

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## Stockwell Day cites 'alarming' rise in unreported crime to justify new prisons

Ottawa uses 2004 Statscan data to defend costs after dismissing reliability of census

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Although the official crime rate is going down, a senior Harper government minister says there is reason to disbelieve the statistics and spend billions of dollars on new prisons: an “alarming” increase in unreported crime.

Stockwell Day's argument is based on a Statistics Canada survey, conducted like a large poll, which showed a slight rise in unreported crimes – though the increase was in property crimes and petty theft, not violent crimes. And the survey was conducted in 2004 – an ironic twist given that Mr. Day made his case only minutes after he maintained that the long-form census is not very reliable because it can be as much as five years out of date.

Mr. Day, the Treasury Board president, is not the first tough-on-crime Conservative politician to disbelieve the official statistics on reported crimes. Senator Pierre-Hughes Boisvenu said last month that “someone, somewhere, is manipulating the numbers.” The latest Statscan figures, released last month, show the number of crimes reported to police dropped 3 per cent last year, and was 17 per cent lower than in 1999.

But Mr. Day also argued that a tough-on-crime agenda is needed to keep dangerous criminals off the streets and deter them with stiffer punishments. The Harper government has dismissed arguments that tougher sentences alone won't dent crime rates, but now finds itself defending a multibillion-dollar prison-expansion program when crime rates are falling.

While some experts argue that unreported-crime surveys don't provide evidence to disbelieve a decline in crime, at least for serious crimes, others insist there are enough questions that the government needs real studies, every year, as a basis for policy decisions.

“My opinion is that we really don't know,” said Ross Hastings, a criminologist at the University of Ottawa. “If Canada had annual national victimization surveys, we would have some kind of purchase on this. In the same way they're taking the long form away, so people will have less information [from] census-gathering, they're not taking a census of crime, either. So more and more we're making really important and expensive policy decisions sort of on the seat of our pants.”

The Vancouver Board of Trade also thinks reported-crime stats are misleading because of unreported crime, and chief economist Bernie Magnan is calling for the government to conduct an annual survey on crime – which

asks people if they have been a victim of crime.

On Tuesday, Mr. Day, who is responsible for controlling government spending, argued that one reason for scrapping the mandatory long-form census is that a study every five years is “untenable in today’s information age.” But on crime rates, he cited the 2004 survey on unreported crime; the next one will be released this fall. “We’re very concerned ... about the increase in the amount of unreported crimes that surveys clearly show are happening,” he said, calling the numbers “alarming.”

The 2004 survey on crime victims found that 28 per cent of respondents reported that they had been the victim of a crime – described by Statistics Canada as a slight increase over the 26 per cent who said the same in 1999. But the number who said they had been victims of violent crimes remained flat, while the increase was driven by more theft and vandalism, according to the survey.

“There’s no evidence that we have that there’s a big increase,” said Steve Sullivan, until recently the Conservative-appointed Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime.

There are serious crimes, notably sexual assaults and spousal abuse, that have been persistently under-reported, and Mr. Sullivan noted that’s a reason to spend on programs to prevent crime and help victims. But the survey found the most common reason crimes go unreported is that the victims consider them minor – often petty thefts and minor assaults – or that they are a “personal matter.”

Mr. Sullivan said most of those crimes wouldn’t get the two-year sentence required for a federal prison term – and though he’s not against locking up criminals, tougher sentences alone won’t change most victims’ lives.

“If you’re really strapped for cash,” he said, “there’s better places to put it than just building more prisons.”