

# 'Mental anguish' on rise for jail guards

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Jail guards are "spread too thin," facing triple the mental anguish and stress they did less than a decade ago, according to the head of the corrections officers' union.

The realities of the demanding job were shoved into the public spotlight last month when an inmate at the Vancouver Island Regional Correctional Centre was able to dig a hole in the ceiling of his cell in an attempted escape.

Turns out, said Dean Purdy, chair of corrections and sheriff services with the B.C. Government Employees Union, the inmate shared the cell with another, though the cell was built for just one person. "We definitely think the overcrowding was a contributing factor to the attempted escape. There were two inmates in the cell, one (slept) on the floor."

He would know. Purdy doubles as a supervisor at the jail.

That arrangement is common practice at VIRCC, commonly referred to as Wilkinson Road jail. The maximum-security facility was built to house 206 inmates, but as of last week, had 324 .

"It routinely houses 350 on average, but it has held more than 400," said Purdy.

"The number of inmates our corrections officers have to deal with sometimes have increased by three times the amount (since 2003). The mental anguish and stress that goes with the job has tripled."

That's because in 2001-2002, the Public Safety Ministry reviewed its requirements for the staff to inmate ratio in B.C. jails, doing away with the 20:1 rule. The day of the attempted break-out, July 17, that ratio was closer to 34:1, Purdy said.

Staff have also seen several cases of "hot buttering" inside the jail lately. That's when inmates mix hot butter and bleach and throw it into an enemy's face. Contrary to Purdy's remarks, a ministry spokesperson said, "There is nothing to suggest that staff inmate ratios played a direct role in this incident."

The spokesperson continued: "B.C. Corrections staff do everything they can to maintain a safe and secure living environment. That said, given the criminal histories of those in custody, and the large number of people with addiction and mental health issues, occasional violent outbursts are a reality. Despite our best efforts, violent outbursts can and do occur in units that have the lowest staff-inmate ratios."

Still, that admission does little to alleviate stress for jail guards at VIRCC, Purdy said.

Overcrowding leads to a mob-like mentality and agitation among inmates. There have been 78 assaults on guards in VIRCC since 2003.

There are some signs of improvement: the ministry plans to expand two Lower Mainland facilities by 320 cells by 2013 and talks between the corrections union and the ministry included discussions on lowering the staff to inmate ratio.

Other talks with the Workers' Compensation Board in July brought forth an agreement to "revise the requirements of the risk assessments to include consideration of the practices of double-bunking inmates, direct supervision model, and officer-to-inmate ratios as contributing factors to workplace violence," according to a press release. For now, the region's maximum security facility is a "pressure cooker," Purdy said.

"Corrections officers do a great job of protecting public safety every day they go to work. They put their lives on the line every day they work a shift at our jails. With overcrowded jails, corrections officers are feeling more stressed out than ever before."