

Who'll be moving the mail?

by Sabine Eiche

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I wonder, will Canada Post's announced changes have any effect on our country's unemployment rate, which hovered around 6.9 % for the last few months of 2013? Official reports state 8,000 jobs will disappear – probably only a drop in the national bucket. However, the story doesn't end here. Ironically, the elimination of one kind of worker (the letter carrier) is expected to drive up the numbers of other kinds of workers (thieves and vandals).

We've read many letters in newspapers about the feared consequences of Canada Post's decision to replace the letter carrier with vulnerable community mailboxes. The possibility that in the future we'll be bandying about the terms thief and vandal disturbingly often drove me to look up the various words we use (and misuse) for people of that calling.

Those who act on the wrong side of the law, damaging and taking the property of others, have been around for a long time. The quantity of terms in Latin referring to malefactors suggests that in ancient Rome they went in for specialization. The law breakers were called "ereptor," "fur" (which gave us furtive) "latro" (ultimately the source of larceny) "clepta" (from the Greek, like our kleptomaniac). And on the seas the ancient Romans were at the mercy of the "pirata," a word likewise from the Greek.

But there are also old Germanic and Anglo-Saxon words at the root of some of our English terms for such offenders. Robber, for examples, grew out of the Germanic "raub," referring to booty, spoils, which then usually included

such prized possessions as clothes. Our English word robe comes from the same source. A robber is, strictly speaking, a plunderer, despoiler.

The Anglo-Saxon “peof” is the source of the word thief. According to the Oxford English Dictionary definition, a thief is one who takes portable property from another without the knowledge or consent of the latter. The verb commonly used to describe this action is steal. There is a verb to thieve, but it’s as rarely used as the noun stealer.

Burglar, first recorded in 1541, has its origins in the 12th century Anglo-Latin “burgulator,” describing someone who by night breaks into a house with felonious intent. Burglar is both noun and verb, though in the 19th century to burgle was used as well. In *Dickens’s Dictionary of London*, 1879, we find reference to “a gentleman of the burgling persuasion.”

In his *Germania*, the Roman historian Tacitus mentions the Germanic tribe known as “Vandali,” who, a few centuries later, invaded western Europe and northern Africa. The Vandali, powerful and feared, sacked Rome in 455. Since at least the 16th century, the name vandal has been associated with anyone who wilfully or ignorantly destroys what is worthy of preservation, particularly monuments and art.

Canada’s labour force surveys (for example, that of Haver Analytics) does not include thieves, vandals and others of that ilk. Perhaps one of these days they’ll have to – in which case, “Other Services” might be a suitable category. And then, keep an eye open to see if the official unemployment rate sinks to an all-time low.