



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

March 9, 2017

Laying fewer charges will help reduce overcrowding

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Manitoba has a higher proportion of adults in custody than any other province.

We lock up people more frequently than Saskatchewan by 17 per cent and three-and-a-half times more frequently than B.C., according to a Statistics Canada report from last week.

Overcrowding in prisons — and especially remand centres — is a growing and serious problem.

Last March, our province's former chief provincial judge, Ray Wyant, wrote about his visit to Headingley Correctional Centre to assess the living conditions.

He had been there 40 years earlier as a cub reporter with the Winnipeg Free Press. "Men live like sardines in a can. Old Block 8 would have held 19 prisoners in 1976; now there are 38," he wrote in a followup report.

"But it's a pipe dream to think if we put people in situations such as this they will come out rehabilitated and less of a risk to society. In reality, they come out much worse."

If men and women are coming out of incarceration "much worse," rising incarceration rates will, over time, contribute to increases in criminal behaviour.

It's also very expensive to house men and women in custody.

The latest figures from Statistics Canada show Manitoba Corrections is spending just over \$200 a day, or \$6,000 a month, for each adult individual behind bars. This is money that could go towards crime prevention or reducing court backlogs.

In the 1990s, the Ralph Klein government in Alberta launched a strategy to reduce incarceration rates as a cost-saving measure.

As a result, Alberta's prison population declined by 32 per cent between 1993 and 1997, allowing that government to realize a 20 per cent reduction in its budget for corrections.

This was done without legislative change, according to researchers Cheryl Marie Webster and Anthony Doob in *Punishment and Society*. Once the decision was in place, a strategy developed quite rapidly. Police laid fewer charges for minor offences, more cases were diverted to alternative measures, prosecutors sought "non-custodial sentences in less serious cases" and correctional workers authorized more early releases.

These strategies would definitely work in Manitoba.

there is an alternative.

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The John Howard Society of Manitoba has seen first-hand the benefits of moving people out of custody.

In partnership with Manitoba Justice, we provide support and supervision to men on bail considered “medium- to high-risk.”

We currently have 20 clients living in our residence and three additional clients under supervision in the community.

If not for our program, these 23 individuals would be in custody at more than two times the cost.

We have seen a reduction in reoffending from those who have gone through our program and the vast majority of our clients are not returned to custody if convicted.

This saves incarceration costs and eases pressure on overcrowded facilities housing twice the numbers they were built to hold.

Compared to the 1990s, there are now a lot more community-based resources available to the government as it looks at ways to reduce custody numbers.

Here in Winnipeg, the John Howard Society of Manitoba, Mediation Services and Onashowewin Justice Circle all currently take cases referred from the courts.

Circles of Support and Accountability works to prevent high-risk individuals from reoffending and going back into custody.

This is good news, as it means the province can utilize capacity in agencies they already fund.

Increasing the number of people on bail, diverting cases from the court to restorative justice programs, looking at early release for good behaviour and keeping minor cases out of the system to begin with — this is a combination

of strategies already proven to reduce incarceration rates.

Manitoba can follow the approach for reducing incarceration developed by Alberta.

By doing so, we can reduce costs, ease jail overcrowding and eliminate some pressure on the courts.

It would also be the right thing to do.

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References available upon request.

