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It seems that the federal government suffers from a variation of the delusion that afflicts many criminals. They expect money for nothin'. In Ottawa's case, it believes in jail for free.

Yet again, parliamentary budget officer Kevin Page has exposed the fallacy of the Conservatives' claim that locking up more offenders won't cost much, if anything at all.

This time, Page analyzed the plan to limit the use of house arrest for low-risk offenders. The government claimed this portion of its much-maligned omnibus crime bill would have "no federal costs." Actually, estimates Page, it would cost Ottawa \$8 million a year and, worse still, it would cost the provinces \$137 million a year.

In Ontario, increased prosecution, incarceration and parole costs from this one change would drive up costs from \$2.2 million a year to \$42 million, [according to Page's report](#) released last week.

That's what Ontario spends operating 800 long-term care beds. The need to reduce the province's \$16 billion deficit means that every time a new cost is taken on, something else has to give. Few Ontarians will want to trade health-care funding to boost prison spending.

But even if the province could easily afford to pay the high costs of limiting conditional sentences in favour of more time behind bars, it shouldn't have to. This measure and others in the omnibus crime bill are bad law at any price. Fewer alternatives to jail, harsher sentences for young offenders and mandatory minimums for minor drug crimes have been proven ineffective as strategies to reduce crime.

Indeed, in the United States, these so-called tough-on-crime laws have done real harm and dyed-in-the-wool American conservatives like Newt Gingrich now campaign against them.

Here, Prime Minister Stephen Harper consistently dismisses concerns over these laws, as he did last week, with a breezy "we're acting on a clear mandate of the people."

If Canadians are so keen on having new and harsher laws — when crime is at its lowest since 1973 — why isn't the government being more transparent about the price tag?

Page's research into the fiscal impact of reducing the use of house arrest was "hampered" by the government's refusal to cooperate. "Actual data was not forthcoming from Public Safety Canada," his report states. Ditto for the Public Prosecution Service of Canada.

Despite their lack of cooperation, Page was able to determine that the per offender costs would rise 16 fold — from \$2,600 to \$41,000.

No wonder they wanted to keep that under wraps.



Parliamentary budget officer Kevin Page's research into the fiscal impact of reducing the use of house arrest shows the program would cost much more than the government claims.

Sean Kilpatrick/THE CANADIAN PRESS