

Youth Crime Trends in British Columbia

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This article presents findings from a study of youth court histories of young persons in British Columbia. The data, collected by the Youth Court Survey (YCS) of the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics from the British Columbia Young Offenders Registry, relate to individuals born from 1972 to 1975. They provide a unique, court-based view of the crimes and court experiences of individuals within the jurisdiction of the Young Offenders Act from 1984, when the oldest turned 12, to 1993, when the youngest turned 18.

The study determines the feasibility of using year-of-birth or generation-based data from the YCS for policy-relevant research. This article focuses on youth court histories that included offences in the person or weapons category. Age-crime profiles are also presented to compare the potential of preventive and reactive strategies to reduce different kinds of youth crime.

The prevalence of youth court careers and the frequency of offending

Approximately 12% of the male and 3% of the female population born from 1972 to 1975 were convicted of at least one offence under the Young Offenders Act in British Columbia.

The youth court histories of 10,904 male offenders included six times as many convictions (38,314) as those of 2,603 female offenders (6,326), or 85% of the total offences. Boys averaged 3.5 convictions and girls 2.4. A significantly larger proportion of female histories included only one offence — 57% compared with 44% for male histories.

Table 1

| Convictions by Sex of Offender and Kind of Offence | | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| Offender | Kind of Offence | Number | Proportion | Cumulative Proportion |
| Male | Breaking and entering | 7,617 | 0.171 | — |
| Male | Theft <\$1,000 | 7,573 | 0.170 | 0.340 |
| Male | Fail to comply w. disposition | 4,261 | 0.095 | 0.436 |
| Male | Possession of stolen property | 3,775 | 0.085 | 0.520 |
| Male | Mischief | 2,943 | 0.066 | 0.586 |
| Female | Theft < \$1,000 | 1,979 | 0.044 | 0.631 |
| Male | Assault (common) | 1,777 | 0.040 | 0.670 |
| Male | Theft >\$1,000 | 1,609 | 0.036 | 0.706 |

| | | | | |
|--------|-------------------------------|--------|-------|-------|
| Female | Fail to comply w. disposition | 1,171 | 0.026 | 0.733 |
| Male | Failure to appear | 1,094 | 0.025 | 0.757 |
| Male | Possession of a narcotic | 790 | 0.018 | 0.775 |
| Female | Assault (Common) | 596 | 0.013 | 0.788 |
| Male | Motor vehicle theft | 510 | 0.011 | 0.800 |
| Male | Robbery | 495 | 0.011 | 0.811 |
| Male | Possession of a weapon | 477 | 0.011 | 0.821 |
| Male | Assault with weapon | 475 | 0.011 | 0.832 |
| Male | Sexual assault | 403 | 0.009 | 0.841 |
| Male | Impaired driving | 386 | 0.009 | 0.850 |
| Male | All other kinds of offences | 4,129 | 0.092 | 0.942 |
| Female | All other kinds of offences | 2,580 | 0.058 | 1.000 |
| Total | | 44,640 | 1.000 | |

Kinds of offences in youth court histories

Only 15 kinds of offences accounted for 85% of all convictions. The distribution in Table 1 positions the three offences most frequently committed by girls — theft under \$1,000, failure to comply with a disposition, and common assault, totalling 59% of all their offences — among those by boys.²

Table 2

| Male and Female Offenders Convicted of Kinds of Offences | | | | |
|---|---------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| Kind of Offence | Boys | Proportion | Girls | Proportion |
| Person or weapons | 2,790 | 0.256 | 602 | 0.23 |
| Indictable property | 4,247 | 0.389 | 368 | 0.14 |
| Hybrid/summary property | 7,120 | 0.653 | 1,776 | 0.682 |
| Administration of justice | 2,560 | 0.235 | 592 | 0.23 |
| Other | 2,199 | 0.202 | 405 | 0.16 |
| N | 10,904 | | 2,603 | |

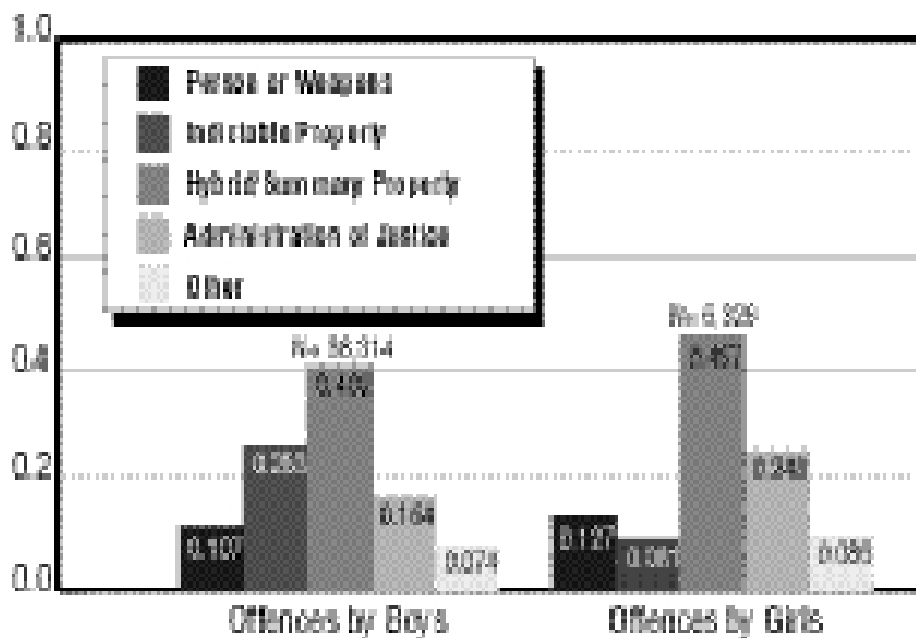
Table 3

| Proportions of Male and Female Offenders with Offences in the Person or Weapons Category | | | | |
|---|-------------------|-------------|-------------------|--------------|
| Year of Birth | Proportion | Boys | Proportion | Girls |
| 1972 | 0.22 of | 2,761 | 0.19 of | 623 |
| 1973 | 0.25 of | 2,777 | 0.22 of | 640 |
| 1974 | 0.26 of | 2,734 | 0.23 of | 670 |

| | | | | |
|-----------|----------|--------|---------|-------|
| 1975 | 0.29 of | 2,632 | 0.28 of | 670 |
| All Years | 0.256 of | 10,904 | 0.23 of | 2,603 |

Figure 1

Convictions by Kind of Offences and Sex of Offender



The “person or weapons” category accounted for 13% of female and 11% of male convictions. For girls this consisted primarily of common assault (74%). For boys, that offence accounted for only 43% of the category. An additional 45% included approximately equal proportions of robbery, possession of a weapon, assault with a weapon, and sexual assault.

Histories that included person or weapons offences

Although person or weapons offences accounted for relatively small proportions of convictions, approximately a quarter of the offenders — 26% of boys and 23% of girls — had at least one such offence in their court histories (see Table 2). These proportions (but none of the others in Table 2) varied significantly, increasing with each year of birth of the offenders as indicated in Table 3.

Because the rate of increase was greater for girls, the ratio of male to female offenders in the category decreased significantly — from 5.2:1 among those born in 1972, to 4.2:1 among those born in 1975 (see Figure 2).³ Boys who committed person or weapons offences averaged 1.5 such offences and girls averaged 1.3. There was no significant variation in these measures by year of birth. Thus, even though the proportion of offenders in the category increased, the intensity of their offending did not.

The YCS data alone cannot address the question of whether the seriousness of offending increased with

the year of birth.⁴ Research combining information on the offences from other sources with generation-based data from the YCS, however, could yield objective information on trends in the seriousness of offending by Canadian youth.

Age-crime patterns of offending from a youth court perspective

One advantage of data based on offender histories is that one can account for the age at which offenders first committed offences as well as the number of offences committed and the number of offenders active at each age. Figure 3 shows age-crime patterns for common assault, the only offence in the person or weapons category that both male and female offenders committed frequently.

The profiles suggest that girls tend to grow out of the activity and boys to grow into it. Female activity peaked at age 15 at 2.1 offences, 1.9 offenders and 1.6 first offenders per 1,000 girls born from 1972 to 1975.

For boys, the prevalence of offences, offenders and first offenders all rose sharply from 14 to 16 years of age, when a levelling out began. At age 17 there were 7.1 offences, 6.1 offenders and 5.4 first offenders per 1,000 boys.

The shape of the female age-crime profile for common assault was similar to female offending generally (see Figure 3, for example). The male profile, however, differed significantly from those of the more frequently committed offences of breaking and entering and theft under \$1,000, for which activity peaked at 15 and 16 years respectively, and for which the ratio of offences to active offenders was also larger (see Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 2

Ratio of Male to Female Offenders Convicted of Any Person or Weapons Offense by Year of Birth

Slope = -0.351, $R^2 = 0.99$, $p_{\text{slope}} = 0.007$

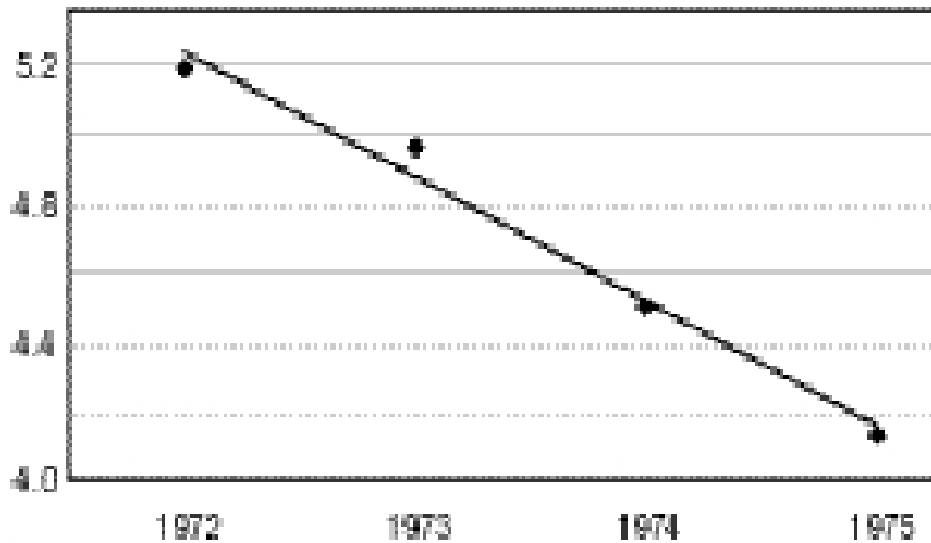
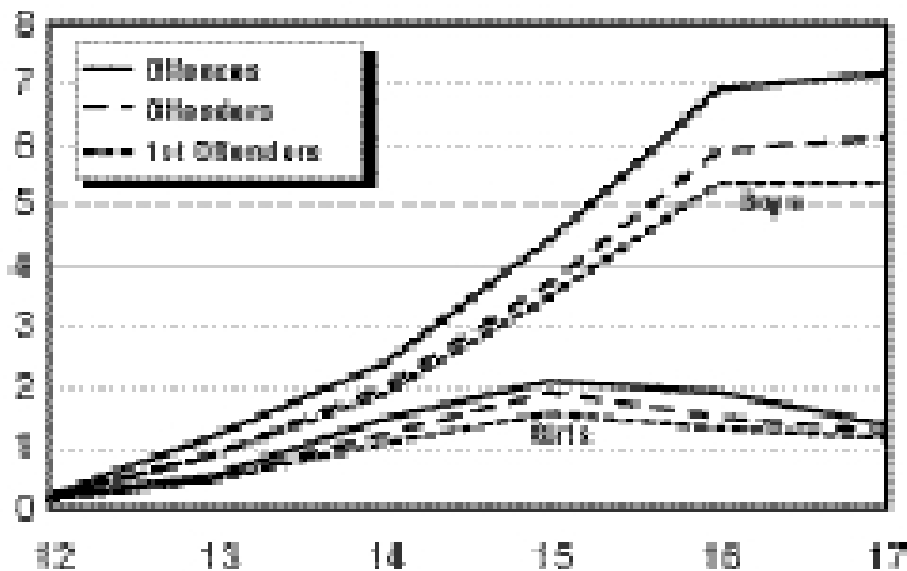


Figure 3

Offences, Offenders and First Offenders per 1,000 Population at Ages 12 to 17 Common Assault



Patterns like those in figures 3 to 5 may be used to consider the scope for the youth court system to reduce various kinds of offending. The court system responds to offences after the fact and cannot affect the prevalence of first offenders. It can prevent only reoffending. From this perspective, a best-case scenario, the ratio of offenders to first offenders would be 1:1, that is, all offending would be first offending. Whether such a scenario could be attributed specifically to the system would be an open question. It would indicate, however, that further reduction of offending would depend on a reduction in

the onset of offending and hence on influences beyond the court system. The profiles for common assault in Figure 3 approximate such a scenario.

In figures 4 and 5, however, the difference between offenders and first offenders is more pronounced and, for boys, increases steadily with age. This suggests there is room for the court system to improve in reducing repeat offending. Figure 6 charts the rise in the ratio of male offenders to first offenders for breaking and entering and theft under \$1,000, to 1.4:1 at 17 years. For common assault, the ratio rises only to 1.13:1.

A worst-case scenario for any kind of offence would be a steady increase in the frequency of offences and offenders following a decline in first offenders. Figures 4 and 5, however, show sharp declines from peaks in all measures — a good sign, although not necessarily attributable entirely to the youth justice system. It could, for example, reflect a tendency for youth to outgrow the activities.

All the profiles in figures 3 to 5 point to the importance of prevention. At every age, first offenders predominate. The steep rises in the onset of breaking and entering and theft under \$1,000 from ages 12 to 15 underline the significant effect prevention could have on the overall level of activity.

Figure 4

Offences, Offenders and First Offenders per 1,000 Population at Ages 12 to 17 Theft Under \$1,000

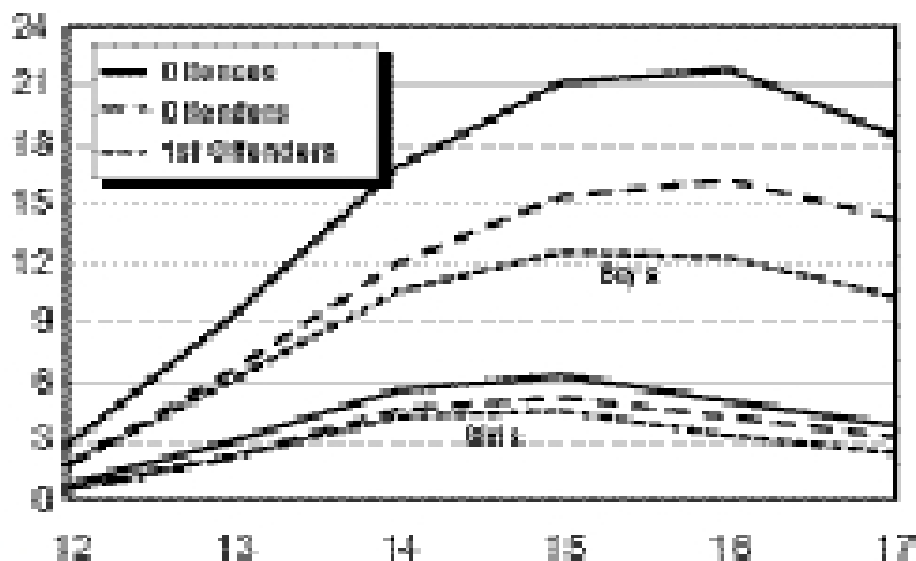
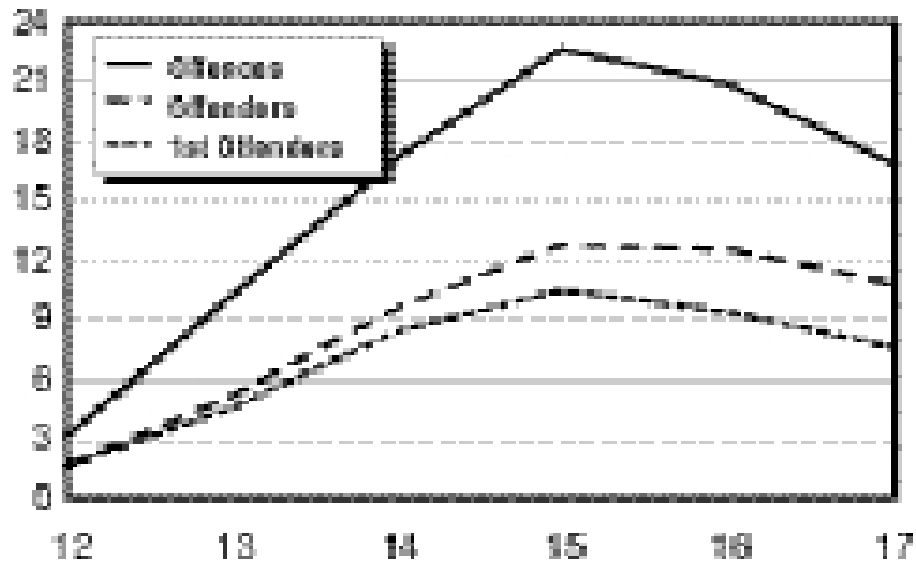


Figure 5

Offences, Offenders and First Offenders per 1,000 Male Population at Ages 12 to 17 Breaking & Entering

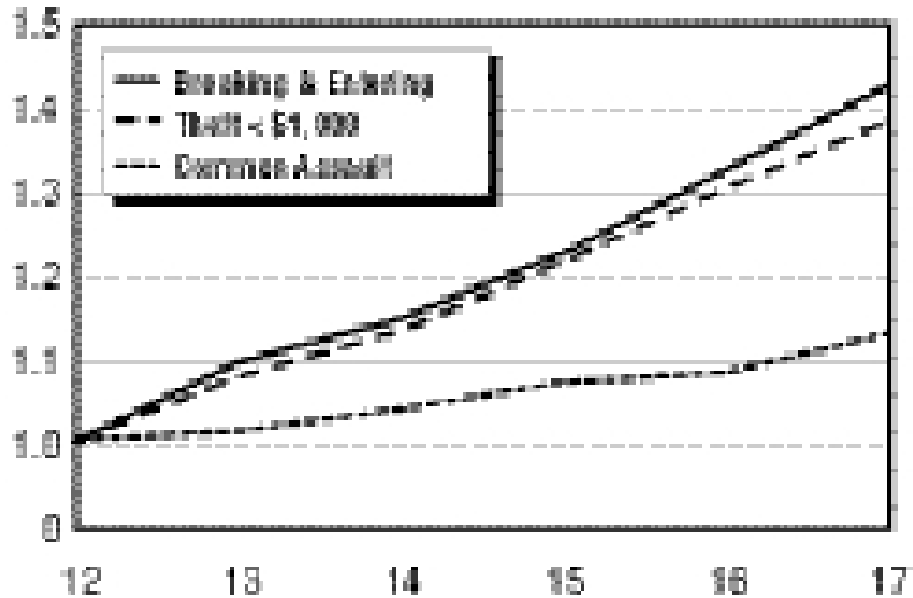


Discussion

These age-crime profiles do not account for when the first youth court intervention actually occurred and for how many offences were committed specifically before and after first dispositions. Because some individuals may have committed offences at more than one age before receiving their first dispositions, such profiles may exaggerate the extent to which youth courts could prevent repeat offending. Yet they still suggest more scope for preventive rather than for reactive strategies to reduce the amount of offending by youth.

Figure 6

Ratio of Male Offenders to First Offenders at Ages 12 to 17



This does not diminish the important role of the youth courts in reducing repeat offending, particularly by very young offenders. Further analysis focusing on recidivism will indicate that it is indeed significant. The age-crime profiles presented here are intended only to underline the relative importance of prevention.

1. 284 Wellington Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0H8.

2. Young offenders born from 1972 to 1975 passed through the jurisdiction of the Young Offenders Act before the Criminal Code was amended to raise the limit from \$1,000 to \$5,000 on the value of stolen property that defines theft as a hybrid offence, that is, one that may be a lesser indictable or summary offence.

3. Although these year-of-birth comparisons are based on proportions of youth referred to court and convicted, similar results are obtained relative to the populations eligible for referral to youth court. The overall prevalence of offenders did not vary significantly by year of birth, but the prevalence of those with offences in the person or weapons category increased.

4. It should be stressed that youth who committed the most violent kinds of offences, such as homicide, were extremely rare, and there was no indication of a trend in their prevalence.