

Reality Check T

Contributing to the factual knowledge of Canadians about crime and criminal justice.

THE JOHN HOWARD SOCIETY OF CANADA

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“The right to feel and be safe”

The claim:

Crime is increasing. The increasing fear of crime is warranted. Canadians want tougher penalties for crime.

The reality:

Crime is not increasing. We know this from;

- \$ Police-reported crime statistics which show that the crime rate decreased in 1999 for the eight consecutive year. After peaking in the early 1990's, Canada's crime rate has been falling steadily. The 1999 rate was lowest rate since 1979; and
- \$ Victimization surveys which show that the rate of victimization has not increased. These surveys collect information directly from the general population related to being a crime victim, regardless of whether or not the crime has been reported to the police.

Increasing fear of crime should be understood with the context of:

- \$ Public misperception about crime. Despite the almost a decade of declines in the police-reported crime rate, the majority of Canadians believe that crime is getting worse. As well, Canadians tend to believe that a greater percentage of crime is violent than is actually the case. In 1999, 12% of all reported crime was violent;
- \$ The aging of the population. Older Canadians are more apt than younger people to believe that crime is getting worse and are more fearful of being victims themselves, even though the actual rate of victimization older Canadians is considerably lower than younger people. This segment of the population has been growing rapidly and, as their relative size grows, so does their influence;
- \$ The influence of the media. Canadians tend to get most of their information about crime through media reports which tend to focus on the rare, sensational incidents and, therefore, present a skewed view of crime;
- \$ The “politicization” of crime. Pandering to the fear of crime to garner support for themselves and for their “tough on crime” and “tough on criminals” agenda, some politicians serve to reinforce the misperceptions of crime.

The assumption that Canadians want to “get tougher” on crime is not so straightforward. We know that:

- \$ People have very little idea about what the maximum sentences are both for adults and youth. When they say that they want the law to be tougher, one has to remember that they do not know what the laws are. As well, there is the tendency to underestimate the use of imprisonment;
- \$ Most people say that they want harsher sentences, most often because they are asked simple questions with the only choice being between what are perceived to be either “soft” and “hard” sentences. But these are not the only choices available as responses to crime. With more choices as to how to best respond to crime, people choose alternatives to prison and crime prevention rather than choosing to build more prisons. When asked directly what is the best way of controlling crime, fewer than a third of respondents in one Ontario study chose making sentences harsher as a way of reducing crime generally. Other community and social approaches were much more popular.

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