Global Trends in Corrections

Jennifer Oades, Director of the ICPA, Canada, views the issues in an international context.

I n this age of globalization, ideas and information travel instantaneously, showing no respect for political borders. Despite the vast differences in culture and economic conditions from continent to continent and from country to country, there are in fact global trends in corrections and prisons systems, and while systems may not be the same, the challenges and opportunities they present are similar.

A number of these global trends have had a profound impact on criminal justice systems, particularly corrections. A swing to the right has contributed to the adoption of a punitive approach within criminal justice systems (i.e., longer sentences, mandatory minimum sentences, truth-in-sentencing, reduced programmes for inmates, an erosion of conditional release mechanisms). The result has left most systems with an expensive and ineffective over-reliance on incarceration, and prison crowding.

This global phenomenon has brought about a number of challenges to correctional systems. In the area of health, HIV, AIDS, tuberculosis, Hepatatis C, and the health needs of ageing

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offenders are serious concerns. In some areas, the statistics are sobering – Mongolia estimates that every year ten per cent of their inmates die from tuberculosis. In Russia over 92,000 inmates have TB. In terms of the inmate population, many correctional systems see the systemic discrimination that exists within their own criminal justice system, particularly where there are indigenous peoples and minority populations. For example, aboriginal peoples in Canada comprise three per cent of Canada's population, yet they constitute 17 per cent of the federal inmate population (Correctional Service of Canada, 1999). In the United States, nearly 1 in 3 (32.2%) of young African-American males are under some form of criminal justice sanction on any given day and nearly one of every eight black males is incarcerated on any given day. (Mauer and Huling, 1995). The concern about organized crime has also brought challenges to managing offenders who are members of criminal groups without borders.

As a result of the over-reliance on incarceration, severe fiscal pressures challenge most systems. In the USA, the annual cost of incarceration is estimated to be $41 billion (November Coalition, 2001). In many countries, fiscal restraint measures

have resulted in a reduction, and in some cases an elimination, of offender programmes that contribute to increased public safety. In some jurisdictions in Africa and Asia, there is difficulty in providing adequate food to inmates. While globally accepted standards are recognized and appreciated, in many instances they are impossible to meet.

Burgeoning prison systems have had other consequences, including an enormous economic interest – what some refer to as the 'prison industrial complex'. In J. T. Hallinan's recent book *Going up the River: Travels in a Prison Nation*, he argues that in the United States, "having failed to make prisons effective, we have learned to make them profitable." As a result of living in a world of instantaneous communications, there is also a growing sense of common community in searching for solutions and constant improvement. One of the most encouraging global developments is the emerging sense of professionalism in corrections. This is one reason that the ICPA evolved in the late 1990s. This development initiated the formulation of a shared vision or common purpose for corrections. The following statement, discussed at a number of international events, appears to be globally accepted: "Corrections and prisons contribute to the safety and the prosperity of the societies they serve through the safe, secure and humane control of offenders while incarcerated, and by actively assisting them to live law-abiding lives upon their return to the community." (Mission Statement, International Roundtable, 1998).
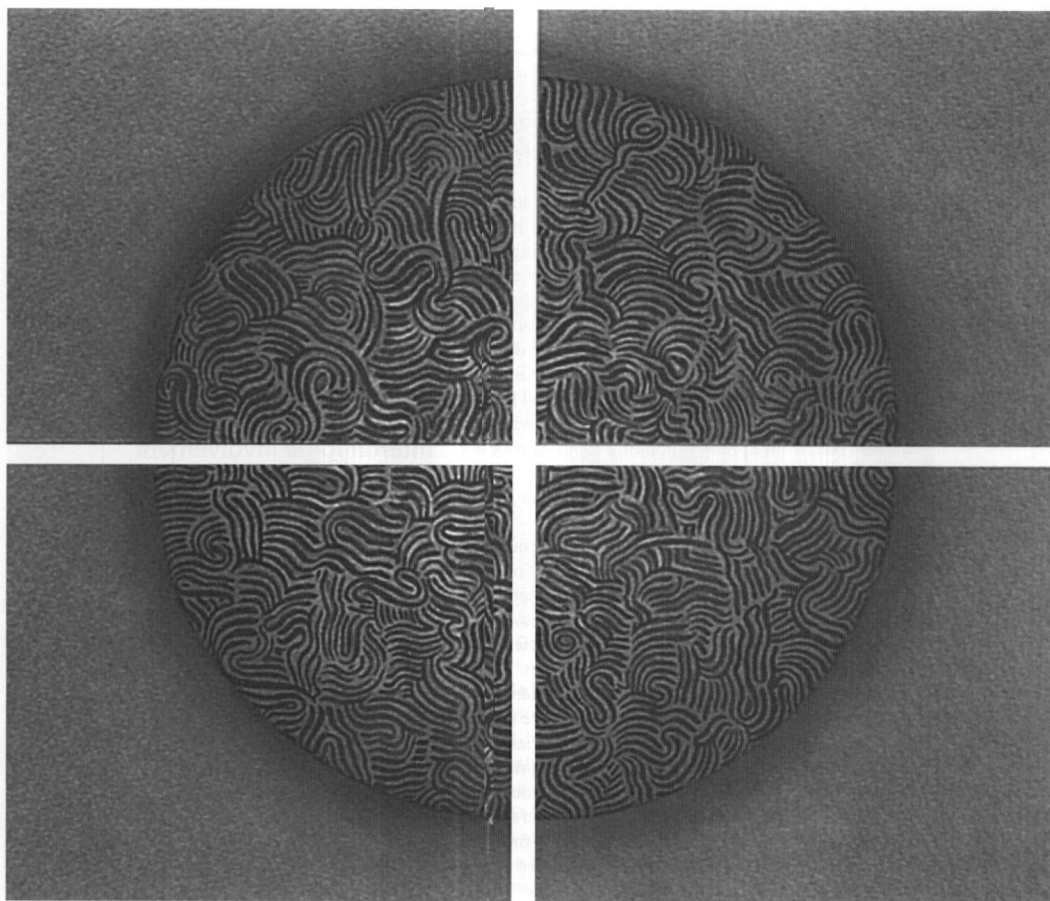
We are also seeing a growing interest in correctional research and 'what works' literature. A significant and increasing amount of first rate, quality correctional research has emerged in the past few years. Much of this research has had a direct and positive impact on the operations of many criminal justice practitioners and organizations, and has contributed to advancing professionalism. For example, New Zealand has implemented a strategic plan to improve effectiveness in reducing reoffending. In Canada, research is pointing to a number of 'reintegration levers' to assist practitioners in the safe reintegration of offenders. And in the United States, the 'offender re-entry process' is rapidly gaining support and momentum. In addition, new holistic approaches to responding to criminal behaviour are being explored, such as restorative justice models and aboriginal healing lodges.

The movement to advance professionalism in corrections means that there is a common intent to become better at what we are doing. In some jurisdictions it has resulted in the creation of 'best practices', which demonstrate the practical ways in which we can become better at what we do. Sharing

'Divisions of the Absolute II', Daniel Salazar, El Salvador.
This painting can be viewed and is available to purchase on www.novica.com, product ID 27007. Neither Novica nor the artist represent the views stated in CJM.

best practices, whether programmes, policies, practices or technological innovations, provides a number of benefits. It can help us keep abreast of new developments, stop us from reinventing the wheel when faced with new challenges, save scarce resources, create opportunities for collaboration and challenge us to do better. All these are the motivation behind ICPA's recent launch of its Centre for Exchanging Best Correctional Practices.

The corrections profession and criminal justice are at a crossroads. On the one hand, trends indicate that a more punitive approach is still favoured, even though it could be argued that the ever-increasing costs of incarceration are draining funds from the social programmes which aim to prevent criminal behaviour. On the other hand, research shows that a risk management approach to corrections is the best approach to contribute to long-term public safety. Corrections professionals have a duty to ensure that an informed debate takes place prior to making this choice of which road to travel.

Jennifer Oades is Executive Director of the International Corrections and Prisons Association for the Advancement of Professional Corrections (ICPA), a membership based non-governmental organization with members from over 60 countries. The ICPA thanks its membership for contributing their ideas to this article.

More information about the ICPA can be found at *www.icpa.ca*

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