
FOCUS ON MENTAL HEALTH



What We Know:

- Inmates have substantially higher prevalences of mental disorders compared with the general public; rates of most disorders are higher in female than in male inmates;
- The majority of inmates suffer from a substance abuse disorder and in many cases, their substance use contributed to committing the crime that resulted in their incarceration;
- Suicide rates in inmates are substantially higher than in the comparably aged general public and are higher than those observed in prisons in several other countries.

This excerpt is from the recent report of the Canadian Public Health Association *A Health Care Needs Assessment of Federal Inmates in Canada*.⁴ The study had been commissioned by CSC and appeared in the March/April edition of the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* (www.cpha.ca/english/cjph/cjph.htm).

The study confirms the findings of a number of stakeholders, including, but not limited to, this Office and the Correctional Service: prisons house a disproportionate number of persons in need of mental health treatment, especially women.

It is particularly regrettable that the study also confirms the view of many observers—supported in CSC’s own ongoing review of its mental health facilities—that the treatment available to inmates with mental disorders is inadequate to the task of preparing them for safe release into the community.

In last year’s Annual Report we anticipated, with great interest, the results of CSC’s review of the role of regional treatment centres and of the effectiveness of mental health assessment and treatment. As of this writing, most of the review’s findings have been compiled, and CSC’s Health Services Branch is about to forward its findings and recommendations to the Executive Committee.

I find that the preliminary outcomes of the review disclose an urgent need for action on a number of fronts.

- mental disorders must be diagnosed quickly and accurately when offenders enter the federal system, so that they may be admitted to institutions offering programs that will meet their needs.
- Mental health units must be established in medium- and maximum-security institutions with a full complement of qualified staff in order to provide appropriate, though less comprehensive treatment than what is available at CSC’s regional psychiatric treatment hospitals.
- Inmates housed in the Special Handling Unit must be afforded appropriate mental health assessments and treatment.
- A broader range of pathologies must be addressed than has been the case to date—including, for example, disorders related to impulse control, fetal alcohol syndrome and substance abuse.
- Mental health treatment facilities must be accredited in accordance with provincial mental health treatment delivery standards.
- Some facilities, such as the Regional Treatment Centre in Kingston, Ontario and the Shepody Treatment Centre in Dorchester, N.B., are hindered in their ability to provide adequate treatment to inmates because of their physical configuration and should be replaced by appropriate facilities.
- There is an urgent need for liaison between CSC and community organizations so that continuity of treatment and support will be extended to offenders on release.

In the coming year this Office will work with CSC towards addressing the needs of offenders in this area. I am aware that financial and human resource commitments are necessary to this end and we will be supportive of CSC’s efforts in securing these resources.

⁴ Canadian Public Health Association. 2004. “A Health Care Needs Assessment of Federal Inmates in Canada”, *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, Volume 95, Supplement 1, p. S48, March/April.

CONCLUSION

This has been a productive year. Although we remain at odds with the Correctional Service of Canada on the appropriate resolution of some issues associated with Health Care, Women and Aboriginal Offenders, the Service has stepped forward and initiated significant change in a number of longstanding areas of concern. Substantive policy and operational changes have occurred in the areas of Investigations, Use of Force and Allegations of Harassment and Staff Misconduct. The Service has as well undertaken to continue its review and evaluation of issues associated with Younger Offenders, the Inmate Grievance Procedure, Inmate Injuries and Institutional Violence. In addition two mediated consultations occurred with respect to the Service's policies and procedures related to Inmate Access to Computers and Visitor Screening. This process has opened an encouraging avenue of redress for offender concerns involving not only the Service and this Office but as well inmates and interested third parties.

Corrections is a difficult and at times thankless business, yet it is a key element of our criminal justice system. The mandate of the Correctional Service is to manage the sentence of the court consistent with the rule of law, respectful of individual and collective human rights while giving primacy to the protection of the public. Canadians expect a correctional system that provides safe, humane custody and supports the offenders' successful reintegration into society. I look forward to working with the Correctional Service and our other criminal justice partners towards meeting that expectation.

Operationally, we have again this year, within a limited resource base, managed nearly seven thousand offender complaints. The intake and investigative staff have addressed approximately three thousand of these complaints through an immediate response (provision of information, advice or a referral) with the remainder resulting in the initiation of an inquiry or investigation. A specific detailing on the areas of complaint and dispositions are provided in the statistics section of this Report.

The investigative staff conducted both announced and unannounced visits at each federal correctional institution over the course of this year. They collectively spent in excess of four hundred working days at the institutions, conducted more than twenty-five hundred individual interviews with federal offenders and met regularly with inmate committees at every institution in the country.

The Coordinator of Use of Force, in addition to managing a process that reviewed some one thousand Use of Force incidents has established a regular briefing and consultation process with each of the regions to assist in the development of a consistent evaluation procedure for Use of Force incidents.

Our Coordinators for Women and Aboriginal Corrections, in addition to their review of individual and systemic complaints, have maintained an on-going liaison with government and non-government agencies active in the areas of Aboriginal and Women's criminal justice and human rights issues.

The General Senior Policy Advisor/Counsel, at the national level, has effectively managed a process which ensures that the position of the Office on issues directly impacting on inmate rights and entitlements are given consideration by the Service during the course of their policy development and review.

The Directors of Investigation in support of our investigative process have established reporting and consultation structures at the regional and national levels to ensure that unresolved and on-going areas of concern are referred to the Service's senior management in a timely fashion.

The key to the Office's operations is our staff. I will take this opportunity on behalf of myself and my predecessor, to publicly acknowledge and thank the staff for their dedication and professionalism in managing what is at times an overwhelming workload. Their commitment to fairness and reason in addressing offender concerns is the cornerstone to maintaining an accessible, independent avenue of redress. It is as well the base from which recommendations to the Commissioner and Minister are developed. Their contribution is immeasurable.