

THE COST OF PROLIFIC OFFENDERS ON THE LOCAL ECONOMY (2016)

The economic development of any community relies upon its reputation as a safe, viable region in which to locate and do business with supporting infrastructure, community assets, and most importantly, customers willing to walk in the door. However, if customers feel unsafe, they won't come. If the reputation of a region is suspect, businesses won't come. If the media targets a community as one in which prolific offenders reside, its economy suffers.

Media reports often highlight threats to communities when an individual is released from incarceration and has not completed mental health or drug treatment programs. News reports headline those who re-offend shortly after their release. While the public does have the right to know, the impact of such media upon business decision-makers as to where they will house their companies and staff cannot be ignored. The media is not the problem. The concern is the profligacy of offenders and their return to the same community time and again.

Prolific Offenders

The majority of crime committed in Canada is by prolific offenders; the largest portion of crimes committed are property crime, and the largest portion of property crimes are commercial crimes which impact business directly via immediate loss and costs to re-secure property and indirectly by the overall costs of our justice system.

High profile media reports of prolific offender criminal activity are causing businesses and citizens to question the efficacy of our criminal justice system and the accountability of all levels of government. All too frequently individuals who are released without completing mental health or drug treatment programs while incarcerated re-offend shortly after their release. The prolific offender cycle continues to cause increased costs directly to impacted businesses and indirectly through increased taxes to pay for the criminal justice system and ancillary costs.

Leadership is required to ensure that all responsible governments, community and business organizations take up the responsibility of making our communities across Canada more resilient, vibrant and accountable when prolific offenders are released back into our communities.

Background

Prolific offenders create a high percentage of the crime reported in Canada and the link to drug and alcohol addiction and mental health issues is overwhelming. 80% of male offenders in federal prisons have substance abuse issues, 60% of female inmates are prescribed psychotropic medicine to manage mental illness.¹

Ongoing dialogue with experts in policing, corrections, treatment facilities and housing for those on parole or conditional release indicates that the “solutions” to the problems of prolific offenders are widely known and supported amongst the criminal justice community, but that federal and provincial budgetary impacts and political decision-making is a causal problem in preventing successful reintegration of some offenders.

Specifically, reductions in federal funding for psychiatric services for offenders while incarcerated and post-release is one example of setting up an offender for failure and increasing community risk.² If a business is a

¹ C Theobald, May 14, 2015, Edmonton Sun

² AM Paperny, Global News, June 4, 2014

victim of repeated crimes due to prolific offenders cycling through the justice system without adequate interventions and programs to stop the cycle of addiction and the need to commit crimes to fund that addiction, where is the incentive to invest in that community?

The Province of British Columbia released a Blue Ribbon Panel report in December 2014, entitled *Getting Serious about Crime Reduction*, is one example of best practices across Canada to end the cycle. The six recommendations are listed below:

1. Manage prolific and priority offenders more effectively.
2. Make quality mental health and addiction services more accessible.
3. Make greater use of restorative justice.
4. Support an increased emphasis on designing out crime.
5. Strengthen inter-agency collaboration.
6. Re-examine funding approaches to provide better outcomes.³

The current initiatives undertaken by the B.C. government in relation to the Blue Ribbon Panel Recommendations include:

- Consideration of a regional, integrated community safety partnership pilot project that would bring together local, relevant government and non-government agencies in identifying and prioritizing community safety goals, focusing resource allocations and programs accordingly, and measuring and evaluating the outcomes; and
- Collaboration between BC Corrections and provincial post-secondary institutions to expand job-training options for offenders and thereby better support their re-integration into society.

Since the release of the Blue Ribbon Panel in December 2014, the provincial government has not provided much public commentary on their efforts to enable the recommendations. Certain initiatives, such as the Integrated Court Services model recently approved in Surrey, British Columbia, do incorporate aspects of the recommendations in their development.

The challenge across Canada is finding the resources to ensure that prolific offenders are engaged in programs to reduce the mental health impacts of drug and alcohol addiction and that best practices are followed. Provincial and federal resources have contributed to the success of Community Courts and Integrated Court Services Programs.

Communities throughout B.C. benefit when stakeholders, service providers, police and justice agencies, under the leadership of the Province, work together to provide offenders with the best opportunities for re-integration and minimizing criminal behaviour. Services including housing, drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, life skills, employment, and counselling are key to decrease prolific offences occurring in any community. Less crime leads to greater economic prosperity as businesses and customers come to a safe, viable community.

THE CHAMBER RECOMMENDS

That the Provincial and Federal Governments:

³ Getting Serious about Crime Reduction: The Report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Crime Reduction. Ministry of Justice - 2014

1. Provide adequate budgetary support for support services treating offenders while incarcerated and for post-release housing and programming of prolific offenders to ensure successful societal reintegration and safer communities; and
2. Combine resources to develop a National Strategy to deal with prolific offenders and ensure the efficacy of programs such as the Integrated Court Services Plan and the successful implementation of measures such as the Blue Ribbon Panel recommendations.