Mental Illness Epicentres

Why prison is capitalism’s penalty box | Jeffrey Hartman

By Jeffrey Hartman

(FEBRUARY 7, 2020, 9:53 AM EST) -- Mental health transcends socioeconomic status. Bell’s concern for mental health does not. Sadly, neither does ours as a society.

Jan. 29 was Bell’s annual Let’s Talk day. As most are aware, Let’s Talk is an annual campaign to raise funds for and awareness of mental health in Canada. The campaign is successful on many fronts. But, as Jordana Goldlist points out in a recent article in this publication, the fact that it ignores prisoners’ mental health while gouging them for fees taints it with hypocrisy.

Goldlist is correct about the hypocrisy but stops short of asking why this is the case.

Bell is not concerned with the mental health of prisoners because it does not need to be. Bell is already profiting from this group, there is little short-term financial gain to be had by improving prisoners’ mental health, and there is inadequate social pressure to compel Bell to expand its focus.

Bell does care about the mental health of the mainstream. We are the people with monthly phone, cable and Internet bills to pay. If Bell were really concerned about the mental health of all Canadians, prison would be the company’s ideal focal point.

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health reports that mental illness is four to seven times more prevalent in prison than Canadian society writ large. My empirical research suggests that even this staggering disproportion is low. I maintain a busy prison law practice and most, if not all, of my clients are or were at one time incarcerated. Every client has a history of mental illness, addiction and/or childhood abuse. In fact, when I meet a client for the first time, I start every meeting by asking about their childhood.

Whatever the precise statistics, it’s clear that prison is the epicentre of mental illness in Canada. If Bell wanted to have a meaningful and serious conversation, it would necessarily include prisoners.

Once we understand whose mental health matters, it’s a short leap to the conclusion that despite its wholesomeness, Let’s Talk is a reallocation of marketing dollars. Bell pays to advertise every month, and in January, it pays by donating to mental health initiatives.

We take over from there. Social media is awash with Let’s Talk posts: we like, share and tweet campaign material for free. It doesn’t cost us anything and we feel good doing it because, given the normative force of the campaign, who would say that mental health isn’t important?

Let’s Talk is important because mental health is important, but the conversation it engenders ignores the reality of mental health in Canada. It is an advertising campaign targeting those of us who pay monthly phone, cable and Internet bills.

Don’t believe me? Then humour me by asking yourself whether Bell and the Let’s Talk campaign contributes anything to ensuring that prisoners get more than a pamphlet on depression when they
tell the prison nurse that things are getting pretty dark.

Of course, it’s no surprise that the needs of Canadians suspended from economic participation are forsaken by business and government. Prison is capitalism’s penalty box and government perpetuates and relies on our collective social disdain of its occupants to underservice their needs.

If we understood that prisons are in fact the locus of mental health issues in Canada, rather than simply a place to put bad people, our national conversation on mental health would be much different. It is therefore our responsibility as Canadians, not Bell’s, to make Let’s Talk an inclusive and meaningful conversation on mental health.

Are we, as Canadians, capable of doing this? Sadly, I don’t think so. To recognize and properly serve mentally ill inmates, we would need to overcome the normative barrier separating us and them.

Mental illness has no inherent meaning; rather, it is a concept to which we have ascribed meaning to. Foucault, commenting on Durkheim, explains that “our society does not wish to recognize itself in the ill individual whom it rejects or locks up; as it diagnoses the illness, it excludes the patient. The analyses … above all is a projection of cultural themes.”

In other words, not only is there economic incentive for business and government to ignore the health needs of inmates, but doing so is perhaps central to our identity as healthy and happy contributors to Canadian society in its present form.

At the end of the day, Let’s Talk, while commendable, has an ugliness to it that certainly is not Bell’s fault alone: on that score, we’ve all got to take the hit.

Jeffrey Hartman is a Toronto-based criminal lawyer at Hartman Law, with a special focus on constitutional law, family law, civil litigation, prison law and police misconduct in Ontario. You can reach him at jeff@hartmanlaw.ca or 416-316-2234.

Interested in writing for us? To learn more about how you can add your voice to The Lawyer’s Daily, contact Analysis Editor Peter Carter at peter.carter@lexisnexis.ca or call 647-776-6740.

© 2020, The Lawyer’s Daily. All rights reserved.