

Community reactions to the new Prison for Women in Kitchener

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Prisons, like factories, power plants, airports, garbage incinerators, toxic-waste disposal sites, freeways, halfway houses and shelters for the homeless, represent “locally unwanted land uses” or LULUs.² These uses benefit the community as a whole “but are opposed by the immediate neighbours who see them as a threat to property values, safety, or health”³ — the “not in my backyard” or NIMBY effect.

The Grand Valley Prison for Women in Kitchener, Ontario, and four other regional facilities across the country, were built in the early 1990s to replace the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario.⁴ Media reports suggest a high level of local opposition when the site of the prison in Kitchener was announced in September 1992. In particular, residents seem to have been alienated by the lack of public consultation in the site-selection process, in contrast to the more open, consultative process used for the new women’s prisons in Truro, Nova Scotia, Joliette, Quebec, and Edmonton, Alberta.⁵

In the fall of 1995, shortly before the prison was scheduled to open, a questionnaire was mailed to a sample of Kitchener-Waterloo households to gauge the extent of support for, and opposition to, the facility. The survey attempted to identify factors related to residents’ attitudes to the prison, particularly in relation to the site-selection process, the LULU and NIMBY phenomena, and the socio-demographic characteristics of residents.

Sample

The 1994–1995 tax assessment rolls for both Kitchener and Waterloo were used as the sampling frame. Three hundred addresses were selected in a disproportionate stratified random sample. One hundred and fifty households were randomly chosen from addresses very close to the prison site.⁶ The remaining 150 households were selected from the rest of Kitchener and from the adjacent city of Waterloo, in proportion to their respective populations.⁷ Ninety-three questionnaires were returned, giving an overall return rate of 31 percent.⁸

Reactions to the prison

As Figure 1 shows, the prison in its current location is generally accepted, suggesting that either initial opposition had diminished, or

that the media exaggerated it. To identify the reasons for positive or negative sentiments about the prison, respondents were asked to indicate what long-term effects they thought the Prison for Women might have on Kitchener. A list of 14 possible effects taken from the literature — five positive and nine negative — was provided, and respondents were asked to choose as many as applied. Responses to positive effects are shown in Figure 2, and responses to negative effects in Figure 3.

Consistent with the overall support expressed for the prison, positive long-term effects were chosen more than negative effects. Specifically, the majority of respondents agreed that the

Figure 1

Opinions on the prison and its location:
 “If you had the power, would you ...” (n=85)

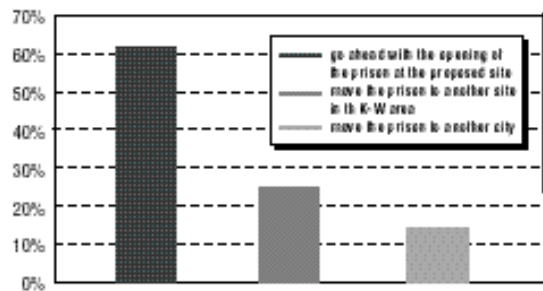


Figure 2

Expected long-term positive effects of the prison:
 percent who chose this expected effect (n=93)

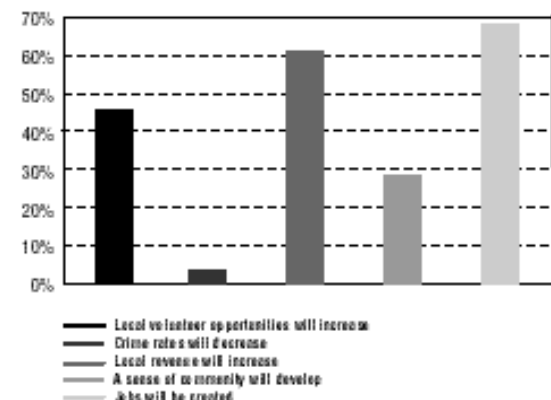
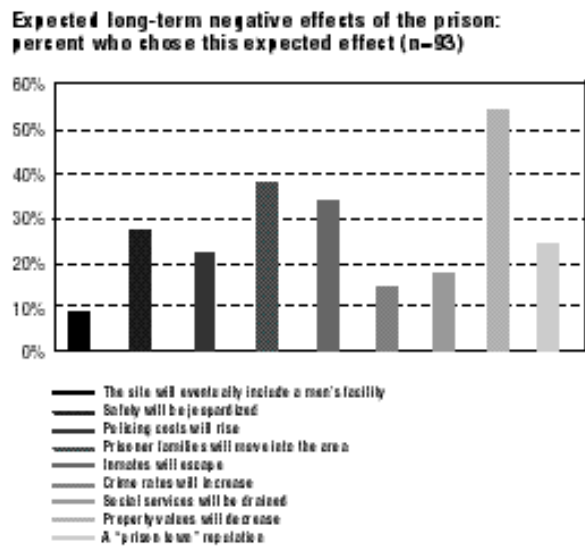


Figure 3



Prison for Women in Kitchener would ultimately lead to new jobs and an increase in local revenue. Just under half of the respondents surveyed believe that local volunteer opportunities would increase as a result of the prison. On the other hand, many respondents expected inmate escapes and a decline in property values, and expressed concerns for their personal safety. One respondent wrote:

The politicians' assurances that women prisoners are not a threat to society ring pretty hollow after the details of Karla Homolka's crimes were made public. The security measures proposed by prison officials don't provide me with any reassurances.

Many respondents also volunteered criticisms of the style of the new prison, expressing disagreement with the correctional ideology behind its architecture and design:

I am not entirely supportive of this prison 'cottage' concept. I don't think prison goals are to emulate 'home'.

For some persons with disabilities or welfare recipients these prison accommodations are luxurious. The general population of Ontario are being faced with cutbacks in all areas. What, if any, cutbacks are these prisoners experiencing?

Consistent with the overall support expressed for the prison, positive long-term effects were chosen more than negative effects. Specifically, the majority of respondents agreed that the Prison for Women in Kitchener would ultimately lead to new jobs and an increase in local revenue.

My biggest disagreement about this women's prison is — 'Is it really a prison?' It sounds more like a condo complex resort for 'bad girls,' not a prison for convicted felons. This is supposed to be a punishment for committing a crime, not a slap on the hand and enjoy your stay!

People (men and women) in prison don't deserve facilities which are more likely better than the ones they lived in prior to prison . . . People will be discouraged from committing crimes if they think they may go to a prison which is a 'hell-hole' rather than a country club.

Views on the site-selection process

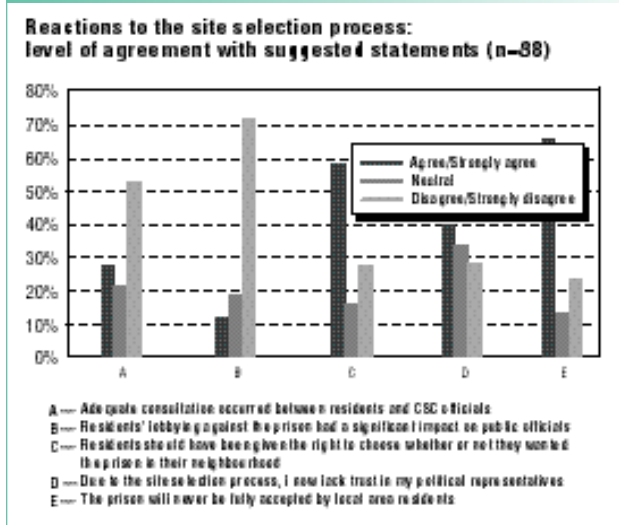
The problem inherent in the site-selection process was succinctly identified by one respondent, who suggested that the major obstacle to the prison's success was the government's inadequate attempt at public relations.

The government badly mishandled the announcement, making very little pretence at consultation, and no effort at selling the idea locally. It seemed to be handled in a very dictatorial fashion, which of course (predictably) stirred up a lot of resentment in the local residents. With a little care and some public relations savvy the whole thing could have been practically a non-issue . . . Surely any government in the 1990s knows enough about public relations to avoid this kind of fiasco.

Figure 4 shows that the respondents were critical of the site-selection process and expressed substantial dissatisfaction. Respondents' resentment is illustrated by the following comments:

I believe when decisions are made as to such things as location of prisons, it has already been finalized before it is presented to the public

Figure 4



in the area. Therefore, it really doesn't matter how much protesting the locals do, the decision has already been made.

Even having the meetings at the end pretending to listen to residents was a farce. They had no intention of changing the site — why waste the taxpayers' money by pretending there was a chance?

A jury of average people decides whether or not someone goes to prison. This is the accepted practice of our Law System. In this case, average people are not even given the opportunity to comment on location choice for a prison.

Support for or opposition to the prison itself was related to respondents' reactions to the site-selection process. For example, 91% of residents who were satisfied with the public consultation process also supported the prison. Of the respondents who were not satisfied with public consultation, only 33% supported the prison. Similarly, 26% of respondents who no longer trusted their political representatives as a result of the site-selection process did not support the prison. Of those who still trusted political leaders, 96% supported the prison. Perhaps the procedures followed in the site-selection process caused unnecessary opposition to the prison itself, but it is also possible that some residents already resented the prison and anything connected with it, whatever public relations strategy had been adopted.

Factors relating to opinions on the prison and the site-selection process

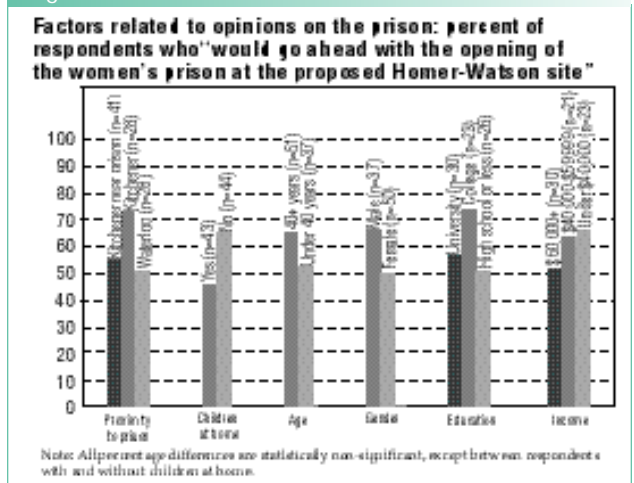
It was expected that, because of the NIMBY phenomenon, people living closer to the prison would be more opposed than people farther away. Several respondents expressed NIMBY-like views:

[The prison] isn't in my immediate neighbourhood and hasn't impinged on my reality.

I'm not very hostile about [the prison], as are the people in the neighbourhood where it's locating.

Surprisingly, the data produced only a very weak confirmation of the NIMBY hypothesis. Fifty-four percent of respondents in the sample living near the prison site said that they would go ahead with the prison as planned, compared with 71% of those living farther away in Kitchener, and only 50% of those living farthest away, in Waterloo (see Figure 5); the differences are not statistically significant.

Figure 5



As a further test of the NIMBY hypothesis, the actual distance of the respondent's place of residence was correlated with expressed concern for personal safety. Consistent with the hypothesis, respondents who did not think that their safety would be jeopardized lived on average 5.6 km away from the prison site, while individuals who expressed safety concerns lived on average 3.1 km away from the prison. However, the *t*-test of the difference was not significant at the .05 level, so the difference could have been due to chance.

As Figure 5 shows, the relationships between opinion regarding the prison and the respondent's age, gender, level of education and income were weak and not statistically significant. However, respondents with children at home were significantly more likely to oppose the prison and to express safety concerns.

Conclusion

Most of our expectations, based on the literature on LULUs and on prisons in particular, and on local media reports, were not confirmed by this survey of residents' attitudes in the fall of 1995. There was little evidence that the prison was regarded as a LULU, since only 14% of the sample said that they would, if they had the power, move the prison to another city. Nor was the NIMBY phenomenon very apparent, since respondents living in the area closest to the prison were only slightly more opposed to it than those living farther away.

There was little or no evidence that support for or opposition to the prison was related to

feelings of personal or economic vulnerability, as indicated by gender, age, income or education. However, there was clear support for the hypothesis that people with children living at home would be more likely to fear and oppose the prison than those without children at home.

We also found that support for or opposition to the prison was strongly correlated with resentment of the site-selection process, but we do not know whether the experience of the site-selection process created opposition to the prison, or whether people simply tended to support or oppose both the site-selection process and the prison.

In sum, the Prison for Women in Kitchener (Grand Valley Institution) seems to have emerged from the controversy of the site-selection process largely unscathed. Most area residents appear willing to accept the prison as part of the community. Whether these sentiments stem from lack of interest, resignation or genuine support, they are unlikely to inhibit the operation of the facility. ■

¹ Based on *Kitchener's Prison for Women: A Case Study in Prison-Community Relations*, Senior Honours Essay, Department of Sociology, University of Waterloo, 1996, by Laura Druar, 673 Keatswood Crescent, Waterloo, Ontario N2T 2R7. This research was supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Research Grant 410-95-0661 to Peter J. Carrington.

² J. D. Krause, "The Effects of Prison Siting Practices on Community Status Arrangements: A Framework Applied to the Siting of California State Prisons," *Crime and Delinquency*, 38 (1992): 27-55. See also M. Chambers, "Learning to Live with LULU's," *Environmental and Urban Issues* (Spring 1989): 17-22.

³ D. Shichor, "Myths and Realities in Prison Siting," *Crime and Delinquency*, 38 (1992): 70-87. See also K. A. Carlson, "Understanding Community Opposition to Prison Siting — More Than Just Finances," *Corrections Today*, 50 (1991): 84-90; K. A. Carlson, "Doing Good and Looking Bad: A Case Study of Prison/Community Relations," *Crime and Delinquency* 38 (1992): 56-69; F. A. Silas, "Not in My Neighborhood — But Most Want Them Somewhere Else," *American Bar Association Journal* 70 (1984): 27-29.

⁴ "Proposed Women's Prison—Kitchener," *Newsletter* [of Correctional Service of Canada] (March 10, 1994): 1-4; K. Moffat, "Creating Choices or Repeating History: Canadian Female Offenders and Correctional Reform," *Social Justice* 18 (1991): 184-203; M. Shaw, "Issues of Power and Control: Women in Prison and their Defenders," *British Journal of Criminology* 32 (1992): 438-452; M. Shaw, "Reforming Federal Women's Imprisonment," in E. Adelberg and C. Currie, eds., *In Conflict with the Law: Women and the Canadian Justice System* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1993): 50-75.

⁵ For open versus closed siting processes, see J. Fox, "Creating Choices Through Community Consultation and Partnership: The Site Selection Process for the Edmonton Federally

Sentenced Women's Facility," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 6 (1994): 37-39; D. K. Sechrest, "Understanding the Corrections and Community Response to Prison Siting," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 17 (1991): 1-16; D. K. Sechrest, "Locating Prisons: Open Versus Closed Approaches to Siting," *Crime and Delinquency* 38 (1992): 88-104. For examples of reports in the Kitchener newspaper, see G. Crone, "6 Alternative Sites for Prison Revealed in Kitchener Memo," *The Record*, November 5, 1992; T. Galloway, "Selection Process of the Prison Site Was Fatally Flawed," *The Record*, April 12, 1994; P. Rygg, "Prison Opponents Lock Horns with Its Supporters at Public Meeting," *The Record*, March 18, 1994; C. Thompson, "Prison Bungled Its Public Relations," *The Record*, September 17, 1994; D. Wood, "Prison Foes Vow Fight: Go-Ahead Stuns Pioneer Park Residents," *The Record*, June 7, 1994.

⁶ The "psychological" boundaries for this oversampled area were the main roads and highways surrounding it: Conestoga Parkway, Highway 8, Highway 401, New Dundee Road and Trussler Road.

⁷ Waterloo — 63 residents sampled from 71,180; Kitchener — 87 residents sampled from 122,799; Kitchener near prison — 150 residents sampled from 45,486. This area was oversampled in anticipation of relatively strong views from residents.

⁸ Waterloo — 20 returns; Kitchener — 29 returns; Kitchener, near prison — 42 returns; location unknown — 2 returns. This raises the issue of non-response bias. Since those with the strongest involvement with the topic of a survey are most likely to respond (J. Goyder, *The Silent Minority: Nonrespondents in Sample Surveys*, chapter 9 (Cambridge, U.K. Polity Press, 1987), one would expect any existing non-response bias would take the form of exaggerating both strong opposition to and strong support for the prison, the site-selection process, or both.