



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

February 22, 2013

More cells not the answer

A recent editorial in the Free Press (“Programs won’t solve jail crisis” Feb 8, 2013) by the President of the Manitoba Government Employees Union (MGEU) calls on the province to continue building more jails as a response to jail overcrowding. Given recent changes to legislation that will cause the prison population to swell, it is understandable that the MGEU is concerned about prison overcrowding.

Unfortunately all evidence shows that it is simply beyond the capacity of the Province to build its way out of this problem. It’s time to take unworkable solutions to jail overcrowding off the table in order to focus discussion on what can be done in order to bring down the population of Manitoba’s correctional system to manageable and safe levels.

According to the editorial, Manitoba jails were built to accommodate 2,000 inmates, and currently house around 2600 inmates on any given day. MGEU predicts that jail populations could double over the next ten years to 5,000, which would mean 3,000 inmates more than the correctional centres were designed to hold. This prediction is actually on the low side, as it does not take into account new minimum sentencing laws, and restrictions on community sentences that are just taking effect.

Since 1999, the Province has built approximately 800 new jail cells, an average of 60 cells per year. Even if we could afford to keep building new jails at the current rate, this would only amount to about 600 new jail beds over the next decade, only a fraction of the 3,000 (4,000 or 5,000) new cells which will be needed by then. Obviously, we can’t rely on a solution that at best would only address 20% of the problem.

And the current jail building boom has come with considerable cost. By way of comparison, during the same period of time Manitoba has only constructed 400 new personal care home beds, an average of 30 per year. As well, recent figures from the Manitoba Civil Service Commission show that over the last four years, out of 18 departments, Manitoba Justice has received 46% of all new civil services positions (and 58% of the new positions created in 2011-2). Yet despite all the extra spending overcrowding in Manitoba jails is worse than ever.

If a problem can’t be fixed by throwing money at it, it is time to look at a different approach. Last year the Province’s Adult Capacity Review Committee made a number of recommendations for responding to the overcrowding crisis, which have only just been made public. Instead of calling on

there is an alternative.

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the Province to keep build more jail cells the committee found that the Province needs to take concrete steps to reduce the number of people going into jail. To use the analogy of an over-flowing sink, what's needed is not a bigger sink, but finding ways to reduce the amount of water the sink has to hold.

One solution that needs to be explored further is non-compliance with conditions of bail or probation. A great number of those currently behind bars are there because they missed an appointment, drank or used drugs when they weren't supposed to, or talked to someone they weren't supposed to contact. Failing to comply with a condition needs to be taken seriously, but does it require the individual to be returned to custody? Alternatives that allow the individual to remain in the community also provide greater access to supports and programs he or she needs to break their cycle of offending. Therefore, not only are finding alternatives to custody much cheaper, it can be much more effective.

It is also time to revisit the use of temporary absences—early release from jail for those seen to have earned it. Temporary absences were widely used in the 1970s and '80s, to encourage successful reintegration back into the community. The practice fell out of favour in the 1990s following a couple of high profile cases. A full return to this practice would be a very effective response to chronic jail overcrowding and sky-rocketing corrections costs.

The Capacity Review Committee has pointed the way towards a new approach to responding to overcrowding—one based on prevention, diversion and less reliance on incarceration. Tax payers should be grateful—because in this case what works best is also what we can best afford.

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