

Recent trends in youth crime

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Youth crime is a major topic in Canada, generating diverse opinions based on a plethora of sources, such as media portrayals and statistics. Research indicates public opinion of youth crime can be heavily influenced by media sensationalization. This article challenges the perception of youth crime as having increased in both frequency and seriousness against statistical data acquired from the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.

Since the early 1990s in Canada, crimes committed by youth, violent crimes in particular, have received increased public attention. This is evident in media reports, opinion polls and the public opinion driving the new youth criminal justice legislation.² Research strongly supports the claim that public opinion, directly or indirectly, is influenced by media portrayals of information and does not necessarily reflect current statistical information.³ The media portrayal of youth crime is that it has both increased and become more serious.⁵ Consequently, the Canadian public, in general, holds six beliefs about youth crime:

1. There has been an increase in the number of youths charged by the police.
2. There has been an increase in the number of youths processed through the youth court system.
3. There has been an increase in the number of youths charged and processed through the youth court system for violent crimes.
4. Youths have been getting involved in crime at a younger age.
5. Youths have received more lenient dispositions.
6. There has not been an increase in the number of youths transferred to adult court.

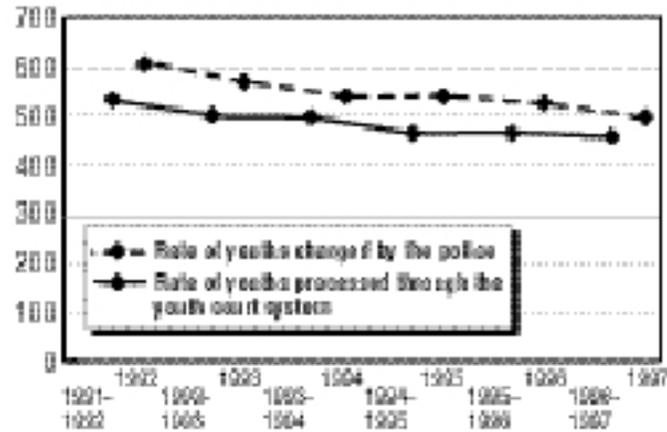
This article examines whether perceptions of heightened youth involvement in the Canadian criminal justice system are supported by data acquired from two Canadian Centre for Justice publications : the Uniform Crime Report Survey and the Youth Court Survey.⁶ Although official statistical data have their limitations,⁷ we believe they are reliable tools for documenting crime trends.⁸ This analysis examines female and male young offenders.

1. Youths Charged by Police

The rate of youths charged by the police for an offence decreased consistently from 1992 to 1997. The rate decreased from 607 per 10,000 youths in 1992 to 495 per 10,000 youths in 1997 (see Figure 1). By offence,⁹ the greatest decrease was in property crimes, followed by the category of other federal statutes and other crime. Violent crimes increased minimally and the rate of drug offences nearly doubled, although consistently remaining the lowest rate per 10,000 youths (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

Rate of Youths Charged by the Police and Processed Through the Youth Court System per 10,000 Youths

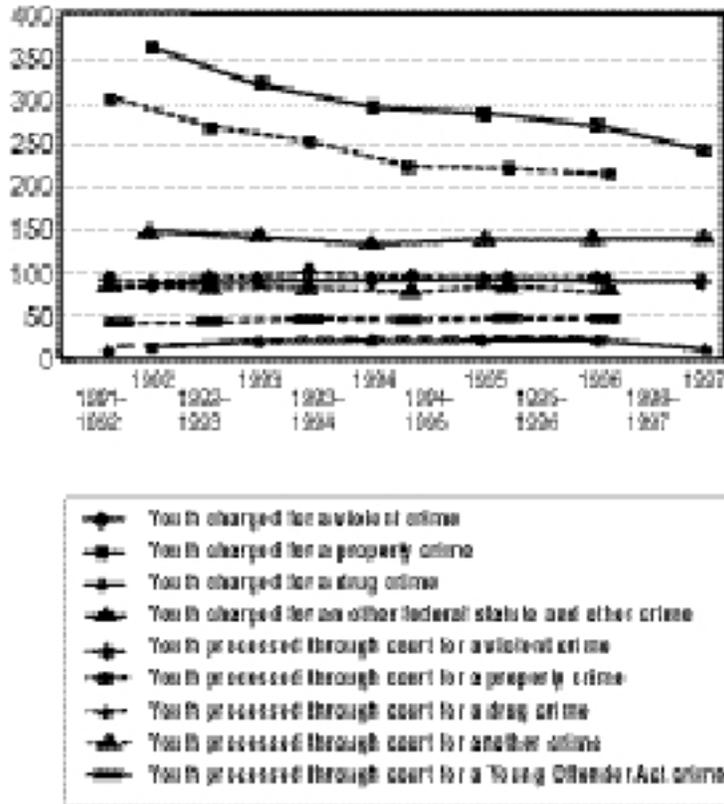


2. Youths Processed Through the Youth Court System

Concordant with the decrease in youths charged by the police for an offence, the rate of youths processed through the youth court system¹⁰ decreased from 1991–1992 to 1996–1997. The rate decreased from 531 per 10,000 youth in 1991–1992 to 455 per 10,000 youth in 1996–1997 (see Figure 1).

Figure 2

Rate of Youth Charged by the Police and Processed Through the Youth Court System for an Offence per 10,000 Youths



By offence,¹¹ consistency was again apparent between police charging practices and youth court processing. There was a substantial decrease in property crimes and a slight decrease in the category of other crime. Young Offenders Act and violent crimes increased slightly. Drug offences nearly doubled (see Figure 2).

3. Youths Charged and Processed Through the Youth Court System for Violent Crimes

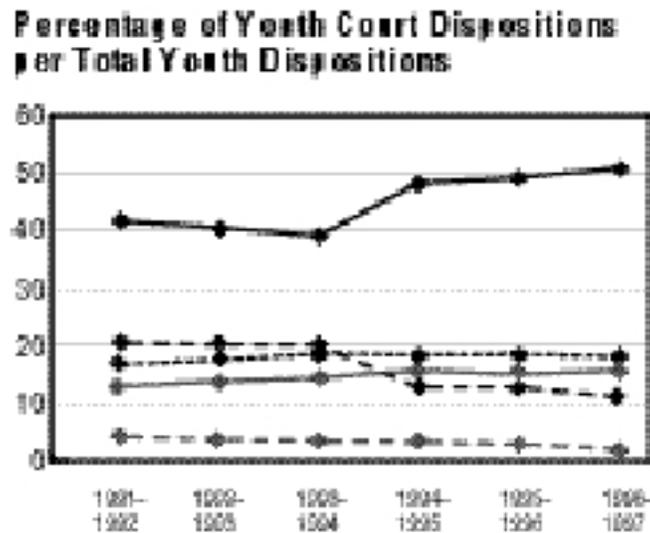
Overall, youths charged with a violent crime¹² increased minimally from 1992 to 1997 (see Figure 2). By specific offence, homicide, attempted murder and abduction rates all remained relatively stable. Sexual assault and other sexual offences decreased. Youths charged with robbery increased and non-sexual assault increased slightly.

Youth processed through the youth court system for a violent crime also increased slightly (see Figure 2). By specific offence, homicide, attempted murder, abduction and the category of other crime remained relatively stable from 1991–1992 to 1996–1997. Sexual assault and other sexual offences and weapon crimes decreased. Youth processed for non-sexual assault slightly increased and robbery increased. These findings are consistent with police-reported data.

4. Age of Youth Processed Through the Youth Court System

The average age of youths processed through the youth court system¹³ has remained stable at 15 years of age from 1992–1993 to 1996–1997.

Figure 3



5. Seriousness of Youth Dispositions

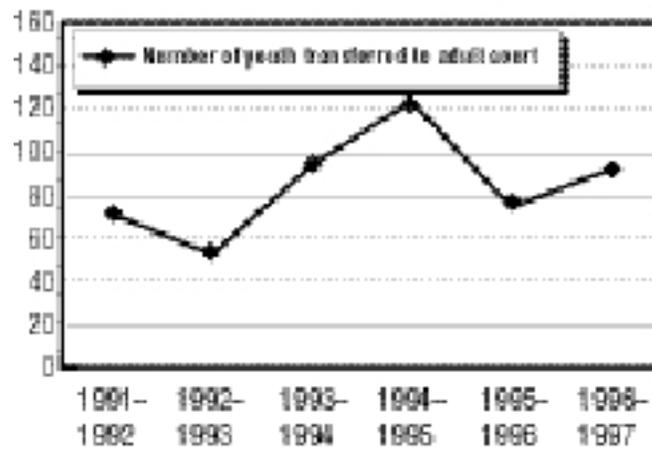
From 1991–1992 to 1996–1997, there has been an increase in the seriousness of youth dispositions¹⁴ (see Figure 3). The order of sentence severity is secure custody, open custody, probation, fine and community service order, and absolute discharge. Secure custody, open custody and probation all increased. Less serious dispositions, fine and community service order and absolute discharge, decreased. The most notable change was the marked increase in probation and the marked decrease in fine and community service order in 1994–1995.

6. Youth Transferred to Adult Court

There was no apparent pattern in the number of youth transferred to adult court¹⁵ between 1991–1992 and 1996–1997 (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Number of Youth Transferred to Adult Court



Discussion

The data examined in this article reveal that, overall, youth charged with a criminal offence and youth processed through the youth court system for criminal offences decreased from 1992 to 1997. This challenges the general media portrayal that youth crime has increased in Canada over the past six years.

When violent crimes committed by youth are examined, a slight increase is evident, but not one that reflects the magnitude often being portrayed. Rates of homicide, attempted murder and abduction among young offenders have remained relatively stable, sexual assault and other sexual offences decreased and only robbery and non-sexual assault offences increased, albeit not significantly.

Other findings from our analyses: (1) the average age of youth processed through the youth court system has not decreased — it has remained stable at a mean of 15 years of age; (2) youth transfers to adult court have neither increased nor decreased; and (3) the seriousness of youth dispositions has increased, contrary to the public perception of increased leniency.

Overall, the six common beliefs about youth crime are in direct contrast with the statistical data.

1. 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9

2. B. Schissel, *Blaming Children: Youth Crime, Moral Panic and the Politics of Hate* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishers, 1997) and *A Strategy for the Renewal of Youth Justice* (Ottawa, ON: Department of Justice, 1998).

3. K. Onstad, "What are we afraid of? The myth of youth crime," *Saturday Night*, 112, 2 (1997) 46-58. See also A. Doob, *Criminal Justice Reform in a Hostile Climate* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto, Centre of Criminology, 1995); and see A. Doob and J. Roberts, "Public punitiveness and public knowledge of the fact: Some Canadian surveys," N. Walker and M. Hough, (Eds.) in *Public Attitudes to*

Sentencing: Surveys from Five Countries (Aldershot, UK: Gower, 1988).

4. J. Sprott, Understanding Public Views of Youth Crime and the Youth Justice System. Unpublished MA research paper (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto, Centre of Criminology, 1995). See also A. Doob, Criminal Justice Reform in a Hostile Climate; and see R. Mofina, “Young offenders and the press,” J. Winterdyk, Ed. in Issues and Perspectives on Young Offenders in Canada (Toronto, ON: Harcourt Brace and Company, Canada, 1996).

5. The data sources and population estimates used in this report may not be the most recent revision of the data. Data are revised by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics the year after the original release. The changes are small, however, and do not affect the findings of this report.

6. The data used to compile this report do not measure the actual number of youths charged with a crime, processed through the youth court system or remanded into custody; the unit of analysis is cases (Youth Court Survey), incidents (Uniform Crime Report Survey) or counts (Corrections Key Indicator Report). For further clarification, please refer to the original source.

7. Common criticisms of police- and court-collected data include: there is not total coverage (i.e., 1996 Uniform Crime Report Survey represents 47% of the national volume of reported crime); excessive judicial and police discretion regarding the charge, prosecution and sentencing processes; inconsistent application of the legal implementation of the Young Offenders Act; broad spectrum of behaviours that fall under the category “violent crime” (i.e., from verbal threats to homicide); statistics do not account for cases where the charge is dropped; and underreporting.

8. The Youth Court Survey data are presented for fiscal years. The Uniform Crime Report data are presented for calendar years. Caution must therefore be made in comparison of the data.

9. “Other federal statutes and other crimes” is defined as “Other Federal Statutes and Other Criminal Code.” Drug offences is defined as “Food and Drugs Act and Narcotics Control Act.” For specific offence category definitions, see the Uniform Crime Report Survey.

10. Source: Youth Court Survey.

11. Overall statistics derived from Uniform Crime Report Survey. For specific offence category definitions, see the Youth Court Survey.

12. Source: Uniform Crime Report Survey and Youth Court Survey.

13. Source: Youth Court Survey.

14. Source: Youth Court Survey.

15. Source: Youth Court Survey.