

## **Brutal conditions behind B.C. bars**

Kamloops This Week  
By Tim Petruk  
November 24, 2011

A Kamloops judge and a prominent B.C. criminologist each spoke out this week about the province's overcrowded jails — and the union representing prison guards hopes the government will finally take action.

On Monday, Nov. 21, Kamloops provincial court Judge Stella Frame included in her sentencing decision for Richard Wagamese a two-paragraph “observation” on B.C. jails — essentially saying overcrowding has reduced the effectiveness of the province's prison system.

The following day, Simon Fraser University criminologist Neil Boyd released a scathing report on the province's correctional system.

Dean Purdy, spokesman for the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union, which represents provincial correctional officers and commissioned Boyd's report, said he hopes Victoria will finally take notice.

“This is something that points to what we've been saying for the past two years,” he said.

In her sentencing decision for Wagamese, Frame did not mince words in describing the current state of provincial jails.

“Overcrowding in correctional facilities is a common and undisputed complaint we hear repeatedly in this court,” she said.

“An increasing number of cases are emerging of violence between inmates and by inmates against guards. The crisis is also well-documented in the media.”

Frame went on to say overcrowding is not only dangerous, but also hampers the effectiveness of the correctional facilities themselves.

“I accept that our correctional facilities are significantly overcrowded, resulting in diminished resources and increased violence,” she said.

“It is difficult to conceive how, in such an environment, any principle of sentencing apart from separation from society can be achieved.”

Boyd's 106-page report, titled *Abnormal Working Conditions*, describes conditions in B.C. jails as “depressing” and “appalling.”

Purdy said Kamloops Regional Correctional Centre is far from immune.

In fact, he said, KRCC has set a record this year with 17 assaults on correctional officers.

“And, there's still more than a month to go in the year,” he said.

KRCC has played host to a number of high-profile incidents in recent months, all of which, according to Purdy, would have been far less likely to have occurred if staffing levels were higher.

On Nov. 12, a correctional officer at KRCC was taken to hospital for decontamination after having a container of feces thrown at him by a prisoner.

Police continue to investigate that incident.

On Oct. 20, a 21-year-old KRCC inmate awaiting trial on fraud charges out of Kelowna had to undergo emergency brain surgery after being stabbed in the face by his cellmate during a game of Scrabble.

The victim, Michel Fougere, was stabbed just below his left eye. Doctors say they don't expect him to regain vision in that eye.

Two days earlier, on Oct. 18, a 22-year-old prolific offender escaped custody while taking part in a prison work group filling sand bags outside the prison. He was on the lam for more than a week.

Steven Hodgins pleaded guilty to one count of escape lawful custody earlier this week and had three months tacked onto the one-year sentence he was already serving.

In June, a pair of attacks on KRCC officers in a one-week span prompted similar calls from Purdy for increased staffing at the jail.

In one incident, a male guard was spit on by an inmate; the other saw a prisoner dump a bucket of urine on a female officer's head.

Among the recommendations in Boyd's report are calls for the provincial government to reduce inmate-to-staff ratios at B.C. jails and to address so-called "abnormal" working conditions among correctional officers.

According to the report, another 150 correctional officers are needed to make provincial jails safe.

Purdy said dangers are ever-present for B.C. correctional officers.

"Twenty-six per cent of the inmates here have some form of mental illness, and we're seeing a higher percentage of gang-affiliated inmates," he said.

"You throw all that together, and you get what we're seeing in our correctional centres."

Purdy said KRCC currently operates at a 40:1 inmate-to-staff ratio. It was built for ratios of 18:1.

Public Safety Minister Shirley Bond said this week her ministry is close to announcing a new site for a 360-cell facility in the Okanagan, which it has been trying to build for several years.

The ministry has \$185 million in expansions planned, she said, including another 200 correctional officers.

Purdy said it's time Victoria took action.

"We're hoping they'll take a serious look at the recommendations in Dr. Boyd's report.

## **KRCC FACTS**

- Kamloops Regional Correctional Centre has been in operation since 1989. Originally built to house fewer than 200 inmates, it's currently home to more than 320.
- The facility is made up of nine housing units and a separate Sprung structure — a large, permanent tent-like construction.
- Each of the nine housing units is made up of 18 cells on two tiers. Each cell is capable of holding two prisoners.
- The housing units also have large common areas with tables, chairs, a pay phone and a games room — which is home to a large TV and a video-game system.
- Inmates in KRCC's housing units are locked up between 10 p.m. and 7:30 a.m.
- When they are not locked up, prison staff keep the inmates on a strict schedule.
- There are also segregation and medical cells at KRCC, in addition to those in the housing units.
- The Sprung structure contains 25 two-prisoner rooms, for a total capacity of 50.
- Open since 2008, it is home to inmates who have been deemed a very low risk.
- KRCC employs more than 200 people.