

Letter to the Editor - Crime Down, Prison Boom Looms

October 17, 2009

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If the federal government gets its way, Canadians will witness a boom in prison construction coinciding with the longest steady decline in crime rates in Canadian history. That's the consequence of the various pieces of "get tough" legislation recently passed or currently working their way through Parliament.

Consider this: the introduction of mandatory minimum sentences for "serious drug crimes" in the National Anti-Drug Strategy plus the limiting of judicial discretion in regard to credit for time served in pre-trial detention is projected by Statistics Canada to grow the rate of incarceration by as much as 10 per cent.

The government claims that ending two-for-one credit for pre-trial detention will alleviate the overcrowding crisis in provincial detention centres by encouraging more guilty pleas and introducing "truth in sentencing." The resulting surge in Canada's rate of incarceration, currently hovering around 149 per 100,000 population, would require roughly 3,000 new beds for men and about 10 to 15 per cent of that number for women.

So what? Bad people go to jail, right? It should be that simple, but it's not.

When governments "crack down," the American evidence shows that they quickly catch the worst of the worst before reaching into the pool of the non-violent – people who might represent a threat to themselves but are little risk to their communities.

The worst crime for most of these people is either that they are racial minorities (aboriginals will be particularly hard hit) or that they started falling through the cracks in elementary school and carry the burden of various learning and cognitive challenges, including ADD, acquired brain disorders, ADHD, fetal alcohol syndrome, depression, trauma and a whole alphabet soup of psychiatric and psychological syndromes.

The result is prisons swollen with greater numbers of the non-violent, mentally ill, and poor and racialized minorities.

Currently, approximately 10 per cent of the federal prison population is double-bunked. Prison crowding undermines the success of treatment and degrades the working conditions of staff, encouraging higher rates of staff turnover and poorer treatment outcomes for prisoners. Most non-violent prisoners can be more effectively, humanely and economically treated in the community than they can in prison, and the government has the research to prove this.

Community supervision costs roughly \$23,500 a year per person compared with approximately \$101,000 a year per person on average across all security levels to keep a man in prison, and \$185,000 a year per woman.

Then there's the issue of where to put them. Current infrastructure is at or over capacity. The passage of Bill C-25 will require temporary housing in the short term, but it's the long term that ought to concern Canadians – for the only land that the federal government can start building on quickly is the prison farms.

Some of the best farmland in Canada could be swallowed up by super-max prisons based on the American model. That is the vision endorsed by the "independent panel" commissioned by the government and chaired by the former minister of corrections for the province of Ontario, Rob Sampson.

So let's connect the dots. The crime rate has been declining for 26 years – those are the government's numbers – but the same government wants to build more prisons at a cost to taxpayers of billions of dollars.

Who benefits? In the U.S. case, private prison contractors and correctional officer unions. Everyone else loses: education, social assistance and health care.

Does prison building buy safer communities? Not in the United States. Money spent on increased imprisonment and longer, harsher sentences is money wasted, because more prisons do not increase community safety – and there is ample evidence that prisons create and reinforce criminal attitudes and predispositions.

If more prisons resulted in less crime, the United States would be the safest place in the world.

Canada does not need to grow its rate of incarceration, particularly in a context of declining crime rates. We do not need to "get tough," but we do need to "get smart."

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