

Build jails, says poll; But Canadians want to know cost

A majority of Canadians support the Conservatives' prison expansion plan but think the government should be compelled to provide the estimated price tag for its entire law and order agenda, according to the results of a new poll.

Fifty-seven per cent of those surveyed by Ipsos Reid said the prison expansion program, estimated to cost at least \$2 billion, is worthwhile, while 43 per cent said it is unaffordable. Those results will take some wind out of the sails of opposition parties who argue that Canadians don't want bigger jails and the government is wasting money at a time when the country has a massive deficit.

But 82 per cent said the government should be compelled to release the figures.

Crime and justice legislation is a high priority for Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government and because some of its legislation will keep convicted criminals in prison longer and add to the prisoner population, the government is investing millions of dollars in expanding penitentiaries.

The opposition parties say the Tories are focused on the wrong priorities and instead, should be investing in health care, education, help for seniors and pension reform.

While the poll results indicate most Canadians support the prison plan, some Canadians are more in favour than others and the demographic trends are interesting to note, says pollster Darrell Bricker. "In spite of the rhetoric in the Commons and what people on the opposition side are saying about the government's justice agenda, you can see why they're on it," said Bricker. "Because the people who are most likely to vote for them -non-university-educated, older, male voters –think this is a dandy idea. So it's basically speaking to their core constituency in a very effective way."

Canadians over age 55 were the most likely to agree the prison spending is worthwhile and Canadians aged 18 to 34 were the most likely to say they are unaffordable, according to the poll's results. Sixty-nine per cent of those surveyed who had less than a high-school education said they supported the spending, compared with 53 per cent of those with a post-secondary education.

The government says it will be spending \$2 billion over five years to cover added costs to the corrections system, but that figure has been disputed by Parliamentary budget officer Kevin Page, who estimates at least \$5 billion is needed.