rehabilitation sciences centres, Toronto Rehabilitation Institute is revolutionizing rehabilitation by helping people overcome the challenges of disabling injury, illness or age related health conditions to live active, healthier, more independent lives. It integrates innovative patient care, groundbreaking research and diverse education to build healthier communities and advance the role of rehabilitation in the health system. Toronto Rehab, along with Toronto Western, Toronto General and Princess Margaret Hospitals, is a member of the University Health Network and is affiliated with the University of Toronto. [www.uhn.ca](http://www.uhn.ca)

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