

Canada at a Crime Crossroads

National Conversation on “crime” and prevention urgently needed

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At a time when the economic, political, and social costs of increasing our reliance on incarceration are widely known, the federal, provincial, and territorial governments are in the process of creating **10,600 new prison spaces with an infrastructure cost of \$3.6 billion, and rising**. These expenditures do not account for the costs of managing and operating these spaces, which each cost the provinces and territories an average of \$59,057 and the federal government close to \$118,000 every year, according to 2008-2009 figures compiled by Statistics Canada.

All this money is being spent even though research has shown that increasing the **use of imprisonment has a negligible impact on “crime,”** and that, for every \$1 spent on it, taxpayers save \$7 that would have been spent on incarceration.

Our prisons have become dumping grounds for the poor, Aboriginal peoples, other marginalized groups, and those suffering from drug addiction and mental illness. We allocate almost 100 times more money for our prisons at the federal level than we do for the victims of crime.

The road we are taking is not one that leads to enhanced safety in our communities. It is rather an approach that will lead to more victimization in the name of victims, to communities stripped of social services in the name of public safety, and a deepening of inequality in Canadian society in the name of justice. And, worst of all, it is a policy that will not work.

It would be easy to put all the blame on the Harper government, but, in a minority government situation, there is plenty of blame to go around. This was made evident in the recent election platforms put forward by the major political parties, all of whom – to a greater or lesser extent – either favoured or failed to oppose the infliction of more pain through imprisonment. Party leaders spent more time accusing each other of being “soft” and “dumb” on crime, and trumpeting their own “tough on crime” credentials than engaging in meaningful dialogue about what it means to be safe, and how that can best be realized.

With the 41st Parliament set to begin, we are again at a crossroads, with the opportunity to rethink the key questions: **What is “crime?”** How can we prevent it? And how can we meet the needs of those impacted by it? It is an opportunity that should be taken up not only by the new federal government and its provincial and territorial counterparts, but also by individuals and groups who

represent the diverse social fabric of this country and have a stake in meeting this challenge head on.

Building safe communities cannot simply be left to the police, lawyers, judges, prison and parole officials, and certainly not to the politicians. As citizens, we must assume our civic responsibilities and re-commit ourselves to building the kind of neighbourhoods in which we want to live.

As it stands, our approach to addressing the conflicts and harms in our communities that we call “crime” is woefully simplistic, given the complexities of the challenges we face. As a consequence, the needs that are engendered often go unmet, leaving a legacy of trauma that far too many of us live with on a daily basis.

Irrespective of whether the rate of “crime” – reported or unreported – is going up, down, or remaining stable, nobody is disputing that something should be done. The focus of a **national dialogue should be on how scarce resources can best be allocated to prevent “crime” and best meet the needs of both the victimized and criminalized.** Whether supported by a new federal government or not, we need a public forum to work towards achieving these objectives in a manner in which all related issues and policy options are put on the table for democratic debate.

This discussion could be guided by a number of substantive questions related to effectiveness. Do the measures proposed respect human rights and meet the needs of all affected parties? What is the social return on investment of the measures proposed, and is their implementation warranted?

If the goal is to generate ideas on how to conceptualize and respond to “crime” in a manner that is inclusive, the forum must reflect this objective by being open to all who wish to submit testimony, evidence, and proposals, and ensure that as many Canadians who wish to participate can do so. Open access and transparency would also be central to such a forum, with all submissions, hearings, as well as reports and related background documents, made available to the public to foster further discussion and debate.

This brief overview is not intended to set the terms of the debate, but just to give some idea of what such a forum could look like, in the hope that others will provide input and bring us closer to having this much needed broad-based discussion.

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