

B.C.'s justice system facing a hefty shortfall

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VICTORIA — British Columbia's troubled justice system is about to suffer an annual shortfall of at least \$53 million, an internal government audit has revealed.

Coming as Premier Christy Clark presses the system to find efficiencies — and to unclog a growing backlog in the courts — the audit identified two major gaps.

First, it found two of the federal government's crime bills will cost the province an extra \$31 million each year.

“Bill C-16 and Bill C-25 are forecast to result in 200 and 270 additional inmates respectively, which is a 17% increase over the current average inmate count,” read the audit, dated Sept. 2011 but released by government Wednesday.

“At the current per diem rate, the additional 470 inmates will cost the branch approximately \$31 million per year.”

The amount is the first time the province has publicly released an estimate of how Ottawa's tough-on-crime legislation will affect B.C.'s bottom line.

But it only captures part of the Conservative government's planned approach. Bill C-25 has become law, but since the audit C-16 was rolled into the federal government's more sweeping omnibus crime bill, C-10. That means the actual amount is bound to be larger than \$31 million.

The internal audit also found that British Columbia will soon have to start picking up the full tab for the 168 new police officers former premier Gordon Campbell announced during a spate of gang violence in 2009.

“The end of one-time federal government funding to hire 168 additional police officers as part of the provincial government's ‘Guns and Gangs’ strategy to fight organized crime and gang violence; if continued, it will cost the province \$22 million per year to keep these officers,” said the audit.

Campbell announced the new police officers in February 2009, saying it was part of his government's effort to combat the rampant gunplay that was happening almost daily on Metro Vancouver streets.

On Thursday, government said federal funding for the officers officially ran out this past December.

Minister of Justice and Attorney-General Shirley Bond was not available for comment Thursday.

Her ministry released a statement on her behalf saying it is still working to determine the costs of all of Ottawa's crime-related bills.

"We want to be as accurate as possible with the estimates for costs related to the new bill [C-10] and that analysis is challenging because of a number of factors including trying to speculate on how judges will actually sentence," said the statement.

"At our recent meeting of provincial, federal and territorial counterparts we clearly outlined our concerns with cost implications and will continue to work constructively with them as we move forward."

On the 168 police officers, Bond's statement indicated government is actively working to keep them in place.

"Ensuring that communities are safe in British Columbia is a priority for our government," it said.

"We are committed to ensuring that the success of our anti-gang strategies continue and will be working to maintain the important programs that are currently in place."

Government numbers show it costs \$1.4 million to support one Provincial Court judge annually, including the judge's salary and other costs for court administration staff, sheriffs, prosecution services and judicial support. That means the \$53 million shortfall is the equivalent of almost 38 new provincial judges.

New Democratic Party critic for public safety Kathy Corrigan said she thinks the \$31 million estimate is way too low, and that B.C.'s justice system should be bracing for a much larger hit.

"It's completely off side with what the Parliamentary Budget Officer said about Bill C-10 and the crime bills generally, which put the costs for the provinces in the billions of dollars over five years," she said.

"We haven't seen any costing from the provincial government yet — I agree this is the first reference to it — but it seems like a really lowball figure."

Corrigan said regardless of what the figure ends up being, the combined shortfall shows the B.C. Liberal government is not effective enough at doing the province's bidding.

"Justice is a partnership. It crosses the federal and provincial lines," she said.

"It seems to me that in a whole bunch of different areas the provincial government is not doing a good job in negotiating well with the federal government."