

ALTERNATIVES TO PRISON:

What Would a World Without Prisons Look like?

We already have many examples of what an alternative to prisons would look like. Here are some that are already working in our society to reduce crime, increase community safety, rehabilitate people, and address the conditions that result in people going to prisons.

COMMUNITY BASED SENTENCES



There are many people serving criminal sentences in the community, through probation, parole, or community supervision. This means individuals spend their criminal sentences out of prisons and in their own homes or community-based residential facilities (halfway houses) with supervision.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE



Restorative Justice is a practice that provides all parties to a crime with the opportunity to talk openly about the crime. This includes the individual that committed the harm, the people they hurt (victims), police, community members and family members of the individual.

EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND TRAINING



Instead of sending people to sit idle in prisons, what if we created better education, employment, and training opportunities?

ADDICTION AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES



When the cause of criminalized behaviour is rooted in addiction or mental illness, the solution should be addiction services and mental health treatment.

HEALING LODGES



Healing Lodges are currently used by Indigenous people in the justice system. By connecting to Indigenous culture, values, traditions, and beliefs, Indigenous people who have been involved in criminalized behaviour can heal from their own trauma and shift their lives in a holistic way.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE 'DANGEROUS FEW'?



The 'dangerous few' in the words of Quaker prison abolitionist Ruth Morris, are the very few individuals who do need to be separated from our society to keep us safe. We can do that in ways that do not rely on prisons as we see them now.



Alternatives to prison offer ways to respond to harmful behaviour that do not focus on punishment and the removal of people from society. Instead, they address the root causes of crime and the conditions that lead people to criminalized behaviour. Rather than locking up people in jails and prisons, we would focus on accountability, and the reasons and circumstances surrounding the individual. Accountability is not about punishment, but rather requires that responsibilities between people or groups are addressed and the needs of all involved parties are met within a broader structure or system that may also need to change or adjust. Focusing on accountability and the broader reasons for crime means safer communities in the short and long term, and more opportunities for healing and change for both people who have committed harm, and those who have been harmed by crime.

WE MUST IMAGINE A FUTURE WITHOUT PRISONS THAT TREATS ALL PEOPLE WITH DIGNITY, RESPECT, AND HOPE. WE ALREADY KNOW HOW TO DO IT.

COMMUNITY BASED SENTENCES

Community-based sentences provide accountability and restrictions on individuals within their community, allowing people to readjust their lives to the community they will live in and change their behaviours and circumstances that lead to criminal behaviour. It holds them accountable to the community they belong to and are supervised by. Halfway houses are a proven means to support, supervise, and assist re-integration, and provide an economical and effective alternative to prison.

By supervision, we do not mean policing or surveillance. Surveillance does not allow people to develop accountability and does not treat people with respect and autonomy. We must ensure that supervision in communities is by communities and not another form of prison or policing. Currently most supervision in the community is done by parole officers or probation officers. We could invest a lot more in these people, making them less like police and more like social workers.

EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND TRAINING

Community service already exists, but we need more resources and dedicated programs that give individuals real skills they can use in their communities. This also requires that criminal records be dismissed or only used in very serious situations. Criminal records prevent many individuals from using skills and education they earned during their sentences in the 'real world'. This restarts the cycle of poverty.

Instead, we should provide people with education and employment opportunities for meaningful work and a positive, productive, and engaged life in the community.

HEALING LODGES

At Healing Lodges, individuals can benefit from the guidance and support of Indigenous Elders during the healing process. Whilst dedicated Healing Lodges must be available and prioritised for Indigenous people, we can look to Healing Lodges as excellent models for an alternative to prison. Similar to restorative justice, the Healing Lodge model provides opportunities for acknowledging harm by the individual, learning about how their lives have led them to harm, and approaching rehabilitation and recovery in a holistic way. Healing lodges can show us how an approach to crime can and should be physical, emotional, and spiritual.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Restorative Justice allows a hurt person to explain to the individual how they hurt them, ask for an apology, learn more about why the harm occurred and understand what the individual is doing to change their behaviour. Restorative justice can contribute to the healing process for people hurt, by giving them closure and answers to their questions. Restorative justice is proven to be positive for both the individual that committed the harm and the people that were hurt. It is also proven to lower repeat crimes (recidivism).

Restorative Justice is increasingly used within the current criminal justice system. It is available at all stages of a criminal process, and in some countries is a mandatory process. In Atlantic Canada, prioritizing restorative justice services for youth has proven to reduce repeat offences and youth incarceration and increase positive outcomes.

ADDICTION AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Prison can increase the effects of addiction and mental illness and prison staff are not trained medical professionals. Treatment should always be provided by trained medical professionals, not police or correctional staff.

Currently, there are many models of drug treatment or mental health treatment which prioritize medical and social services for individuals when the roots of their criminalized behaviour are because of drug addiction or mental illness. Treatment to address addiction and mental illness is proven to have a positive effect on individuals, decreasing their involvement in criminal behaviour and increasing their ability to build safe, positive lifestyles.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE 'DANGEROUS FEW'?

We can consider examples like the Halden Prison in Norway for how we might remove people from our societies but still treat them with dignity and respect and provide them ways to contribute to a meaningful life. In these types of residences, people can get treatment and rehabilitation, not punishment. Most people who spend time in prison will be released into our communities, without supports, healing, or safe futures. Prisons can harm people, and the incarcerated often leave in worse condition than when they entered. Instead of prisons, we must change society and focus on these and other alternatives that help people change their lives.



Learn more about Canadian Friends Service Committee's criminal justice work at quakerservice.ca