



THOUGHTS ON THE 2026 SPRING ECONOMIC UPDATE

The tabling speech for the 2026 Spring Economic Update ends with the phrase “*long live Canada!*” The tone plays well into nationalism, which is on the rise in Canada, and into resolving Canadians’ deepest named and unnamed fears: insignificance, insecurity, uncertainty. The budget update reads as confident, defensive, relevant—at surface value, and fairly, in some significant ways.

“*A Canada that is not just for some, most of the time, but for all, at all times*” is also shared on the first page of the Update. This quote left us wondering whether it was really a Canada for all. Or is it perhaps more accurate to say:

A Canada for all, except for the hundreds of thousands of incarcerated Canadians.

A Canada for all, except for the children and families of criminalized people.

This is a budget update that mentions the word *criminal* 16 times, and the word *justice* only 7 times. The term *mental health* received 4 mentions. *Public safety* was mentioned 3 times, and the word *addiction*, only once. There was no mention of the words *prison*, *reintegration*, or *incarceration* at all.

The only measure supporting people who have experienced incarceration in Canada to reintegrate as law-abiding citizens is a two-year extension of funding for Criminal Record Suspension support programs (welcomed by many Elizabeth Fry Societies across the country who provide these services). In contrast, there is ample funding for increasing security technology in federal prisons and at borders, through increased funding to both the Correctional Service of Canada and the Canadian Border Services Agency. The Update also increases security presences in our communities by establishing the Community Safety Fund, which asserts that community safety is created through enhanced security presence so that “*all Canadians can feel safe.*”

If it was only suspected before, it can now be confidently asserted that incarceration and addictions have become the things we do not talk about as a society.

Have we really decided that the solution to our increasingly complex social problems is a vast, expensive, dysfunctional prison system that no one speaks about?

Reintegration has been entirely erased from discussions of—and priorities related to—public safety. From the 1950s to the early 2000s, Canada upheld strongly articulated fiscal commitments to the reintegrative premise of our prison system. Today, there is little evidence supporting any continued priority. Likely resulting from the very vocal *first era* of “tough on crime” years led by Stephen Harper’s Conservatives, the Trudeau Liberals followed with largely quiet inaction in addressing this core institution and its associated problems. However, the Canadian prison system is solely the



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responsibility of the federal government to administer. Its operations carry a huge, direct, and peripheral price tag.

In our sector, meetings with government are always constrained by a tone of *“if only the general public knew more”* about issues in prisons, they would be more easily resolved. We are told that advancing good policy about Canada’s prison system is a risky political move. Yet public safety is only advanced to the general public through defensive messaging. Public safety is presented as being about how to protect Canadians—how to protect Canadians from Canadians. Public safety is rarely, if ever, described in terms of meeting people’s basic needs or addressing the structural conditions that produce harm, rather than relying on surveillance, incarceration, and punishment after the fact.

A tiny investment in the federal budget—the National Voluntary Organization Grants and Contributions, which funds organizations doing the work of public safety in the community—is entering a phase of running empty, with no signal on the horizon that funding will be replenished. Mention of it is absent in the Spring Update, as it was in the full Fall budget. Overall, this represents around one million dollars annually to maintain Canada’s largest sector of NGOs supporting people in and being released from prisons. Contrast this with the billions spent on federal prisons each year.

Our sector sees the faces of incarceration in Canada and responds to them. This is a responsibility downloaded from government to us—an underfunded and now questionably funded sector.

Let us grapple with this not only for the impacts on our sector, or for the unresolvable harms occurring in the prison system right now, but broadly as a society. What does it mean to abandon commitments to reintegration? What does it mean to believe in Canadians, except those who did not come from well-resourced families? Except those who grew up in Canadian foster homes, group homes, motels, shelters, and prisons—as so many do. Not to mention the fact that roughly 50% of women in prison continue to be Indigenous, a reality that has become the nucleus of our national, uncomfortable silence.

Symbolically—but with very practical consequences—what has the country become when we are so uncomfortable discussing issues related to incarceration that we cannot even mention them in a core financial document? The discomfort Canadians have developed in talking about prisons poses a real and imminent threat. It is not only disingenuous, but a risky path to take.

A byline of the budget update reads, *“In an Uncertain World, Canada Focuses on What It Can Control.”*



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Well Canada, in a time when the growing divide between the rich and the poor is visible to all, we **can** control our prison system, and we **can** support the countless unhoused people who are in active addiction on our streets—at imminent risk of criminalization, if they have not been criminalized already.

So perhaps instead of using the Spring Budget Update to propose amendments to the *Canada Post Corporation Act* to search and seize mail, we could have focused on ending the tragedy of Indigenous overrepresentation in our prison systems, or on acknowledging that a cell and a lifetime of exclusion from economic participation are perhaps not the solutions our country needs at this time