

In corrections, for example, less emphasis was placed on punishment and more on prevention and rehabilitation. However, the pace of change was not always determined by carefully made plans; sometimes it was spurred by violent confrontation. One such incident took place in 1946, in an unlikely place and in an unusual style.

### *The "Riot" in the Portage Jail and Corrections Reform*

On April 14, 1946, the women prisoners at the Portage Jail staged an uprising—but this was a civilized riot, if ever there was one. The women started to throw assorted pieces of furniture out the windows. They stopped to allow the warden's wife to rescue her potted plants, which were becoming unintended victims of the aerial upholstery. The riot ended peacefully a few hours later with the women returning to their cells. Attorney General J.O. McLenaghan blamed the incident on an institutional oversight. Hardened criminals had not been segregated from the general inmate population. This explanation did not satisfy the press or public and further investigations took place. A year later, an unreleased 1946 report on the jail was leaked to the press. It documented substandard food and living conditions and described an outbreak of venereal disease that the medical staff was unable to handle. The report urged immediate action to curb abusive treatment by the guards. Little had been done to correct the problems and several prisoners had written to the attorney general with their own stories of mistreatment.

The press reports in April 1947 produced a deluge of negative comment about the department and the attorney general. In response, the department tried to improve conditions in the jail by examining the food and health services and improving the library and exercise facilities.

Unknowingly, the women in the Portage jail helped to trigger an era of important corrections reform. The department was already engaged with the issue of improving correctional facilities for young offenders. In 1944 the American Public Welfare Association had been asked to examine juvenile facilities and make recommendations for improvement. Its report, dated September 1944, was a far-reaching study of juvenile

crime and punishment in Manitoba and the findings were disturbing. The juvenile courts were deemed satisfactory, but the rest of the juvenile justice system was judged to be sorely deficient. The report stated that corrections facilities, especially the Carman Home for Boys, “concentrated too highly upon punitive measures,” instead of on rehabilitating the offenders. It suggested that the rate of recidivism could be reduced by more social work within that institution.

In the post-war years, juvenile crime was a major concern for the department. From 1945 to 1950 the rates of youth crime rose substantially. The most disturbing factor was that most of the offenders were repeat offenders. In the aftermath of the Portage riot, local organizations began to urge the government to institute reforms to curb youth crime. The Social Agencies of Greater Winnipeg published a pamphlet, *Youth Needs in Winnipeg*, which called for job initiatives, better libraries and the construction of hockey rinks, swimming pools and playgrounds. The pamphlet suggested the increase in juvenile delinquency was the result of society’s failure to meet the needs of young people, not a faulty court system. In response to the reports and public pressure, the department substantially improved Manitoba’s juvenile corrections facilities.

### *The Beginnings of Legal Aid*

Among the most significant changes in the post-war years was the introduction of government-sponsored legal aid in Manitoba. Before 1948, many poor Manitobans could not afford to have a lawyer in court and were faced with battling an experienced prosecutor or pleading guilty. Many had to do the latter, but others chose to defend themselves, usually with poor results. In the 1930s, the Law Society of Manitoba decided that a system that equated legal representation with wealth was not a just system. The society therefore endeavoured to change it. It advocated a program of government-sponsored legal aid, under which lawyers would be provided at no cost to defend persons who could not afford private counsel. These suggestions were noted by the department, but nothing was done. In response, the society introduced its own system of free legal aid to the indigent. Although the program was well-intentioned, it was underfunded and