

Unemployment and population aging: Contradictory trends affecting penitentiary populations

There has been a steady rise in crime and incarceration rates in both Canada and the United States since about 1940. This increase has occurred in conjunction with two other social developments: a large increase in the post-war youth population that has since resulted in an aging population, and a period of high economic growth and low unemployment which has given way to extended periods of economic stagnation and rising unemployment.

As we enter the second half of the 1990s, it seems likely that the recent manifestations of these trends will continue into the foreseeable future. Continued aging of the Canadian population will significantly reduce the number and proportion of high-risk youths in the population, and the continuing upward drift in unemployment rates may create a permanently unemployed (and perhaps unemployable) youth sector.

This article examines federal corrections admission risk rates to highlight some recent experiences with these trends, and reviews the general effects of demographic change on federal penitentiary populations. Finally, and perhaps most important, the article explores aspects of changes in employment patterns and their potential effect on federal corrections. Federal admission risk rates The relationship between the age and sex composition of the population and crime / incarceration levels has been frequently examined in recent decades.⁽²⁾ Researchers have observed that the condition most associated with the risk of committing crimes is being young and male.⁽³⁾ This relationship between age, gender, crime and incarceration has remained relatively stable for nearly two decades in Canadian federal corrections.

Two findings stand out over the past two decades. First, male youths have the highest risk rate and this rate has remained relatively stable for 20 years. Second, risk rates for older men are significantly lower, although they have been gradually rising over time.

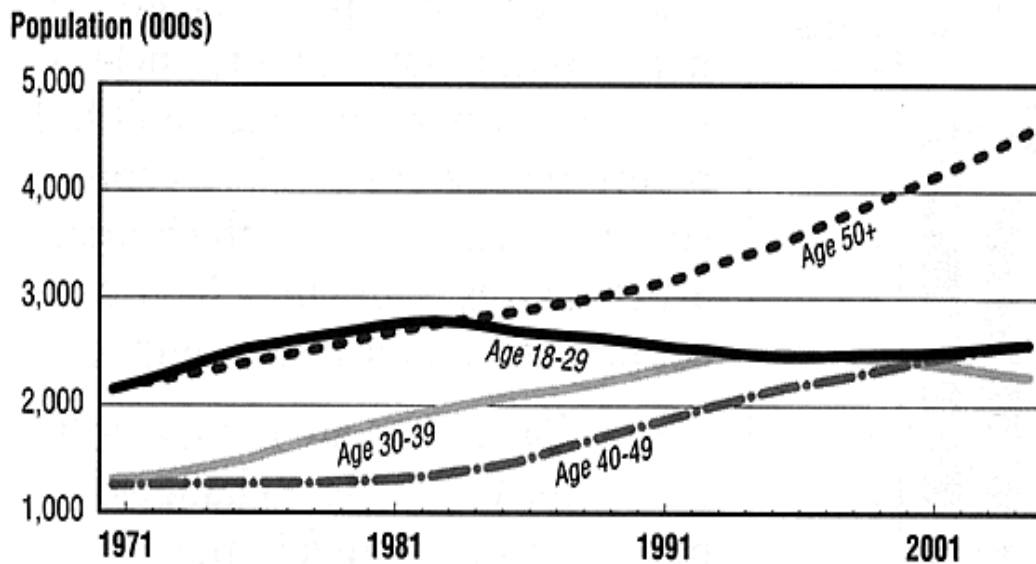
For example, the risk of federal incarceration for an 18- to 29-year-old male was about 0.14% in 1992, up from about 0.12% in 1976. The 1976 risk rates for other age groups were significantly lower-just 0.055% for 30- to 39-year-old men, 0.025% for 40- to 49-year-old men, and about 0.01% for men 50 and older. The risk rates for these groups have also been gradually rising over time. Impact of the "baby boom" and "baby bust" Immediately following the Second World War, Canada experienced both rapid growth in its under-30 population and a relatively steady increase in crime and incarceration rates. This confirmed the view that crime levels can, to a great extent, be explained by demographic trends.⁽⁴⁾

However, recent concerns have shifted from the effects of the "baby boom" to the effects of the subsequent "baby bust"-problems associated with the aging of the Canadian population. Although an aging population is sure to have its own unique set of problems, this new trend should dampen future incarceration rates as the number and proportion of high-risk youths diminishes, while the number of low-risk males (50 or older) increases dramatically (see Figure 1).

The over-50 male population will continue to increase during the next decade, from about 3 million to more than 4.5 million by 2005. The other three adult male age groups will converge at about 2.5 million each, and remain at this level until 2005.

The Correctional Service of Canada has long been interested in demographic change, for obvious reasons. In the late 1970s, a Service-developed demographic model predicted that if risk rates remained the same, federal corrections admissions would increase until 1982 (the year the number of 18- to 29-year-olds peaked in the general population). This was to be followed by a major reversal, as the under-30 population decreased.

Figure 1
Canadian Male Population and Projections



However, although population trends have emerged as expected, the predicted correctional results have not (see Table 1).

The differences between actual and predicted admissions are highly significant. They illustrate increases in annual federal corrections admissions where demographics predicted stable or slightly declining admissions.

Clearly, there is a significant difference between what was predicted and what actually happened. Numerous social changes can account for these discrepancies, including a rather robust criminal and corrections law and policy agenda.⁽⁵⁾

However, another plausible reason for the discrepancy could be the countervailing effect of structural changes in employment patterns, particularly the general upward drift of unemployment and the emergence of a permanent sector of unemployed youth. Unemployment counter-trends Young males with steady jobs are typically believed to be at much lower risk of criminal behaviour and incarceration. Research has generally found a modest but significant inverse correlation between incarceration and unemployment. For example, recent research has found a small but significant relationship between changes in the unemployment rate and changes in the size of the overall prison population in Canada.⁽⁶⁾

The effects of unemployment (unemployment associated with either cyclical recessions or with long-term structural changes in the labour market) include an assortment of social and psychological

disorders, such as child poverty, family breakdown, mental health difficulties, suicide, and rising crime and incarceration rates.

However, research efforts have only been able to generate weak empirical support for such theories.⁽⁷⁾ For example, analysis conducted for this article found a significant, but weak, relationship between changes in unemployment rates and federal corrections admissions-it could explain just 7% of the variance in annual male admissions.

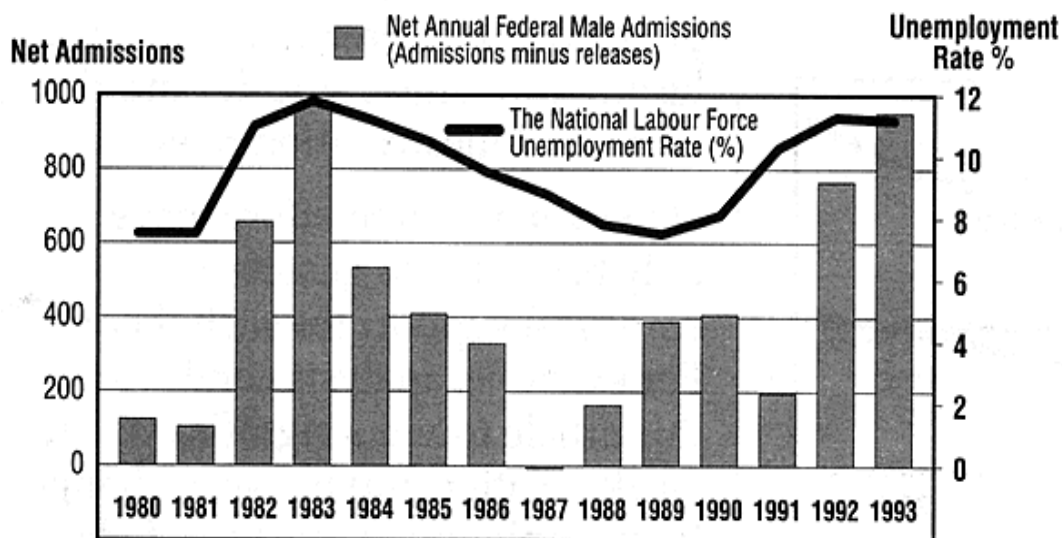
Table 1

Actual Predicted Male Federal Corrections Admissions (1982-1992)			
Year	Actual admissions	Predicted admissions	Difference
1982	5,307	5,307	0
1983	5,655	5,356	+299
1984	5,715	5,366	+385
1985	5,760	5,357	+313
1986	5,916	5,350	+566
1987	6,020	5,359	+661
1988	6,193	5,372	+821
1989	6,151	5,388	+763
1990	6,434	5,387	+1,047
1991	6,331	5,477	+854
1992	7,104	5,478	+1,626

Incarceration and recessionary unemployment Interestingly, the experience of the Service in recent economic recessions suggests that a stronger unemployment / incarceration relationship exists in practice. The two major recessions since 1980 have both been accompanied by significant increases in net (total custody admissions minus releases) annual admissions (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Comparison of Correctional Service of Canada Admissions Growth and Unemployment



The relationship between economic recession and net admissions is quite modest, with increases of between 25 and 50 admissions each month. However, even a small absolute increase in admissions will have a significant impact on the annual growth of the correctional population and this impact will typically endure for many months, until the inmate is released.

For example, there were 6,400 federal corrections admissions in 1991 (about 625 per month). Therefore, even small increases (as few as 25 to 50 extra inmates per month) would translate into an additional 300 to 600 inmates over the year. Annual population growth would, as a result, be double or triple its usual level (350 inmates).

Parole releases are also affected by rising unemployment. The early release of eligible offenders (six months before completing one-third of their sentence for day parole or after completing one-third of their sentence for full parole) becomes more difficult if employment opportunities are not available in the community. Many eligible inmates may, as a result, remain incarcerated until their statutory release eligibility (after serving two-thirds of their sentence).

Therefore, although research suggests only weak statistical relationships, the Service has been forced to adjust to the significant impacts of the two recent recessions. Structural unemployment trends The recession that began in 1991 appears to be longer and more drawn out than the recession of 1981-1983. Back then, the economy rebounded quickly, and federal corrections admissions peaked rapidly and then declined significantly.

The same general pattern could be happening today, but it is unclear whether admission trends will fully revert to previous levels. Deeper structural changes (see the Sunter article in this issue) may have a countervailing long-term impact.

Young Canadians are not the only ones affected by these changes, but the impacts are felt most dramatically by this group.

For example, labour force participation rates for youths (aged 15-19) have dropped significantly in recent years. Between 1989 and 1992, the percentage of male youths with jobs dropped from 52% to 41%.

Young people have always had higher unemployment rates, but their unemployment levels have reached a historic high.

In 1992, the unemployment rate for those between 15 and 19 was 19.7%, compared with 16.6% for those aged 20 to 24 and 9.9% for those 25 and older.

Youth school enrolment is also at unprecedented levels. For example, 77% of those between 15 and 19 were full-time students in 1991-1992, compared with just 65% in 1975-1976.⁽⁸⁾

However, not all youths are in the labour force or school. Studies indicate the emergence of an unemployed (and under-employed) group of youths, who are in neither school or the labour force.⁽⁹⁾ This under-employed and under-educated group is not only large, it seems likely to increase unless action is taken.

From a corrections perspective, the profiles of young federal offenders bear a striking similarity to the unemployed / out-of-school group of youths.

They tend to have below-average education, irregular job experience and may lack basic employment and social skills-the basic "social capital" required to achieve success, or even durable attachment, in a difficult labour market.⁽¹⁰⁾ Criminogenic concentrations What should concern us most is if this concentration of labour force/school dropouts develops into a large and permanent fixture in Canada. Research merely reinforces the argument that concentrations of poverty and joblessness are criminogenic.⁽¹¹⁾

The Service recently recognized the importance of systematically identifying the needs of offenders by developing responses to dynamic criminogenic factors-factors that can potentially be changed through active intervention and programming.

However, this response also requires at least minimal external supports. For example, there must be jobs for youths to return to. A permanently underemployed population, which could draw offenders back into criminogenic patterns, must also be avoided. Racing forward toward the future An artist once depicted the Angel Gabriel being blown backwards into the future, seeing human progress only through the accumulated chaos and debris of history. Examining social trends can be something like that - we often fail to turn to see where we are going.

We should bear in mind that federal penitentiaries are hardly the best places for developing the type of "social capital" that inmates are often missing. Inmate education and skills-training programs can, at best, address only their most basic needs.

The Correctional Service of Canada must do what it can for all its clients. However, in the long run, it will be better and cheaper to establish effective measures in the community that will prevent individuals

from embarking on a life of crime. Much research is, therefore, required to understand the fundamental processes at work in today's society and to develop effective alternatives to incarceration.

(1)2C-340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.

(2)Where I refer to a "crime" relationship, I am implicitly including incarceration as well.

(3)G. Nettler, *Explaining Crime* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978). See also E. H. Sutherland and D.R. Cressy, *Criminology*, Eighth Edition (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970). The literature is too vast for a complete review.

(4)For more complete discussions of the age-crime nexus, see T.T. Hartnagel, "The Effects of Age and Sex Compositions of Provincial Populations on Provincial Crime Rates," *Canadian Journal of Law and Criminology*, 67 (1977). See also T.N. Ferdinand, "Demographic Shifts and Criminality: An Inquiry," *British Journal of Criminology*, 10 (1970). And see C.J. Welford, "Age Composition and the Increase in Recorded Crime," *Criminology*, 11 (1973).

(5)Changes to the corrections system (such as Bills C-67 and C-36) were expected to have a neutral effect on penitentiary population growth. However, other major revisions and amendments to the *Criminal Code*, and policing and corrections policy (relating to issues such as capital punishment, firearms, the *Young Offenders Act*, drinking and driving, assault and rape statutes, spousal and child abuse, and domestic violence) have affected incarceration rates.

(6)B. Schissel, "The Influence of Economic Factors and Social Control Policy on Crime Rate Changes in Canada: 1962-1988," *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 17 (1992).

(7)For a detailed review of some of the time series and cross-sectional research, see S. K. Long and A. D. Witte, "Current Economic Trends: Implications for Crime and Criminal Justice," *Crime and Criminal Justice in a Declining Economy*, K. N. Wright, ed. (Cambridge: Delgeschlager, Gunn and Hain, 1981). See also D. Cantor and K. C. Land, "Unemployment and Crime Rates in Post-World War II United States: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis," *American Sociological Review*, 50 (1985): 317-323.

(8)C. Lindsay et al, *Youth in Canada: Second Edition* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1994): 17.

(9)D. Sunter, "Youth's - Waiting it Out," *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, 75-001E (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1994).

(10)Economists in the 1960s and 1970s developed a theory called "human capital" to explain the relationship between educational systems and the labour market. Basically, knowledge (human capital) was seen as economically equivalent to other traditional forms of capital, for which there were buyers, sellers and markets. The concept of "social capital" has been developed to include other basic social attributes that relate to either the successful integration into the social system or the attainment of human capital. See G. S. Becker, "Crime and Punishment: An Economic Approach," *Journal of Political*

Economy, 76 (1966):169-217. See also J. Coleman, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," *American Journal of Sociology*, 94 (1988). And see J. Coleman, "The Rational Reconstruction of Society," *American Sociological Review*, 58 (1993).

⁽¹¹⁾J. Hagan, "The Social Embeddedness of Crime and Unemployment," *Criminology*, 31, 4 (1993): 466.