

## Older offenders in the Correctional Service of Canada

A great deal has been written about the aging Canadian population and the consequences this may have for pension plans, health care and other government services. The same trend is evident in the correctional population. The Correctional Service of Canada '5 offender population is getting older, and offenders over 50 years of age constitute the fastest growing group.<sup>(2)</sup>

Older offenders may require different treatment programs, specialized accommodation, and different types of treatment and health care. Further, because they are usually serving long sentences, older offenders are more likely to face the prospect of living the rest of their life in prison or under supervision in the community. In either case, older offenders present unique challenges because of increasing mobility problems, sensory impairment, and likelihood of life-threatening illnesses such as heart disease and cancer. Who is an older offender? Defining the category of "older offender" is problematic. Although "older offender" might be more appropriately defined by ability, chronological age is sufficiently useful for the present purpose. In mainstream society, "older" is about 60 or 65, the age of retirement from the workforce and the age when the physical effects of aging start to become apparent.

However, the effects of aging may begin much earlier and may be exacerbated by substance abuse, poor diet and an unhealthy lifestyle - all of which are often characteristic of offenders. In addition, offenders can remain under the Correctional Service of Canada's jurisdiction for a very long time. Therefore, the definition of "older" used here is 50 years of age and older.

The following data were obtained from the Offender Population Profile System, which is an historical database containing information on offenders under the jurisdiction of the Service. Offenders are classified either as in an institution or as in the community under supervision (following release on day parole, full parole or statutory release). Data describing the institutional and community supervision populations were extracted for each June 30th from 1990 to 1993. Admissions data are presented by fiscal years 1990-1991, 1991-1992 and 1992-1993. Age distribution Approximately 1,100 inmates (8% of the institutional population) and 1,300 offenders on community supervision (13% of the supervision population) are 50 years of age or older (see Table 1). Close to half of these 2,400 offenders are between the ages of 50 and 54, and an additional 25% are between 55 and 59 years old. The institutional population includes 316 inmates (2%) who are at least 60 years of age, while the supervision population includes approximately 400 offenders (4%) in the same upper age bracket.

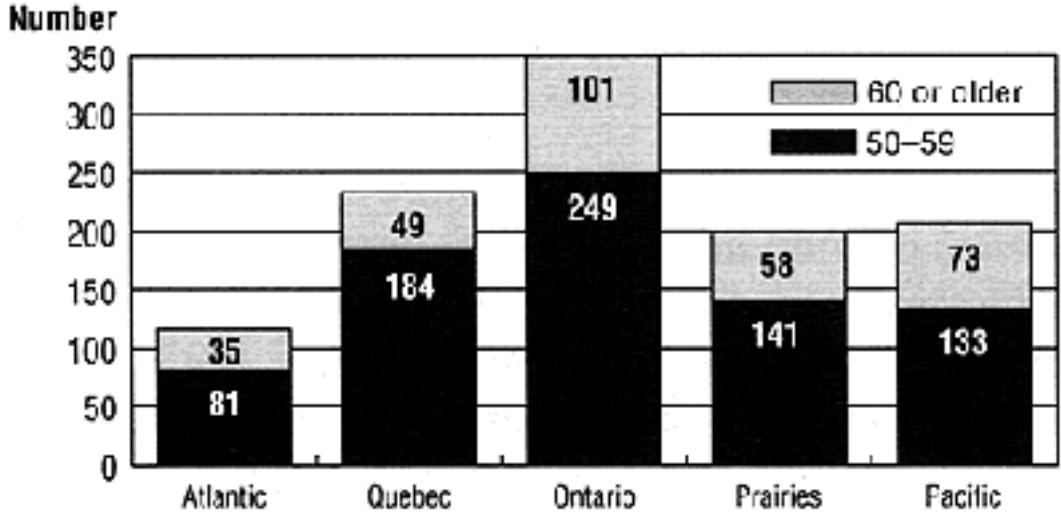
**Table 1**

| <b>Age Distribution in the Institutional and Community Supervision Populations</b> |               |                        |  |   |                        |  |
|--|---------------|------------------------|--|---|------------------------|--|
| <b>Institutional population</b>  |               |                        |  | <b>Community supervision population</b> |                        |  |
| <b>Age (Years)</b>   | <b>Number</b> | <b>% of population</b> | <b>% of the 50 or older population</b> | <b>Number</b>                           | <b>% of population</b> | <b>% of the 50 or older population</b> |

|                           |        |      |      |       |      |      |
|---------------------------|--------|------|------|-------|------|------|
| 50 or younger             | 12,021 | 91.6 | N/A  | 8,457 | 86.8 | N/A  |
| 50-54                     | 524    | 4.0  | 47.5 | 531   | 54.4 | 41.1 |
| 55-59                     | 264    | 2.0  | 23.9 | 346   | 3.5  | 26.8 |
| 60-65                     | 200    | 1.5  | 18.1 | 233   | 2.4  | 18.0 |
| 65+                       | 116    | 0.9  | 10.5 | 182   | 1.9  | 14.1 |
| Note: Data from June 1993 |        |      |      |       |      |      |

Regional distribution In the Pacific region, 12% of the inmates are older inmates, while about 10% of the Ontario and Atlantic regions' institutional populations are older inmates. Only about 7% of the Quebec and Prairie regions' institutional populations are older inmates. More specifically, Ontario has the largest number of older inmates (350), followed by Quebec with 233 (see Figure 1). Only the Atlantic region has fewer than 200 older inmates. The Pacific region also has the highest proportion of inmates aged 60 or older (4%).

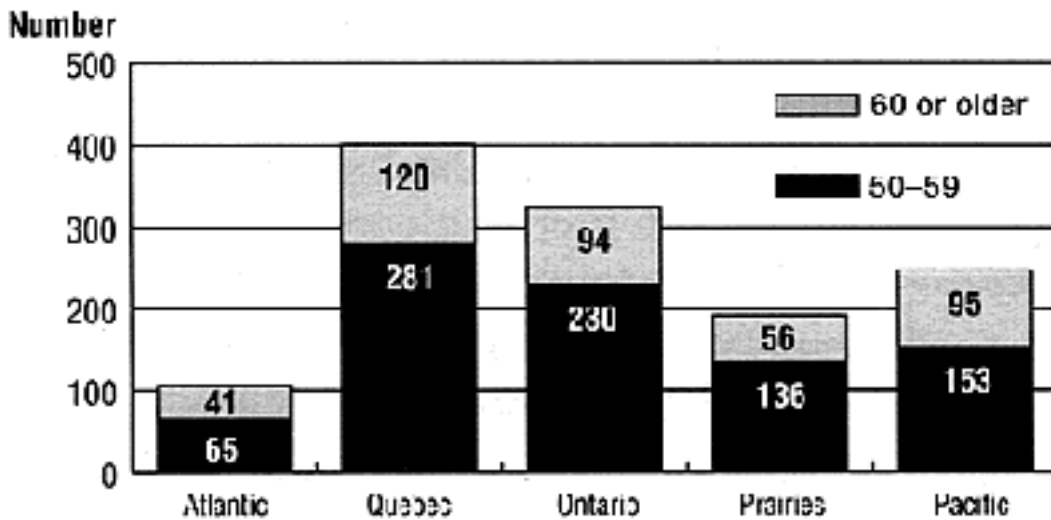
**Figure 1**  
**Number of Older Offenders in Institutions by Age and Region**



The proportion of older offenders in the community supervision population, ranging from 9% in the Atlantic region to 22% in the Pacific region, is higher than in the institutional population. Quebec has the largest number of older offenders under supervision, with approximately 400 (see Figure 2). The Pacific region again has the highest proportion of supervision population aged 60 or older (8%).

**Figure 2**

## Number of Older Offenders Under Community Supervision by Age and Region



Institutions and security Older offenders are more likely to be in minimum-security institutions than younger offenders and are less likely to be in medium- or maximum-security institutions. In fact, the oldest inmates (aged 60 or older) are twice as likely to be in a minimum-security institution than offenders younger than 50.

There were 207 inmates 50 years of age or older in maximum-security institutions in June 1993, and 46 of these inmates were 60 or older.

In most institutions, about 10% (or fewer) of the inmates are 50 years of age or older. However, seven institutions have close to a 20% population of older offenders, and in these institutions 6% (or more) of the inmates are 60 or older. In fact, in two of the institutions, more than 10% of the population is 60 or older. Risk factors **Term of incarceration**

Each admission to a federal prison is counted as a new term of incarceration. The term being served is, therefore, an indicator of the seriousness of the criminal history of the offender, although it does not reflect admissions to provincial prisons (for sentences of less than two years).

Fifty-six percent of the institutional population younger than 50 and 59% of the inmates between 50 and 59 are serving their first federal prison term (see Table 2). However, almost three quarters (72%) of the inmates 60 years of age and older are serving their first term. Similarly, the percentage of inmates serving at least their fourth term is almost the same for those younger than 50 and those between 50 and 59 years of age (15% versus 14%). But in the over 60 group, only 7% are serving at least their fourth term.

**Table 2**

**Distribution of Offenders in the Institutional and Community Supervision Populations by Term of Incarceration and Age**

| Term   | Institutional population (%) |                  |             | Community supervision population (%) |                  |             |
|--|------------------------------|------------------|-------------|--------------------------------------|------------------|-------------|
|  | Younger than 50              | 50 -59 years old | 60 or older | Younger than 50                      | 50 -59 years old | 60 or older |
| 1st  | 55.5                         | 58.6             | 72.5        | 68.7                                 | 68.5             | 74.7        |
| 2nd  | 19.1                         | 17.5             | 15.2        | 15.7                                 | 15.7             | 14.0        |
| 3rd  | 10.4                         | 9.5              | 6.0         | 7.7                                  | 7.5              | 6.3         |
| 4th or more  | 15.0                         | 14.2             | 6.6         | 7.9                                  | 8.2              | 5.1         |
| Total institutional population younger than 50: 12,021; 50-59; 788; 60 or older; 316 |                              |                  |             |                                      |                  |             |
| Total supervision population younger than 50; 8,457; 50-59; 877; 60 or older 115     |                              |                  |             |                                      |                  |             |

### Community Supervision

There are three types of community supervision: day parole, full parole and statutory release (formerly referred to as mandatory supervision); lower risk offenders are more likely to be released on day parole or full parole. About 56% of younger offenders (under 50) are released on full parole, but 73% of offenders between 50 and 59 years of age are released on full parole, with the percentage increasing to 81% for those 60 or older.

Younger offenders are more likely than older offenders to be released on day parole (20% versus 11%) and statutory release (25% versus 13%). The higher percentage of releases on full parole suggests that, as a group, older offenders are viewed as less of a risk to the community.

### Revocation rates

Revocation of parole or statutory release occurs when the offender fails to meet the conditions of his or her release or commits a new offence(s). It appears that older offenders are slightly less likely to have their conditional release revoked (14%) than offenders who are younger than 50 (18%). However, when revocation of conditional release occurs because of a new offence, there is almost no difference between the younger and older offenders (8% versus 7%).

### Type of offences

The major admitting offence can be defined as the offence with the longest sentence for which an offender is under Correctional Service of Canada jurisdiction. While only 13% of younger offenders in the institutional population are admitted for a sexual offence, almost one third (32%) of inmates 50 to 59 years old and almost half (48%) of those 60 and older are admitted for a sexual offence (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

| Percentage of Offenders by Major Admitting Offence and Age of Offender |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Institutional population (%)   | Community supervision population (%) |
|  |                                      |

| <b>Major admitting offence</b>  | <b>younger than 50</b> | <b>50 -59 years old</b> | <b>60 or older</b> | <b>younger than 50</b> | <b>50 -59 years old</b> | <b>60 or older</b> |
|---|------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Homocide  | 16.4                   | 22.2                    | 21.5               | 11.4                   | 30.4                    | 39.0               |
| Violent offence   | 36.0                   | 18.5                    | 13.9               | 28.9                   | 15.2                    | 13.0               |
| Sex offence   | 13.1                   | 31.7                    | 47.8               | 7.9                    | 15.6                    | 18.1               |
| B&E -Theft  | 19.0                   | 9.9                     | 6.0                | 19.1                   | 8.2                     | 8.0                |
| Drug offence  | 7.9                    | 10.2                    | 6.0                | 17.0                   | 16.6                    | 10.6               |
| Other   | 7.6                    | 7.5                     | 4.7                | 15.7                   | 13.9                    | 11.3               |
| Total instituional population younger than 50: 12,021; 50-59; 788; 60 or older; 316 |                        |                         |                    |                        |                         |                    |
| Total supervision population younger than 50; 8,457; 50-59; 877; 60 or older 415    |                        |                         |                    |                        |                         |                    |

Homicide is also more likely to be the major admitting offence for older offenders (22%) than for younger offenders (16%) in the institutional population. Other types of violent offences and non-violent offences like break-and-enter or theft are less common for older offenders.

The major admitting offence for older offenders under community supervision is most commonly homicide (39% for those 60 or older), with a sexual offence the next most common. Trends From 1973 to 1984, the average age (arithmetic mean) of men admitted to federal prisons remained around 29, but it then began to increase steadily. Between 1973 and 1993, the average age increased from 29 to 32. Although the increase in average age may not seem significant, the number of older offenders has increased significantly.

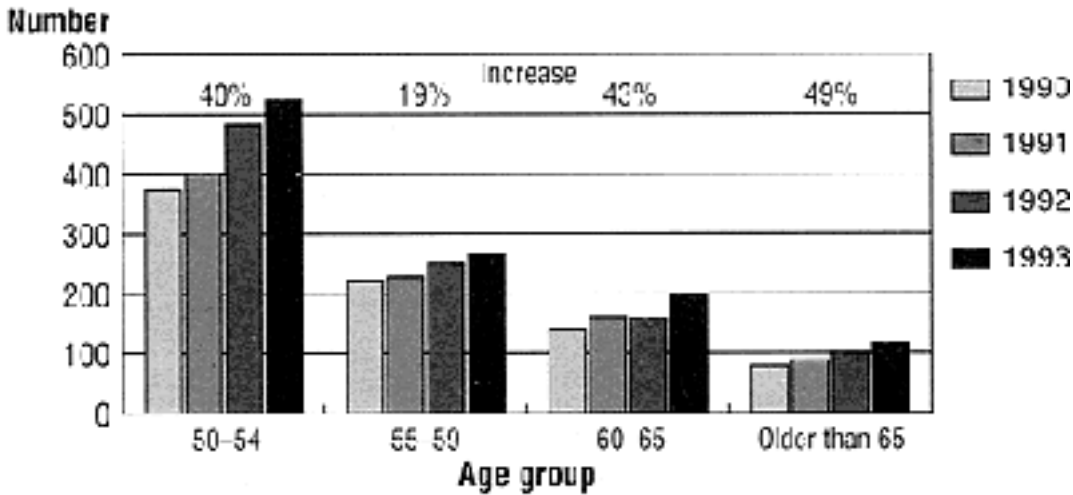
Over the last three fiscal years (1990-1991 to 1992-1993), admissions of older offenders increased from 233 to 323 per year, a 39% increase, while admissions for younger offenders increased by only 14%. The 60 and older age group has shown the largest proportional increase (although the absolute numbers are small), from 60 in 1990-1991 to 91 in 1992-1993.

The increasing age trend is also evident in the institutional and supervision populations (see Figure 3). During the four-year period between 1990 and 1993, the largest percentage increase in the institutional population was for the oldest group (49% for offenders older than 65), similar to the admissions results. The largest absolute increase was for the 50 to 54 age group, whose numbers increased from 374 to 524 inmates, a 40% increase in four years.

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**Figure 3**

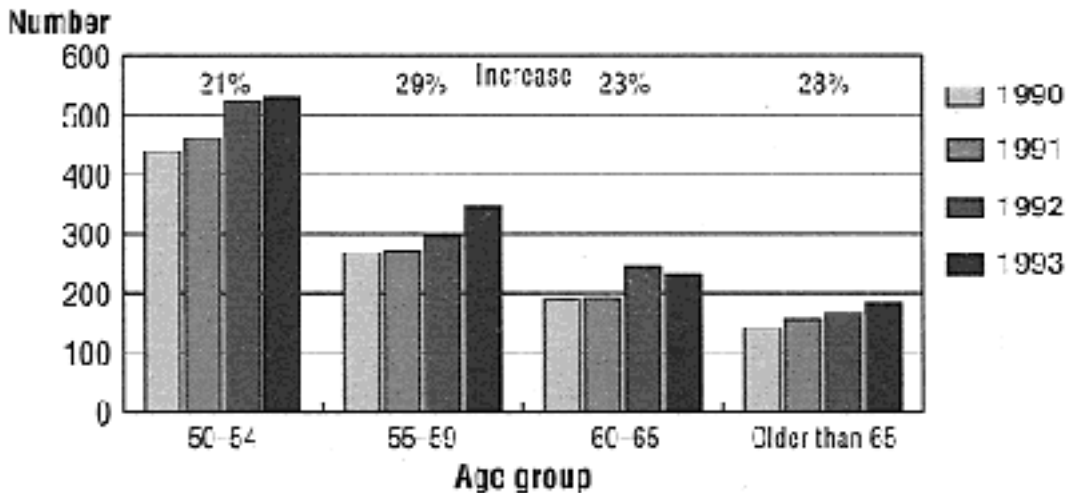
## Number of Older Offenders in Institutions by Age Group (1990–1993)



Increases were steady for each of the other over 50 age groups and exceeded the percentage increases for the inmates under 50. The pattern of increases in the community supervision population was similar to that of the institutional population, although the changes were not as dramatic (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

## Number of Older Offenders Under Community Supervision by Age Group (1990–1993)



Discussion Three conclusions can be drawn from this descriptive analysis:

- The number of older offenders both those older than 50 and those older than 60) is increasing faster than the number of younger offenders.
- Older offenders are more likely (than younger offenders) to have been convicted of more serious violent offences, such as homicide or a sexual offence.

- Older offenders, in most cases, present a lower risk to the community (than younger offenders), given their higher proportions in minimum-security institutions, their greater likelihood of release on full parole, and their lower rate of revocation of conditional release.

Older offenders are not highly concentrated in one region, although the Pacific region does have a higher percentage of older offenders. Further, institutional data indicate they are distributed throughout the institutions within each region, although a few institutions do have a slightly higher percentage of older offenders than others.

The research literature suggests that the older offender's need for medical services, the effect of the older offender on the prison population, and the older offender's need for specialized treatment programs may all need to be carefully considered.

Medical costs rise with the patient's increasing age, so the increasing number of older offenders (particularly those older than 60) may put a serious strain on correctional medical budgets. It has been argued that older, "experienced" offenders have a calming influence on other inmates, but will there still be this calming influence with the large number of older inmates who are "new" offenders? Finally, older offenders may have problems adapting to the rigours of prison life because of mobility and sensory limitations, physical problems, and a lack of relevant treatment and recreational programming. Rather than programming to help with job skills, older offenders may need programs to address the needs of retirement and the effects of aging.

Older offenders and younger offenders under supervision in the community will also have different needs. Assessing the risk of re-offending in the community is likely to be quite different for older offenders. Physical limitations may reduce the likelihood of some types of crimes, but the data on major admitting offences suggest that older offenders are still capable of homicide and other crimes that do not require excessive physical force. In addition, as with those in institutions, older offenders may have less need for help in job searches and training but more need for help in learning how to navigate the world of pensions and services for the elderly.

There are clearly significant numbers of older offenders under the jurisdiction of the Correctional Service of Canada, and their age defines a unique group. More detailed analyses are needed to determine whether these offenders present programming and treatment problems within the Service.

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(2) Work on this article was initiated following a request for information from Dr. Armstrong-Esther at the University of Lethbridge, who is conducting a study of crime and the elderly, funded by the Alberta Law Foundation.