

## **In Between Bouts of Depression and Apathy: Reflections from Riverbend Institution**

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The prison population is of course directly proportional to the laws society chooses to enact, how it chooses to punish, and what the expected results of incarceration are (Christie, 2000). You would think that considering prisons have been around for hundreds of years in one form or another, that through experience, refinement, and new insights that rehabilitation must now be a science. In fact, little has changed other than subtle shifts in rhetoric justifying imprisonment (Mathiesen, 1990).

The Harper government enacted harsher laws, restricted opportunities for parole, and diminished positive incentives for change (Webster and Doob, 2015). It is truly unfortunate that the issues related to crime and punishment are an easy target for politicians to manipulate fear (Simon, 2007). Harsher laws invariably create more criminals who will serve longer sentences with fewer opportunities to expect parole. This means higher costs to the public, more guards, more infrastructure to house and feed prisoners, and so on. Appropriate budget increases rarely match the newly and politically created needs. In short, the system becomes more stressed, more punitive, and more unstable (Sapers, 2015).

These situations fly in the face of the Correctional Service Canada's (CSC) mission statement which in part states they are here to "actively encourage and assist offenders to become law-abiding citizens" (CSC, 2018a). Almost everyone who spends any time in prison who is not already suffering some level of mental/emotional trauma is sure to once behind bars. Anger, depression, anxiety and resentment are fostered in a brew where violence and paranoia act as catalysts within an unnatural state of confinement. One of the six priorities stated by Corrections Canada is "effective and timely interventions in addressing mental health needs of offenders" (CSC, 2018b). I can tell you this is an abject failure. In my own situation, after 3 requests and 10 weeks, I was able to get in to see the psychologist. There is no ongoing structural support available if you require it. There are programs in place such as anger management, which are required for some to take before they have a chance of parole. For many prisoners who do take these programs, the motivation is not that they want to be better functioning – they just want the quickest path out. It serves their purpose as it does CSC's. CSC gets to point at all these programs they have in place. Think about it – you are offering anger management in the

worst possible circumstance like giving swimming lessons in a hurricane. The majority of prisoners would not be taking any programs on their own volition in the midst of the abuse endured while confined. It is simply a means to an end – a game played by both prisoner and the CSC. Make no mistake though the CSC has no problem handling your depression, anxiety, ADD, FAS or whatever you have through pharmaceuticals (Kilty, 2012), but are incapable of providing psychologists whom a high percentage of prisoners should be accessing. Of course, this costs money. Considering the current federal government’s seemingly high interest in mental health, I have to wonder why so little is on offer in their own penitentiaries.

The federal government also needs to address drug issues that are exacerbated or caused by their prohibition (Alexander, 1990). Things have only become worse as evidenced by recent overdoses and deaths behind bars. Opioids have now become the scourge. Before that, was it ecstasy or was it crack? It doesn’t matter! We need to find a social accommodation with drugs in our society. Only police and criminals profit from our “just say no” mentality. Theft, prostitution, violence, death, broken lives, destroyed families and any number of other negative outcomes come from drugs. However, it is the prohibition of drugs that is at the root of these issues (ibid).

Moving past the drug-related addictions, we also need to recognize the part that mental illness plays in crime. When most people think about the relationship between crime and mental illness they tend to imagine “someone losing touch with reality” who commits a horrible crime. In fact, these are rare situations. More common is depression, anxiety, bi-polar, and other treatable mental health issues (Beaudette *et al.*, 2015). People need to be able to access mental health services without the fear that those services may be obligated by law to report you to the police. How can you treat someone who wants help if this leads directly to prison?

The Harper years of prison policy are thankfully behind us. The cut backs and crowding have abated. This lost decade though will be a scar on the Canadian justice landscape that will linger for years to come. The false state of fear that the Conservative government promoted in order to create a toxic anti-progressive legal system will take a long time to wash clean.

The Government of Canada needs to address the root causes of crime and disband the ‘us versus them’ mentality. The longer time a person spends behind bars, the more likely that their outside support weakens (Munn and Bruckert, 2014). This is exactly the reverse of what we (society) should want.

I recommend the following, and, yes, some of these suggestions will fly in the face of conventional thinking:

- Since poverty remains rampant in First Nations, and a disproportionate number of Indigenous people are incarcerated, we need to bring economies to First Nations. How about the next time the government gives money to an entity it ties a portion of that money to set up manufacturing (or what have you) on First Nations. I am thinking that Bombardier receives 400 million in government money – 40 million should be tied to First Nations development.
- Stop punishing people for drug use and mental illness. If there is such need, and I can see no other path, we must consider legalizing all drugs. In fact when a person becomes addicted, the government should supply the drugs. A registered drug user program would reduce demand, and therefore lower the price and profitability of the drugs trade, and place persons at risk outside the reach of criminal activities.
- Stop putting people in jail unless the crime involves violence. Consider alternative means of societal controls.
- Create an Indigenous justice system that will reconnect them to their roots and remove them from gang influence.
- Restructure Parole Board Canada's power of parole to being one of review only in cases where the sentence is greater than four years. Parole should be granted solely on the basis of whether or not prisoners are meeting their correctional plan obligations. Parole officers, both inside federal penitentiaries and outside in the community, should also be held accountable for prisoners' progress through their correctional plans.
- Decrease the level and number of conditions placed on parolees. The current regime sets people up to fail, placing parolees back in prison unnecessarily in many instances.

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