



## **People in prisons: A matter for Christian reflection**

*Who is in prison in Canada and what is happening to their families?*

*What can this mean for Christians called to act from hearts of flesh? (Ezekiel 11:19)*

Did you know that, in this time of fiscal constraints, Canada is building more prisons even though we already have one of the highest incarceration rates in the world? New federal laws will be ensuring that many more people will go to jail and stay there for longer periods. Informed observers call this policy direction a bad investment of public funds. It has already proven ineffective in the U.S. with a poor return on the dollar for crime reduction results.

Researchers have also found that prisons cause much additional harm.<sup>1</sup> A direct relationship has been shown between serving time and lifelong negative impacts for large numbers of offenders and for their families. Incarceration is also proving damaging to communities, in terms of generating and perpetrating the financial and social hardships that lead to more crime.

There are safe and effective alternatives to prison. Given the negative impacts of the prison system, is it not time to be asking our leaders to address the failings in our current system and implement measures that provide a lasting, meaningful and healing vision of justice?

### **For Christians, there are compelling reasons to take this matter seriously**

Beyond concerns for good stewardship, Christians have an overarching mission for community wholeness. How far have we wandered from the call of our Gospel if we have been turning a blind eye to what may be happening to our brothers and sisters in prison and their families struggling in our communities?

Our ignorance of prisoners seems natural given that we are part of a society that believes punishment requires us to isolate and separate offenders from the rest of us, in our prisons and also in our minds ('we're not like them'). This distancing makes what happens during and after their incarceration easier to ignore. Indifference quickly sets in. But as Christians, we are also moved by a more heart-stirring vision of Justice as found in Scripture: reconciliation through right relations; Shalom community grounded in inclusiveness and covenant; belief in the dignity and possibility of every person.

Yes, terrible wrongs are committed among us, but Christ's radical call is to consciously and effectively grapple with the spiritual reality of evil without making outcasts or harming real people in the process.

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<sup>1</sup> The Pew Charitable Trusts, "Collateral Costs: Incarceration's effect on economic mobility," Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010.



## **Who is being sent to prison?**

There are just under 40,000 people currently in custody in Canada's federal and provincial jails – a rate of 117 per 100,000 (2008/2009).<sup>2</sup> Shockingly, our prisons are being increasingly filled by people who have not been tried or convicted of any crime.

On any given day in 2008/2009, just over 13,500 adults were being held in remand.<sup>3</sup> Remanded inmates outnumbered sentenced inmates in Nova Scotia, Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia. Prisoners on remand are awaiting trial – in other words, they who have not yet been convicted. These prisoners are held under harsh maximum security conditions and the duration of remand is getting longer due to court delays. By the time they go to trial, some of these individuals will have been imprisoned longer than eventually required by their sentence – if indeed they are convicted at all. The number of individuals on remand has doubled in the past decade: it is they who are filling to over capacity our local jails. Many could be managed with safe and effective community supervision.

Of those prisoners who have been convicted, most receive very short sentences which can be served in the offender's province/territory. However, given the vastness of our country, prisoners may still be serving their sentence far away from their home and support network. Distance makes support and release planning more difficult.

The great majority of people involved in the courts of our communities and imprisoned in our jails are non-violent offenders. The majority of violent crime in most communities is committed by a small group of persistent, repeat offenders, mostly male. Homicide, however, is rare and is often a first and only offence. While violent crime makes up only a small percentage of crime, it does pose a serious challenge and requires focussed efforts and resources. We may find these efforts are poorly managed in our community because expensive resources are wasted on those who could be better served by different interventions that are more effective at lesser cost.

It has been shown that non-violent offenders pose an extremely low risk to re-offend in a violent manner. Without incarceration, outcomes have proven the same or better in terms of any re-offence, at a fraction of the cost and much less human damage. Additionally, most offenders are poor, disadvantaged and ill-equipped to learn. They require treatment, health services, educational, employment and housing interventions – services which are better delivered right in the community.

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada, "Adult and youth correctional services: Key indicators, 2008/2009," Sept 30, 2010 <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/091208/dq091208a-eng.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada, Sept 30, 2010.



## **What happens to people who go to prison and what happens to their families?**

Most people recognize that a community is harmed when a crime is committed. What is not as recognized is the additional harm caused by the adversarial justice system and the penalty of imprisonment. The offender is not the only one punished by a prison sentence – families and especially children are put at risk when offenders are sent to jail.

Sudden removal from family and community can wreak havoc with jobs, wages, housing, childcare, and sources of financial and emotional support for the families of offenders. Many families find that, at a time when help is most needed, people seem to withdraw from them, fearful of being criticized for the relationship. Loved ones feel a sense of shame and of being labelled guilty by association. Prison visits can be traumatic, and locations can be distant with poor public transportation. Security procedures can feel humiliating.

For offenders, time in prison puts them at risk of infectious disease, assault, increased criminal involvement, and loss – such as of family, employment and identity. Daily living conditions and interactions can feel demeaning. They may never make it into a rehabilitative program, if one is available at all. Additionally, there is little opportunity for offenders in prison to take responsibility for their actions, or to engage in meaningful accountability or apology to their victims. Even after release, offenders face the barriers of trying to live and work with a criminal record and the attached prejudice which stands in the way of employment possibilities, access to bank accounts, lodging, travel and other activities many of us take for granted.

In very practical terms a prison sentence amounts to lifetime punishment. Serving time reduces annual wages persistently down the years. A study in the United States showed that even years after a father is released from prison, family income remains lower than the years before incarceration.<sup>4</sup> Having an incarcerated parent, with the deep stigma of a mother or father declared a ‘criminal’, can damage children in ways that last a lifetime. As well, children with fathers who have been incarcerated are significantly more likely than others to be suspended or expelled from school. Considering that both education and parental income have proven strong indicators of children’s future economic mobility, our prison habit is dooming large numbers of offenders and their children to a lifetime of failure and exclusion, for which we all bear the cost.

## **Troubling questions for Christian communities**

Jesus saw a radically different way to overcome evil, sin and harmful behaviour, a way which was respectful even of those who are guilty. The vision of justice we find in Scripture is profound, and a profound departure from our present culture of punishment. There is the command to love our enemies, to refrain from vengeance, to believe in the dignity of every person; to leave room for mercy, grace and the possibility of transformation.

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<sup>4</sup> The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010.



This is a tough call for individuals faced with devastating losses and human behaviour that is brutal and cruel. At the heart of such darkness a highly personal journey unfolds; we can only respect and learn from the Mystery of the individual soul struggling with the impact of evil. But our addiction to prison points us to something other than our strengths or failings at individual virtue and forgiveness. Our addiction to prison is foremost about our collective failure to be in relationship with fellow humans, in right relations, in inclusive, covenant community.

More than anything we are called to be a people caring for one another through all the twists and turns of our conflicts and sins. We are called to engage the Spirit of God, moving among us, to find creative ways back into covenant community and hold together in solidarity and connectedness, despite everything – never letting go. But how can we be a community of the faithful when we automatically, by public policy, exclude and isolate all those we have reduced in our minds to the one-size-fits-all label ‘criminal’? This does not mean making excuses for people and turning a blind eye to what they have done. The story of Jesus with the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:11) shows His practice of total inclusivity even with those who are guilty as charged: He knows and names as sin what she has done. He tells her to sin no more. But He sets aside dominant power, condemnation and punishment as the way to handle evil and maintain moral order. Jesus drew no boundaries between those on the inside and those on the outside, whether guilty or not.

God’s way of operating is radically different from ours. Jesus invited us into a new way of relating to God as Compassion, with implications for a new way of relating to one another.

### **What does this mean for churches and for criminal justice policy?**

It is difficult to practice inclusiveness and compassion with people sent to prison about whom we know nothing. It is also difficult for them to experience that we believe in their dignity when we abandon them to demeaning conditions.

A congregation can do much once it has been sensitized to that very special group of victims: the families of offenders. We can take steps to reach out to the families of offenders, offering simply and genuinely our compassion and support. We can reach out to children with parents in jail by inviting them to join in activities which offer comfort, affirmation, empathy and respect. An offer of transportation for a family’s visit can be most welcome, or a quiet coffee between women, or men, now and then. Holidays can be particularly hard and congregations could use these occasions to reach out with warmth and compassion. The Canadian Families and Corrections Network offer many resources and additional suggestions for support.

Relationships of compassion and grace between congregations and those directly impacted by crime has the radical possibility to bring us all closer into communion with God and with each other, heal our communities and demonstrate the profound change which results when we turn from hearts of stone and embrace the call live with hearts of flesh.