

THE COST OF PROLIFIC OFFENDERS ON THE LOCAL ECONOMY

The economic development of any community relies upon its reputation as a safe, viable region in which to locate and do business with supporting infrastructure, community assets, and most importantly, customers willing to walk in the door. However, if customers feel unsafe, they won't come. If the reputation of a region is suspect, businesses won't come. If the media targets a community as one in which prolific offenders reside, its economy suffers.

Media reports often highlight threats to communities when an individual is released from incarceration and has not completed mental health or drug treatment programs. News reports headline those who re-offend shortly after their release. While the public does have the right to know, the impact of such media upon business decision-makers as to where they will house their companies and staff cannot be ignored. The media is not the problem. The concern is the profligacy of offenders and their return to the same community time and again. A recent incident in Downtown Kamloops has led the locally operated McDonald's to close down.¹

Solutions to the problems of prolific offenders are widely known and supported amongst the criminal justice community; however, federal and provincial budget decisions leading to program cuts can lead to the unsuccessful reintegration of some offenders. For example, reductions in federal funding for psychiatric services for offenders while incarcerated and post release can set up an offender for failure and increase community risk.

The Province of British Columbia released a report in December of 2014 entitled *Getting Serious about Crime Reduction*, which is one very good example of best practises across Canada to end the cycle. The six recommendations are listed below:

1. Manage prolific and priority offenders more effectively.
2. Make quality mental health and addiction services more accessible.
3. Make greater use of restorative justice.
4. Support an increased emphasis on designing out crime.
5. Strengthen inter-agency collaboration.
6. Re-examine funding approaches to provide better outcomes.

The current initiatives undertaken by the BC government in relation to the previous Blue Ribbon Panel Recommendations include:

- Consideration of a regional, integrated community safety partnership pilot project that would bring together local, relevant government and non-government agencies in identifying and prioritizing community safety goals, focusing resource allocations and programs accordingly, and measuring and evaluating the outcomes.
- Collaboration between BC Corrections and provincial post-secondary institutions to expand job-training options for offenders and thereby better support their re-integration into society.

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/downtown-kamloops-mcdonalds-closes-1.6406181>

Since the release of the Blue Ribbon Panel in December 2014, the Provincial government has not provided much public commentary on their efforts to enable the recommendations. Certain initiatives, such as the Integrated Court Services model recently approved in Surrey, British Columbia, do incorporate aspects of the recommendations in their development.

Provincial and federal resources contributed to the success of Community Courts and Integrated Services Programs. Senior B.C. Corrections staff led the development of the Mental Health Strategy for Corrections in Canada. The strategy seeks to ensure mentally ill offenders receive progressive and consistent care in custody and after release.²

To date, BC Housing, and social assistance providers are the only points of access for released inmates to receive assistance in finding housing. Without adequate housing and jobs, re-offence becomes a higher risk. The current plan to move rehabilitated individuals into half-way homes then allowing them to reside in their choice of communities puts these communities at risk if stable jobs and housing assistance is not provided by governments.

Communities throughout BC benefit when stakeholders, service providers, police and justice agencies, under the leadership of the Province, work together to provide offenders with the best opportunities for re-integration and minimizing criminal behaviour. Services including housing, drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, life skills, employment, literacy and essential skills training, and counselling are key to decrease prolific offences occurring in any community. Less crime leads to greater economic prosperity as businesses and customers come to a safe, viable community.

THE CHAMBER RECOMMENDS

That the Provincial Government:

1. Work in coordination with the Federal Government to expand programs that support offenders to receive treatment while incarcerated and thereafter, and for post-release housing and programming of prolific offenders to ensure successful societal reintegration and safer communities;
2. Combine resources with the Federal Government to ensure the efficacy of programs such as the Integrated Court Services Plan and the successful implementation of measures such as the previous Blue Ribbon Panel recommendations.

Co-Submitted by the Surrey Board of Trade and Penticton & Wine Country Chamber of Commerce

Supported by:

Kamloops & District Chamber of Commerce

Terrace & District Chamber of Commerce

² <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/health/092/MH-strategy-eng.pdf>