



## The Correctional Process

### Description



The *Correctional Process* module takes students from fiction to reality by providing them with more concrete and realistic knowledge of the correctional process, from offence to release. It presents the various stages of offender management and a picture of a typical day in the life of an inmate, so that students can better understand the everyday role of the Correctional Service of Canada in bringing about a Canadian society that is just and secure.

### Learning objectives

As part of their law and/or sociology coursework, this module will allow students to:

#### Law

- Understand the stages of the correctional process, from arrival at the penitentiary to conditional release;
- Define the inmate rights and responsibilities set out by legislation.

#### Sociology

- Develop their understanding of the factors that affect their actions;
- Understand the importance of respecting common social values and the consequences of violating them;
- Become aware of the everyday reality of offenders incarcerated in federal institutions.

## From sentence to release: Offender management

Throughout history, there have been great changes in the approach used in handling offenders. We moved from punishment toward a concept of rehabilitation. With exceptions, most offenders serving a sentence in an institution will return to life in the community, and it is important to prepare them for that return if we want to avoid the risks of **recidivism**. That is why the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has designed a whole series of measures and programs for the safe return of offenders to the community. CSC's strategy includes the following elements:

Once the sentence is imposed, a thorough *intake assessment* determines the offender's risk level and needs, and ensures that the offender's initial placement is at the appropriate **security level**. This assessment is used to identify the factors that drove the offender to commit the offence, the risk he poses and his needs in terms of correctional services. To that end, CSC uses information from police officers, courts, victims, the offender's family members, his employers, and psychologists.

Based on the information collected in the intake assessment, CSC develops a *correctional plan* that sets out the *rehabilitation* activities and programs in which the offender must participate to change his attitudes and beliefs and overcome the problems that led to his incarceration. For example, if an offender has a substance abuse problem, his correctional plan will be designed to break the cycle of substance abuse. If the problem is violence, an attempt will be made to bring the offender to understand the dynamic that leads to violence and to learn to replace his violent behaviour with positive, non-violent reactions and behaviour. Aboriginal people and women also have special needs that require carefully designed programs.

The offender's participation in these programs is mandatory, since research shows that they contribute greatly to the offender's safe return to the community. Of course, the correctional plan will be reassessed regularly to measure progress and, if necessary, recommend any changes.

Similarly, an offender's *security classification* is re-evaluated once or twice a year. The decision may be to transfer an offender to an institution with a lower security level if he has made notable progress in his current institution. As a result, most offenders will finish serving their sentence in minimum-security institutions, which offer them more freedom, facilitating the transition from custody to the community.

As discussed earlier, reintegration is central to the Canadian correctional system. A highly developed, well-structured *conditional release* process has been set up to allow the offender to make the transition from the correctional setting and return as an active member of the community. The different forms of conditional release are described in detail in the *Conditional Release* module.

## Glossary

**Recidivism:** Commission of a new offence after being convicted of a similar offence.

**Security levels:** CSC is responsible for 57 institutions, which include minimum security, medium-security, maximum-security and multi-level security facilities.

## A day in the life of an inmate

The aspects of offender management that we have just seen were intended to give us an understanding of the administrative process surrounding the life of an incarcerated inmate, from intake to release. But what happens on a typical day inside a correctional institution?

In the movies and on television, we have all seen images of inmates locked up in cells they almost never leave. Sometimes, that is the only idea we have about life in a correctional institution. This does happen—in what is called segregation—but it is a rather limited practice. Certain inmates who are considered too dangerous or who have committed serious offences during their detention may be placed in segregation, from which they emerge only to take a shower and spend one or two hours outside. There are also inmates who ask to be put in segregation because they fear for their life after contracting a debt or doing something that has created tension within a group of inmates.

For most inmates, life instead tends to follow a set schedule that dictates the times for meals and for participation in various programs and activities. But, as one may imagine, the security level of the penitentiary will have a major impact on the everyday life of the inmates there. Therefore, it is important to know the characteristics that define the various institutions and their impact on inmate routine.

Maximum-security institutions are obviously the most restrictive. The buildings are surrounded by a barbed-wire fence, since they house individuals who pose the greatest risk of escape and hence the greatest danger to society. But this high risk level also affects the staff and other inmates: in maximum-security institutions, correctional officers are armed, and officers are posted in towers or other strategic surveillance locations.

In these penitentiaries, the schedules are stricter: the times for participation in the various activities of the day must be strictly adhered to; meal times are sometimes established for the different sectors of the institution, since there are risks of conflict between certain inmate groups if they cross paths.

In medium-security institutions, while the site is fenced as well, the rules are less restrictive. Officers are not armed, although weapons are available—under lock and key—in specific locations. Daily life is much like that in maximum-security penitentiaries: inmates participate in programs, work or study. They receive a maximum allowance of \$6.90 a day for their participation in these activities. Of course, this allowance is not paid in cash, but rather as credit that the inmate can use to buy a soft drink, a pack of gum or a bag of chips. Some penitentiaries are even equipped with kitchenettes where inmates who want to can prepare their own meals, for which they use their allowance money to buy ingredients ordered from a fairly comprehensive list. In this way, inmates learn to be more responsible, to manage their finances, to meet their personal needs and to save in anticipation of their release.

Finally, the minimum-security institutions play a very important role in the process for returning offenders to the community. These penitentiaries are often like little villages where inmates live in living units (houses) in groups of seven or eight. There is no barbed wire and there are no armed officers, since the inmates in these institutions present a very low risk: they have committed non-violent crimes, or they have reached the end of their sentence and have every interest in behaving well, or else they could well return to an institution with a higher security level.

## A day in the life of an inmate (continued)

These minimum-security institutions offer inmates great freedom of movement: some even leave each morning to work outside and come back at the end of the day; they work for charitable organizations or participate in programs like **CORCAN**. In minimum-security institutions, inmates enjoy considerable freedom in their daily lives. They can fraternize in less restrictive fashion, organize their schedule according to the activities they are required to participate in, and often are responsible for their own meals. This is a good way to create a sense of responsibility and prepare them for life in the community.

Lastly, there is one feature that is common to all institutions: private family visits. When inmates meet certain criteria, they can have access to special units in the compound of a correctional facility where they can spend time with their family. Most of these units contain two bedrooms, a kitchen and a living room. Private family visits are permitted once every two months, and can last up to 72 hours. They are designed to maintain inmates' ties with their family and the community, facilitate their reintegration and mitigate the negative effects of incarceration on relationships with family members.

In short, inmate life is not always like what we see on the big screen. We must not lose sight of the fact that the ultimate goal of CSC is to provide inmates with the emotional and practical tools they need to return to the community and become full law-abiding citizens.

## Glossary

**CORCAN:** Special operating agency of CSC mandated to offer vocational training to offenders incarcerated in Canadian correctional institutions. CORCAN employs nearly 4,000 inmates per year in a range of sectors such as manufacturing, construction, textiles and services.