

Violent crime trends in Canada since 1983

The federal correction community has a natural interest in violent crime trends, since inmates convicted of violent crimes (especially homicide, sexual assault, non-sexual assault and robbery) constitute the major proportion of the federal offender population.² Violent crime trends, therefore, speak directly to the probable workload of the Correctional Service of Canada. In addition, public fears concerning violent crime have often foreshadowed major legislative initiatives, which can significantly affect the Service.

Many Canadians are concerned about the threat violent crime poses to their security, and are more concerned about violent crime than about any other type of crime.³ Yet it is often suggested that the fear of violent crime tends to exceed greatly the actual threat or experience of violent crime. This raises the questions of how much violent crime there is and whether it is increasing.

Major trends

- The violent crime rate recorded by the police has increased significantly since 1983. However, the rate has dropped each of the last three years.
- Minor (level 1) assaults account for 60% of all violent crimes and most of the increase in the overall violent crime rate over the last decade.
- The rate of level 1 sexual assaults reported to the police has grown the most rapidly since 1983, although these offences account for a much smaller fraction of all violent crimes.
- Sharp increases in both assault and sexual assault follow major legal changes to these offences in 1983 and changes to the way police respond to cases of spousal assault.
- The more serious (level 3) assaults, sexual assaults and robbery incidents have shown more modest or no increases, while homicide rates have declined since 1983. The 1995 homicide rate is the lowest recorded in 25 years.

Factors affecting violent crime rates

It is difficult to say whether the steady increase in the violent crime rate recorded by police up to 1992 is a reflection of actual increases in the levels of violence in society, artifacts of other factors or both. Nor can it be established with certainty whether the more recent declines reflect a real reduction in levels of violence.

Changing societal values

Changes to the law and reduced societal tolerance toward certain types of violence, such as schoolyard violence and spousal assault, no doubt have changed the way police respond to and record these types of incidents. About 60% of violent crime is classified as level 1 assaults where the physical injury to the victim is relatively minor, and much of the increase in total violent crime rates is attributable directly to

changing rates of level 1 assaults.

Changes to criminal law

Major changes to criminal law can have a great effect on violent crime rates. In 1983, the offences relating to rape and indecent assault were removed from the Criminal Code and replaced with three levels of sexual assault. Under the new law, both men and women can be victims of sexual assault, and charges can be brought in cases of sexual assault involving spouses.

Changes in police practices

Three parallel classifications of assault offences came into effect at that same time. Under the new assault law, police officers can lay a charge if they have "reasonable and probable cause" to believe an assault has occurred. Before 1983, police had difficulty proceeding with charges unless there was independent evidence, apart from the complainant's testimony, to corroborate the complaint. Throughout the 1980s, policy directives in police departments across the country made it mandatory for police officers

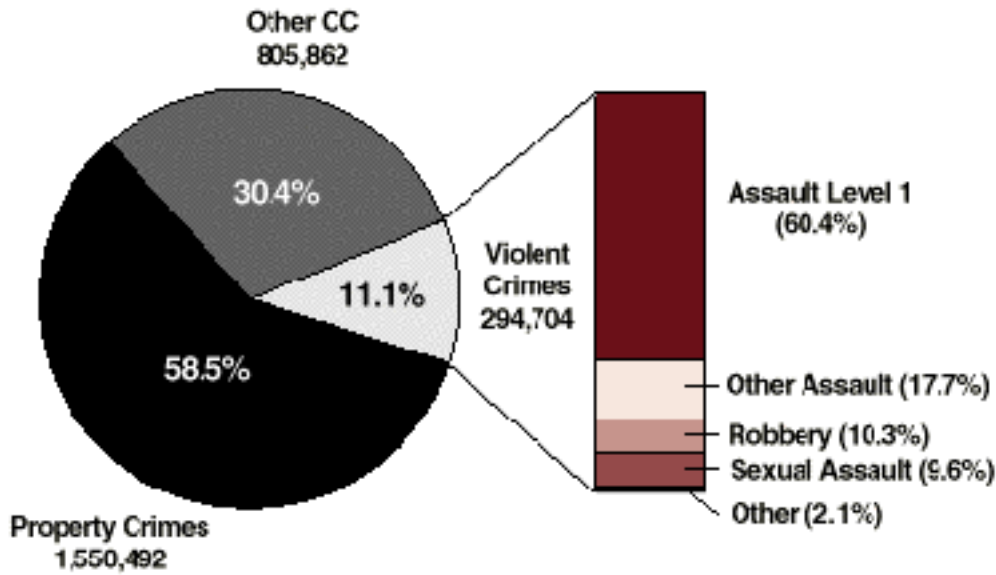
to lay charges in cases of wife assault where probable grounds existed. This removed a significant amount of discretion in the decision to lay charges and shifted domestic violence from a private to a public affair. The elevated rates of assault are at least partly due to these changes in police procedures.⁴

General trends in violent crime

Violent crimes account for a relatively small proportion of all criminal incidents recorded by the police each year. As Figure 1 indicates, there were almost 2.7 million incidents involving violations of the Criminal Code known or reported to the police in 1995. Approximately 11% of these were violent crimes. Fifty-eight percent were property offences, and 30% were other offences under the Criminal Code such as mischief, prostitution and disturbing the peace.

Figure 1

2,651,058 infractions of the Criminal Code reported to police, 1995

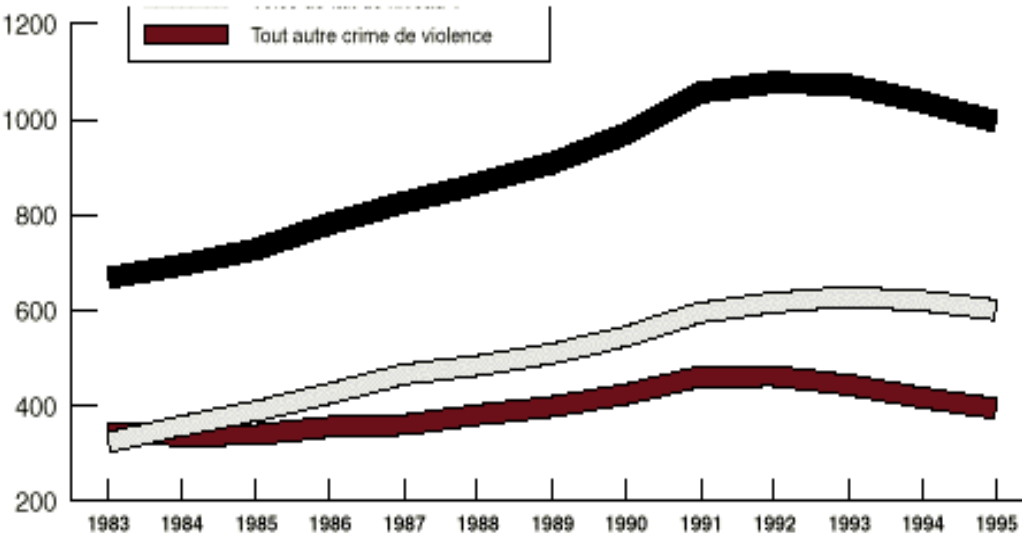


Note: *excluding traffic (172,437 offences).

The violent crime rate increased significantly over the last 15 years, but recently has declined - in some cases quite significantly (Figure 2). While the 1995 violent crime rate was 47% higher than in 1983, common assault (level 1, which increased by 85%) accounted for most of this increase (Table 1). If the relatively minor assaults were factored out, the rate for more serious types of violent assaults increased about 19%.⁵

Figure 2

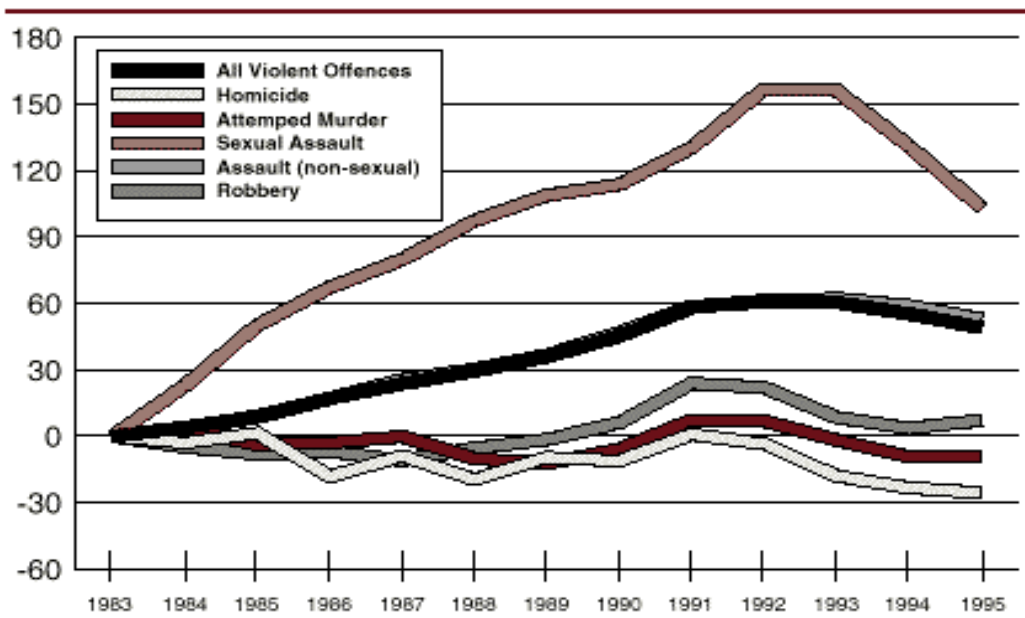
Rates of Assault Level 1 and Other Violent Crimes, 1983-1995



However, in the period from 1983 to 1992, the most rapidly increasing rate (nearly 160%) was for sexual assault. It has since declined considerably (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Cumulative Change in the Crime Rate for the Major Violent Offences Since 1983 (Percentage)



Note: taken from Statistics Canada, *Canadian Crime Statistics, 1995* (85-002-XPE) and *Violent Crime in Canada* (85-002-XPB).

The violent crime rate peaked in 1992 and has declined each year since. The rate in 1995 was 995 incidents per 100,000 population, 4% lower than the rate in 1994, which itself was 3% lower than the rate in 1993.

Most categories of violent crime declined between 1994 and 1995. Five of the seven categories showed large decreases: sexual assaults declined by 12%, other sexual offences declined by 10%, abductions by 9%, assaults by 4%, homicides by 3%. Of the remaining categories, attempted murder showed no change in rate between 1994 and 1995, while robbery increased by 3%. As Figure 3 indicates, by 1995, each of the major components of the violent crime rate had declined from a peak reached three to four years earlier, with the greatest decline in the sexual assault rate.

Assault

Non-sexual assaults account for about three quarters (78%) of all violent crimes reported to the police and so have a major influence on the overall violent crime rate. The three levels of assault established in 1983 include common (level 1) assault, assault with a weapon or causing bodily harm (level 2) and aggravated assault causing wounding, maiming, disfiguring or endangering the life of the victim (level 3). The category of "other" assaults includes assaulting a police officer, unlawfully causing bodily harm and discharging a firearm. Level 1 assaults account for 77% of all assaults and 60% of all violent crimes.

Minor assault rates increased dramatically after the new legislation in 1983, but began to level off in 1991. Rates of level 2 assaults increased at half the rate of level 1 assaults over the same period, and level 3 assaults actually declined.

Table 1

Violent Crime Trends - 1983 to 1995						
	1983		1991		1995	
Reporting Year	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
All Criminal Code (excl. traffic)	2,148,635	8,440	2,898,988	10,309	2,651,058	8,954
Violent offences	170,036	668	296,962	1,056	294,704	995
Homicide	676	3	753	3	586	2
Attempted murder	880	3	1,044	4	932	3
All Assaults	141,266	555	256,903	914	258,383	873
Sexual assault	11,932	47	30,351	108	28,216	95
Sexual assault 3 (aggravated)	550	2	464	2	300	1
Sexual assault 2 (with weapon)	840	3	971	3	658	2
Sexual assault 1 (other)	10,542	41	28,916	103	27,257	92
Assault (non-sexual)	129,334	508	226,552	806	230,167	777
Assault - level 1	82,460	324	167,227	595	178,064	601
Assault - level 2	24,274	95	37,796	134	35,854	121
Assault - level 3	3,506	14	3,884	14	2,771	9
Assault - other	19,094	75	17,645	63	13,496	46
Sex offences (non-assault)	2,940	12	3,931	14	3,490	12
Abduction	701	3	1,095	4	1,040	4
Robbery	24,274	95	33,236	118	30,273	102
Robbery with firearm	7,505	29	9,006	32	8,692	29
Robbery with other weapon	5,789	23	9,436	34	10,136	34
Robbery - no weapon	10,980	43	14,794	53	13,445	45
Property offences	1,422,703	5,589	1,726,769	6,141	1,555,492	5,237
Other CC total	536,312	2,107	843,594	3,000	805,862	2,722
July 1 Population and Estimate	25,456,300		28,120,300		29,606,100	
Note: from "Violent Crime in Canada" Juristat; 16, 6 (June 1995) and Statistics Canada, Canadian Crime Statistics; 1995 (85-002/XPE)						

Sexual offences

An estimated 22% of incarcerated federal offenders have a sexual offence conviction. Over a two-year period, this population has increased by about 10%.

The law surrounding sexual offences was also transformed in the 1980s. Legislation in 1983 abolished the offences of rape, attempted rape and indecent assault and replaced them with three levels of sexual

assault parallel with the three levels of non- sexual assault as described above.

As with assaults, the three levels of sexual assault correspond to the degree of injury and the presence of a weapon.

In addition, three child sexual abuse offences came into effect in 1988: sexual interference, invitation to sexual touching and sexual exploitation. These offences, together with incest, are included in the category of "other sexual offences." The rate at which these offences were reported to police since 1988 has remained constant, at between 12 and 14 per 100,000 population.

As Figure 3 illustrates, there was a dramatic increase in the rate of sexual assaults recorded by the police since 1983, due almost entirely to level 1 offences. A total of 27,257 level 1 offences was reported in 1995 (92 per 100,000 population), and this is more than twice the 1983 rate of 41 per 100,000 (10,542 incidents). Levels 2 and 3 sexual assaults have remained constant at between 1 and 4 per 100,000.

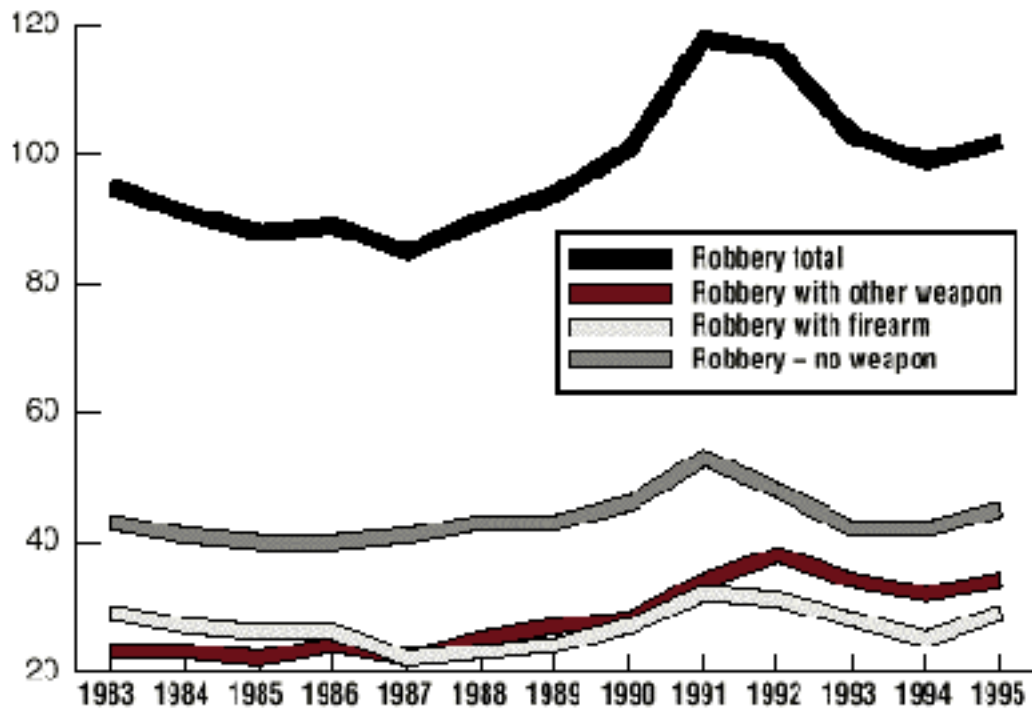
Robbery

Robbery offenders constitute about 36% of the total federal incarcerated population, an increase of about 1.6% in the last two years.

Historical trends in police-recorded robbery rates do not indicate a consistent increase but show fluctuations, with the highest rates occurring in the early 1990s (see Figure 4). The rate dipped in the intervening years.

Figure 4

Rates of Robbery by Type of Weapon Used, 1983–1995



Robberies committed with firearms follow the general trend shown for total robberies (see Figure 4). Overall, rates of robbery increased slightly in 1995 from a dip in the previous years and following a high in 1991. In all years, robberies were more likely to be committed through the use of physical force than with firearms. According to the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, the most popular target for robbers is commercial establishments, such as banks, gas stations and convenience stores. In 1994, 51% of robberies fell into this category while 40% took place on streets and other outdoor spaces.

Homicides

Homicide offenders comprise more than one fifth (22%) of the federal incarcerated population, and this population has increased by 7.1% over the last two years.

Measures of homicide are generally considered the most reliable of the violent crime statistics because homicide is not as susceptible to subtle changes in public willingness to report, or to changes in police policy or recording practices. Almost all homicides become known to the police and are recorded in police statistics.

Homicides understandably receive much media attention, particularly those involving very vulnerable victims or heinous acts of violence. This may give the impression that very serious violence is on the rise. Notwithstanding extensive media coverage of particularly brutal killings and the trials of the accused, the homicide rate has generally declined and, in 1995, reached its lowest level in 25 years. There were 586 homicides in Canada in 1995, 10 fewer than in 1994, which was

44 fewer than in 1993. The 1995 rate of 1.98 per 100,000 population was 3% lower than the 1994 rate of 2.04, which was itself 51% lower than the 1975 high of 3.02.

Since 1961, when collection of national homicide statistics began, there have been two distinct trends. Between 1961 and 1975, the homicide rate increased steadily from 1.28 per 100,000 to peak at 3.02, an increase of 136%. From 1975, despite yearly fluctuations, the homicide rate has declined gradually to 1.98 per 100,000 in 1995.

During the latter period, two significant pieces of legislation were enacted: the first abolished the death penalty in 1976, and the second (in 1978) controlled the proliferation and ownership of guns. By restricting access to deadly weapons, legislators intended to reduce the availability of deadly weapons during violent interactions.

Typically, about one third of all homicides are committed with firearms, averaging about 214 annually. These figures are relatively small, and there has been a general decline in the rate of firearm use in homicides from 38% in 1978 to 30% in 1995.⁶

International homicide patterns

The homicide rate is considered the most reliable measure in comparing crime levels among nations. The United States, which has a reputation for being more violent than Canada, generally reports a homicide rate three to four times higher. In 1994, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported 23,305 homicides or nine per 100,000 Americans.

In the United States, where approximately four in every ten households contain a firearm, about 70% of all homicides in 1994 were committed with firearms.⁷ In Canada, where gun control laws are generally much stricter, the proportion of homicides committed with firearms (33%) is less than half that. When homicides committed with a firearm are factored out, the difference in the 1994 rates between these two countries is less dramatic -1.4 per 100,000 population in Canada versus 2.5 in the United States. In other words, much of the difference in the homicide rates between the two countries can be explained by a much higher use of firearms in the United States.

A comparison to other western countries, however, shows that Canada's homicide rate was at the higher end in the mid 1990s. Of the countries surveyed, the United States (8.5), Northern Ireland (6.5), France (2.4) and Scotland (2.1) had higher homicide rates. The other European countries showed lower rates: Switzerland (1.1), Sweden (1.8), England and Wales (1.4), Germany (1.7), Italy (1.7) and Norway (1.0).⁸ However, there is no clear pattern between homicide rates and the rates for other violent crimes among these countries (see Table 2).

Table 2

Victimization Rates for Violent Crimes				
	rate per 100,000			
	Homicide	Assault	Sexual Assault	Robbery
United States (1995)	8.5	50	15	17
Northern Ireland (1994)	6.5	18	4	5
Italy (1994)	1.7	8	10	13
Canada (1995)	2.0	44	18	11
France (1994)	2.4	20	6	4
Switzerland (1994)	1.1	12	0	5
Sweden (1994)	1.8	27	8	3
England and Wales (1995)	1.4	28	3	9
Germany (1994)	1.7	31	17	8
Scotland (1994)	2.1	18	8	5
Norway (1989)	1.0	30	6	5

Note: from "Understanding Crime: Experiences of Crime and Crime Control," United Nations Interregional Criminal Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), Rome, August, 1993

Patterns of victimization

There are identifiable patterns to the way in which violence is committed, with certain segments of the population reporting higher rates. In 1994, of all violent crimes with an identified suspect, 88% of those suspects were male. Half of all incidents involved a male perpetrator and a female victim, and 39% involved a male perpetrator and a male victim. The remaining 12% were committed by female offenders, who had an equal number of male and female victims.

Women have higher rates of violent victimization than do men. According to the 1993 General Social Survey, the national rate for three violent crimes (assault, sexual assault and robbery) was 93 per 1,000 people aged 15 years and older. For women, the rate was 100 per 1,000 females and for men it was 84 per 1,000 males.

The circumstances of violent events involving men and women also differ in important ways. Women report much higher rates of sexual assault (29 incidents per 1,000 females compared to a very small number of men), while men report robbery rates twice those of women (12 per 1,000 males compared to 6 per 1,000 females). The sexes report very similar rates of assault (68 and 66 per 1,000).

version of "Violent Crime in Canada," Juristat, 16,6, (1995).

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2. For example, as of December 31, 1996, more than one fifth (22%) of the federal incarcerated population had a conviction for homicide, another one fifth (22%) for a sexual offence and one third (32.8%)

for robbery. These numbers include offenders who have convictions for several violent crimes. For more detailed statistics on federal offenders with violent convictions, see L.L. Motiuk and R.L. Belcourt, Homicide, Sex, Robbery and Drug Offenders in Federal Corrections: An End-of-1996 Review, Research Brief No. B-16

(Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1997).

3. Almost half (46%) of Canadians polled in the 1993 General Social Survey (Statistics Canada) felt that the level of violent crime in their own neighbourhoods had recently increased. In the 1988 survey, 43% of those polled said an attack or threats of violence were the types of crimes of greatest concern to them. In 1993, 12% of Canadians stated that they felt very unsafe walking alone in their neighbourhoods after dark, and an additional 15% felt somewhat unsafe. Twenty-five percent of Canadians also felt very or somewhat worried when alone in their homes at night. Worry is higher for women, urban dwellers and recent victims of crime.

4. B. Kingsley, "Assault" in Crime Counts: A Criminal Event Analysis, L. Kennedy and V. Sacco (eds.) (Scarborough, Ont.: Nelson, 1996): 101.

5. D. Hendrick, "Canadian Crime Statistics, 1995," Juristat, 16, 10, 1996.

6. O. Federowycz, "Homicide in Canada -1995," Juristat, 16, 11, 1996.

7. Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics -1994, (Washington: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, 1995): 318.

8. "Understanding Crime: Experiences of Crime and Crime Control," Report No. 49, (Rome: United Nations Interregional Criminal Justice Research Institute), August, 1993.