

Risks Associated with Needle Exchange Programs in Canadian Prisons

It is no secret that Canada is in a state of crisis when it comes to opioid use and drug overdose. In response to this crisis, the Canadian government has been implementing ways to combat and prevent death due to opioid use; needle exchange programs in prisons is one of their proposed strategies. The goal of needle exchange programs is to prevent and reduce the transmission of diseases, such as HIV and Hepatitis C, by providing those who inject drugs with sterile needles (Hartney, 2016). The needle exchange program puts needles in the hands of inmates with a disregard to the risks it causes for the correctional officers that are left to deal with this program. The risks associated with this program are the potential of the needles being used as a weapon against officers, the possible exposure of officers to blood-borne diseases and the probable fact that officers may be forced to intervene in the event of an inmate overdose, adding stress to an already mentally draining job.

Correctional officers constantly have to deal with the threat of being attacked or harmed by an inmate while on the job. Inmates have been known to make weapons of seemingly harmless objects, such as; toothbrushes, hairbrushes, pens and knee braces, and by giving them easy access to needles it is giving them easy access to yet another weapon that can potentially be used to harm an officer. Correctional officers have the second highest mortality rate of any occupation and statistics show that a correctional officer will be seriously assaulted on a minimum of two occasions in a twenty-year career ("Correctional", 2007). Evidently, there is already significant risk associated with being a correctional officer so it seems irresponsible to make needles, an object with large potential to be used as a weapon, readily available within the prison systems. Not only does doing so put officers at an increased risk of physical attack, but it also puts them at risk of being exposed to blood borne diseases.

Blood borne diseases are diseases in which viruses and bacteria are carried within the blood and are transmitted through contamination by blood or bodily fluids ("Bloodborne", n.d.). The most prevalent blood borne diseases are HIV, Hepatitis B and C, Tuberculosis and other sexually transmitted diseases ("What" n.d.). Injection drug use and contaminated needles are one of the most common

culprits of the spread of these diseases, with 10% of HIV cases being spread by injection drug use ("What", n.d.). It is important to realize that when needles are being handed out to inmates, it comes with the very large risk of many of those needles going missing, and putting officers at risk of being compromised by a contaminated needle. There is large potential for officers to be injured by needles during cell searches or body pat downs, and with only puncture resistant, frisk master gloves they do not have the proper protection to prevent injury or the transmission of these diseases if they were to be unintentionally injected by a contaminated needle. The physical safety of officers is not the only concern; it is equally as important to address the psychological toll this program may have on our officers.

Correctional officers have many complex roles in the prison system, and have arguably one of the most mentally exhausting jobs. A report found that in a study of correctional officers, 50% of those interviewed reported being excessively tired, 44% reported frequent headaches and 15% reported feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness (Sultan, n.d.). Evidently, correctional officers are already carrying the burden of a high stress job. By putting the needle exchange program in prisons and giving inmates easy access to needles used to inject drugs it would undoubtedly increase the amount of inmate overdoses that officers would be forced to respond to. This adds yet another stress for correctional officers to handle, when it is clear many officers are already struggling to cope with the many demands of their job.

Overall, the needle exchange program poses many risks to correctional officer's physical safety and emotional well being. The program could potentially put weapons in the hands of inmates by giving them needles, posing a threat to correctional officer's safety, and therefore, could significantly increase the risk of a correctional officer being unintentionally injected while doing routine searches. Along with this, it will put an even heavier burden on officer's mental health by adding the stress of dealing with

inmate overdoses' to their plate. For the needle exchange program to be successful in prisons, the program must put officer's safety first and address the risks it poses to our officers.

References

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