

# The Welfare of Aging Offenders: Why Should We Care?

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By Eddy Elmer, MA and Heather Campbell Pope, LL.M.

The greying of Canada's offender population is well documented. Offenders aged 50+ now account for 25% of the federal prison population and about 40% of those under supervision in the community—that is, offenders on parole, statutory release, or a long-term supervision order.

One big reason is the length of sentences. Over a quarter of federal offenders are serving a life or indeterminate sentence, with many having been incarcerated for several decades. Thus, there is a continual accumulation of 'lifers.' Another reason is the rise in convictions for historical offences (e.g., convictions for sexual offences committed several decades ago) and an increase in consecutive and minimum mandatory sentences.

Compared to the general population of older adults, aging offenders are at greater risk for chronic health problems and early death. In fact, while the evidence is limited, it has been estimated that offenders age 10-15 years faster than everyone else. This is why Correctional Service Canada has used age 50 as the threshold for defining an 'older' offender.

The causes of accelerated aging are unclear, but may be due to the cumulative effects of a criminal lifestyle, substance abuse, poor health habits, inadequate healthcare, or factors that increase the risk for both criminality and poor health (e.g., poverty).

Accelerated aging could also be due to chronic isolation and loneliness, as research shows that both are independent risk factors for poor health and early mortality. Inside prison, isolation and loneliness may be caused by lack of meaningful social contact; physical barriers that impede mobility; fear of bullying from younger inmates; and the deleterious effects of traditional solitary confinement, which Canada has only recently curtailed.

Incarceration can also lead to hypervigilance, suspiciousness, and hostility, as well as institutional dependency, apathy, and lack of interest in the outside world and in starting fresh. All of these issues can interfere with the formation and maintenance of supportive relationships both inside and outside of prison. Making matters worse, research suggests that isolation and loneliness can also cause or exacerbate these problems.

For offenders who manage to leave prison, they may find themselves feeling ashamed due to the stigma of a criminal record. Believing that older offenders are dangerous or do not deserve a second chance, people may be reluctant to provide them with work, housing, or healthcare. Offenders may also find that they cannot pick up relationships where they left off before they entered prison; old friends and family may have died or moved on with their lives. Due to stigma and self-consciousness, offenders may have trouble forming new relationships. Moreover, some may have spent so many decades behind bars that the freedom of the outside world is overwhelming; they may self-isolate to cope or even long for the familiarity and consistency of prison life.

The general public may find it difficult to sympathize with the situation of older offenders, given that many have served long prison terms for very serious crimes. However, in addition to legal and moral reasons, there are at least two practical reasons why their welfare should matter to us. First, as a result of their health problems, older offenders are very expensive to care for, especially those with complex conditions like dementia or who require palliative care. Importantly, as prisons were never designed to be nursing homes, it is far more expensive to meet the needs of infirm offenders behind bars than in community settings designed specifically for older people.

Second, while many older offenders are generally at low risk to reoffend, research suggests that social rejection and loneliness can increase impulsivity and aggression, which are risk factors for criminal behaviour. Moreover, those with scarce or poor-quality relationships may find it harder to cope with the stress of daily life and to reintegrate into society. Those who feel that nobody cares about them, or who have nobody to care *for*, may lose the motivation to turn their lives around.

For these two reasons alone, it behooves us to consider the needs of aging offenders and how we can better support them throughout the correctional process, especially as they prepare to re-enter society. Although not everyone agrees with it, one of the main goals of corrections is to help offenders reintegrate into society and become productive, law-abiding citizens. It benefits nobody, and may carry substantial costs in terms of safety and money, if offenders are worse off leaving the correctional system than they were going in.

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Eddy Elmer, a graduate of the gerontology master's program at SFU, is completing his PhD in social gerontology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. He is also Vice-Chair of the Correctional Service of Canada [Citizen Advisory Committee](#) for Metro Vancouver West Community Corrections. His views are his alone and not necessarily those of the Citizen Advisory Committee or Correctional Service Canada. Eddy can be reached at [eddy@eddyelmer.com](mailto:eddy@eddyelmer.com). Heather Campbell Pope, a former B.C. lawyer, is founder of Dementia Justice Canada: [www.dementiajustice.com](http://www.dementiajustice.com).