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## Civil Society Organizations: Locking People up is Not the Answer, Invest in Communities to Improve Public Safety

We, the undersigned, are organizations that work every day with the effects of our legal and prison system. We work to create safe and better communities for everyone by championing programs, services, and social responses that are rooted in evidence-based practices. We know that safer communities are well-resourced so that everyone has what they need to thrive.

It is with this depth of knowledge and expertise that we respond to the shortsighted and dangerous calls for amendments to the *Criminal Code* from the Ontario government, aimed at tightening bail legislation. The proposed changes are narrow and ignore the realities of Canada's judicial and prison system. More importantly, they will not only continue to put vulnerable and marginalized people in more danger but will decrease public safety.

Instead of focusing on punitive measures that have failed in the United States and beyond, the government should be focusing all of its efforts on comprehensive solutions that address the systemic factors that contribute to safer communities, like housing, education, health care, and evidence-based supports for the current bail system, like bail bed programs.

“Proposals such as reinstating mandatory minimum sentences and eliminating bail for certain offenses do not effectively prevent violence or protect communities and worse, they violate our *Charter* rights,” said Shakir Rahim, Director of the Criminal Justice Program at the Canadian Civil Liberties Association. These extreme measures exacerbate issues for all people in Canada, but especially for socio-economically disadvantaged populations, and too, for the many survivors of gender-based violence who time and again find themselves unfairly prosecuted or caught in a punitive cycle that fails to keep them safe.

Furthermore, the emphasis on measures like a three-strike rule and imposing ankle monitors highlights a troubling trend towards increased punishment rather than care. Emilie Coyle Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies says that “these strategies will compound existing issues in Canada's legal system and work against public safety. They will continue to perpetuate a cycle of incarceration that further isolates people, especially those from racialized and marginalized communities, from the necessary social supports and resources that they need”.

Everyone wants safer and more just communities, but community safety will not be achieved by creating mass incarceration practices in Canada. We need only look to the

devastating consequences these policies have had in the United States to understand what they will do to our society.

Calling on the federal government to implement failed policies based on fear will only persist in harming all Canadians. Not only are prisons already overcrowded and insufficiently structured to serve as a social response to addiction and economic insecurity, but incarceration makes many of the social problems that Canada is facing worse.

Being incarcerated is traumatic. Incarceration itself creates a number of adverse mental health outcomes, from post-traumatic stress disorder to depression and beyond—these are devastating individual consequences that then lead to worse problems for both individuals and society as people are released from prison in worse shape than when they entered.

“Creating meaningful social responses to the increasing presence of people who suffer from addiction and who are unable to afford housing through community-based programs, mental health services, and preventative measures that address the underlying conditions leading to crime will improve public safety,” said Nicole Myers a professor at Queen’s University.

Already, Canada is faced with the human rights crisis of the mass incarceration of Indigenous people. These proposed changes will certainly send more Indigenous, Black, and disadvantaged people into prisons. The problem with laws like these is that they don’t target people who are committing actual social harms—they target society’s most disadvantaged populations.

Ultimately, the Ontario government must reconsider its approach and work on responses that are evidence-based and fundamentally aimed at promoting justice, equity, and community well-being, rather than doubling down on punitive measures that incite fear and will add billions in harmful public spending.

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**Signed by the following organizations and individuals:**

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