

## Challenges Facing Community Corrections in the Nineties

*It's midnight in an average urban city; the year is 2025 and the streets are empty. Next to the street lights, a TV camera monitors the empty street for any activity. Curfews are rigidly enforced and most of the populace are safely in homes that have elaborate security systems. Crime in the late nineties was a major social problem, threatening the fabric of the society, which led to the passage of Safe Streets Legislation with greatly enhanced powers of search, seizure and detention. Technology for surveillance, and monitoring of known offenders were instituted, as were housing estates with perimeter security designed to keep non-residents out.*

*The criminal justice system included the following:*

- *speedy trial legislation*
- *increased use of imprisonment*
- *longer sentences for most crimes*
- *reduction in community corrections programs unless they demonstrated a capacity for surveillance*
- *greater use of waivers to adult courts for young offenders*
- *abandonment of parole*
- *determinate sentences*
- *restrictive bail provisions.*

*Most of these changes occurred after the 1996 troubles and the tax riots of 1998 and were instituted to ensure the awarding of the Olympic Games and the World's Fair in AD 2000.*

Fantasy? Possibility? Straight-line projection of current correctional thinking? The questions could continue to be asked, and the answers will depend to a very great degree on how the public thinks we should deal with crime in our society. They will also depend on how we face and respond to the trends that are emerging.

There are three major challenges facing community corrections in the 1990s, which, I believe, will lead us away from the scenario imagined above.

### **The Challenge of Ideology**

During the past 20 years, there has been a serious reappraisal of correctional practice. It has included attacks, first from the Left, dealing with the rights of offenders, the lack of due process, and the problem of arbitrariness of professionals - in sum, with the problem of disparity and uncontrolled discretion. This attack generally targeted the professional service provider. The accusation that professionals disabled their clients by inappropriately accumulating authority stung more than one professional.

The ideological attack was one thing; the results of research, striking at the issue of effectiveness, was quite another. One could conceive of legislation to control perceived abuses of discretion and authority of professionals, but if the program did not work and the philosophy informing it was suspect, then total

abandonment was the only way to minimize damage.

In this context, the movement to the Justice model emerged and coincided with the rise of the Right as a political force in western democracies. The critique from the Right emphasized the need to influence the criminal justice system through political and public controls. It was the era of the politics of law and order. According to most opinion polls, crime was a major concern to the public, and its management became a popular election issue. To be **seen** to be doing **something** about crime was important for the political process. The fact that there were no easy answers or simple solutions did not stop the announcement of programs that would solve "the crime problem."

One can view this period as an attempt to re-establish political accountability in order to counter the perceived effects of irresponsible bureaucratic discretion. In Toronto, for example, we have had an enormous media storm centred on halfway houses and their lack of control over residents. The media reporting and the majority of political responses to incidents in Toronto indicate a trend toward punitiveness founded on feelings of frustration, anxiety, and loss of control. The push to turn halfway houses into minimum security settings through the use of curfew-monitoring devices and other security measures demonstrates a shift toward surveillance and monitoring that threatens to eat up valuable staff time that would otherwise be used to assist offenders in getting and securing employment, or for job-retraining activities, life-skill training, etc. The problem with the control-culture halfway house, of course, is that it is a short-term solution. Its proponents are not concerned about the future of the discharged offender who is under their care while serving the court sentence. Dealing with the impact of this approach to the crime problem is particularly difficult for traditional, progressive residential services.

Thanks to the diligent work of Canadian researchers, support for another view has recently emerged: rehabilitation as a viable correctional practice and a more balanced approach to offender management. However, this approach has yet to receive widespread acceptance and is struggling to be heard above the antirehabilitation discourse that currently dominates much of correctional policy making in North America.

The challenge facing community corrections is how to fan the embers of the rehabilitative ideal and incorporate the findings of research in the policy-making and program development process. It will not be a return to the past, because we have been chastened and are now wiser about what works and what does not work. The re-emergence of a genuine emphasis on reintegration will help us avoid the excesses of a control-culture mentality.

## **The Challenge of Demography**

The current fascination with the baby boom generation and the impact of an aging population on social institutions is well documented. The increased life expectancy of Canadians has given rise to a new phenomenon: an increase in the number of elderly. By the turn of the century, there will be a dramatic increase in the size of the middle-age and mature adult populations. What will this mean for community corrections? The following are some possible challenges:

- an aging work force with fewer young people to attract into correctional work
- fewer young people in trouble with the law, but more troubled offenders and more serious crimes
- re-entry problems for the longer-sentenced offender, who will be coming out of prison in late adulthood or older
- the emergence of crimes among the elderly
- health-care issues for aging offenders.

The growth in ethnic populations and increased emphasis on multiculturalism will also provide challenges for community corrections as we struggle to understand offenders from different cultures who will come to expect service in their own languages and accommodation to certain aspects of their culture, such as religious observances and diet. It will also provide a challenge in the recruitment of minorities to work in community corrections and the need for correctional managers to learn to manage both a diverse work force and a diverse offender population. The Challenge of Resources The fiscal problems of governments will continue and the necessity to reduce deficits will affect their ability to meet demands for service. Recent efforts to control government spending have been based on devolution, that is, passing on to the next level of government the cost and the actual responsibility for programs; and privatization, contracting out and, where possible, termination of programs and services.

The increased workloads of those providing supervision in the community as well as of the providers of residential services are evidence of an erosion of the financial resources available to most community corrections programs within the past decade. It is obvious that new methods of funding these programs will have to be sought if the two challenges mentioned earlier are to be met. For example, the expansion of the trend to increased surveillance through the use of technology will require capital investments in equipment. On the other hand, more emphasis on rehabilitation will require a greater investment in people. Other problems created by a lack of resources are:

- to recruit and keep skilled workers
- to engage in public education and social marketing
- to challenge current community resistance to community corrections.

Governments and providers of community correctional services will need to work together, in a non-adversarial way, to find ways to fund programs more wisely.

There are obviously more challenges, but the above three strike me as major ones, going to the heart of what community corrections is about:

- What drives our mission?
- Who do we serve?
- Will the resources be there?

Recent research has indicated that, despite detractors, decarceration efforts have been successful and alternatives have been developed. Just as community corrections has had to wait for research to confirm the advantages of rehabilitation, so will it have to await more research to confirm the practitioners'

common sense about the values of alternatives to prison. Matthews (1987) has noted that: It is arguably the persistent pessimism which surrounds deinstitutionalization and diversion strategies in Britain and North America that has inadvertently lent support to the movement towards a re-expansion of the prison system. By reducing the decarceration process to an epiphenomenon, or by condemning it to a premature burial despite continued widespread evidence of its success, many theorists have discouraged debates and ignored the gains which have been made during the decarceration era.

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This paper drew upon concepts and ideas expressed in the following sources:

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