

MEDIA STATEMENT

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What Happens Behind Prison Walls Affects Us All

The John Howard Society of Ontario's Executive Director, Paula Osmok, responds to the Ontario Ombudsman's report, "The Code" which was released earlier this week.

TORONTO - Prisons are uniquely isolated and isolating places. These institutions, typically closed off from public view, have recently become the subject of a shocking Ombudsman investigation. The Ombudsman's detailed [report](#) on the excessive use of force by correctional officers in Ontario's provincial detention centres exposes the inexcusable behaviour of some correctional officers and the context in which this behaviour arises.

Correctional officers are tasked with very challenging and often unenviable jobs. The behaviours reflected in the report are by no means representative of all of the men and women working within corrections, as both Ombudsman, Andre Marin, and Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services, Madeleine Meilleur, aptly point out. While the use of some force cannot be prevented given the nature of the correctional environment, its application requires strict professionalism, regulation, accountability and oversight. To the Ministry's credit, its line-by-line response to the report's recommendations and its immediate commitment to shifting corrections in Ontario is commendable.

Why should you care about the treatment of prisoners? For one, the large majority of them will eventually be released. Every year about 70,000 provincial prisoners return to communities across Ontario. How they are treated inside impacts how well they fare upon release. An unsafe prison environment does not lend itself to producing well-adjusted, law-abiding citizens; in fact, quite the opposite. Regardless of the offences committed, we have a responsibility to ensure that all prisoners have their basic needs met, have opportunities for rehabilitation and are safe from harm while inside our prisons. The excessive use of force is one of a number of serious issues endemic to our correctional system, and indeed, cannot be fully examined in isolation from these broader conditions.

What are these conditions? Overcrowding, growing rates of mental health problems among prisoners, and high remand populations, to name a few. Picture a concrete room the size of an average household washroom, and imagine two to three complete strangers having to live and sleep there. It is not uncommon for prisoners to be sleeping on cell floors in prison cells originally designed for one. Now consider that the majority of these people are not convicted of any charges and are awaiting trial (most prisoners in our provincial correctional system are *not* sentenced). In addition, of these incarcerated cellmates, chances are high that at least one, if not several, suffer from undiagnosed or unmanaged mental health or addictions problems. Now magnify and multiply this scenario: data show that most provincial correctional institutions are maxing out their rated capacities, at a time when government resources are increasingly scarce. These

circumstances exacerbate tensions, conflicts, and worsen pre-existing mental health concerns; all of which impact correctional officers' work environment. These conditions are also counterproductive to effective corrections.

During a time of historically low crime rates, there are more effective and innovative methods of dealing with crime than simply building more prisons, or packing more people into existing ones. Prisons require disproportionate amounts of our tax dollars to build and operate, and as the Ombudsman's report shows, crowded prisons create unsafe environments for both staff and prisoners. Prisons, though a necessary part of society, do not always provide the public with the best return on investment, particularly when it comes to individuals who can be managed safely and effectively in the community.

Yes, the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services owns the responsibility of ensuring that prisoners are treated with the dignity, respect and protection that they deserve as citizens and human beings. The Ombudsman was crystal clear on this point, and laid out concrete ways in which the Ministry can redress some of the issues around oversight of the specific issue of excessive use of force. But what of the other challenges facing our prisons? The conditions that put our civil servants, prisoners and communities at risk? These issues require a strong commitment from the government to address at the early stages of the criminal justice process, long before these individuals wind up in our jails.

For the time being, however, there needs to at least be recognition from our leaders that current conditions are not acceptable and a commitment to meaningfully tackling these problems. And the government is not, and should not be, alone on solving this problem; there are many community-based organizations willing to roll up their sleeves. John Howard Society staff have been providing services to youth, prisoners, ex-prisoners, their families and Ontario's neighbourhoods for decades. Our staff are inside the prisons and on the ground in our communities every day assisting those affected by the criminal justice system, in an effort to build safer neighbourhoods. Ultimately, prison safety is community safety – the sooner we all recognize prison conditions as a public issue, the better.

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