

Government cuts put prison guards in danger: criminologist

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Under staffing is putting guards in British Columbia jails in danger, Simon Fraser University criminologist Neil Boyd said today.

"We ask a lot of correctional officers in this province," said Boyd while releasing Correctional Officers In British Columbia, 2011: Abnormal Working Conditions, a report the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union contracted him to research and write.

"It's very dangerous for staff. It's more dangerous for the inmates," he said. The report was based on interviews with more than 200 correctional officers.

More than one out of four guards had been assaulted by an inmate, he said. Almost 40 percent had been hit by feces, urine, vomit or spit and more than 90 percent had been exposed to blood, he said.

Boyd traced the problem to 2002 when the provincial government closed 10 jails. Since that time, when inmate to staff ratios at most provincial jails were 20 to 1, the ratio has risen to 40 to 1. At North Fraser Pre-trial the ratio started at 30 to 1 and rose to 60 to 1, he said.

At the same time, the prison population has shifted with more inmates having mental illness or gang involvement, he said. "It was a mistake to move in the direction the government has chosen over the last decade."

The government had an internal report three years ago that identified similar problems, but has not acted on it, he said.

"If something isn't done, our biggest concern is we're going to see someone dying on the job," said Dean Purdy, a correctional officer at the Vancouver Island Regional Correctional Centre in Victoria and a BCGEU representative.

The government laid off 550 guards in 2002, he said. "That's additional capacity that disappeared."

There are about 1,500 officers working in direct supervision today, and adding 150 to 200 would make a big difference, he said.

Before 2002 assaults by inmates on guards were rare, he said. Since that time there've been 83 such assaults at VIRCC. This year alone there have been 60 assaults at the three jails where the union tracks numbers, he said.

Andrew MacLeod is The Tyee's Legislative Bureau Chief in Victoria.