

Dangerous jail crowding

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Prison work will always involve dangers. But guards and inmates -- many of whom have not been convicted of any offence -- should not be knowingly put at risk.

The attack this week on a guard at the Vancouver Island Regional Correction Centre sparked union allegations that overcrowding at B.C. jails is creating risks.

The provincial government's own documents support the claims. The Solicitor General's Ministry reported this month that the province's nine correctional centres are operating at 175 per cent of their capacity. The local jail on Wilkinson Road -- Wilkie, as it's known -- was built for 206 inmates and is housing 370.

In 2002, some 2,048 people were in jail on an average day in B.C. By last year, that had climbed 37 per cent to 2,800. In the same period, the number of employees in the corrections branch was cut by seven per cent.

The ministry's service plan report confirms that jail crowding -- as well as a more than 20-per-cent increase in the number of offenders being supervised in the community -- has become dangerous for those inside jail and the public.

"The growth in the number of offenders in custody and under supervision in the community is increasingly compromising community and staff safety," the ministry reported this month. It offered similar warnings last year.

The greatest increase has come in people in jail awaiting trial; their numbers might decrease when pre-trial custody doesn't count as two-for-one time in sentencing.

But the risk is real and plans to add 120 jail spaces -- in a system that is currently over capacity by 1,200 inmates -- will do little to increase safety, for public, guards and inmates.

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