



CRIME

CRIME RATES HAVE been dropping steadily in Canada for two decades. Conservative insistence on the need for tougher sentences for a raft of offences has continued unabated. And it's not just rhetoric: According to a 2013 report from the Parliamentary Budget Office, spending on criminal justice as a percentage of GDP was trending downward until 2006, when the Conservative party was first elected, but, since then, has increased both in real terms and as a share of the total Canadian economy.

TORIES DOMINATE THE CRIME DEBATE

So far, only the Conservatives have had much to say on the issue of crime and punishment, and the other parties have reacted to the government's agenda. The real opposition has come from the bench.

WHERE THE PARTIES STAND

CONSERVATIVE The party has long pursued a law-and-order agenda. It has introduced several pieces of legislation to further the tough-on-crime approach, including mandatory-minimum sentences for gun crimes, capping the credit an offender could receive for time served in pretrial custody, and repealing early parole, which were all either scrapped or softened by the Supreme Court of Canada. Conservatives also created a federal ombudsman for victims of crime and raised the age of consent to 16 from 14.

NDP They've been critical of the tough-on-crime agenda, particularly the increasing expenditure on the criminal justice system, and have called for both an increase in restorative justice, as well as tougher sentences for violent crimes.

LIBERAL They've supported mandatory minimums for "serious and violent offences only," but their platform doesn't yet address crime or incarceration directly, apart from the issue of marijuana legalization. Justin Trudeau has called for an "evidence-based" approach to laws governing marijuana and prostitution.

GREEN They've opposed the government's tough-on-crime legislation. The party suggests introducing an independent law-reform commission that would report to Parliament on proposed changes to the Criminal Code, and create a forum for public discussion of contentious legal issues such as assisted suicide, sex-trade workers and "more realistic anti-drug policies, including the legalization and regulation of marijuana."

EXPERT OPINION

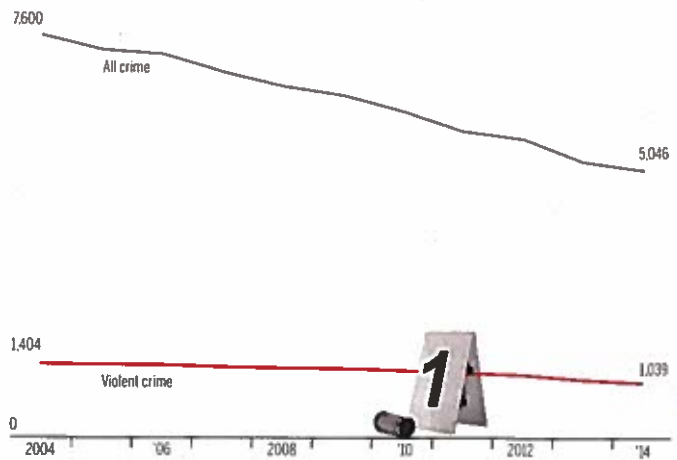
"Voters should consider two things: Are we taking the smartest approach to crime? The U.S. is moving away from mandatory minimum sentences and a reliance on imprisonment, just as Canada is embracing both. Will this get us value for money? Second: Do voters care about the unequal distribution of crime in our communities, in which Aboriginal women are grossly overrepresented among crime victims, and Aboriginal women, men and youth are severely overrepresented among prisoners? Are voters content with this status quo? Which party has the best criminal justice strategy for the future?"

—Kent Roach, University of Toronto law professor

BY THE NUMBERS

Canadian crime rate

Incidents per 100,000 people



SOURCE: STATISTICS CANADA

Criminal justice in numbers



SOURCE: STATISTICS CANADA PRO