

# Citizens' Advisory Committees: A profile of members

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**A**n integral part of the management of the federal correctional system in Canada is the involvement of the public. Citizens' Advisory Committees (CACs) represent one way that citizens are involved in the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC). CACs have been in place in some form since the mid 1960s. In 1977, the MacGuigan report recommended that CACs be implemented in all correctional institutions across Canada<sup>3</sup>. Today, there are CACs associated with all federal correctional facilities in Canada, and over 20 with parole offices. This article provides a profile of individuals who are volunteers of CACs.

**A**ccording to the CSC Commissioner's Directive 023, the objective of CACs is:

To ensure citizens are consulted in the development and implementation of policies and programs relating to offenders and to promote and maintain positive relationships between operational units and local communities through the establishment of Citizens' Advisory Committees<sup>4</sup>.

The role of CACs is to:

- facilitate mutually gainful relationships between the institution and the local community;
- assist and advise the Director in implementing national, regional and local policies and plans, with particular reference to community-related policies;
- assist and advise the Director, as required, in commenting on the development of national and regional policies and plans;
- promote positive interaction between the institution and the local community; and
- participate in the development and maintenance of community resources for the Service<sup>5</sup>.

In order to gain a better understanding of the individuals who volunteer on CACs, the Research Branch of CSC, in partnership with the Community Engagement and Evaluation and Review Branches of CSC and the National Executive Committee of CACs, undertook an

examination of CACs. A membership survey was sent to all CAC chairs, requesting the participation of members. By mid-March 2003, 194 completed surveys had been returned<sup>6</sup>.

In total, 25 respondents were from the Pacific region, 55 from the Prairie region, 38 from the Ontario region, 41 from the Québec region, and 31 from the Atlantic region. Of the completed surveys, 136 were from CACs associated with federal correctional facilities, 43 from CACs associated with parole offices, and 10 from CACs associated with both correctional facilities and parole offices<sup>7</sup>.

## Involvement in CACs

The largest proportion of CAC members said they became a member of the CAC because another member (46%) or someone in CSC (38%) asked them to join. Members joined the CAC for a variety of reasons, such as wanting to have greater community involvement (66%), wanting to learn more about the criminal justice system (41%), wanting to contribute to a safe society (41%), or wanting to assist offenders (33%)<sup>8</sup>. The vast majority (90%) said that they participate in other volunteer activities.

The respondents have been members of CACs for varying periods of time. Approximately one-fifth (22%) of the respondents have been members of a CAC for between three and four years and a further one-fifth (21%) for one to two years. Eighteen percent have been involved for less than one year, 14% for five to six years, 14% for seven to 10 years, and 10% for more than 10 years.

The largest proportion of CAC members reported spending up to three hours a month volunteering with their CAC (46%), while 29% spend 4-6 hours per month. Approximately 25% spent seven or more hours a month doing volunteer work on their CAC.

## The characteristics of CAC members differ from the Canadian population

Generally, the sample of CAC members who responded to the membership survey differs

from the Canadian population as a whole on some characteristics<sup>9</sup>. For instance, a slightly larger proportion of men are involved in CACs (56% compared to 50% of the Canadian population). Furthermore, CAC members tend to be older than the general Canadian population, with 82% of CAC members 45 years of age or older (compared to 35% in the Canadian population). Almost two-thirds (64%) of CAC members are married (compared to about 50% of the Canadian population).

Three-quarters (75%) of the CAC members said that English was their primary language, and 22% said it was French. Only 2% reported their primary language as being something other than English or French (compared to 6% in the Canadian population). In terms of ethnicity, 8% of the respondents reported being a visible minority and 5% Aboriginal. In the Canadian population, 11% are visible minorities and 4% are Aboriginal.

Approximately two-thirds (68%) of the respondents said they had completed post-secondary education, including a college, university or post-graduate degree. In comparison, about one-third (35%) of the Canadian population have a post-secondary degree.

As might be expected given the age of the respondents, the largest proportion of CAC members (40%) are retired. The next largest proportion reported having jobs related to the

social sciences, education and religion (14%), followed by business, finance and administrative occupations (8%), and sales and services (7%). Over one-half of the sample (59%) reported an average family income of \$50,000 or greater.

### Involvement in CAC activities

One of the primary purposes of CACs is to act as independent observers. CAC members reported an average of five visits in the past year in order to act as an observer for day-to-day activities and/or operations of CSC<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, CAC volunteers reported an average of one visit per year to act as an independent observer during a crisis or disturbance.

Respondents were also asked to indicate, on a five-point scale, the extent to which they are involved in various CAC activities<sup>11</sup>. As illustrated in Table 1, the largest proportion (65%) said they were often involved in meetings and discussions with CSC managers and staff. Further, 52% said they were often involved in being informed about the criminal justice system, 52% in seeking information on general correctional issues, 45% in requesting information about the correctional process, and 37% in regular visits to CSC facilities and programs. Approximately one-third said they often helped to identify and solve problems relating to community attitudes, myths and misinformation (33%), met with offenders /

Table 1

Involvement in CAC activities	
Activities	A great deal (%)
Having regular meetings and discussions with CSC managers and staff	65%
Being well informed on the correctional process and other components of the criminal justice system	52%
Seeking information on general correctional issues	52%
Requesting information on all aspects of the correctional process	45%
Regular visits to CSC facilities and programs	37%
Assisting in identifying and solving problems involving community attitudes, myths and misinformation	33%
Meeting with offenders/parolees and offender/parolee groups	32%
Supporting and encouraging community involvement through volunteer participation	31%
Increasing awareness/understanding of my local community about CSC.	29%
Helping to increase communication between my local community and CSC.	28%
Serving as a link between CSC and the local community.	28%
Maintaining liaison with other CACs through national, regional and/or local participation	26%
Acting as independent observer of CSC's day-to-day activities and operations.	22%
Contributing to offender programs in the institution and in the community	21%
Meeting with community members and groups to inform and receive feedback on correctional issues	19%
Contributing to the training and development of other CAC members	18%
Assisting offenders in their community reintegration.	16%
Being an observer or participant at correctional workshops or training sessions	15%
Assisting in the development of community resources for institutional pre-release or post-release programs	11%
Surveying attitudes of the community, offenders and correctional staff	10%
Attending parole hearings, disciplinary courts and grievance proceedings	8%
Acting as independent observer during disturbances or crises	7%

parolee groups (32%), and supported and encouraged community involvement through volunteer participation (31%).

Finally, when asked about their experience as a CAC member, more than two-thirds (70%) said that they derived a great deal of satisfaction from their experience as a CAC member.

The findings of this study, although preliminary, provide some insight into reasons why individuals become members of CACs. Further, based on the sample that completed the surveys, the profile of CAC members differs from the

profile of Canadian society. CAC members are older, more often married, better educated and tend to be retired or working in a field related to social sciences. This profile is not surprising given the unique demands of volunteering within the correctional system. The study also illustrates that CAC members are most frequently involved in meetings with CSC and seeking information. These findings have implications for the recruitment of CAC members and can better inform CSC and provide important information about the major areas of activity of CAC members. ■

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> MacGuigan, M. (1977). The Sub-Committee on the Penitentiary System in Canada. Report to Parliament, Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs, Second Session, Thirtieth Parliament. Ottawa, Ontario.

<sup>4</sup> Commissioners Directive 023, Correctional Service of Canada, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> The sample is based on CAC members who returned their membership surveys by mid-March, 2003. It should be noted that not all membership surveys were received by this date.

Therefore, this is not necessarily a representative sample of respondents.

<sup>7</sup> CACs may be associated with an institution, a parole office, multiple institutions, or an institution and a parole office.

<sup>8</sup> Members may have given a number of reasons for joining the CAC. Therefore, the percentages do not add up to 100%.

<sup>9</sup> Based on data from the 1996 or 2001 Census of Canada, Statistics Canada.

<sup>10</sup> A few outliers were removed from this average because the scores skewed the mean.

<sup>11</sup> For analysis purposes, the 5-point scale was re-grouped into "low" (1-2), "some" (3), and "a great deal" (4-5).

## Let's Talk

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