

Safe Streets Act: A Dead End

For Immediate Release – March 10, 2004

On March 10th, the Safe Streets Coalition (SSC) announced its campaign to pressure the provincial government to enact a Safe Streets Act (SSA) and to amend the Trespass Act. The coalition is comprised primarily of business associations that have been working in conjunction with one another for years. The Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association, Vancouver Board of Trade and Tourism Vancouver are leading this crusade to further persecute poor people.

In their press release, the SSC describes the atmosphere in the streets as disorder. Using the term 'disorder' repeatedly, they attempt to frighten the public and media into believing civil society is under attack and that the only defense is more laws and police. This same panic-inciting argument was made in Ontario, leading to the passing of the Ontario Safe Streets Act (OSSA) in early 2000.

Since its enactment, numerous reports and studies have pointed out the absolute failure of the OSSA. Attacking people who make a living from working on the street has only intensified the catastrophe of poverty. Overdoses have risen dramatically as people are forced to flee areas where services exist (most often due to either harassment or the types of area restrictions endorsed by the Vancouver SSC). Many women and girls have been pushed into the sex trade as there are no other viable employment opportunities. By eradicating this source of income, the OSSA has actually increased dependency on welfare.

Because of the failures of the OSSA, the police and government have for the most part lost interest in mass persecution. The fining and jailing of homeless people has only aggravated the problem and cost exorbitant amounts of money. To be concise, taxpayers have failed to see a return on their investment.

"To engage in the same ill-founded crackdown on poverty is ridiculous," states Vince Louis, a member of the Anti-Poverty Committee and a street worker himself. "I was kicked off of welfare and now I panhandle. So now they want to throw me off the streets and into jail, how would that be productive? What I need is decent housing, not more harassment."

The City of Vancouver has tried time and time again to deal with poverty by resorting to more police and the problem has only gotten worse. "Because Operation Torpedo was such an embarrassing failure, the city and province are trying this [Safe Street Act, street crime working group]. What we should be putting our money and resources into is an efficient welfare system and social housing. How many more failures must we endure until we realize you can't police away poverty and you can't replace housing with jails," said Housing Action Committee organizer Linda Rasmussen.