

Violence and Suicide in Canadian Institutions: Some Recent Statistics

There is good news and bad news to report on the incidence of violence and suicide in Canadian federal prisons. The good news is that violence directed toward staff has been decreasing steadily over the last few years; the bad news is that violence directed toward inmates has not. As to inmate suicide, the number of inmates taking their own lives has been relatively low in recent years, but increased substantially last year.

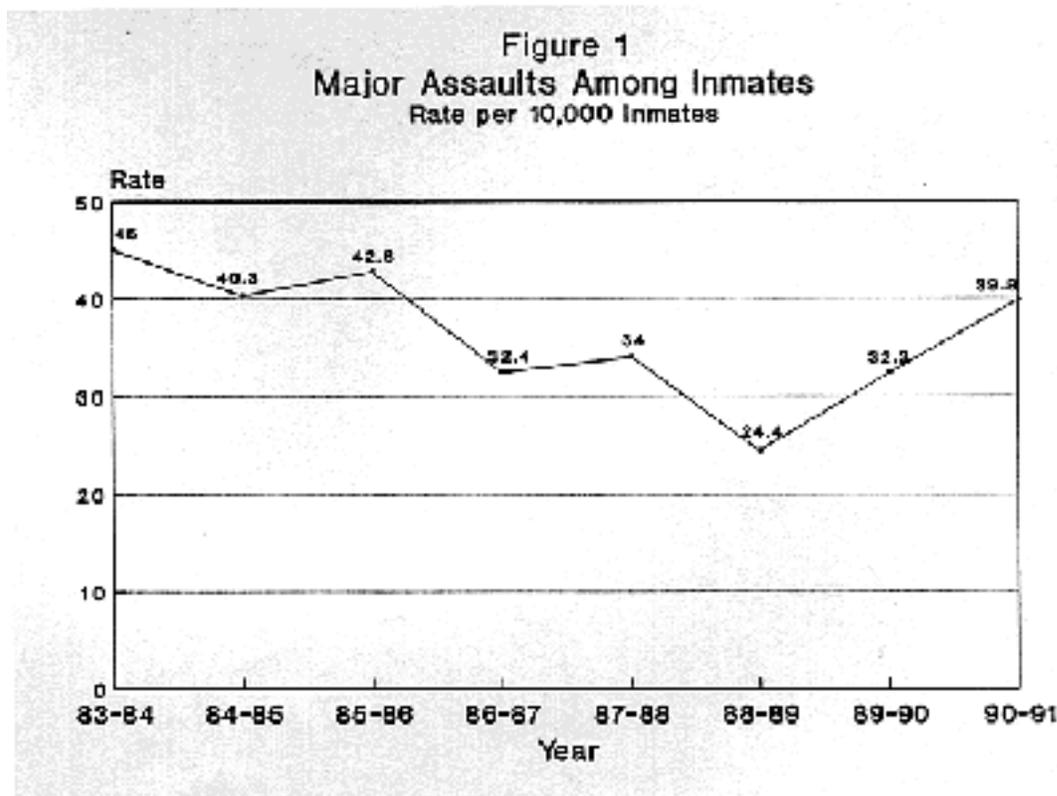
The Correctional Service of Canada collects information on violent incidents and suicide in its institutions. This article presents some of the latest statistics on major assaults on staff and inmates, murders of staff and inmates, and inmate suicides.

Major Assaults on Inmates

A major assault is defined as a deliberate attack causing grievous bodily harm (e.g., unconsciousness, broken bones, knife wounds, etc.).

As Figure 1 shows, the rate of major assaults on inmates decreased between 1985-86 and 1988-89, but has climbed steadily ever since.

Figure 1



These numbers can be examined another way. We can compare the rate of major assaults on inmates for

the last four years with that of the previous four years. Calculated this way, the overall major assault rate for 1987-1991 was 32.6 per 10,000 inmates, much lower than the rate of 40.1 for the previous four-year period.

Last year (1991-92), there were 63 major assaults on inmates. These assaults were not evenly distributed across institutions. In fact, 41.3% ⁽²⁶⁾ occurred in 4 (out of 43) institutions. Three of these institutions were medium-security and one was maximum-security.

A Profile of Major Assaults on Inmates

The Institutional Operations Division of the Correctional Service of Canada analyzed in detail the information available on major assaults occurring during the first three quarters of 1991-92 (from 1 April 1991 to 31 December 1991). Of the 63 major assaults recorded for the entire year 1991-92, 42 occurred during the first three quarters. Information on these cases is presented here.

In these 42 major assaults, most often the victim had been stabbed (40.5%) or physically assaulted by punching or kicking (33.3%). The victim was clubbed in 19% of the cases, sexually assaulted in 4.7% and burned in 2.4% of the cases. In more than three quarters of the assaults (78.6%), the victim sustained stab wounds, fractures or both.

About half of the victims (52.3%) had been involved in a previous assault or fight among inmates, either as an instigator or a victim. Only 4 of the 42 victims were serving sentences for sex-related offences.

Motives for the assaults varied. The motive was drug-related (e.g., drug debts, under the influence, etc.) in 28.6% of the cases. In another 19%, the instigator was retaliating for a previous incident of physical or verbal abuse. About 10% of the victims had been identified by other inmates as an informer. In 7.1% of the cases, the motive was sexual assault, and in 2.4% the victim was identified as a cell thief.

Most of the 42 major assaults (54.8%) took place in medium-security institutions. More than one third (35.7%) occurred in maximum-security prisons and about one tenth (9.5%) took place in minimum-security institutions.

Most assaults (52.3%) took place either in the inmate's cell or on the range. Close to one third occurred in the exercise yard (14.3%) or in the gym (14.3%). They occurred most frequently on Mondays or Tuesdays, during evening hours and in late summer (August).

Inmate Murders

From 1984-85 to 1987-88, the number of inmates murdered each year fluctuated between 4 and 11. Since 1987-88, it has remained fairly steady at between two and five. Last year (1991-92), four inmates were murdered in federal correctional institutions.

Major Assaults and Murders of Staff

There are far more major assaults and murders of inmates than of staff. In the last eight years (1984-85 to 1991-92), the number of major assaults on staff peaked in 1985-86 at 10, then dropped to a low of 1 in 1987-88. Since then, there have been between two and four major assaults on staff each year. Last year, 1991-92, there were two.

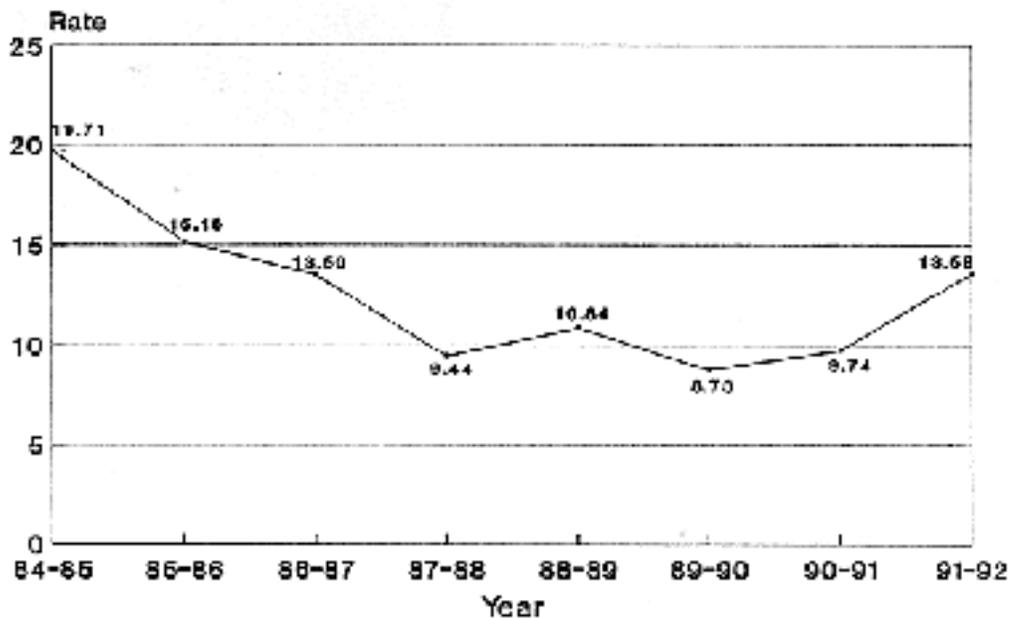
In 1984-85, two staff members were murdered in federal prisons. No staff members have lost their lives in the line of duty since.

Suicide Among Inmates

As shown in Figure 2, for the last half of the 1980s, the rate of inmate suicide declined fairly steadily. It went from 19.7 per 10,000 inmates in 1984-85 to 8.7 in 1989-90, with an increase occurring only once during that period. In 1990-91, the inmate suicide rate rose slightly to 9.7 per 10,000 inmates, but then jumped by 39.4% last year to a rate of 13.6 - the highest annual rate since 1985-86.

Figure 2

Figure 2
Suicide Among Inmates
Rate per 10,000 Inmates



In terms of regional suicide rates, the 1991-92 rates increased in the Atlantic and Quebec regions from the previous year but decreased in the Ontario and Prairie regions. The suicide rate in the Pacific region stayed the same.

A Profile of Inmate Suicides

The Institutional Operations Division did a more detailed analysis of information available on the 16 inmate suicides that occurred last year, during 1991-92. The results of this analysis are presented here.

All 16 inmates who committed suicide had been male with an average age of 32 years. About 63% had been single, the others married or in common-law relationships. Two of the 16 inmates had been native, the others, Caucasian.

The most common major offences of these 16 had been robbery (43.7%) and first- or second-degree murder (37.5%). The major offence of another 12.5% had been sexual assault, and 6.2% had been serving time for break and enter.

Although most of these inmates (62.5%) had an extensive criminal history (10 or more criminal convictions), half had been serving their first federal term. Most (62.5%) had prior convictions for both property offences and offences against the person.

Twelve of the inmates who committed suicide had been in medium-security institutions and four in maximum-security prisons. All 16 inmates hanged themselves in their own cells, most commonly with a bed sheet (43.7%). An electric cable or cord was used in one quarter of the suicides. Eleven of these inmates were in the general population at the time of their suicide, four were in segregation and one was in protective custody.

As to the time of the suicides, almost two thirds occurred in the evening, between 4:00 p.m. and midnight. Half took place on either a Saturday or a Sunday, and 62.5% occurred during the winter months (November to March).

The information on factors relating to the inmates' sentences is interesting. Commonly, the inmates had been serving either a relatively short or an extremely long sentence: 31.2% had been serving between two and five years, and 37.5% had been serving a life sentence.

Similarly, before committing suicide, these inmates seemed to have either served a very short portion of their current sentence or a very long time: one quarter had served less than one year, while another quarter had served 10 years or more. Often, inmates had served between 5 and 10 years of their sentence (31.2%).

Of the nine inmates who had not been serving life sentences, most were fairly close to their release date for mandatory supervision at the time of their suicide. In fact, all but one would have reached their mandatory supervision release date within two years.

These findings on factors relating to the inmates' sentences suggest that, for some, the prospect of serving a very long sentence was perhaps too much to handle, while for others, the difficult issue may have been the prospect of being out on the street again.

Conclusion

We have provided these statistics to show that prison violence and inmate suicide remain key concerns for management, staff and inmates in federal correctional institutions. Although the number of violent

incidents against staff has remained low in recent years, the same is not true for violent incidents against inmates and inmate suicide. This makes research on prison violence and inmate suicide that much more critical.