

Case Study: Prison versus Programs

The following article argues in favour of closing prisons and expanding rehabilitation programs.

"Reason must prevail over emotion, the government told us, as it ordered hospital closings. It is a waste of resources to keep high-cost institutions running, when patients can recover at home. Prudence must triumph over passion, it told us, as it ordered school closings. It is a drain on the public purse to run half-empty inner city schools when families are moving to the suburbs. If the government really believes its own rhetoric, it should now start closing prisons.

"The crime rate has fallen steadily for the last six years. Murders, robberies and assaults—the type of crime from which society needs protection—have showed the steepest decline. The incarceration rate is also beginning to drop. [In 1997], there were 32 917 adult offenders in penal institutions on any given day, down 3 per cent from the previous year.

"Rationalizing prisons could yield significant savings. It costs \$1.9 billion a year to keep Canada's 52 penal institutions open—an average of \$56 800 per inmate. Yet governments across the country, with the honourable exception of Alberta, are in no hurry to close jails. On this issue,

it seems, logic is no match for feelings.

"Any objective look at the evidence suggests that Canada will need fewer penal institutions in the years ahead. The baby boom generation is aging. With fewer people in the 18-to-40 age range, which accounts for 70 per cent of serious crime, it follows that fewer jails will be needed. Courts are increasingly handing out conditional sentences, which allow a low-risk offender to admit responsibility, provide restitution, and perform community service. This trend is likely to intensify as more judges become comfortable with Bill C-41, the Sentencing Reform Act, which encourages them to consider alternatives to incarceration. And these alternatives appear to work. Jurisdictions that have tried conditional sentencing have noticed a drop in recidivism. They have also found offenders get more help dealing with substance abuse and mental illness outside the prison system.

"So what is stopping our policy-makers from closing prisons and saving money? Two things: their attitudes and our perceptions. Most governments in this country got elected on

strict law-and-order platforms. They promised to crack down on young offenders, hand out tougher jail sentences and keep the streets safe. To turn around, now, and admit that crime isn't really out of control and locking up offenders isn't always the best approach, would be embarrassing.

"The second factor standing in the way of closing prisons is public fear. Despite six consecutive drops in the crime rate, 77 per cent of Canadians believe the streets are becoming more dangerous, and their homes and communities more vulnerable. We in the media reinforce this impression by describing acts of violence in great detail, without devoting much attention to the causes of crime. We report crime statistics without explaining—or understanding—why a disproportionate number of blacks and Aboriginal Canadians end up in jail. We document the failures and shortcomings of our justice system, while overlooking the programs that are working.

"Our politicians, in turn, exploit people's fears to win votes rather than daring to challenge conventional wisdom. It is much safer to promise more cops and

more jails than to tell people offenders than to tackle the
their concerns are exaggerated. It poverty, domestic abuse and drug
is far easier to vilify young use that often lead to crime.

Abridged from: "Fear Imprisons Debate on Jail Issue." 1998. *The Toronto Star*. 28 November 1998.

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1. Why does the author argue that we should be reducing the number of jails in Canada?
 2. What is stopping policy-makers from closing prisons? Explain your answer fully.
 3. Why do Canadians continue to believe the streets are becoming more dangerous, despite evidence to the contrary?