

Improve social conditions to combat crime

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To de-escalate street violence in Toronto, Canada's worsening social conditions must be addressed.

In the short term, victims of violent crimes need public support. Perpetrators must be arrested and prosecuted.

Equally important to curbing criminal violence is the defeat of racism and its interconnected injustices in this country.

When some people gain privilege at the expense of others, the resulting exclusion, alienation and rage become breeding grounds for violence.

The best antidote is to create social conditions based on fairness, something that is not happening in Canada today.

From 1996 to 2004, tax cuts by the federal and provincial governments pulled a cumulative total of almost \$250 billion out of the public sector.

One result was that higher income individuals reaped most of the benefits of tax cuts.

Another result was that our hospitals, schools, social services, and a host of other public sector areas were hit with budget cuts, causing our public services to deteriorate. When social agencies are adequately funded, social workers can interrupt the cycle of violence.

Social service workers have helped victims of violence to break their silence, release their rage, and redirect their lives as productive, law-abiding citizens.

By contrast, for the past 20 years, budget cut-backs have caused social service caseloads to skyrocket, undermining the capacity to deliver effective assistance.

Faced with teetering public services due to tax cuts, privatization was touted as the solution. All kinds of government programs, from highways, health clinics, colleges, to services for older adults were pried open for the private market.

Switching the delivery of services from the public sector to the private sector promised to shore up service quality, to cost less, and to save taxpayers money.

Were those promises kept?

University of Toronto economist Ernie Lightman reviewed privatization in the United States and concluded: "The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that quality is rarely maintained and promised cost savings are often elusive or non-existent."

Despite the damning evidence, social services in recent decades have experienced a damaging see-saw: cuts to social programs followed by some privatization, then more cuts, followed by more privatization.

In short, social services were gutted.

Tax cuts also forced cuts to income transfer programs. These cuts in income supports have aggravated the turmoil and stress of Canadians living in poverty.

Almost non-existent 30 years ago, many food banks today are picking up the pieces of a tattered social safety net. Hunger is growing in Canada.

In March 2004, almost 850,000 hungry people used one of the 235 food banks across the country. When people are hungry and desperate enough, violence is not far behind. Once violence erupts, the resulting fear and anger can ignite a backlash of violence, scapegoating racialized and other vulnerable communities.

To counter these dangerous scenarios, Canada needs an infusion of public accountability to shape a fair tax system capable of generously supporting universal public programs, from health care to social housing.

Instead of chipping away at universal access, we need to widen and deepen it, and apply it to social services. For that to happen, we need a bold and sweeping expansion of democracy.

New, innovative networks of on-going public accountability must be inserted right into the fabric of both public and private sectors.

The expansion of democracy must include community members who today are excluded from decision-making by our institutions. That would deflate the poisonous growth of alienation, which so often triggers criminal activity.

An expanded democracy would also create a more equal playing field, increasing the potential for economic and social justice to govern the institutions that impact on our lives. As social conditions become equitable and fair, one battle against street violence will have been won.

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