



IT'S TIME TO EDUCATE, NOT INCARCERATE

Something wicked stirs beneath the shrubbery of this warm and watered land, a creeping fungus that saps our virtue, strangles our hope and chokes the promise of Canadian progress. Only the fearless and morally superior among us can halt its pitiless march across the landscape; only federal cabinet ministers, blessed by uncommon foresight and fortitude, can rescue us from the perdition we surely face as they prepare to build new prisons, gulags of the righteous, to contain the hordes of evil-doers now emerging from the national dankness. For, yes, dear citizen, crime is on the rise.

Except, of course, it isn't.

A Statistics Canada report this summer concludes that not only are we safer than we've been in 40 years, all classes of offense – including homicides, attempted murders, assaults, robberies, break and enters, and vandalism – have been trending down since 1990. In fact, says the agency, the overall crime rate today is 17 per cent lower than it was a decade ago, a finding that prompts Steve Sullivan, executive director of Ottawa Victims Services, to opine: "If the government is telling taxpayers it is going to spend millions and billions of dollars on getting tough on crime, I think it at least has to have some evidence that it is addressing a real problem. Neither these statistics nor the other surveys we have would suggest that we are in some kind of crime wave."

None of which seems to matter in Ottawa's chambers of power. The government's omnibus justice bill, which will undoubtedly pass this fall, seeks to renovate and expand federal penal institutions at a cost of more than \$2.1 billion. This, at a time when the budget for the Correctional Service of Canada – which has increased 87 per cent since 2006 – is expected to jump to \$3.1 billion by 2013.

Still, there's another form of crime, which rarely merits the attention of this country's law and order types, that's far more socially and economically deleterious than all the rank illegalities combined.

In its latest *How Canada Performs* analysis, released in July, the Conference Board of Canada observes, "The richest group of Canadians increased their share of total national income while poor and middle-income individuals lost ground since 1993. Even though

Statistics prove we are not in a crime wave, but that doesn't matter in Ottawa.



Illustration: Ian Keith Murray

income levels for the poorest group of Canadians also rose minimally, the gap between the rich and the poor in Canada widened... While the poor are minimally better off in an absolute sense, they are significantly worse off in a relative sense."

But structural income inequality is not just a crime against the poor; it's a blow to the economy, as it robs the country of skills that would otherwise enhance industrial productivity and global competitiveness. It also places an enormous and unnecessary burden on the social programs that corporate and personal income taxes support. And the greater the disparity, the greater the burden.

According to the Center for American Progress, "The costs to the United States associated with childhood poverty total about \$500 billion a year, or the equivalent of four per cent of GDP. Each year, childhood poverty reduces productivity and economic output by about 1.3 per cent of GDP. It raises the costs of crime by 1.3 per cent of GDP. It raises health expenditures and reduces the value of health by 1.2 per cent of GDP."

Meanwhile, the Conference Board estimates that the chasm between the real average incomes (based on a statistical median) of the richest group of Canadians and the poorest grew from \$92,300 in 1976 to \$117,500 in 2009. It did so just as labour productivity rates plummeted, university enrolment plateaued and spending on public schools dried up. The link should be obvious to anyone serious about public policy.

Canada doesn't need new prisons to warehouse a fictional surge in the number of criminals who populate our phantasmagorias. It urgently requires a new and honest effort to distribute educational opportunities – early childhood and adult learning programs, and work training initiatives to address specific labour shortages in the marketplace – to the least prosperous among us.

Without this commitment, we law-abiding scions of respectability have only ourselves to blame for the wickedness that stirs at our feet, ready to pounce. | ABM

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