

John Howard

THE JOHN HOWARD SOCIETY OF CANADA
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NEWS RELEASE

The Second Wave of Covid-19 in Canada's Prisons

OTTAWA, ONTARIO (December 21, 2020): The last week has seen a dramatic escalation of Covid-19 inside Canada's penitentiaries. On November 25th there were 0 cases inside prisons in Ontario. As of December 17th, there were 95.

Prisoners across the country have called our phone line to tell us harrowing stories. From being locked down 23 hours a day, to being denied phone access to being refused medical assistance and cleaning supplies, to having their virtual video visits in response to Covid cancelled. This "new normal" is not just unacceptable, but dangerous.

The dramatic escalation of Covid-19 cases demonstrates that the measures taken to combat the spread of Covid-19 inside Canada's prisons have failed. Why were prisoners from Assessment Units transferred across Ontario? Why were new transfers not being isolated? Why were Correctional Officers not abiding by mandatory masking policies?

The recent spike in cases reminds us that, so long as Covid-19 is inside Canadian prisons, medically vulnerable prisoners are at risk. Prisons, as congregate living settings, create uniquely dangerous situations for those with underlying health issues as ventilation remains dismal and physical distancing impossible. The denial of cleaning essentials and medical assistance for such prisoners only exacerbates these heightened risks.

The recent spikes also remind us that locking prisoners up for 23 or more hours each day is inhumane. Such responses show a blatant disregard for the mental well-being of prisoners. Extreme isolation is not only morally objectionable but also constitutes a violation of the Charter rights of individuals as well as a complete disregard for the *Mandela Rules* and for judicial precedents from courts across this country.

Given the emerging crisis in our federal prisons, we call on Minister Blair to:

- Support the use of the Governor General's prerogative respite power to allow medically vulnerable and low-risk prisoners to serve their sentences outside of prisons.
- Ensure prisoners who have Covid-19 are in an environment which is not akin to torture, but instead is both humane and medical in nature.
- Add external oversight to CSC's Covid-19 response process, appointing an external advisor with experience in emergency response.

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