The half-hearted war on drugs—in prisons

Chris Selley, MacLean's Magazine
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Getting drugs into Canadian prisons is deceptively simple. So are the solutions.

"It is not surprising that drug abuse and trafficking is an issue within the penitentiary walls," the Correctional Service of Canada Review Panel wrote in its largely ignored December report to Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day. It is "unacceptable," they stressed. It "destroys hope of providing a safe and secure environment where offenders can focus on rehabilitation." But not, somehow, surprising.

The panel, which was chaired by former Ontario Cabinet minister Rob Sampson, is probably right. Drugs in prisons are a worldwide phenomenon, and by no means a new one. But that doesn't make the statement any less remarkable. The facilities to which we send society's most dangerous elements to keep them away from us—in hopes they'll reemerge, at the very least, less dangerous and, ideally, as productive members of society—are themselves criminal environments. And not just a little criminal, either. Fully 10.5 per cent of random urinalysis tests conducted in Canadian prisons in 2005-2006 came back positive. Meanwhile, 12.4 per cent of tests were refused (they cannot be administered without inmates' consent). A suspicious mind might assume a fair proportion of those would have come back positive, had they been administered.

How do drugs get into such supposedly secure environments? On the demand side, "[a]bout 4 out of 5 offenders arrive [in prison] with a serious substance abuse problem," the CSC Review Panel wrote. As the gang-affiliated population in prison grows—by a third in the past decade, according to CSC Commissioner Keith Coulter—the number of inmates with on-the-job experience in the drug trade exacerbates the problem. And, famously, there isn't much else to do in there.

The supply side, meanwhile, is limited only by the gag reflex and human ingenuity. Putting contraband inside tennis balls and hurling them onto prison grounds is a tried and true method. The CSC Review Panel also mentioned bows and arrows. And it suggested, quite reasonably, that the decision at some facilities to stop manning guard towers had made the over-and-in technique a bit of a gimme. In New Zealand, the Christchurch Press reported last year that people had taken to stuffing methamphetamine inside dead birds and sending them on their last flight over the perimeter fence. A Corrections department spokeswoman referred to the technique as "wacky."

Visitors, who are at least theoretically subject to screening by drug dogs and ion scanners, are another huge point of vulnerability. But during its first-hand inspections of Canadian prisons, the CSC Review Panel noted that some gained access after a "no more than cursory" inspection. "Ion scanners are used inconsistently," says the report, "and in some penitentiaries, the Panel was told by staff that they could not properly use the technology because they had not been fully trained." And while drug-sniffing dogs have been proven effective, the Panel noted significant "service gaps." "Resources are insufficient to maintain a comprehensive search program," it stated bluntly, even recommending a national registry of prison visitors be established to monitor positive drug tests and screen out potential smugglers.

In its submission to the Panel, the Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness suggested "any visitor convicted of attempting to transport illegal drugs or narcotics into institutions be banned for life from entry upon CSC premises." If anything, it seems astounding that they aren't already. After all, staff can also be part of the problem. In 2005, Alice English was charged with smuggling fully 2.8 kilograms of marijuana, as well as crack, cocaine, hashish, cellphones and pornography into the Bordeaux jail. She.copped to it in videotaped testimony this week, but said she only did it once, and only because inmates had threatened her

http://www.ucco-sacc.csn.qc.ca/pregenerate/cmsContent_EN_RegionsOntario_D081019... 16-12-2009
children—and she added that other guards must have been complicit in the arrangement, since there was no other way inmates could have known such details. Pierre-Arold Agnant, a guard at the Montreal Detention Centre, was nabbed last year for allegedly accepting bribes to allow a gang-controlled smuggling ring to bring drugs into the facility. It's impossible to know for sure, but Jackson said recently he suspected as much contraband entered prisons via staff as via visitors.

Despite that, at least one CSC facility did not "routinely" search staff members at all as they entered in 2006, according to a heavily censored report on drug interdiction activities from the CSC's Audit Branch. Its report noted that ion scanners and sniffer dogs were rarely used on any CSC staff. These "would mitigate a significant risk," the report read, noting that "the rise in organized crime may increase attempts to compromise staff."

Stockwell Day's office pledges a commitment "to ensuring a fair and effective corrections system with a priority to protect Canadians." Which, ultimately, is the point. It's easy not to care about what people put up with behind bars—but as one inmate told Insight magazine for its exhaustive look of drugs in American prisons, "They should understand that these guys are going to get out some day. They are going to be your neighbors, cutting your grass." Cracking down on visitation rights—or cutting them off entirely, as the CSC Review Panel suggested if the situation worsens—would demoralize prisoners and jeopardize rehabilitation efforts. But most studies have concluded that drugs are the single biggest factor in creating a criminal, disrespectful atmosphere in prisons. Cracking down on staff screening, meanwhile, would be sure to create strife with the unions. But the overwhelming impression, given the ingenious yet simple ways in which drugs arrive in prison, is that the problem could be solved if the political will existed to do so. The platitudes emanating from Day's office don't exactly reek of urgency.