

A Profile of Drug Offenders

Drug offenders represent a substantial proportion of the inmates serving federal sentences in Canadian institutions. Approximately 1,200 inmates, or about 9% of the current inmate population of the Correctional Service of Canada, are serving their longest sentence for a drug offence. In terms of admissions to penitentiaries during recent years, drug offenders have made up about 14% of offenders admitted on a new warrant of committal.

Drug offenders are a small group relative to other offenders, such as inmates serving time for property crimes (20%), robbery (23%), and other types of violent offences, e.g., murder, assault and sex offences (38%). However, drug offenders are an interesting group because they differ from the general inmate population in a number of characteristics.

An examination of our inmate population in September 1990 revealed that about 75% of drug offenders were serving their first sentence in a federal institution. On the other hand, approximately 59% of non-drug offenders were serving a first federal sentence. Individuals serving time for drug offences also tended to be somewhat older than other offenders. The average age of drug offenders was 35 years, compared with 29 years for property offenders and 33 years for violent offenders, including those who had committed robberies. In terms of marital status, 54% of drug offenders, versus 37% of non-drug offenders, claimed they were married or had a common-law spouse.

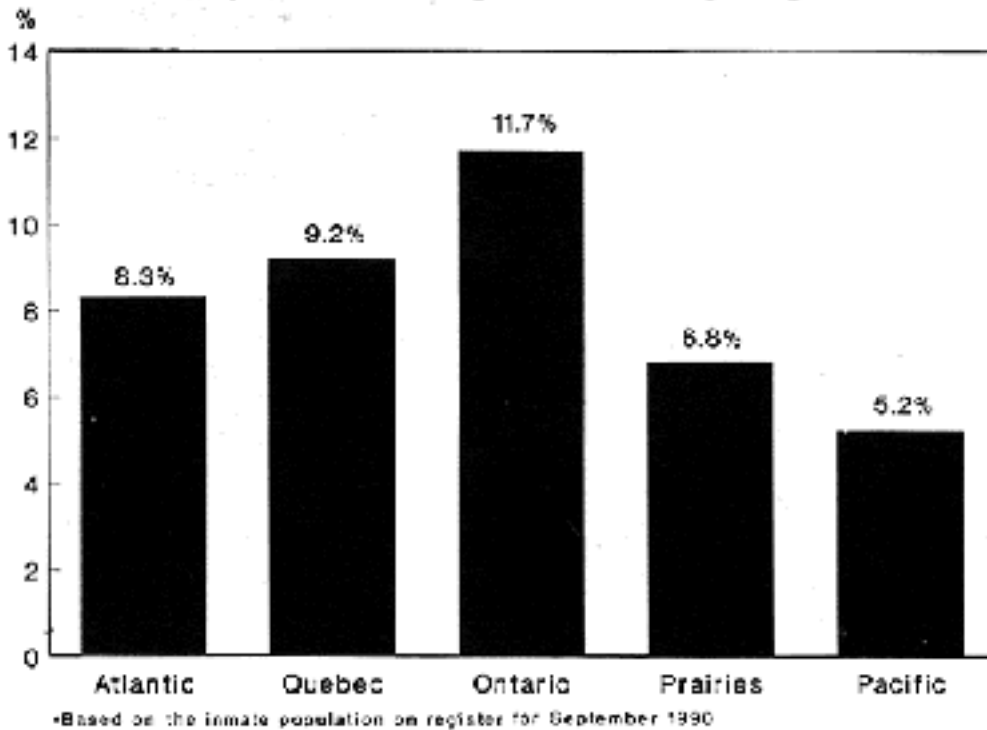
An interesting gender difference associated with drug offenders is that the female offenders are much more likely than the male offenders to be serving their longest sentence for a drug-related offence. Approximately 8.5% of our current male offender population, compared with 21% of our female population, are categorized as drug offenders.

Of the various ethnic groups in our inmate population, native offenders are the least likely to be serving time for a drug offence. Only 1.8% of native offenders in the current population, compared with 8.6% of offenders categorized as Caucasian, are drug offenders. About 17% of Black offenders and 23% of offenders classified as Asiatic are serving time for drug offences. Of the remaining offenders, who represent a variety of other ethnic groups, 32% were serving their longest sentence for a drug-related offence.

There were differences in the composition of the drug-offender populations in the five regions of the Correctional Service of Canada. Figure 1 shows the proportion of offenders by region who are serving their longest sentence for a drug offence. The graph demonstrates that the Ontario and Quebec regions have the largest populations of drug offenders. Although the finding was somewhat unexpected, in September 1990 the Pacific region had the fewest number of drug offenders.

Figure 1

Figure 1
Proportion of Drug Offenders by Region*

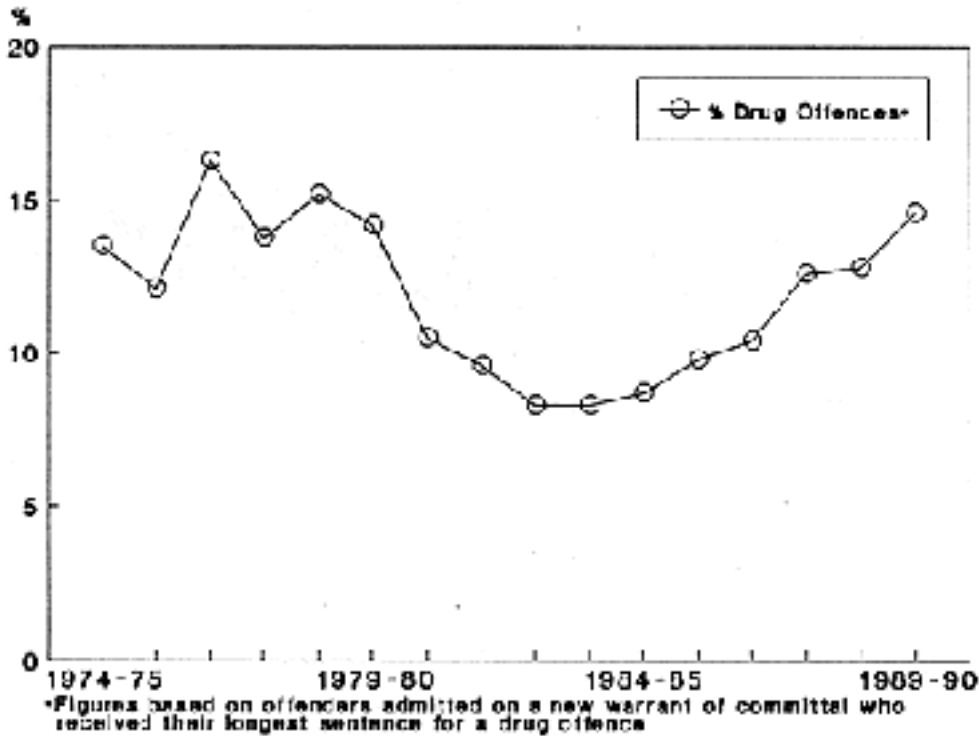


The average sentence length for drug offenders admitted to Correctional Service of Canada facilities is about 3.9 years. This figure is based on the sentence lengths for offenders who had received their longest sentence for a drug offence and who were admitted on a new warrant of committal to our institutions in the 1989-90 fiscal year. The average aggregate sentence of these offenders is longer than the average sentence of property offenders (2.9 years), but comparable to that of offenders who were admitted for violent offences, excluding those serving life sentences (4.2 years).

The aggregate sentence length for drug offenders serving federal sentences has remained relatively stable over the last 15 years. As seen in Figure 2, the aggregate sentence length has hovered between 4 and 5 years, with the average at 4.5 years. In recent years, as the figure illustrates, there is a slight trend toward shorter sentences.

Figure 2

Percentage of Drug Offence Admissions, 1974-90



Average Aggregate Sentence Lengths for Drug Offenders, 1974-90

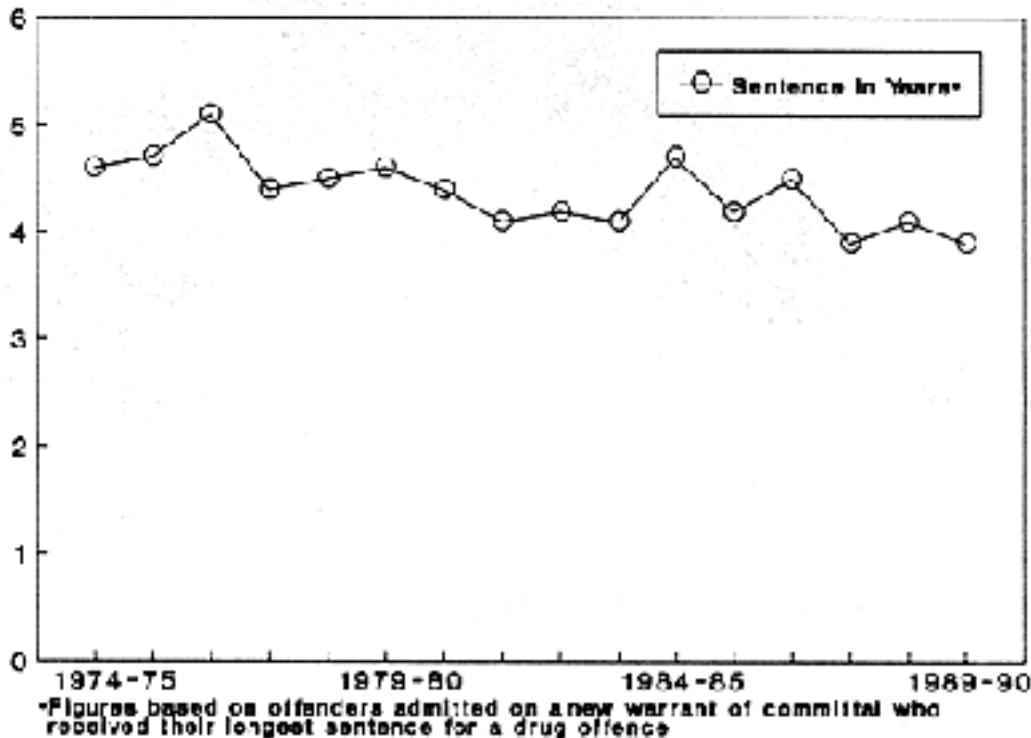


Figure 2 also charts the proportion of admissions for drug offences over the same 15-year period. Prior to the 1979-80 fiscal year, there were yearly fluctuations in the admission numbers for offenders who received their longest sentence for a drug offence. However, in the early 1980s, there was a noticeable

decline in the number of offenders admitted for drug offences. This drop corresponds to the decreased numbers of convictions for drug-trafficking offences in Canada during this period.(1) In the five fiscal years following 1984-85, the proportion of offenders admitted for drug offences gradually climbed again to a high of 14% in 1989-90.

Relative to other types of offenders, drug offenders appear to be good release risks. Recently the Research and Statistics Branch examined the release performance of a large sample of offenders who had been admitted to federal institutions between 1985 and 1987 and had served sentences of five years or less.

Compared with offenders who had served sentences for property offences, robbery, sex offences and other violent offences, drug offenders were more likely to be released on full parole and to remain successfully in the community. About 80% of the drug offenders in the sample, compared with only 38% of other types of offenders, were released on full parole. In terms of release success, 87% of the drug offenders remained in the community until their warrant expiry, whereas only 58% of the other offenders were successful.

(1) *Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (1990). "Drug Trafficking, 1988," Juristat Service Bulletin 10, no.4.*