

## **Advocacy group says U.S. 'experiment' show tougher sentencing doesn't reduce crime**

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OTTAWA—The federal government is being warned to not follow in the footsteps of the United States, which jails more of its citizens than anywhere else in the world.

Craig Jones, executive director of the John Howard Society of Canada, says elements of Conservatives' get-tough criminal justice agenda lead him to believe Canada may be headed down that trail.

"Growing the prison population does not reduce crime. It may increase crime. Growing the prison population is the most expensive way to lower the rate of crime and in any event the crime rate has been in decline for 25 years," Jones told the Toronto Star.

Although the U.S. has less than 5 per cent of the world's population, The New York Times has reported it has almost a quarter of the world's prisoners – 2.3 million behind bars, or one in every 100 adults.

The Conservative government has made crime fighting a major plank in its platform.

Among other things, it initiated a review of the country's prisons that recommends a new type of regional, penitentiary complexes that "responds to the cost-efficiency and operational-effectiveness deficit of its current physical infrastructure."

Critics fear not only will there be more prisons, but that they will be privately operated. This fear is fuelled by the fact the chair of the review panel was Rob Sampson, a Mike Harris Ontario cabinet minister who was the chief architect of the province's short-lived experiment with private prisons and young offender boots camps.

There are 74 federal facilities – many of them aging – in Canada, with most of them more than 40 years old. Some were built in the 1800s and early 1900s.

Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day, who could not be reached for comment, has acknowledged the Conservative law-and-order plan may include new prisons, but denies any suggestions they would be privately run.

A Day spokesperson noted the 2008 budget called for corrections reforms. "This will take time but we are committed to implementing the promise we have made in order to improve public safety," she said late last week.

The passage of the Tories' Tackling Violent Crime Bill will result in more people behind bars for longer periods, Jones said.

The omnibus law includes tougher bail provisions, higher mandatory minimum sentences for serious gun crimes and stiffer penalties for repeat offenders and impaired drivers. Also, the

proposed national drug strategy calls for mandatory prison terms for serious drug crimes.

"If you pay attention to these kinds of initiatives in other countries, what you see is that rather quickly you incarcerate all the really bad and violent people and then you have built up such a momentum that you end up reaching deep in the pool of non-violent offenders," Jones said.

Most, but not all, of the people the John Howard Society helps have either been in trouble with the law or are at risk of becoming involved in criminal activity.

Efforts to combat illegal drugs play a major role in explaining long prison sentences in the United States. In 1980, there were about 40,000 people in American jails and prisons for drug crimes. These days, there are almost 500,000, according to the Times.

Jones said there is much to be learned from the "experiment" to the south.

"They went on a (prison-building) binge," he said. "Basically they tried a social experiment on incarceration and it didn't produce a reduction in crime. In fact, it may have increased crimes in some neighbourhoods . . . not to mention the consequences of overcrowding and the spread of HIV and Hepatitis C, and it disenfranchised a generation of young black men."

Jones said one in every three young black men in the U.S is in jail or on parole or probation.

"If you put together the elements of this particular (Conservative) crime package, I think what you do is you end up incarcerating greater and greater numbers of non-violent offenders and when you incarcerate non-violent offenders they become violent because that's what prison does to people."