

Jail 'a lazy response to poverty'

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Imagine pockets of cities where so many residents are in jail and prison, and for so long, that by the time they are released their incarceration will have cost more than \$15 million. Imagine these people being released and returning home to the same place and conditions where the trouble began and, within two years, 4 in 10 are back behind bars.

It is a costly human migration pattern, and it is real.

It what is believed to be a first in Canada, the Star has mapped incarceration costs by neighbourhood and hometown using one-day snapshots of sentencing and address data for inmates in Ontario jails and federal prisons. Both were obtained in freedom of information requests.

The maps, combined with socio-economic data from the Census, show familiar patterns. The people in jail come from our most troubled neighbourhoods. In Toronto, the high-incarceration areas – including Regent Park, Kingston-Galloway, Jane-Finch and Jamestown – are the same neighbourhoods at risk for everything from diabetes to unemployment.

It is where the poor live.

In the GTA, there are postal areas where it will cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to jail inmates serving sentences of less than two years, based on a daily cost of \$160 per inmate.

Torontonians in federal prisons – where it costs \$255 a day per inmate and sentences are longer than two years – will cost Canadians \$535 million before their sentences are up. The provincial data includes the first three digits of an inmate's postal code. The Correctional Service of Canada did not release postal code information and instead provided only home towns for federal inmates.

But assuming federal and provincial inmates from Toronto come proportionately from the same neighbourhoods, the one-time incarceration bill for offenders from the 10 most costly postal areas surpasses \$15 million each. The most expensive, M8V in Mimico, figures to cost almost \$31 million.

Criminal justice experts see these numbers not only as a measure of wasted human potential, but also of wasted taxpayers' dollars. They urge investments in

COST OF CRIME

\$70 billion — estimated total cost of crime to Canadians in 2003

\$47 billion – amount borne by victims, including stolen property, pain and suffering and loss of income.

\$13 billion — amount spent on criminal justice system, including police, courts and correctional services

\$10 billion — amount spent on security devices and protective services

Source: Department of Justice

disadvantaged neighbourhoods. They see new laws from the Conservative government – which add more minimum sentences for gun crimes and propose the same for a host of drug offences – increasing federal incarceration costs, which are already \$2 billion a year.

"I don't think anybody's getting a slap on the wrist for even possession of guns, but are the sentences being handed out acting as a deterrent?" asks Patrick LeSage, former Chief Justice of the Ontario Superior Court. "If you look at the proliferation of guns around now, I think it's very, very doubtful. The root causes of crime and violence aren't resolved by putting people in jail."

Toronto police chief Bill Blair also thinks increasing incarceration is unwise.

"We have to have a whole menu of options available to us because they (those prone to crime) are all human beings, they're all different. Some of them are going to respond positively if you give them better opportunities, better choices...we have to have hopeful redemption for those individuals to get them on the right path."

Jail, he says, should be reserved for "truly dangerous" criminals. "We're not talking hundreds of thousands here, we're talking a relatively small number of people."

And even those people may not be dissuaded by the threat of longer sentences.

During his former life as a career criminal and mid-level coke dealer, addicted to heroin, Greg Simmons didn't think about how much time he might serve. "I didn't care," says Simmons, now a prisoners' rights advocate living in Toronto. "I could do time."

Simmons, in terms of jail costs, was a million-dollar inmate. His longest sentence was 13 years, for a laundry list of serious crimes, including robbery, trafficking, weapons, fraud and forgery.

Few would argue that violent criminals shouldn't serve prison time. But mandatory minimum sentences keep them in longer and overcrowding has restricted access to rehabilitation programs. Many, like Simmons, come out more hardened than when they went in.

In the U.S., studies have found that neighbourhoods with high incarceration also experienced increased levels of crime, thanks in part to the social instability created by imprisoning so many residents.

CRITICS SAY THE new federal measures are similar in approach, though not in reach, to the laws that have given the U.S. the highest incarceration rate in the developed world – seven times that of Canada's. And the new laws come even as U.S. jurisdictions are reversing some of their toughest laws, concluding they were a costly dead end.

In response to the U.S. prison boom, Eric Cadora of the Justice Mapping Center in New York began mapping jail costs by city blocks and areas in New York City, Louisiana, Arizona, and Texas. His work documents neighbourhood-to-prison migration patterns of mostly men, mostly of parenting age, from hard-up neighbourhoods.

Incarceration, says Cadora, began looking more like a condition of social distress than public safety policy. "In some ways, I think of incarceration as a lazy response to poverty. It's a way of not dealing with poverty, it's a benign neglect."

The center has helped persuade several state governments to reduce jail populations through early release of low-risk inmates and alternatives to prison for those who violate minor release conditions. The money saved is given directly to the communities

the inmates come from.

"We pushed this message that this was a migration policy, and you have to start to realize that that's what's going on," says Cadora. "By turning that into money maps, we say there are dollars spent for particular places in huge amounts, and that if we actually think about the opportunity costs of alternative investments in those places, would actually beg the question, 'What are getting for a return on those investments.'

"If we start to think about it like that, we'll solve it. We can do that. We can actually change policies and come up with alternatives."

Among these alternatives, for example, are early interventions aimed at preventing and curbing juvenile delinquency.

Dr. Fraser Mustard, a Toronto-based early childhood development expert, says studies have consistently shown that early childhood development programs – often attached to primary schools, for both parents and children – can cut future anti-social or criminal behaviour by half. Yet Canada ranked dead last among 14 industrialized countries in a 2006 OECD study on investment in early childhood education and care.

"It's basically because we are a highly individualistic society and don't realize that we actually have a social responsibility to families," says Mustard, founder of the non-profit, Council for Early Child Development.

A 2003 COST-BENEFIT study by American researchers indicated that for every \$1 spent on early intervention initiatives, many more dollars were saved in court and prison costs in the long run. The programs they detailed in their report include:

- Nurses partnered with first-time pregnant women, making visits before birth up to the baby's second birthday. A 15-year follow-up study of one program determined that for every dollar spent, \$2 was saved on criminal justice and victim costs.
- Preschool programs for children from poorer families. One program involved 2.5 hours of supervised learning five days a week, for children younger than 5, for 30 weeks, as well as weekly home visits. In the long term, children from low-income families were less likely to dropout, had fewer reports of delinquency and higher rates of employment. An analysis showed the cost benefit to be \$1:\$7.
- The Seattle Social Development Project involved classroom coaching for teachers aimed at reducing classroom behavioural problems, school parenting workshops and social and emotional skills programs for the children. Aggressive behaviour in boys was reduced, as was self-destructive behaviour in girls and alcohol use in both sexes. Cost-benefit estimated to be \$1:\$4.

It all seems to make perfect sense, but, as the authors note, "Although we know a great deal about what to do, we do not use this knowledge well." The will to bring about systemic changes in an ethnocentric society is often missing, particularly when public safety is a manifest concern, they wrote.

"The news here is that the problem is a political problem, not a scientific or technical one."