

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE & PRISON MINISTRY

Our national social justice committee includes the topics of advocacy, systemic change and restorative justice. There is little doubt about the relationship between the criminal justice system and poverty. One might argue that poverty is a major factor in why people turn to crime as a means to attaining a life that resembles what we all hope for. Of course, the result is usually a criminal record and prison time away from family and loved ones, thereby contributing to, rather than alleviating, the challenges of a life lived in poverty. A criminal history is often associated with substance abuse, mental and physical health concerns as well facing huge barriers in finding employment or furthering one's education. Covid-19 has also had a number of outbreaks in prisons across Canada. There is also a higher ratio among people of colour who are affected by the criminal justice system. Victims of crime include the families of both the criminal and the victim and often result in them facing a life in poverty as well as trying to deal with the aftermath of a crime.

There are currently few Society of Saint Vincent de Paul members who are active in this area. We would like to form a national network that would include SSVP members, as well as other Catholics, who would work together in the development of a plan that would address restorative justice from a faith-based viewpoint, founded on Catholic social teachings and our own Vincentian charism. I would like to invite Vincentians who may currently be active to let us know about your work. If you have ever thought about becoming active, please let us know.

Perhaps some families or individuals we help with food and clothing have had a negative experience with crime that they would be willing to share if asked. Our home visitations and other forms of engagement with persons in need provide a great opportunity to learn more.

There are many ways we can make a positive difference and advocate where needed for systemic changes to the criminal justice system. While a prison ministry that visits inmates is certainly one way, there are more ways to help. It is understandable that, for many, a prison visit may be too difficult to undertake. We can do more! We can be there when inmates are released, often with only the clothes on their back. We can help the families of inmates who are struggling to simply live a decent life. We can collaborate with other organizations that are involved in the criminal justice system. We can PRAY for inmates, their families and all victims of crime.

Please consider joining this effort. You can start by sending an email with your name, email, location and any experiences or other comments you may have on this proposal. There are resources available which we can share that will provide a good educational background regarding criminal justice in Canada.

Finally, let us recall that Jesus died on a cross between two criminals, who were blessed by Him as they shared their deaths. Vincent ministered to criminals without judgement. Let us remember our commitment as Vincentians as we follow our mission and values. Please join me and others in this worthy and much needed ministry.

*Jim Paddon, Chair
National Social Justice Committee*