

2026.02 Apply Existing Terrorism Laws When Prosecuting Arson Attacks on Places of Worship

Resolved, that national council of The Catholic Women's League of Canada in 106th national annual meeting of members assembled urges the federal government to encourage the application of existing terrorism laws when arson attacks on places of worship are prosecuted.

Brief: Apply Existing Terrorism Laws When Prosecuting Arson Attacks on Places of Worship

There is an alarming increase in the number of places of worship being deliberately burned in Canada. An Order/Address of the House of Commons resulted in a report of 592 police-reported arson attacks at places of worship in Canada between 2010 and 2022 (Canada, Order). “Arson at religious institutions in Canada more than doubled compared to the baseline in 2021 and has not significantly declined since then” (Sepulveda). “Arson continues to be the leading cause of fires affecting Canadian places of worship, with up to 50 incidents a year across the country” (Ecclesiastical). This aligns with one of the objects of The Catholic Women’s League of Canada to contribute to the understanding and growth of religious freedom, social justice, peace and harmony.

According to a recent Macdonald-Laurier Institute report, “The act of setting fire to houses of worship carries profound implications for our culture, our politics, and for the state of religious liberty in Canada...” (Sepulveda). The *Criminal Code* of Canada defines terrorism to include substantial property damage intentionally committed “... in whole or in part for a political, religious or ideological purpose, objective or cause...” (Canada, Justice). By contrast, hate crime laws do not recognize ideological or political bases for the crimes. “While hate crimes are motivated by prejudice and aim to harm specific groups or individuals, terrorism typically seeks to achieve broader political, ideological or religious goals by instilling fear or intimidation to the public or a segment of the public” (Turner). Ideological or political factors are “ideas, beliefs and attitudes... which reflects or shapes understandings or misconceptions of the social and political world. It serves to recommend, justify or endorse collective action aimed at preserving or changing political practices and institutions” (Freeden). Given this, existing terrorism laws should be applied to the prosecution of arson attacks on places of worship.

Sepulveda notes, “There is no public database of arson incidents in which charges have been laid and the individuals charged have been identified. In the absence of such data, investigative journalism has identified 9 arson incidents over the 2021–23 period that had resulted in charges by January 2024...” This represents only 3.8% of the 238 reported incidents during that period. Sepulveda further cautions that because police services and news organizations are not required to publicly report every arson investigation or resulting charge, the nine identified cases should be regarded as a minimum estimate rather than a complete count. By comparison, the national rate of charges being laid for all arson offences is approximately 11%, which, if applied to the 238 incidents, would suggest that approximately 25 cases should have resulted in charges.

The benefit to applying existing terrorism laws to arson of places of worship include altering the “‘threat environment’ by sending the message that Canada is not a safe haven to those contemplating terrorist attacks” (Canada, *The Views*). The application of terrorism laws would act as a deterrent by outlawing incitement and participation in terrorist activities (Gabor 6).

Arson attacks on Catholic churches also impacts Indigenous communities and threatens reconciliation because of the lack of government response and society’s general apathy towards condemning these actions. Indigenous communities have expressed their opposition to such acts of arson (Sepulveda).

Whether an act of arson was committed for political, religious or ideological purposes, existing terrorism laws should be applied. The Catholic Women’s League of Canada urges the federal government to encourage the application of existing terrorism laws when arson attacks on places of worship are prosecuted.

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Action Plan: Enforce Existing Terrorism Laws When Prosecuting Arson Attacks on Places of Worship

1. Communicate with the prime minister and the minister of public safety urging the federal government to encourage application of existing terrorism laws when prosecuting arson of places of worship. Refer to the *National Manual of Policy and Procedure* for options, including letter-writing, petitions and postcards.
2. Educate members on the increase in the number of places of worship, including churches, synagogues and mosques, being deliberately burned in Canada and hold discussions on why this may be happening.
3. Monitor the federal government's response.