

# Alcohol and drugs: A perspective from corrections in the Province of Saskatchewan

**Don Head<sup>1</sup>**

*Corrections Division, Saskatchewan Justice*

**All correctional jurisdictions within Canada have been grappling with the issue of alcohol and drug abuse by those individuals that enter their systems. Saskatchewan is no different than any other province. However, the overall response to this issue requires more than just increased enforcement or programming. It requires an approach that recognizes all aspects of the problem and involves a multi-faceted response.**

## Basic facts

To understand the extent of the problem within Saskatchewan, it is worth noting some of the challenges the province must deal with in mounting a strategy to address alcohol and drug abuse. Saskatchewan had the highest crime rate in Canada in 1999 with 12,155 incidents per 100,000 population. It also had the highest violent crime rate in Canada (1,589 incidents per 100,000 population) and the second highest rate for property crimes (5,724 incidents per 100,000 population).

Approximately 75% of those involved in the criminal justice system, both as offenders and/or victims, are of aboriginal ancestry. This is almost seven times the representation rate for aboriginal peoples when looking at the provincial census data.

Saskatchewan had the highest rate of incarceration for any province in 1998-99 (161 per 100,000 population) even though the rate has been declining for the last 5 years. On average there are approximately 1,200 incarcerated offenders and 5,100 offenders under community supervision in the provincial system. Approximately 30% of the incarcerated population are being held as remands and the average length of time for a sentenced inmate is 12 months.

## Extent of alcohol and drug use and abuse

Alcohol and drug abuse has been a problem in the correctional system for over 100 years. In reviewing historical data related to correctional admissions, between 25% to 30% of admissions at the turn of the

century were related to substance use. Currently, up to 93% of provincial offenders have some to serious problems with substance use/abuse even though the actual admissions for alcohol or drug related offences are less than 4% of the total admissions. Also a recent study of women offenders in the Prince Albert area has identified that 75% of the women have been or are intravenous drug users and 30% of the women have been or are involved in a methadone maintenance program.

During 1999/2000, there were 90 drug seizures in the correctional facilities. Of these 90 cases, 10 were referred to police for outside charges. In addition, 145 urine tests were requested, resulting in 103 positive tests. Based on the seizures and the drug tests, the drugs of choice appear to be: marijuana, THC products, hash-oil papers, illicit use of prescription drugs, and benzodiazepine. More recently, seizures have also included small quantities of heroin, cocaine, and Talwin and Ritalin.

One of the problems experienced by officials is how the police respond to drug seizures within the correctional facilities. The police do not normally get involved with the drug seizures when small quantities are involved. This leads to operational problems when the inmates realize that they can avoid further criminal charges when they keep the quantities they are importing small.

Recent developments associated with the admission of suspected gang members have impacted on drug activity within the correctional facilities. The number of cases of inmate assaults and "muscling" have been increasing over the last year and this seems to be most significant when alleged gang members are present within the offender population.

## Effective correctional response

Over the last three years, Saskatchewan Corrections has developed a basic framework for defining an "effective correctional response". The four key elements are prevention; assessment; intervention;

**Saskatchewan Corrections has developed a basic framework for defining an "effective correctional response". The four key elements are prevention; assessment; intervention; and continuum of care.**

and continuum of care. Our response to the alcohol and substance use/abuse is grounded in relation to this framework and we have identified a series of opportunities that would strengthen our response to this issue.

### **Prevention opportunities**

Based on the current environment within the province, Saskatchewan Corrections has identified several activities that will strengthen our overall prevention response. One of the key activities is related to communications. Saskatchewan Corrections has taken steps to increase communications with local police units and the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) through the use of gang/drug liaison staff members. This will increase our ability to take proactive steps to eliminate the introduction of illicit substances within our facilities and to monitor high profile offenders or visitors who may be involved in the drug trade.

Saskatchewan Corrections is actively involved in sharing information with other correctional jurisdictions on various security matters. This includes sharing information about significant security incidents or investigations. Over the last three years Saskatchewan Corrections has been receiving CSC Security Bulletins and sharing this information with our staff as a means of enhancing our overall response to drug and alcohol use.

Every opportunity that facilitates a standardized approach to dealing with HIV/AIDS and infectious diseases within our correctional environments must be pursued. The time for discussing these issues is over and preventative measures must be put in place.

There also needs to be an active discussion about legislative amendments that address the introduction of illicit substances into correctional facilities. The belief that small quantities of drugs or the introduction of "soft drugs" into a correctional environment is not a problem is misguided and dangerous. Muscling, assaults, overdoses and an underground economy are major issues within correctional institutions.

### **Assessment opportunities**

It is apparent that in order to make any inroads in relation to addressing offender substance abuse issues, a standardized approach to assessment is required. This not only applies to correctional jurisdictions but to other agencies or organizations involved in substance abuse assessment/treatment.

Opportunities need to be explored that would facilitate the sharing of substance abuse assessment information between jurisdictions/agencies. One of the obvious benefits would be a more timely

offender intake assessment process for correctional jurisdictions. However, the sharing of information with other agencies could facilitate ongoing treatment when an offender moves from one jurisdiction or agency to another.

The assessment of ongoing substance use by offenders while in a correctional system is another area where opportunities exist. The current approach to drug testing (urinalysis) is entrenched in a disciplinary regime. However, the use of new techniques which would allow staff to monitor offenders' substance use in a more timely fashion and one focused on effective relapse prevention is an area to be explored.

### **Intervention opportunities**

One of the findings in reviewing our Primary Risk Assessment data is that a significantly high number of offenders are expressing their motivation to participate in programs. Unfortunately, the length of sentence for provincial offenders, the limited number of available program facilitators, and some other factors preclude a prompt response to this high level of motivation. It is clear that the more times that individuals come into contact with the correctional system their motivation to participate in programs drops off. Consequently, the correctional system must seize upon the opportunity to provide programs while the motivation levels are high.

Saskatchewan Corrections and CSC have been engaged in cross-training program facilitators for the last three years. These kind of opportunities need to be explored on a regular basis in other jurisdictions as the benefits to delivering, supporting and maintaining a common set of programs are clear.

In conjunction with having a common set of programs, both Saskatchewan Corrections and CSC are able to establish complementary program delivery schedules. This allows offenders in either jurisdiction to be able to attend a program in a timely manner. Currently, parolees, probationers and low security provincial inmates have been able to attend joint program sessions.

One opportunity that exists in almost all provinces is the ability for jurisdictions to participate in provincial networks dealing with substance abuse issues. Traditionally, provincial health and Non-Governmental Organizations representatives and Canada-Base officers representatives have attended these forums. These forums are also accessible by provincial and federal corrections representatives and these opportunities should be actively pursued.

The enhancement of methadone treatment programs in correctional facilities is another opportunity that should be pursued. This includes both maintenance

programs and initiating methadone treatment for offenders entering the correctional system.

### Continuum of care opportunities

One of the most significant concerns related to correctional programming is the relapse prevention and community support network that are required once an offender leaves the correctional system. Correctional jurisdictions must establish meaningful and long-lasting linkages with provincial inter-departmental committees dealing with social development issues. This would allow for the establishment of partnerships to deal with such issues as employment, education, health, and housing.

Another opportunity that should be actively pursued is training non-correctional community substance abuse workers in program delivery / maintenance methodologies that are consistent with the approaches and programs of the correctional service. This would provide the ongoing support to offenders, while capitalizing on their programming accomplishments and the capacities of their home communities to assist with relapse prevention and program maintenance.

Opportunities exist for exploring the use of "halfway-back" options. An example is how Saskatchewan Corrections uses its Community Training Residences for probationers who are encountering difficulties in the community. This approach provides an opportunity to deal with offender relapses in a reparative mode as opposed to an enforcement mode.

Establishing "reintegration" agreements with individual communities is another opportunity that can be actively pursued by jurisdictions. It allows for structured release planning using an integrated case management approach with community agencies and support networks.

### Partnerships

There have to be meaningful and effective partnerships established in order to pursue or initiate action in relation to any of the opportunities that have been mentioned. It is no longer acceptable for communities or other government departments to assume that a correctional service in any jurisdiction has full responsibility for the issue of substance abuse. It is equally important for correctional

jurisdictions not to try to accept sole responsibility for this issue.

Partnering requires clear and agreed expectations, balanced expectations and capacities, clear roles and responsibilities, and a process for review and evaluation. This is critical even when the obvious partners' roles may be evident.

Partnering on the matter of substance abuse requires internal integration within a correctional service. Often there are competing interests that impede any progress that can be made when pursuing an opportunity. Balancing the security and programming goals, the research and evaluation interests, and the managerial and the operational expectations is critical.

**Correctional jurisdictions must establish meaningful and long-lasting linkages with provincial inter-departmental committees dealing with social development issues.**

It is also important to clearly identify all the partners needed to be involved in substance abuse issues using the same model for defining an effective correctional response. Partners must be identified for each element of the model: Prevention (e.g., schools, police, prosecutions, family), Assessment (e.g. researchers, physical and mental health professionals), Intervention (e.g., health care workers, community program facilitators) and Continuum of Care (family, health care workers, education professionals, housing, employment agencies, etc.).

### Conclusion

The issue of substance abuse has been around for over 100 years in the Saskatchewan correctional system. The traditional approaches to dealing with this issue have only resulted in questionable progress. It is critical that a more comprehensive approach to addressing this issue is pursued in a manner that involves all applicable agencies and communities. The approach that Saskatchewan Corrections is pursuing is one that builds upon the elements of our effective correctional response framework and recognizes that significant partnerships must be in place to achieve the desired outcomes. We are quite hopeful that our integrated approach will allow offenders, communities and criminal justice partners to make the right decisions for the future. ■

<sup>1</sup> 1874 Scarth Street, 7th Floor, Regina, Saskatchewan S3P 3V7.