

## **Prison guards endure mix of violence, bodily fluids**

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A survey of 205 B.C. corrections officers has revealed more than one in four were physically assaulted by an inmate in the past year, and nearly 40 per cent were hit with feces, blood or other bodily fluids.

Last month, Simon Fraser University researcher Neil Boyd unveiled the results of his study examining the working conditions for correctional officers. Approximately 19 per cent of the officers who responded worked at the Prince George Regional Correctional Centre.

"We ran a test to see if there was anything which stood out at any of the facilities," Boyd said. "There was nothing distinctive about any of the facilities, in terms of the way they respond to stressful events."

B.C. Government Employees' Union corrections and sherrifs services chairman Dean Purdy said the results of the survey are not surprising to those who work in corrections. Purdy is a supervisor at Vancouver Island Correctional Centre in Victoria.

"These types of conditions are pretty much across the board. It's pretty overwhelming and systemic," Purdy said. "The conditions our officers have to endure are extreme."

The inmate to guard ratio has increased significantly since 2002, when the provincial government eliminated the 20 to one maximum ratio, he said.

"The Prince George Regional Correctional Centre was built in 1998 for 184 inmates. It's had counts as high as the mid-300s," Purdy said. "[And] The Corrections Branch has said that the counts will continue to rise until 2020." In Prince George, the inmate to guard ratio has been as high as 38 to one, he added.

"One thing that's changed is that 26 per cent of all our inmates have some form of mental illness now," Purdy added. "We've become the de facto mental health institution."

Currently the province uses the direct supervision model, he said, which needs to be reexamined given the current conditions. Under a direct supervision model, prisoners are organized in living units with 18 to 20 cells, plus common area and staff station.

"The staff station is a desk right inside the unit," he said. "When you have a certain number of human beings in a confined space, there is going to be conflicts. When you have more and more inmates, the direct supervision model stops working."

A return to indirect supervision would mean, "the inmates are behind the bars and we're outside them," Purdy said.

Reducing the inmate to guard ratio to 20 to one would also increase correctional officer safety and their ability to supervise inmates, he said.

Assaults, threats, exposure to bodily fluids and witnessing death and violence all put stress on officers physically and mentally, Purdy said.

Corrections officers filed an average of 45 violence-related claims per year-compared to 50 for municipal police officers, Boyd wrote. However there is 50 per cent more police officers than correctional officers in B.C.

"The physical assaults they suffer are staggering," Purdy said. "Many of the corrections officers may have PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] from what they've seen and dealt with."

B.C. Solicitor General and Prince George-Valemount MLA Shirley Bond said the province has invested \$185 million since 2002 in expanding prison capacity.

"Since 2007 we've added 240 full-time equivalent employees to enhance staffing at our corrections facilities," Bond said. "[But] certainly anytime the safety of our corrections officers is put at risk, it is a concern for me. I am always prepared to sit down and discuss creative solutions."

The provincial government did move away from strict 20 to one inmate to guard ratios, Bond said, but has gone to a more flexible system and increased video surveillance.

"We've had inmate to staff ratios as low as 10 to one for special cases," she said. "[And] we are looking at the issue of mental illness. We're looking at ways to provide alternative supports."

#### BY THE NUMBERS

A survey of 205 B.C. correctional officers revealed disturbing trends about life in provincial prisons. The study asked the respondents, 19 per cent of which worked at Prince George Regional

Correctional Centre, about their experiences in the past year:

- Physically assaulted by an inmate: 27 per cent.
- Hit by blood, feces, urine, vomit or spit: 39 per cent.
- Observed the murder or suicide of an inmate: 17 per cent.
- Respond to serious injury to an inmate: 82 per cent.
- Discovered a weapon in possession of an inmate: 74 per cent.
- Responded to a Code Yellow (staff in need of help): 96 per cent.
- Threatened by an inmate: 67 per cent.
- Witness drug overdose by inmate: 50 per cent.
- Responded to five or more fights between inmates: 66 per cent.

According to the B.C. Solicitor General's office, the number of assaults on corrections officers at Prince George Regional Correctional Centre:

- 2011 (year to date): 6
- 2010: 4
- 2009: 5
- 2008: 9
- 2007: 12

According to WorkSafeBC statistics for 2000 to 2009, corrections officers have the highest rates of violence-related workers' compensation claims.

- Corrections officers: 33 per cent
- Municipal police officers: 32 per cent
- All protective services: 19.6 per cent

- General population: 1.96 per cent --