

THE COST OF INCARCERATION

By Nance Ackerman, co-director, *Conviction*

What if, as an exercise, we were to examine Canada's prison system like we would an investment. The definition of an investment, in finance, is a monetary asset purchased with the idea that the asset will provide income in the future, or will later be sold at a higher price for a profit. An investment can also be one of time, energy and ideas. And a cost can be financial, or tragically human. Or both.

Cost of our prison system vs community support

If we look at the numbers, the cost of correctional services in Canada is over five billion dollars per year. That covers all corrections expenses, for men and women, provincial and federal, including prisons, parole and probation in community. By comparison, we spend about one billion dollars on the environment, federally.

In the documentary film airing on the documentary Channel, *Conviction*, Senator Kim Pate, former Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, and prisoners' rights activist, is invited to collaborate with women inside prison to imagine alternatives to prison, using art, film and photography.

On one of her visits to a jail in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, she asks the women if they know how much it costs to keep them in prison. The reply is an awkward silence. Many Canadian taxpayers are probably just as in the dark about the cost of incarceration, as are the women inside.

Pate's position has always been that if those 5 billion dollars are funnelled into society, instead of prisons, it would be a much better investment. "We need to go upstream, divert those funds and put them into the community – into mental health and addiction services, a minimum livable income, housing and other social programs if we want to stem the tide of people becoming criminalized in the first place." It's these preventative measures, Pate believes, that will help stop women from getting caught in the revolving doors of our corrections system.

In addition, if we look at allowing offenders to serve their sentences outside of prison, with supervision, the federal 2018 Corrections and Conditional Release Statistical Overview shows that the cost associated with maintaining an offender in the community, under parole and probation, is 74% less than the costs of maintaining an offender in custody (\$30,639 per year versus \$116,473 per year).

So if we were to support those people, now behind bars, in the community, we could save taxpayers billions of dollars.

'Not a good investment' says industry financial analyst

After watching *Conviction*, Elaine Hanson, former Chief Operating Officer at Lazard Canada, one of the world's leading financial advisory and asset management firms, was quick to point out, "from a strictly dollars and cents perspective, the prison system would not, in its current state, make a good business investment." Hanson has rallied behind the film, and believes it needs to be shown in the country's financial and business circles, in order for it to have a real impact, "looking at the issue through the public's pocketbook is usually the fastest way to policy change."

Ivan Zinger, the federal corrections ombudsman agrees, and commented in the Globe and Mail, this year, "If we were talking electricity bills, this would be the equivalent of telling Canadians they are paying the highest hydro rates in the world and getting tons of blackouts."

Canada's recidivism rate is unknown

For any business investment, it would be prudent to look at the performance indicators. The performance indicator for the prison system is recidivism, a measure of the tendency to relapse, re-offend and return to prison. It indicates how well the system rehabilitates inmates, and in turn, keeps the public safe.

While other countries that spend this much on prisons, like Norway, have recidivism rates of 20 per cent, Canada's recidivism rate remains a mystery. In fact, in his annual report Zinger laments the lack of statistics, "The current national base recidivism rate is simply not known. Canada still lacks a robust, regularly maintained, national recidivism database." Zinger's first recommendation, in his annual report (2018) is that Public Service Canada build a comprehensive and detailed recidivism database, something journalists, social workers and activists have been demanding for decades.

"Given the very poor outcomes from incarceration in terms of both public safety and individual welfare, this must surely rank as one of the worst investments of public money that Canadians make." John Howard Society of Canada

Move to decarceration

Hanson agrees that if there is no way to measure the success of an investment, then the investment needs to be re-examined. On both a financial and human level.

"It's so clear, in *Conviction*, that the women do not belong in prison." Hanson explains, "The problem is that our prison system today invests in "end of pipe" solutions, missing the value add – the support, education, therapy and training required to keep people out of prison. In the film you can see that the women receive little to no treatment while

incarcerated, so when they leave the system, they re-enter society, and a labour market, with even more issues than when they went in. It's a domino effect. One that, as you can see in this film, sets the women up for failure, and then sends them into a downward spiral of chronic mental health issues and increased recidivism. So the cost to Canadian taxpayers is obviously, and exponentially, greater."

As Kim Pate says in the film, Canada can, and should, be a leader in decarceration – investing our tax dollars in supportive, safe and effective alternatives to prison in the community.

According to Hanson, that's good, sound investment advice.