



News Release / Communiqué

Correctional Investigator Finds Measures to Manage Prison Self-injury Inadequate

OTTAWA, October, 2012 – The 39th Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator was tabled in Parliament. In releasing his report, the Correctional Investigator of Canada, Mr. Howard Sapers, called attention to the dramatic increase in the number and prevalence of serious self-injury incidents in federal prisons. “The number of self-injury occurrences has almost tripled in the last five years. My concern extends beyond just the numbers, and goes to the response and capacity of the Correctional Service of Canada to manage prison self-injury appropriately and not primarily as security incidents,” stated Mr. Sapers.

In 2011-12, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) recorded 912 incidents of self-injury, involving 303 offenders. Aboriginal offenders accounted for 45% of all self-injury incidents in federal penitentiaries. Women offenders accounted for just over one-quarter of self-injury incidents in 2011-12. Types of self-harm include slashing, head banging, self strangulation, swallowing harmful objects and other forms of self-mutilation.

The Office maintains that self-injury is often a symptom of an underlying or untreated mental health issue. While safety and security requirements are always a consideration in a prison setting, the report concludes that there are safer and more therapeutic options available to correctional authorities in managing the most serious and complex cases of self-injury. “The Correctional Service does not have adequate specialized physical and human resources to meet the needs of inmates who seriously and chronically self-harm. Recognizing this fact and acting on recommendations to seek alternatives to segregation and the use of restraints will reduce trauma, preserve life and lessen staff burnout,” stated Mr. Sapers.

The report points out that use of force measures, particularly inflammatory pepper spray and the use of restraints, are increasingly deployed by front-line staff to stop, interrupt or prevent prison self-injury or to preserve life. Unfortunately, these interventions often serve to reinforce patterns of self-destructive behavior and can be counter-productive. As the security response intensifies, in some instances the cycle of self-injury repeats itself, becoming more frequent, sometimes more severe, and occasionally, even fatal.

Of particular concern to the Office is the fact that nearly one-third of all reported incidents of self-injury occurred in segregation cells under close observation. Research suggests that the extreme seclusion, isolation and deprivation that prevail in segregation units can exacerbate symptoms of mental illness. “I am increasingly concerned by the use of long-term segregation to manage mental illness in federal penitentiaries,” said the Correctional Investigator. “I call upon the Correctional Service to immediately cease the

unsafe and inhumane practice of placing mentally ill offenders and those at risk of suicide or serious self-injury in prolonged segregation.”

Other sections of the 2011-12 Annual Report address ongoing priorities of the Office – physical health care, prevention of deaths in custody, conditions of confinement, issues affecting Aboriginal and women offenders and access to correctional programs. In his outlook for 2012-13, the Correctional Investigator notes that the Correctional Service is in the midst of the largest renewal and expansion of cell capacity in Canadian history, involving adding more than 2,700 accommodation spaces by the end of 2014.

The Office of the Correctional Investigator contributes to public safety in Canada by providing external oversight and independent monitoring of the Correctional Service of Canada, which includes timely, impartial and accessible review of offender complaints. The Office makes recommendations consistent with safe and humane custody and the fair and lawful treatment of federally sentenced offenders. The report cited in this release is available at www.oci-bec.gc.ca.

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