

Incentive to Scrutinize

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In line with the army of changes the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) have been marching forward with as a part of their “transformation agenda” on the government endorsed *Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety* (Sampson *et al.*, 2007), the topographers themselves have decided to carve out yet another jagged valley for prisoners to traverse through. As of 1 October 2013, federal prisoners are now required to pay a sizable percentage of their already meagre prisoner employment earnings towards food and prison cell accommodations. Concomitantly, prisoners employed by the Crown Special Operating Agency, CORCAN, will no longer receive incentive pay in exchange for the many hours of labour they contribute towards the production of goods and services used by CSC, other public institutions, and purchased through private corporate contracts. These “accountability” measures, along with other rules and practices which were announced by former Conservative Minister of Public Safety Vic Toews in April 2012, were then branded as an attempt to usurp a few million extra dollars per year in savings from the nearly 3 billion dollar annual budget of CSC.

Prior to the changes, prisoners would receive a maximum of \$6.90 for one day of prison work in areas such as food services and prison maintenance, while CORCAN employees would receive the same base pay along with an additional \$2.20 per hour. With the proposed changes in effect, prisoners will receive 30 percent less per day and the CORCAN incentive pay will be eliminated altogether, meaning that the rate of pay will be reduced to \$4.90 per day for a basic exchange of labour. Meanwhile, the more complex skills-based labour at CORCAN will no longer be expressly remunerated above the base rate at all.

While the treatment and wage status of prisoners are no doubt low on the public list of priorities in these austere times – when even many law-abiding citizens are feeling the effects of government cutbacks – this issue is one that deserves attention. It must be looked at in terms of the broader interest of public safety and the future of CSC.

It is interesting that the former Minister of Public Safety advertised these measures in terms of the financial benefits that could be reaped through their implementation and terms of the implicit message of accountability that it would send to prisoners. In actuality, these measures will likely have the exact opposite effect.

A prison is essentially a miniature society, and naturally one with few comforts and many deprivations. With such scarcity, access to basic goods, which are already tightly regulated, take on extraordinary meaning for the individuals living under such conditions. One of the ways that prisoners access these goods is through the prisoner canteen, where prisoners can purchase items with the payments they receive for their work assignments. This creates a level playing field so that those without family members in the community able to provide them with financial support can still purchase things like stamps, hygiene items, the occasional chocolate bar, Tylenol, or place money on their prisoner telephone card.

In keeping with the analogy of the prison population as a micro-society, it is the access to and control of scarce resources that generates the most competition and conflict. By further severing prisoners from their ability to access these resources, the prison environment will naturally become more hostile. Prisoners will more often come into conflict with one another and they will be more inclined to find illegitimate means of satisfying the deficit through participation in the underground economy of the prison and/or by trafficking illicit drugs in the institution (although CSC will vehemently deny their availability).

From a financial perspective, these new security threats will likely generate hundreds of thousands of dollars in both static and dynamic security measures each year for each of the dozens of institutions that CSC manages. Such expenditures will only be dwarfed by the additional costs of managing prisoners who end up in administrative segregation, the many extra hours worked by security intelligence officers performing investigations and the substantial increase in the reclassification of prisoners as maximum security prisoners.

In terms of accountability, altogether eliminating the scant \$2.20 per hour payments that CORCAN prisoner-employees received for their productive labour sends an entirely negative message to workers. If anything, it sends the message that one is being exploited. Part of the reason that CORCAN jobs were attractive for prisoners was the fact that meaningful labour could be exchanged for a little extra money that could be sent home to family members, used to finance post-secondary education, or put away for an eventual release. Of course, the incentive component also ensured that CORCAN had a steady supply of willing prison labourers to contribute to the \$60.5 million in sales that the agency generated in 2006-2007 when

Sampson et al. (2007, p. 46) made their recommendations for the federal penitentiary system.

In response to the elimination of incentive pay for CORCAN prisoner-employees, one might ask why a prisoner would still be willing to work there. The obvious answer is that they most likely will not, which is why one must read this measure, along with the 30 percent reduction in inmate pay, as a part of a much larger agenda to emulate the failed, draconian American-style of federal corrections (CBC, 2009). If one reads the unfolding of this agenda as such, it becomes clear that the groundwork is being laid for the implementation of still more uncritically endorsed transformative recommendations found in the partisan policy pushing *Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety* chaired by Harris-Era private prison politician Rob Sampson.

The continued implementation of this document will work to Americanize the Canadian penitentiary system, linking more prison discipline and increased structure through mandatory work programs tied to the Canadian economy, and lead to the eventual abolition of statutory release and the creation of a system of coercively earned parole (Jackson and Stewart, 2009). All activities that derive from this agenda can only be understood as stepping stones towards a Canadian prison industrial complex and, thus, should be thoroughly scrutinized.

REFERENCES

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