

PRISONERS' STRUGGLES

The John Howard Society of Ontario: Effective, Just and Humane Responses to Crime and its Causes for Over 85 Years

JHSO

Those gentlemen who, when they are told of the misery which our prisoners suffer, content themselves with saying 'let them take care to keep out...', forget the vicissitudes of human affairs; the unexpected changes to which men are liable; and that those whose circumstances are affluent, may in time be reduced to indigence, and become debtors and prisoners.

– John Howard (1777), page 23.

The John Howard Society is a charitable organization with lengthy roots in Ontario. The organization's namesake, John Howard, was a remarkable individual and his legacy guides the work that the John Howard Society continues to undertake today.

John Howard was an 18th century Englishman who was captured by the French while sailing from England to Spain. He subsequently spent five years in French dungeons before returning to England as part of a prisoner exchange. Eventually, he was made the Sheriff of Bedford, a post that included among its duties, the task of inspecting local prisons. Few sheriffs actually bothered to carry-out these duties, but John Howard was different. Shocked by the corruption, stench, filth, starvation and disease he saw in the jails, he dedicated his life to improving prison conditions throughout England, Wales and continental Europe. His famous report, *On the State of Prisons in England and Wales* led to legislation against the more obvious brutalities of the system, and slowly moved public opinion to favour more humane prison conditions.

In Ontario, the John Howard Society traces its roots back to classes taught in Toronto's Don Jail in the late 1800s. In a more formal way, the organization was founded in 1929 by Brigadier General Draper, then the Chief of Police in Toronto. Draper recognized the futility in much of the work being done by police, trying to solve crimes and apprehend wrongdoers, when prisoners who were being released from jail were thrust into circumstances of unemployment, isolation and poverty – circumstances that escalate rather than decrease the chances of re-offending.

Since 1929, the John Howard Society of Ontario (JHSO) has grown to include 19 local John Howard Society offices which serve communities all across our province, and advance our collective mission, “*Effective, just and humane responses to crime and its causes*”. Today, these local offices provide a variety of direct services to Ontarians and their families who have become, or are at risk of becoming, involved with the criminal justice system. The local offices provide services in a broad continuum of care from prevention programming to at-risk youth, institutional services and in-reach to prisoners, and reintegration support to those returning to the community after incarceration. John Howard Society clients have access to case management, individual counselling, addictions and mental health counselling, anger management counselling, employment services, housing, and other services either at the local John Howard Society office or through referral to other organizations.

In 2003, JHSO established its Centre of Research, Policy & Program Development (the Centre) to contribute to the evidence-based literature in the criminal and social justice fields, to inform policy discourse and to engage in rigorous program evaluation. The Centre’s research, policy, and public education efforts are strategized to reflect and to further the mission of the provincial Society.

A key aspect of JHSO’s mission is to promote the fair and humane treatment of all incarcerated persons and to seek to ensure that all forms of detention and imprisonment comply with relevant legal and human rights standards. Through the provision of institutional and reintegration services to both federal and provincial institutions in Ontario, the John Howard Society strives to ensure that individual prisoners’ needs are being met, and that they are receiving supports and referrals that will help facilitate a successful transition back to the community (for those who are being released). Through the work of the Centre at JHSO, the Society both studies and profiles systemic issues in corrections and the social and criminal justice realm, in an effort to effect evidence-based and humane change.

Some of JHSO’s key correctional policy priorities in recent years include high remand rates, prison overcrowding and bail in Ontario. Persons “on remand” are individuals being held in provincial custody awaiting bail, trial, or sentencing. The majority of the remand population is presumed to be legally innocent. Since the 1990s, fewer persons charged with criminal offences have been granted bail and have been detained in increasingly

crowded, maximum-security detention centres until their charge is disposed of. In Ontario, approximately two-thirds of prisoners in our provincial institutions are those on remand – around 5000 persons on any given day (MCSCS 2013). In addition, approximately 70 percent of those on remand in Ontario are detained for non-violent charges (Porter and Calverley, 2011). Even short remand stays can be profoundly disruptive to a person's life.

JHSO has undertaken numerous studies, reports and submissions on the issue of remand, and most recently released a report entitled, *Reasonable Bail?* which found that bail in Ontario has drifted far from its legislated purpose, resulting more people detained pre-trial, as well as the erosion of the presumption of innocence and the guaranteed right to reasonable bail. Indeed, fewer people are being released on bail, less quickly, and with more bail conditions, during a time of historically low crime rates. Our provincial jails are crowded and at capacity; prisoners sleep two to three to a cell designed for one, at times on a mattress on the floor. While improving timely and broader access to bail will not solve all of the issues associated with high remand populations and crowding, it would make a significant impact.

Another solution to overcrowding in Ontario's provincial institutions that JHSO calls for is the re-invigoration and expansion of the use of community releases for sentenced prisoners. There has been a significant reduction in provincial parole and the use of conditional release programs in Ontario in recent decades. Additionally, as part of the reforms of the mid-late 1990s, the Ontario government eliminated halfway house and transitional housing programs for provincial prisoners, which has directly impacted the amount of transitional support available to reintegrating provincial prisoners (JHSO *et al.*, 2006). As our research has demonstrated, individuals who are justice-involved or are recently released from prison face a confluence of barriers upon re-entering society and need numerous support services. JHSO supports increasing the use of community-based sanctions, gradual release and prevention-focused programs, which reliably reduce rates of crime and victimization.

JHSO is uniquely positioned to have meaningful impacts on both our clients' lives through the services offered by local offices and on broader issues in Ontario. The organization's frontline expertise and connection to persons who have been in conflict with the law is critical to identifying current and emerging issues in our sector, which could necessitate a

provincial JHSO response. Conversely, the research, policy and program evaluation work undertaken by the Centre ensures that the programs offered by the local John Howard Societies are evidence-led and impactful, and that challenges facing justice-involved persons in Ontario are being meaningfully documented and disseminated. The work of JHSO has certainly expanded since its formal inception in 1929, consistent with the evolving literature on social determinants of crime and successful responses to crime, but the organization remains committed to the values and vision espoused by John Howard many years ago.

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