

# Have falling crime rates and increased use of probation reduced incarceration? — Some trends and comparisons

by **Roger Boe and Mike Muirhead**  
Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada

The inmate population in Canada has grown faster in recent years than either crime or the overall population. This is particularly noteworthy because it has occurred despite a rapid increase in the use of probation and other community dispositions. This article examines these recent trends, and compares Canadian and American experiences.

Canada has witnessed significantly different rates of growth over the past several years in its population, reported crimes, and average annual prison and community supervision counts. These differences are illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the changes since 1991–1992.

## Demographic trends

Demographic changes have significantly affected crime and correctional trends.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 shows how the overall Canadian population increased since 1991–1992. This increase amounted to nearly 1.9 million persons, a growth of 7%. Population growth alone has accounted for some of the increase in crime and incarceration.

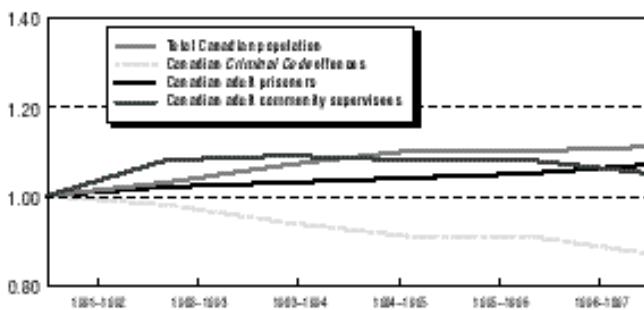
Population aging, however, is now offsetting the impact of overall population growth on crime. Figure 2 shows that, since 1981, the number of males in 18–29 age group (the cohort at highest risk of criminal involvement) has been in absolute decline, after peaking in 1982, and males aged 30–39 peaked in 1996. For males, the 40–49 and over-50 cohorts are projected to increase in the coming decade.<sup>3</sup>

## Crime trends

Since 1991, the number of Criminal Code offences known to the police has decreased from just over 3 million in 1991 to just over 2.6 million in 1997<sup>4</sup> — a decline of 13%. Moreover, violent crimes — which have generally increased faster than other offences —

Figure 1

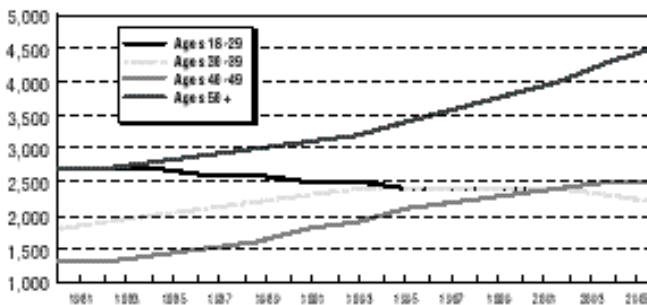
Relative Growth of Canadian Crime and Prison Populations Since 1991–1992 (1991–1992=1.00)



Sources: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, *Criminal Justice at a Glance*, 1997; CD-ROM (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 1997); Statistics Canada, *Review of Adult Correctional Services in Canada, 1996–97* (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 1998).

Figure 2

Male Adult Population (000s) and Projections, Canada, 1981 to 2005



Sources: Statistics Canada Projections from the 1991 Census

have also declined since 1993.<sup>5</sup> As noted, the aging of the Canadian population has likely contributed to the decline in the crime rate.

## Offender population growth

**Incarceration.** Since 1991–1992, the average reported count of adult inmates in federal and provincial or territorial institutions has increased by 11%, from about 30,700 to 34,200 (Table 1). Over this period, therefore, the rate of increase in prison populations has significantly exceeded the increase in crime

and has mostly outpaced the growth of the Canadian population.

**Community Supervision.** As Figure 1 illustrates, the total number of adults under community supervision jumped significantly during the first part of the period under study and then gradually dropped, although not as low as 1991–1992 numbers. Since 1991–1992 the adult community supervision population counts increased from about 112,000 to almost 118,000, a gain that just exceeds 5%.

In Canada, probation can be imposed as a sanction on its own or may be accompanied by an additional sanction such as a term of imprisonment not exceeding two years, an

intermittent sentence, a fine, a suspended sentence, or a conditional discharge.

For adults, a sentence of probation<sup>6</sup> is the main alternative to imprisonment used by the courts. Information from Statistics Canada's Adult Criminal Court Survey, which is still relatively new, indicates that probation was ordered in 37% of provincial criminal court convictions, and was accompanied by a median sentence of one year. Of all convictions, 40% produced only one sanction, 45% resulted in two sanctions and almost 10% involved three or more sanctions. Among the combination sentences, prison and probation accounted for 12%, probation and fine 8%, and probation and some other sanction for 23%.<sup>7</sup>

Table 1

**Comparative Adult Prison and Probation Growth in the United States and Canada Since 1991**

<b>Canadian Index</b>						
1991–1992 = 1.00	1991–1992	1992–1993	1993–1994	1994–1995	1995–1996	1996–1997
Total Canadian Population	1.00	1.02	1.03	1.04	1.05	1.07
Canadian Criminal Code offences	1.00	0.98	0.94	0.91	0.91	0.87
Canadian adult prisoner counts	1.00	1.03	1.07	1.10	1.10	1.11
Canadian adult probation and parole counts	1.00	1.08	1.09	1.08	1.08	1.05
<b>American Index</b>						
1991 = 1.00	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Total U.S. population	1.00	1.01	1.02	1.03	1.04	*
U.S. crime index offences	1.00	0.97	0.95	0.94	0.93	*
U.S. jail and prison counts	1.00	1.06	1.12	1.21	1.30	*
U.S. probation and parole counts	1.00	1.05	1.08	1.11	1.14	*
<b>Canadian Growth</b>						
<b>Trends 1991–1992 to 1996–1997</b>						
	1991–1992	1992–1993	1993–1994	1994–1995	1995–1996	1996–1997
Total Canadian population	28,120,000	28,542,400	28,946,900	29,251,200	29,606,000	29,997,540
Canadian Criminal Code offences	3,027,681	2,970,525	2,852,915	2,757,355	2,758,992	2,624,148
Canadian adult prisoner counts	30,723	31,709	32,803	33,759	33,785	34,167
Canadian adult probation and parole counts	111,682	120,116	121,650	120,542	120,411	117,683
<b>American Growth</b>						
<b>Trends 1991 to 1995</b>						
	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Total U.S. population	252,618,000	255,391,000	258,132,000	260,682,000	263,168,000	*
U.S. crime index offences	14,872,900	14,438,200	14,141,800	13,990,000	13,867,000	*
U.S. jail and prison counts	1,216,664	1,292,347	1,364,881	1,469,947	1,577,845	*
U.S. probation and parole counts	3,319,520	3,470,212	3,579,260	3,671,393	3,796,703	*

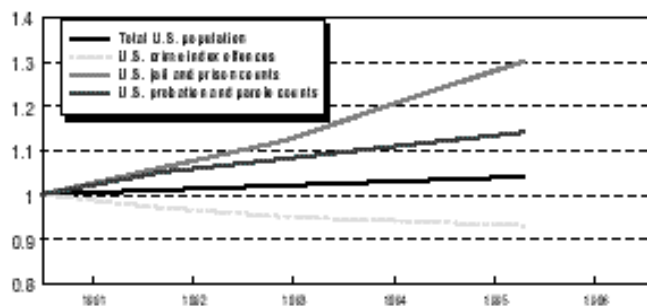
Sources: Statistics Canada, *Review of Adult Correctional Services in Canada, 1996–97*, (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada 1998).  
 Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, "Criminal Justice at a Glance, 1997," CD-ROM.  
 U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Key Facts at a Glance," Web site [[www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/Welcome](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/Welcome)].  
 U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*. Annual. (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office).

\* 1996 data not yet available for United States

\*\* The U.S. crime index is compiled annually from a survey by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, covering occurrences of seven major offences throughout the United States. It is commonly used to indicate major crime rates and trends.

Figure 3

### Growth of U.S. Crime and Correction Populations Since 1991 (1991=1.00)



Sources: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Key Facts at a Glance," Web site ([www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/welcome](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/welcome)); U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Statistical Yearbook of Criminal Justice Statistics, Annual* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office).

Note: The U.S. crime index is compiled annually from a survey by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, covering occurrences of seven major offenses throughout the United States. It is commonly used to indicate major crime rates and trends.

### Comparisons with the United States

The United States has taken a different approach to crime and incarceration over recent years. Between 1991 and 1995, the populations of U.S. prisons and jails, and the number of people on probation and parole, have increased significantly, at rates well above those of crime or the overall U.S. population. In fact, U.S. growth trends in population and crime are remarkably similar to Canadian trends (compare Figure 1 and Figure 3).<sup>8</sup>

The increase in the U.S. prison population — up almost 30% in just four years — was nearly triple the 10% growth experienced in Canada. The U.S. parole and probation population also increased much faster than the comparable population in Canada — 14% versus 8%, or nearly double the rate. As the U.S. and Canadian crime and population growth rates are similar, then other factors, such as differences in public policy toward crime deterrence, must have a major influence.

### The impact of community sentences

The result of Canada's various new (or amended) correctional legislation over the past five years has been a slight reduction in the use of

incarceration relative to the number of adults charged by police, along with a slightly greater use of community dispositions.<sup>9</sup> However, the data indicate that alternative sanctions have, at best, only modestly reduced incarceration growth. Canada's approach appears most successful when it is contrasted with the United States, where parole and probation grew twice as rapidly as in Canada, yet where prison populations still grew at three times the Canadian rate.

The incarcerated population in both Canada and the United States grew faster than the respective crime rates, which declined, or the respective overall population growth rates, which were very similar. Despite rapid expansion of the community supervision population the increased use of community dispositions appears to arise from their popularity as an additional sanction, and not from use as an alternative to incarceration.

### Summary

The crime rate will probably continue to decline for at least the next five to ten years. First, as the population ages, the size of the higher at-risk young adult population will shrink. Most demographers define the "baby boom" as the age cohort born between 1946 and 1966. In 1986, therefore, the oldest boomer was 40 and the youngest was 20. By 1996, this cohort was between 30 and 50 years of age, and by 2006 it will be between 40 and 60 years of age.

Demographic pressures may favour a continuing reduction in crime and incarceration rates for another reason — as the baby boomers begin to age out of the labour force, the range of economic opportunities available to young people should improve.

In future, employers will be forced to compete in a much smaller labour market. However, we have already seen that a decline in the crime rate does not necessarily translate into a decline in prison populations, even when

The increase in the U.S. prison population — up almost 30% in just four years — was nearly triple the 10% growth experienced in Canada.

community sanctions are used more. If a decline in incarceration is desired, therefore, public policy must ensure that future

community supervision legislation does not merely extend the reach of the criminal justice system. ■

- <sup>1</sup> 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.
- <sup>2</sup> Especially since David Foot made his provocative assertion that "demographics explains two-thirds of everything," in *Boom, Bust and Echo* (Toronto, ON: Macfarlane Walter and Ross, 1996): 1.
- <sup>3</sup> The information for this chart is based on Statistics Canada 1991 Census data and projections; projections based on the 1996 Census were not yet available. The trends and projections may need to be modified when newer projections become available.
- <sup>4</sup> The statistics are for actual Criminal Code offences excluding excluding Criminal Code traffic offences, taken from Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (CCJS), *Criminal Justice at a Glance, 1997*, CD-ROM (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 1997).
- <sup>5</sup> CCJS, *Criminal Justice at a Glance*.
- <sup>6</sup> A probation sentence may be accompanied by specific conditions, in addition to the basic ones, which are to keep the peace, be of good behaviour and appear before the court as required.

- <sup>7</sup> Note that these combination categories may include additional sanctions and are therefore not mutually exclusive. They are from: Statistics Canada, "Adult Criminal Court Statistics, 1995-96," *Juristat* 18, 7.
- <sup>8</sup> The population of the United States increased in a similar manner to Canada (4% growth versus 5% in Canada), and crime also decreased, although not at quite as rapid a rate (it decreased more slowly, by nearly 7% versus just over 13% in Canada). The United States also mirrored Canada, in that there was a peak in crime in 1991 followed by a decline.
- <sup>9</sup> "...custody admissions in Canada seem to have maintained a constant relationship to the number of adults charged since 1986-87. However, since 1988-89 there has been a tendency for an increased use of probation relative to the number of adults charged by police." Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Corrections Program, *Community Corrections Programs: Provinces and Territories*, (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, February 1993): 9.

## Access to information

***The Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, regularly produces research reports and briefs on a variety of corrections-related topics. To obtain copies of specific reports/briefs, contact the Research Information Centre at (613) 995-3975.***

***You can also access Research publications on the Internet via the Correctional Service of Canada Web site at <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca>.***