



POLL: Ontarians Reject “Safe Streets Act”, finding it an unsuitable way of dealing with homelessness

The results of a recent province wide poll suggest that Ontarians broadly reject the use of the “Safe Streets Act” and policing as an effective way of dealing with homelessness. In fact, **a strong majority of Ontarians (56%) reject the Safe Streets Act**, while only one quarter (26%) support this law.

Instead, Ontarians argue for better access to affordable housing, employment, mental health and addictions supports and an investment in prevention so that people don't become homeless in the first place.

The poll was conducted by Mainstreet Technologies on behalf of the [Coalition for the Repeal of Ontario's Safe Streets Act](#)¹. On February 22, 2015, 2,797 Ontario residents were interviewed by Interactive Voice Response. This poll carries a margin of error of +/- 1.85%, 19 times out of 20.

The Ontario Safe Streets Act or SSA is a provincial law in Ontario ([S.O. 1999, CH. 8](#)). The SSA came into effect in 2000 in response to the growing number of visibly homeless individuals in cities across the province during the 1990s. The SSA is designed to address panhandling, squeegeeing and other forms of solicitation undertaken in an “aggressive manner ... a manner that is likely to cause a reasonable person to fear for their safety and security”. Unfortunately, the language of the act is rather vague, giving law enforcement officials broad discretion in its application. Moreover, suggesting enforcement is justified in response to a person's fears can play to prejudices rather than real concerns. The law, while not explicitly mentioning people who are homeless, is clearly intended to target people of that status, and is based on similar legislation from the United States that has the intention of criminalizing homelessness, or the activities that people who experience homelessness engage in as a means of survival.

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1. The Coalition for the Repeal of Ontario's Safe Streets Act (CROSSA) is dedicated to the repeal of the Act. It is made up of ten member organizations including the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, Justice for Children and Youth, and many individual Ontarians.



Rejecting the Safe Streets Act: What Ontarians Said...

The poll asked Ontarians a range of questions about how the government has responded to the problem of homelessness. Below is a breakdown of results:

THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS

Q1. All things considered, do you think government has done an effective job at addressing homelessness?

Strongly agree	17%
Somewhat agree	22%
Neither	10%
Somewhat disagree	22%
Completely disagree	29%

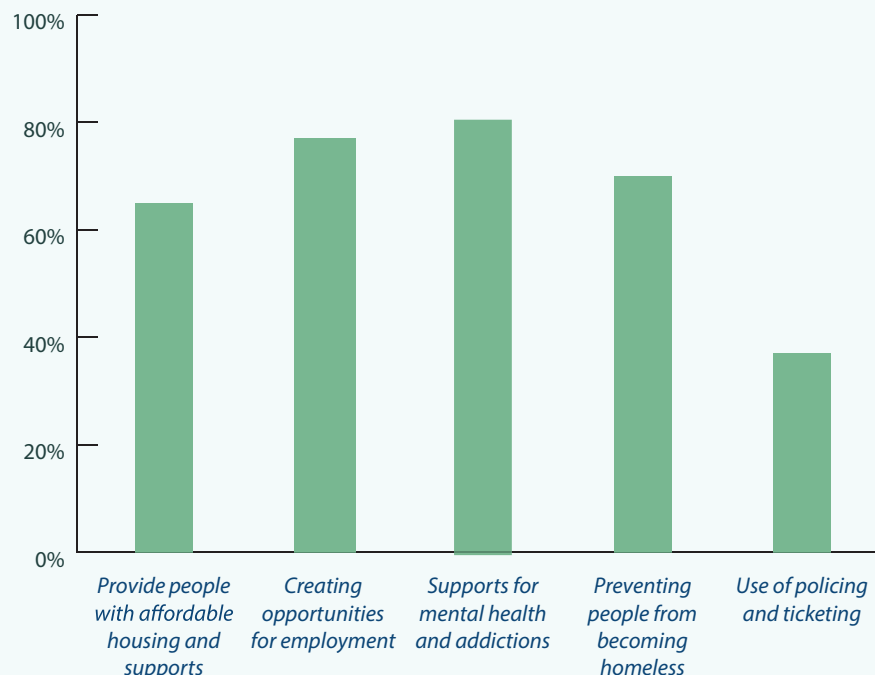
Overall, while there is some support for the work that government is doing on homelessness, more Ontarians believe there is more work to be done. 39 percent of Ontarians believe that government is doing an effective job of addressing homelessness, while 51% disagree. Men (49%) are much more likely than women (30%) to feel that government is doing a good job.

Perspectives on what government should do to tackle homelessness

SUMMARY:

Preferred options for what government should do to address homelessness

When asked to evaluate different strategies that government might take to address homelessness, Ontarians strongly suggest that the best options include better access to affordable housing, employment opportunities for homeless people, better mental health and addictions supports and an investment in prevention so that people don't become homeless in the first place. It is clear that the use of policing and ticketing is the least preferred option for addressing homelessness.



Results Breakdown

Q. Thinking about the best ways to tackle Homelessness please indicate whether you completely agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree or completely disagree with the following:

Q2 Providing Homeless People with AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND SUPPORTS

Strongly agree	39%
Somewhat agree	26%
Neither	16%
Somewhat disagree	8%
Completely disagree	11%

65% of respondents agree that providing affordable housing and supports should be a priority, and 19% disagree. Females (74%) are more likely to agree than males (55%).

Q3 CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR EMPLOYMENT for homeless people

Strongly agree	50%
Somewhat agree	27%
Neither	13%
Somewhat disagree	5%
Completely disagree	6%

77% of respondents agree that creating opportunities for employment for homeless people should be a priority, and 11% disagree. Females (77%) and males (76%) are evenly split on this issue.

Q4 Providing more SUPPORTS FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTIONS

Strongly agree	69%
Somewhat agree	12%
Neither	11%
Somewhat disagree	3%
Completely disagree	4%

81% of respondents agree that providing more supports for mental health and addictions should be a priority, and 7% disagree. Females (89%) are more likely to agree than males (72%).

Q5 Focusing more on PREVENTING PEOPLE FROM BECOMING HOMELESS in the first place.

Strongly agree	56%
Somewhat agree	14%
Neither	20%
Somewhat disagree	5%
Completely disagree	5%

70% of respondents agree that a focus on preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place should be a priority, and 10% disagree. Females (83%) are more likely to agree than males (55%).

Q6 USING POLICING TO TICKET PEOPLE for panhandling and squeegeeing.

Strongly agree	21%
Somewhat agree	16%
Neither	19%
Somewhat disagree	15%
Completely disagree	28%

Only 37% of respondents agree that using policing ticket people for panhandling and squeegeeing should be a priority, 43% disagree. Females (37%) and males (37%) are evenly split on this issue.

Is the Safe Streets Act a good law?

Ontarians were asked their opinion on the Safe Streets Act, and whether they considered this to be a good law. A considerable majority (56%) reject this idea, while only one quarter (26%) support this law. There was not significant variation in opinion across regions of the province or based on age. Ontarians believe the Safe Streets Act is a bad law.

Q7 The Ontario Safe Streets Act was put in place fifteen years ago. To date, police have spent over a million dollars ticketing panhandlers, and every year give out thousands of tickets, 99% of which cannot be paid by the panhandlers. Do you agree or disagree that this is a good law?

Strongly agree	16%
Somewhat agree	10%
Neither	18%
Somewhat disagree	18%
Completely disagree	38%

Repealing the Safe Streets Act

Ontarians are clear that using policing and ticketing through the Safe Streets Act is not the way government should be addressing the problem of homelessness. Instead, Ontarians argue for better access to affordable housing, employment, mental health and addictions supports and an investment in prevention so that people don't become homeless in the first place.

The Coalition for the Repeal of Ontario's Safe Streets Act (CROSSA) argues that the Province of Ontario should repeal the Safe Streets Act and efforts should be made to ameliorate the negative consequences these laws and practices have on individuals who are subjected to them.

Why is this bad policy and practice?

Issuing tickets to homeless people is a counter-productive way of dealing with a poverty issue

People who are homeless do not choose to be homeless. The research evidence indicates that a lack of affordable housing, combined with the inadequacy of necessary supports for those dealing with health, mental health, disability, violence and addictions issues means that many people become homeless. Moreover, many are forced to inhabit public spaces to meet basic needs such as sleep and income generation. The way to deal with these social and economic issues is to ensure that people have access to safe and affordable housing, as well as necessary supports to maintain their housing. Using law enforcement to deal with poverty is bad policy and practice.



**99% OF TICKETS
WENT UNPAID**

Average fee of a ticket:
\$60

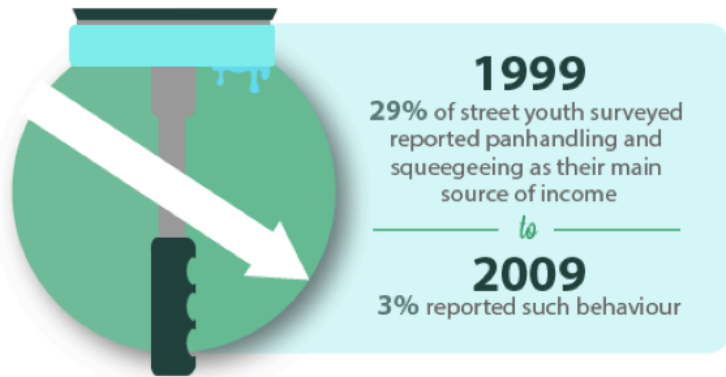
Max fine for first offence:
\$500


POLICE HOURS WASTED
(processing tickets)
16,847

Homeless people cannot pay SSA fines

A recent study identified that the number of SSA tickets issued in Toronto in 2009 was 13,023, while the total number over eleven years (2000-2010) was 67,388. The total value of the tickets in 2009 was minimally \$781,380, and over eleven years more than four million dollars (\$4,043,280). This is a large financial burden placed upon homeless people living in extreme poverty. Many individuals, over time, accumulate hundreds and even thousands of dollars in fines that they are unable to pay. Involvement in the Criminal Justice System makes it even more challenging for homeless individuals to engage in education, training and/or the labour market. Furthermore, convictions for panhandling count against your driving record so the

Act makes it harder for homeless people to find jobs, keeping them on the street longer. And when jail is imposed for panhandling, people can lose the housing they do have and be forced back onto the street, actually increasing homelessness. Homeless people panhandle for small change because they have no money. So why would we give people in this situation a fine? The SSA calls for fines of up to \$500 for a first offence, and for imprisonment up to 6 months plus \$1000 for any subsequent offence. People who are sentenced to more than 30 days in jail lose any social assistance they would normally receive for housing and can be evicted. As such, people who have housing are forced back onto the street.



Panhandling and squeegeeing have been on the decline for a decade, yet the number of tickets issued in Toronto continues to rise

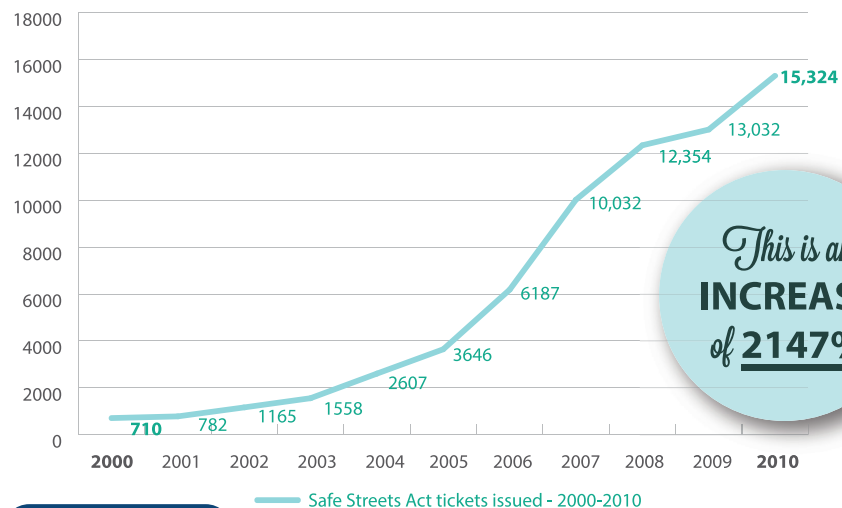
Two significant pieces of research, including one by the City of Toronto, show that incidences of panhandling and squeegeeing have been declining over the past decade. Yet the number

of tickets issued continues to rise. This suggests that ticketing has more to do with the visibility and status of people who experience homelessness, rather than their infractions.

The Safe Streets Act does not actually address aggressive solicitation

A review of SSA tickets issued by the Toronto Police Services between 2004-2010 shows that 20% of tickets issued were for "aggressive solicitation," while the remaining 80% of tickets were for non-aggressive acts that have been criminalized under the SSA. This suggests that despite its stated purpose, the SSA is not actually being implemented to address aggressive panhandling and soliciting.

SSA TICKETS ISSUED



*This is an
INCREASE
of **2147%***

OF THOSE TICKETS:

2010 - 15,224 TICKETS

20% for "aggressive solicitation"

&

80% were for "non-aggressive acts of soliciting a captive audience" such as those standing in line at a bank or waiting for public transit.



The Safe Streets Act is not cost-effective

The SSA is expensive to implement. Research suggests that implementing the SSA cost Toronto Police Services \$936,019 between 2000-2010. The fines imposed for panhandling are almost never collected (only \$8,086.56 in fines were paid over that same period), but taxpayers are still paying for the courtroom, the Justice of the Peace, the testifying police officer and the prosecutor to have the fines imposed.

Public fears of homeless people do not justify the use of law enforcement

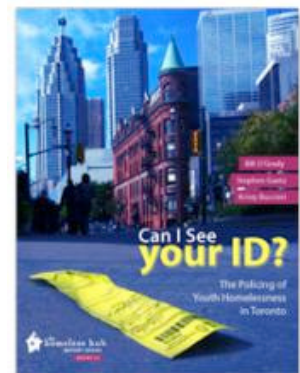
In announcing the Safe Streets Act in 1999, the government of the day proclaimed: "Our government believes that all people in Ontario have the right to drive on the road, walk down the street or go to public places without being or feeling intimidated. They must be able to carry out their daily activities without fear. When they are not able to do so, it is time for government to act". While at face value, this may seem to be a worthy sentiment, in reality it is a very flawed approach to criminal justice. If some members of the public 'fear' others because of their skin colour, the fact they look different, wear different clothes, are visibly poor or are young, it is not incumbent upon government to enact laws or enforcement strategies that target such people. This is bad policy and practice that infringes on the rights of marginalized people, and the most vulnerable members of our society.



What is the Evidence?

There is a strong evidence base supporting the rejection of policies and practices that criminalize homelessness. To find out more about the criminalization of homelessness and the Ontario Safe Streets Act, check out these resources:

- [Can I See Your ID? The Policing of Youth Homelessness in Toronto](#)
- [Disorderly People: Law and the Politics of Exclusion in Ontario](#)
- [Criminalizing Poverty: the Criminal Law, Power and the Safe Streets Act](#)
- [Tickets...and More Tickets: A case study of the enforcement of the Ontario Safe Streets Act](#)
- [Whose Safety Counts? Street Youth, Social Exclusion, Criminal Victimization](#)
- [Safe Streets for Whom? Homeless Youth, Social Exclusion and Criminal Victimization](#)
- [The Criminalization of Homelessness: A Canadian Perspective](#)



People who experience homelessness should be treated with dignity, respect and fairness before the law.

Laws and practices that criminalize people for being homeless are inhumane, unjust and counterproductive in our efforts to prevent, reduce and end homelessness.

Such laws and practices – including the Ontario Safe Streets Act - should be repealed and efforts should be made to ameliorate the negative consequences these laws and practices have on individuals who are subjected to them.



ABOUT THE CANADIAN OBSERVATORY ON HOMELESSNESS

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness is a non-profit, non-partisan research institute that is committed to conducting and mobilizing research so as to contribute to solutions to homelessness. We work together as a group of researchers, service providers, policy and decision makers, people with lived experience of homelessness as well as graduate and undergraduate students from across Canada with a passion for social justice issues and a desire to solve homelessness in our communities.

To learn more, visit <http://www.homelesshub.ca>



ABOUT MAINSTREET TECHNOLOGIES

Mainstreet Technologies is an emerging national public research firm. With 20 years of political experience at all three levels of government, President and CEO Quito Maggi is a respected commentator on Canadian public affairs. Mainstreet has provided accurate snapshots of public opinion, having predicted a majority PC government in Alberta, a majority Liberal government in British Columbia and a majority Liberal government in Ontario. Most recently it was the most accurate pollster in the 2014 Toronto election and the 2015 Sudbury by election. Public works are funded from Mainstreet's Public Polling Fund.

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**LEARN MORE ABOUT THE COALITION FOR THE REPEAL OF
ONTARIO'S SAFE STREETS ACT AT:**

www.homelesshub.ca/repealSSA

