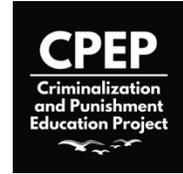




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NEW REPORT DRAWS ATTENTION TO RISING PRISON POPULATIONS, GROWING RISK OF OUTBREAKS BEHIND BARS DUE TO COVID-19 VARIANTS

19 March 2021 – A new report released today is drawing attention to the rise in Canada’s prison populations and the health risk that increasingly crowded prisons pose to prisoners, prison staff, and surrounding communities. The report, prepared by the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA), the Centre for Access to Information and Justice (CAIJ) and the Criminalization and Punishment Education Project (CPEP), states that numerous provincial-territorial prisons have continued to become more crowded as COVID-19 cases surged behind bars.

With a third wave of COVID-19 looming and transmission of new variants of concern accelerating, the report calls upon federal, provincial and territorial governments to increase efforts to divert and release people from custody and make vaccines available for prisoners and prison staff at the earliest opportunity. The authors of the report also call upon governments to end segregation-like conditions and increase prisoner access to PPE, as well as cleaning and hygiene supplies, to limit the harms and COVID-19 transmission risks currently faced by incarcerated people.

Dr. Justin Piché, Associate Professor of Criminology at the University of Ottawa and member of CPEP, notes: “Early on in the pandemic, concerted efforts were made by police, crown and defence attorneys, the courts, prison authorities, and a host of other actors to reduce the number of incarcerated people. These efforts contributed to public health by exposing fewer people to a higher risk of COVID-19 transmission behind bars, while also contributing to community safety by exposing fewer people to torturous conditions of confinement imposed to limit movement inside sites of human caging. It’s troubling that numerous jurisdictions have allowed their prisons to fill during the second wave. We must return to what worked better, as well as invest more in community supports for people being diverted from custody or decarcerated, if we want to limit the impact of COVID-19 and enhance public safety as we enter the homestretch of this pandemic”.

Abby Dushman, Director of the Criminal Justice Program for the CCLA, adds, “The vast majority of prisoners across this country have not been offered a vaccine, making the rising incarceration rates particularly concerning. Ontario, for example, is imprisoning significantly more people at a time when more infectious COVID-19 variants are spreading. Higher incarceration rates also increase the likelihood that prisons and jails will rely on inhumane and torturous conditions of imprisonment to respond to possible or confirmed cases of COVID-19, including prolonged solitary confinement. A year into the pandemic, it’s critical that governments listen to public health experts who’ve underscored the need to vaccinate people living and working in congregate settings including prisons, not only to limit the spread of COVID-19, but also to lift pandemic restrictions that limit access to programming and visits at the earliest opportunity”.

Throughout the pandemic authors of the report have faced significant barriers compiling accurate and timely information about COVID-19 and prisons. Dr. Kevin Walby, Associate Professor of Criminal

Justice and Director of the CAIJ from the University of Winnipeg, describes the nature and significance of the information barriers they have encountered: “As we enter the second year of the pandemic, many jurisdictions are still not providing basic information such as the number of prisoners and prison staff who’ve contracted COVID-19. While some jurisdictions have fulfilled their commitment to information disclosure by releasing previously unpublished records in a timely and accessible fashion, other jurisdictions are significantly limiting what can be known by the public through practices such as issuing excessive request processing fees in the thousands of dollars. Throughout this crisis, it’s become clear to me that not only has our collective health further deteriorated, but also the health of our democratic institutions. That information is effectively being locked-up precisely at the same time that state authorities are enacting profound restrictions on our liberties should concern us all”.

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The Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA) is an independent, non-profit organization with supporters from across the country. Founded in 1964, the CCLA is a national human rights organization committed to defending the rights, dignity, safety, and freedoms of all people in Canada.

The Centre for Access to Justice and Information (CAIJ) promotes public interest research using freedom of information (FOI) and access to information (ATI) law. The CAIJ is built to foster collaborations between social science and humanities scholars, as well as access advocates, investigative journalists, and legal professionals from across Canada and beyond.

The Criminalization and Punishment Education Project (CPEP) engages in research and community organizing to reduce the use and harms of imprisonment in the short-term, while working towards abolitionist futures. The group advocates expanded access to community supports and transformative justice to prevent and respond to social harm.

These three organizations have come together to form the Prison Pandemic Partnership, which examines the impact of COVID-19 on jails, prisons and penitentiaries across the country. The partnership is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Media Contact:
media@ccla.org