

Fact Sheet

#13

*in a series of fact sheets
that examine questions
frequently asked about
the criminal justice
system*

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Population Trends and Crime: What should we be planning for?

Crime and crime rates, as measured by official statistics, have not been static (Chart#1). Explaining why changes occur is not simple. There is growing evidence that social and economic factors, such as population changes, unemployment and income disparity, are correlated with crime. These factors are seen to influence the amount and nature of actual crime committed. (Other factors include changes in attitudes, policies and practices and legislation - all of which can influence the reporting and recording of crime regardless of any change in the actual incidence of crime.)

Current and projected trends in social and economic factors allow us to anticipate possible effects on crime and the criminal justice system. We should be able to use this information to begin planning and developing approaches which might help to ameliorate the possibility of negative effects. This Fact Sheet looks specifically at trends in the age composition of the Canadian population, examines what effects these trends might have on factors associated with crime and our responses to crime and suggests action required.

Age and Incidence of Crime

There is general agreement in the literature that the crime-prone years are between the ages of 15 and 24. The offences committed by this age group are typically less serious personal offences and property crimes. This is not a new phenomenon - it has existed since the middle of the nineteenth century. Judging from official statistics and self-report studies which show that involvement in criminal behaviour decreases with age,

offending is, for most, part of a maturational process that ceases as young people mature.

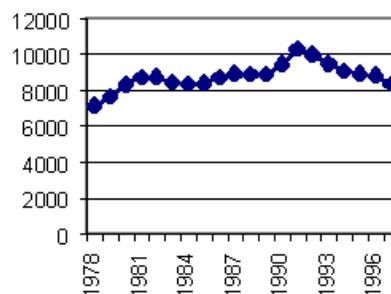
Victimization surveys carried out in Canada show that young people also have higher personal victimization rates. The most recent survey carried out by Statistics Canada in 1993 reported that:

Canadians age 15 to 24 reported a personal victimization rate (318 per 1000 population) twice that of those age 25 to 44 (156 per 1000 population) and over 4 times that of those 45 to 64 (74 per 1000 population)... These differences become even wider in the case of violent victimizations: the young (15 to 24) are five times more likely to be a victim than those 45 to 64 (225 vs 45 per 1000 population).

Many experts associate changes in age populations with changes in the crime rate. For example, the rapid rise in the crime rate in the 1960's and 1970's has been attributed in large part to the "baby boom" phenomenon. Those in the "baby boom" generation - born between the years of 1947 and 1966 - came into the years of highest criminal activity during the 1960's and 1970's. It was also a time of abrupt social and economic change. In the same vein, the decline in the crime rate

Chart #1

**Rate of Reported Crime
(per 100,000 population)
Canada 1978 to 1997**



Source: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics

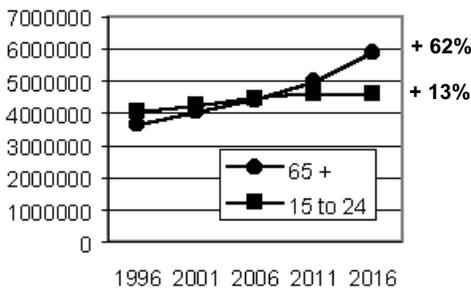
Changing age patterns

Statistics Canada projects that, over a 20 year period (1996 to 2016), the number of Canadians age 15 to 24 will increase by 13%. During the same period, the number of those age 65 and older will increase by 62%. By the year 2006, the two age groups will be virtually the same in numbers.

In 2016, those age 15 to 24 will make up 12% of the total population (down slightly from 13% in 1996). Correspondingly, Canadians age 65 and older will comprise 16% of the total population - up from 12% in 1996.

Chart #2

Numbers of Canadians By Age
Actual 1996 and
Projected 2001 to 2016



Source: Statistics Canada

in the 1990's is seen as a reflection of decreasing numbers of those age 15 to 24 - the products of the "baby bust" years (1967 to 1979). There has been a smaller pool of people who are at the greatest risk with respect to criminal behaviour.

Age and Type of Crime

Official statistics (Revised Uniform Crime Statistics) suggest that:

- *Property crime is the staple of youthful offending - 45% of those accused of a property crime in 1997 are between the ages of 15 and 24.*
- *Involvement in property and "other" crime generally decreases with age. With property crime, the proportion of accused drops to 21% for those age 25 to 35, to 16% for*

those between the ages of 35 to 49 and to 5% over the age of 50. With "other" crimes, the decrease with age is less dramatic.

- *The pattern for violent crime is not as clear. While those age 15 to 24 account for 31% of accused in 1997, the proportion decreases only slightly to 27% for the age group 25 to 34 and remains at 27% for those age 35 to 49. The proportion then decreases to 7% for those over the age of 50 (Chart #3).*

Since 1991, the police-reported crime rate has declined by 19% primarily due to the drop in property crimes, particularly break and enter. The rate of violent crime has been declining since 1992 and was 9% lower in 1997 than it was in 1992.

Most experts agree that these trends are associated with changing demographics. Declining property crime rates seem to be a reflection of the declining number of those age 15 to 24 (along with a relatively healthy economy). In the same vein, involvement in violent crime does not

seem to be as age-dependent between the ages of 15 to 50. The slower and smaller changes in violent crime may be more reflective of the fact that those born in the baby boom era are now just starting to turn 50.

Age and Perceptions of Crime

With the aging of the "baby boom" generation and no matching growth in the younger population, the Canadian population as a whole is aging. Not only could this affect the incidence and type of crime but it could also influence perceptions of crime and, correspondingly, how our society responds to crime.

A poll conducted by Angus Reid in 1997 showed that more Canadians age 55 and over felt that crime rates had increased greatly over the previous five years. Further, more Canadians in this age group had a "great/fair" fear of crime (26%) compared with younger Canadians (18% for those age 18 to 34 and 21% for those age 35 to 54). While generally there was a high level of support for the use of alternatives to prison for non-violent offences, opposition was highest among Canadians age 55 and over.

Impact of Projected Changes in Age Composition

Statistics Canada projects a 13% increase in the number of Canadians age 15 to 24 from 1996 to 2016. This age group will increase by about 500,000 by 2011 and then begin to

If childhood neglect and disadvantage are not altered, there is a strong likelihood that delinquency and crime will develop over time ... A history of parental mishandling, family crime, school failure and economic deprivation [in childhood] makes delinquency in the next three years probable. Truancy, economic deprivation and delinquent friends in the early teenage years combine to make delinquency more likely. Any unstable job record and anti-establishment attitudes, combined with delinquency by the age of 20, makes criminal behaviour from the ages 21 to 24 more likely.

Report of the Standing Committee on Justice and the Solicitor General, 1993

decline slightly. With more Canadians at the greatest risk of involvement in criminal activity, one could easily speculate that Canada might again experience an increase, modest, in the incidence of crime generally, with property crime driving the trend. The projections also foresee smaller increases in the age groups 25 to 34 (+ 3%) and 35 to 49 (+ 5%). This projected trend would suggest relative stability with respect to the incidence of violent crimes.

In the next 20 years, the number of Canadians age 50 to 64 is expected to grow from 4.2 million to 7.8 million (+ 84%) and those age 65 and older from 3.6 million to 5.9 million (+ 62%). While there will be far more people less likely to be the perpetrators of crime, there will be more people in the age group more prone to experience a heightened fear of crime, maintain misperceptions about crime and are less likely to be in favour of alternatives to incarceration.

Currently, we see more demands for longer and harsher sentences despite declining crime rates and growing evidence of Canada's overuse of incarceration and of its ineffectiveness. In an environment of a dramatically aging population, these attitudes and demands could become more prevalent. It will become even more difficult to reduce our use of incarceration and to make greater use of more effective community alternatives if these trends are combined with further politicization of crime.

Ameliorating the negative effects:

■ *Dealing with the risk factors associated with crime*

Given the projected rise in the crime-prone age group, good planning would suggest that we invest *now* in initiatives designed to reduce the risk factors associated with crime.

There is growing and consistent evidence that income disparity, unemployment, abuse, family problems and school problems or failure correlate with crime. The authors of a 1993 Statistics Canada study done by Statistics Canada in 1993 found that the socio-demographic characteristic correlated most strongly with all offences under study was the male unemployment rate. Other community characteristics correlated with specific offences include: high proportions of families living in poverty, in rented dwellings or who are supported by lone-parents, and the percentage of the population over the age of 15 without a high school diploma.

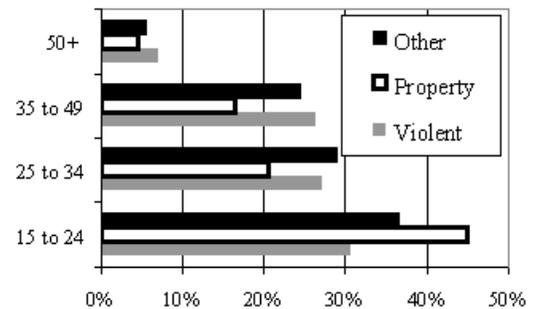
Many of these factors are interrelated. Low levels of education are tied to high rates of unemployment and job instability. Unemployment means a lower income. Families headed by a lone-parent, particularly if the lone-parent is a female, are more likely to be living with a low income than two-parent families. Low income families often have no other choice but to live in low-quality housing in

The ability to forecast undesirable outcomes, such as a rise in certain kinds of crime or an increased use of hard drugs, highlights another important use of demographics - making predictions in the hopes that they will be wrong. If we know, through demographic analysis that certain things are likely to occur, then we can take steps to prevent or at least mitigate these outcomes.

David Foot, *Boom, Bust and Echo*

Chart #3

Age of Accused By Category of Offence Canada 1997



Source: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics

transient run-down neighbourhoods. Providing for the basic needs of food and shelter often leave disadvantaged families without the resources to involve the children in sports and community activities, resulting in children having more unstructured and unsupervised time. Financial stress can lead to family problems and abuse.

Reducing the risk factors associated with crime suggests immediate action on a number of fronts including:

i) early childhood education and parent support for disadvantaged families

A 25 year follow-up of the Perry Preschool Program in the U.S. showed that individuals who participated in the program providing high quality early childhood education and support and training for the parents were far less likely to be persistent offenders (5 arrests or more by age 28) than a matched control group who were not part of the program (7% versus 35%).

ii) community-based afterschool recreation programs

A 1998 report to the U. S. Congress on the effectiveness of different programs in preventing crime found evidence that such programs can reduce juvenile crime in the immediate area.

iii) family therapy and parent training about at-risk and delinquent preadolescents

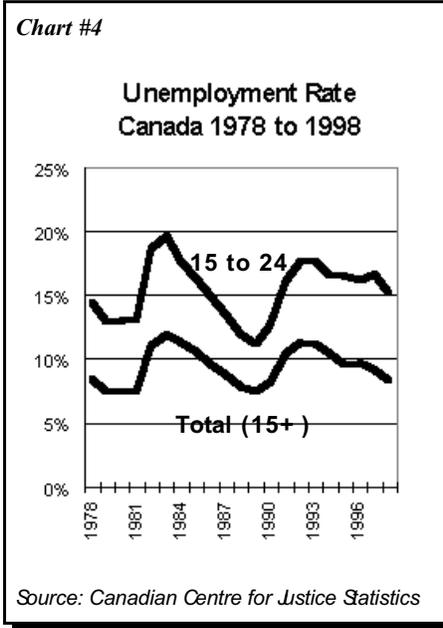
The same 1998 report to the U.S. Congress stated that such programs have shown to reduce the risk factors for delinquency such as aggression and hyperactivity.

iv) stay-in-school programs

RAND, a research institute in the U.S., reported significant reductions in arrests of youths who participated in graduation incentive programs. Their analysis indicated that such programs appear to be more cost-effective (in terms of serious crimes averted per cost of the program) than incarceration.

v) youth employment initiatives

Research has shown a relationship between unemployment rates and crime and incarceration rates. Statistics show that youth are particularly disadvantaged with respect to employment and further that they have not benefitted from the recent improvements in the economy (Chart #4). Employment provides income, status, meaningful use of time and demands responsibility and commitment - all of which can make a young person less likely to maintain involvement in criminal behaviour. Special attention should be paid to the urgent circumstances of Aboriginal people. High rates of illiteracy, lower levels of education, unemployment rates three times the national average,



average incomes one-half the national average, one-half of the children living in poverty and over-representation in prisons and as victims are only some of the obstacles that Aboriginal people face. Given what we know about the risk factors associated with crime, the fact that 35% of the Aboriginal population are under the age of 15 (compared with 21% for the total population) should call all Canadians to action.

■ Dealing with the misperceptions about crime

Attention must be paid to providing citizens, particularly older Canadians, with accurate information about crime and their risk of

victimization, strategies for avoiding victimization that do not create panic and more detail about effective ways to prevent crime and reduce re-offending.

Public education is the key. Given that most Canadians get their information about crime from the media, the media have a special role to play in providing Canadians with accurate, balanced and complete information on crime and responses to crime. As well, politicians must be committed to leading with the facts and the research rather than merely responding to what they perceive the public demands to be. Any attempt to reduce the fear of crime and to create an atmosphere hospitable to developing thoughtful responses to crime cannot succeed in an environment where crime is highly politicized.

Anticipate the future: Act now

Population forecasts can, to some degree, help us anticipate changes relating to crime and identify areas of concern. We cannot afford, however, merely to anticipate the changes and take no action. We need to develop strategies and implement initiatives **now** in order to, in the future, prevent crime and ensure a citizenry knowledgeable and supportive of effective approaches to crime and its causes. We can make a difference if we start now.

Effective, just and humane responses to crime and its causes

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