

Three deaths at one facility within a month expose disastrous conditions in Canada's jails and prisons

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The conditions facing inmates in Canada's jails and remand centres have for some time included the distinct possibility of death by negligence or outright abuse, against a backdrop of the prioritization of efficiency over safety.

According to researchers with the Tracking (In)Justice project, the already unacceptable state of affairs has been getting steadily worse over recent years with over 150 deaths in custody each year identified on the basis of incomplete research for 2021 and 2022.

One recent case illustrating the dire conditions is that of 29-year-old Marcus West. Normally, his death would probably have gone almost unremarked as there is usually very little detailed media reporting of such incidents. However, his death was one of three in quick succession at the Edmonton Remand Centre (ERC) in October 2024, and his distraught grandmother demanded answers—which made her willing to speak to CBC News.

West was arrested in Edmonton on October 9 and sent to the ERC where he was held prior to a bail hearing scheduled for October 16. Before that could take place, police notified Margaret McLennan, West's grandmother, that they needed to speak to her in person.

A Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officer and victim services workers arrived at her rural Alberta home on the evening of October 12 to notify her that her grandson was dead.

McLennan was told West was “in custody, and he died from withdrawal.” She said, “I want to know, at least, how he died. Don't just say withdrawal. There was all kinds of guards and cameras. He could have got help, right?”

Recovery Alberta, the provincial health authority that manages correctional health services, said that due to patient confidentiality, no official causes of death have been released for any of the three deaths at the ERC in October.

The families of all three will now have to wait years for the inquest procedure to run its course. An internal provincial corrections board of inquiry will be convened and a public fatality inquiry will likely be required to examine the circumstances of the deaths and make recommendations to

prevent future similar occurrences.

But that process takes years to complete. At the end of October, the ERC alone accounted for seven deaths on the province's fatality inquiry list, with one case still dragging on since 2017.

With the process being so drawn out and the results being typically nothing more than another series of non-binding recommendations, the potential for meaningful reform of any kind within the “corrections” system is purposely remote.

While the protocol for reporting and investigating deaths in jails varies by province, the common experience for families across the country is one of waiting for years to be presented with any meaningful explanation of their personal tragedy.

A recent coroner's inquest into the deaths of five men at the Niagara Detention Centre (NDC) in Ontario led to a jury making 66 recommendations. Timothy Anderson, Murray Balogh, David Cowe, Michael Croft and Jahrell Lungs all died of drug-related causes between 2018 and 2022. Similarly to Marcus West at the ERC, the five men had only been held at the NDC for a few days before their miserable deaths.

The jury's recommendations include adopting harm-reduction principles, implementing 24-hour nursing services, recruiting addiction counsellors, abandoning zero-tolerance policies for drug use, continuously monitoring patients at risk of overdosing, and allowing direct access to the opioid overdose treatment Naloxone.

According to the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario, the recommendations will be followed up with the Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General and the NDC within six months. But as the jury's suggestions are not mandatory, any or all of them may be declined.

That five deaths under similar circumstances were repeatedly tolerated over the space of four years without immediate action being taken to minimize the probability of recurrence indicates the level of comfort with which such events are accepted within not just one institution, but the ruling class and system as a whole.

The real priorities of the judicial system were laid bare in the course of the inquest through the testimony of medical experts

and workers at the NDC. Witnesses were required to answer questions from lawyers representing the Coroner and the Ministry of the Solicitor General, which oversees provincial jails, as well as from the Prison Harm Reduction Coalition, a community organization advocating for the incarcerated.

Patrick Sproat, deputy superintendent of the NDC, essentially preempted the work of the inquest jury when he laid out the reasons that various measures to safeguard lives are not now, nor likely will be, implemented. Sproat said, “We need to take everything into account to ensure the jail is operating as optimally as possible.” Questions about the possibility of call buttons in cells or closer monitoring of intoxicated inmates were dismissed as likely unfeasible due to frequent false alarms and draining of staff resources. And regardless of the proven efficacy of Naloxone to prevent overdose deaths, giving inmates direct access to the medication would allow them to manage the adverse effects of proscribed conduct outside of the control of staff, he declared.

Further proof that the deaths of people in custody are a low priority for the responsible authorities is given by the researchers who launched the Tracking (In)Justice project out of social necessity. As they state:

There is no sustained civil society or government body keeping track of police-involved deaths or deaths in custody in Canada. Independent academics have attempted to keep track of deaths in custody, families and friends of victims of police killings have tracked deaths in their communities, and journalists have reported on police-involved deaths, and occasionally relevant statistics are released in reports from various oversight bodies. But it remains there is no publicly available, verified, sustained, and comprehensive source for this information.

The lack of data prevents researchers, policymakers, advocates, and communities most impacted by police violence from answering basic questions about police use of force, police-involved deaths and deaths in custody.

Using information from publicly available sources, including department of justice reports, coroners’ websites, inquest documents and media articles, as well as filing 21 Access to Information and Freedom of Information requests, the Tracking (In)Justice project assembled the largest dataset on deaths in custody ever created in Canada.

The database provides penetrating insights across a variety of aspects, but is admittedly hampered by the lack of detail and outright gaps in official records.

The researchers compiled a list of 2,131 deaths in police custody, prisons and jails, and in youth, immigration and psychiatric detention since the year 2000. The recent push by

some politicians to expand involuntary treatment for mental health and addictions could dramatically contribute to these fatality numbers. While the average life expectancy in Canada is 81, the average age at death in the list is 44—meaning that being in state custody can reduce an individual’s life expectancy by almost half. Also, 21 percent, or 452, of the deaths were suicides and 299 deaths, or 14 percent, were preventable overdoses. Overall, according to the available coroner’s documents, 910 of those deaths, or 55 percent, were potentially preventable.

Disturbingly, the project documents that although the 24 years of data averages to 87 deaths per year, the more recent data—which the researchers believe to be more robust—indicates an increasing problem. From 2013 to 2023 the average number of deaths per year is 118. But individually there were 129 deaths in 2018, 134 deaths in 2019, 165 deaths in 2020, and 169 deaths in 2021.

Of particular note is that 328 of the 2,131 in-custody deaths over the past 24 years were people incarcerated on remand, meaning they were legally innocent as they had not yet been to trial or bail.

While interventions are urgently needed to prevent deaths, the real problem is not simply what some call the “pervasive culture of inhumanity in prisons.” Prisons are a concentrated expression of the values of a capitalist ruling class which also allows homelessness and food insecurity to explode in the working class simultaneously with the massive accumulation of wealth and power by a thin segment of society that is driving to authoritarianism and world war.

The growth of in-custody deaths has taken place under the watch of all the establishment parties, Liberals, Conservatives and NDP alike, under conditions of a constant devaluation of human life by the powers that be, whether it be the homicidal policy of mass infection in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the waging of a savage imperialist war against Russia in Ukraine that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives or, most recently, the universal support within the ruling class for Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians. No amount of reform will substitute for the necessity of overthrowing the social order which relies on brutality and ruthless exploitation to maintain its existence.



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