

Cell doors open too easily

Canada's ridiculous statutory release program has been a disaster

By **LORRIE GOLDSTEIN**, TORONTO SUN

Imagine a Canadian company manufacturing a product which fails to perform properly 43% of the time, resulting in death, injury and suffering, with huge economic and social consequences.

Imagine the company knew about the problem for years and did nothing to fix it, while self-proclaimed "experts" irresponsibly defended the product, claiming a 43% failure rate was perfectly acceptable.

Imagine most politicians, instead of demanding the product be recalled and those responsible criminally charged, instead attacked as ignorant, simplistic and narrow-minded, anyone who complained about it, including the people victimized by it.

Well, stop imagining, because the product is Canada's statutory release program for violent criminals, which gives the vast majority (save for murderers and designated dangerous offenders) a virtually automatic one-third discount on their prison sentences.

Depending on the study, statutory release fails 40% to 43% of the time, often resulting in death, injury and suffering -- to the innocent people who become new victims of crime as a result -- with huge economic and social consequences for society.

Statutory release is a disaster. Even the official failure rate of up to 43% is artificially low. That's because "failures" only include criminals returned to federal prisons after violating release conditions or re-offending. If they re-offend and are sentenced to a provincial corrections facility, they're not counted. This subtle distinction is no doubt lost on their victims.

Even the unacceptably high 25% failure rate for full parole (which can be granted after violent criminals have served just one-third of their sentences) pales compared to statutory release.

An independent panel that recently reviewed Canada's corrections system notes in a report to Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day that inmates on statutory release account for only 35% of criminals on early release programs, but 79% of the violent crimes. They re-offend at three times the rate of inmates in other programs.

"The one resounding theme, heard from both within the walls of penitentiaries and in communities across Canada, was that statutory release is not working," the report, titled A Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety, concludes.

Logically, the five-member panel recommends scrapping it and replacing it with "earned parole."

It warns today's inmates are often violent, gang-affiliated, drug abusers, with few job skills and lacking a high school education, who have no interest in rehabilitation. Instead they "wait out" statutory release and return to crime.

They don't have to wait long. Of all those sent to federal prisons today, "nearly 60% are now serving sentences of less than three years and have histories of violence," the report states.

Given that, what real chance is there of rehabilitating violent, career criminals in less than three years? Especially when, as the report notes, there's no incentive to participate in rehabilitation programs because those who refuse are basically treated the same as those who take them.

The review panel further recommends a major prison construction program, noting most federal prisons are old and inadequate. They're also overcrowded. A key reason for failed early release programs is to free up prison space, and because it costs less to have a criminal serve his sentence in the community compared to prison.

Unfortunately, it's also way more dangerous for the community.

Finally, the review panel recommends new investment in rehabilitation programs to make them more available and effective.

Despite these sensible proposals, soft-on-crime federal opposition MPs, who control most seats in the Conservative minority Parliament, dismissed the report as simplistic, ignorant, narrow-minded and harsh, as did many so-called experts and prisoners' rights groups.

The Canadian Press, in what I'll laughably call its "news" story on the report, disparagingly noted the review panel consisted of chairman Rob Sampson, a former Ontario corrections minister under the Mike Harris

government who experimented with privately-run prisons (horrors!) and "four panel members with little formal corrections expertise."

Right, because what could a former corrections minister possibly know about problems in the corrections system compared to say, CP reporters?

Or panel member Sharon Rosenfeldt, co-founder of Victims of Violence, whose 16-year-old son was murdered by Clifford Olson?

Or Serge Gascon, a veteran, now-retired senior investigator with the Montreal police?

Or Ian Glen, former chairman of the National Parole Board?

Or Chief Clarence Louie-Oliver, whose impressive record of creating successful aboriginal businesses needs to be emulated if we're ever going to reduce the disproportionately large number of aboriginal convicts.

Obviously, then, these people lack the "formal corrections expertise" of the !@#?!^ geniuses who totally !@#?!^ up our corrections system in the first place.

Which is exactly why Prime Minister Stephen Harper should implement their recommendations.