

A Day in the Life of a Prisoner in Ontario

Did You Know?

- If prisoners get work opportunities in provincial prisons, they **do not** get paid for their labour.
- **Discharge planning**—planning for a prisoner's release back into the community — is only offered to sentenced prisoners, even though over two-thirds of Ontario's prisoners are not sentenced. Exceptions to this practice may be made for prisoners identified as having mental health issues.
- Even short prison stays can leave a person **unemployed** and **homeless**, which can make turning one's life around without a discharge or reintegration plan pretty challenging.

Unless you've visited or spent time in a prison before, many people have no idea what it is actually like inside of one. On any given day, there are about 9,000 people in Ontario's provincial prisons. Our provincial prisons house those who are either awaiting their trial, or prisoners who are sentenced to less than two years of custody. In Ontario, most people in our prisons are still awaiting trial—these are referred to as "remand" prisoners—which means they are still presumed legally innocent. They spend their time incarcerated in maximum-security prisons.

Some people think that prisons in Ontario are easy places to "do time" - often using the metaphor of a country club to describe what they think it is like inside a prison. Anyone who has actually been to a prison knows the reality and doesn't for a moment imagine they're like a trip to Club Med. These are tough, punitive and overcrowded places.

You might expect that there are numerous programs dedicated to education, counselling and rehabilitation. You would be wrong. The dollars for these simply don't exist in correctional budgets. It can cost over \$100,000 a year to put an adult in prison, and more than twice as much to imprison a youth. Virtually all of that goes to pay guards and administrative costs.

So what does a typical day in the life of a prisoner on remand in Ontario look like?

- 1) 6:00am Wake-Up: You are woken up in your prison cell, designed for one person, and look over at the other one or maybe even two cellmates you have. If you have another cellmate, you may have to step over one sleeping on the floor to use the un-

Photo of an Ontario prison cell courtesy of Caroline Carrington



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covered, stainless steel toilet. Forget privacy.

This is also where you eat your meals.

Left: This is what an average cell designed for one prisoner looks like. Due to overcrowding in Ontario's prisons, most cells designed for one now house two or even three prisoners: two in a bunk bed and /or one on a foam mat on the floor.

Who are we?

"Effective, just, and humane responses to crime and its causes"

The John Howard Society of Ontario supports our 19 local Affiliates through research, policy and program development. We strive to offer the most effective service possible to our clients and their families and contribute to the health, well-being and safety of communities.

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2) Range Time: For several hours during the day, you are locked out of your cell for "range time" with all of the other prisoners in your unit. The range is one big common area cell, that all of the individual prisoner cells open into. It is typically quite noisy, and you might pass the time playing cards or watching TV. This is your chance to use the phone. Usually the guards are outside of the range, looking in. *Note: prisoners in segregation and protective custody can spend up to 23 hours a day isolated in their cells.*

3) Yard time and/or programming: Provincial prisons do not offer recreational programming, and have not for some time. At best, prisoners receive about 20 minutes a day for yard time or "fresh air". The availability of programming options in prisons for remand prisoners varies across institutions, but often Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous are available. Prisoners are also entitled to religious services where requested. Work opportunities inside are very limited, and tend to only be available for sentenced prisoners.



4) Visits: Depending on what day of the week it is—visitation hours vary—you may be entitled to have a visit with a loved one. If you are in a prison that is far away from your home, it is likely much more difficult for them to get out to see you, and even then you can only speak through a telephone and see each other through a glass wall.



5) Hygiene: As part of your time out of your cell each day, you are afforded a shower. Prisoners are given a toothbrush, toothpaste, and shower gel which functions as both soap and shampoo.

6) Dinner and Lockdown: You are then returned to your cell for the nightly lockdown. You are most likely served a "cook-chilled" dinner - food that is prepared in a factory and

re-heated in the prison kitchen - which is served to you in your cell. If you require special dietary considerations for religious or medical reasons, you will be accommodated. You are locked in your cell for the rest of the evening with your cellmates, until you fall asleep.

You are woken up the next morning and do it all over again.