

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Devon Ebach is currently incarcerated in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. He hopes that one day his words, and those of many other incarcerated peoples, will stand for something.

ARTICLE

The Canadian federal prison system is an antiquated system. The challenges of the present are not the same as when the prison was initially conceived as a place of penitence. Canada is now too eager to adapt their approach of mass warehousing from the United States. We share a border with a country that still has the death penalty and has allowed profit from privatizing prisons. Why has increasing prison populations among Indigenous peoples become the acceptable norm? These conditions create a host of problems not just for people in prison, but as a matter of concern for everyone.

Trades and programming will successfully reduce the recidivism rate by equipping people in prison with skills and the ability to secure gainful employment and enrich our quality of life. It will teach us to fish and share with the village. The introduction of digital tablets in prison would create another option for incarcerated persons to develop important skills, improve institutional programming and schooling, as well as an ability to communicate more regularly with their families and supports. Program facilitators, teachers, doctors, parole officers, psychologists, elders, religious advisors, and management could all be in a safe environment while still being connected to incarcerated persons and their correctional plans. Going fully digital would also reduce our environmental footprint while streamlining process. The institution could easily monitor and regulate communications on these devices.

Despite these technological options, family contact, community supports, private family visits, and video visits are limited and restricted by the institutions. Rather than mend family bonds, they bend and break them. Family members are persecuted for loving the guilty and stigmatized for having compassion, forgiveness, mercy, and grace. Family members and supports endure invasive requirements to visit incarcerated people. These connections and contacts play a key role in our mental health and behaviour.

The pay for imprisoned people in Canadian federal penitentiaries has not been revised in over 40 years. This pay practice completely ignores decades of inflation for people in prison with canteen purchases, phone calls and long distance charges, mail, and family visits among other expenses all costing us more. People on prison are allotted anywhere from two to six dollars a day and that does not include the 30 percent pay deduction that goes towards food, accommodation, telephone service, and cable television. After an eight-hour workday and these pay deductions we can barely afford stamps and envelopes.

The food in prisons is inadequate. A typical meal consists of 90 grams of protein pre-cooked, two ounces of vegetables and four ounces of carbs. If you are powdered milk-intolerant, you can have all the warm water you want.

Healthcare services are similarly inadequate compared to health services in the community. The wait time for any type of health issues can exceed six months or more. The options of medicines and treatments do not meet community standards across the country. Individuals struggling with an opiate disorder are told they must wait months for treatment.

Mandatory minimum sentences and the elimination of accelerated parole has also created a powder keg of overcrowding. This environment perpetuates violence, as well as accelerates transmission of infectious diseases within institutions. You cannot just “stuff” many people into a cramped space and expect there not to be problems and conflicts.

Escorted and unescorted temporary absences are only granted in the minimum-security institutions, which reflects the smallest prison population percentage. Those at medium and maximum-security levels are often released on their warrant expiry dates without any support or reintegration options.

An alarming number of parole revocations are also occurring. Drug use is a common reason for revocation, which typically terminates parole. This is done despite that drug addiction issues could be better managed in the community through detox, addictions counselling, treatment centres and support groups, rather than prisons.

One of the greatest violations of Canada’s *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* is the Dangerous Offender (DO) designation and Long-Term Supervision Orders (LTSO) that result in indefinite sentences, especially for Indigenous people. It is Canada’s adopted version of the brutal three strikes laws popular in many jurisdictions in the United States that impose indefinite prison sentences, instead of maximum sentence lengths. Those

who are given DO designations or LTSOs are left to the mercy of the institution and parole boards with no hope or plans of freedom within sight. Families are also burdened with this injustice as they manage without their loved ones or become the jailers and supervisors upon their release. When will we stop following the U.S. model that has shown not to work? Through prisons, the government has simply reinstated the 60's scoop, giving it a new name, but still abusing Indigenous people. The system is now targeting the adults who were once targeted as children through child welfare agencies and foster care.

This pandemic gives us the opportunity to explore the problems with prisons; it has also given CSC ample cover to inflict cruel and unusual punishment on people in prison. Any attempts to inform and negotiate with management has been met with unpleasant criticism and threatening undertones. The wake of the pandemic is quickly becoming a mental health crisis in the prisons. In the absence of any oversight committees, those in prison remain exposed and at risk.