

Corrections and Conditional Release Statistical Overviews

Robert B. Cormier¹

Corrections Research and Development, Department, Solicitor General Canada

The idea to publish the *Corrections and Conditional Release Statistical Overview (CCRSO)* occurred in the summer of 1997, just after the appointment of a new Solicitor General. In keeping with the usual process, the briefing of the new Minister involved the preparation of briefing books as well as oral briefings by officials from the Department and the Agencies on the various aspects of the Portfolio of the Solicitor General. Inevitably, the briefings included a variety of statistics. The Deputy Solicitor General, who reviewed the material that went forward to the Minister and attended most of the information sessions with the Minister, was struck by the number and range of statistics as well as some apparent inconsistencies among them. Would it be possible, he wondered, to prepare a coherent set of statistics on key information on the corrections system, and present these statistics in a format that would be readily understood by someone who was not an expert in the field?

Action taken

In response to the Deputy Solicitor General's question, a committee, now known as the Portfolio Corrections Statistics Committee, was formed in September 1997 with a mandate to establish a standard set of key statistics on corrections and conditional release that would be used as a common source of statistical information within the Portfolio and in external communications. The committee includes representatives from the Department of the Solicitor General, the Correctional Service of Canada, the National Parole Board, and the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. I was responsible for establishing the committee, and have served as Chair of the committee since its inception.

Operating principles

In setting out its work, the committee adopted five operating principles to guide the compilation of statistics. The statistics should:

- 1) address all major aspects of the system;
- 2) be based on the most valid and reliable data available;
- 3) be presented in a format that would be understandable to a lay audience;

- 4) be produced in a standard way on a regular basis; and
- 5) be easily accessible for internal use and external audiences.

CCRSO publication

The first issue of the CCRSO appeared in the fall of 1998, and it has been produced on an annual basis since that time. The preface explains that the document is intended to provide a statistical overview of corrections and conditional release within the context of trends in crime and criminal justice. It also informs the reader that the CCRSO differs from typical statistical reports in that it is designed to present statistics in a "user friendly" way that will be understood by a broad audience. The following five features illustrate this point. First, the graphs in the document are uncluttered, and under each one there are a few key points that are designed to assist the reader in extracting the central information from the graph. Second, on the page following each graph (i.e., overleaf) there is a table of numbers that correspond to the visual representation and, in some cases, provides a longer series than depicted in the graph. Third, rather than using conventional headings for statistics (e.g., crime rates by province/territory) the title for each graph and table aims to inform the reader about the matter at hand (e.g., crime rates are higher in the west and highest in the north). Fourth, footnotes are kept to a minimum, that is, only where they are considered to be essential for the reader to understand the statistics. Finally, the source of the statistics is indicated under each graph and table in order to assist the reader in accessing more information if desired.

The CCRSO is divided into five sections. Section "A" provides statistics on crime and the criminal justice system, and is intended as a context for the more focused sections that follow. Section "B" contains statistics related to corrections administration, i.e., the utilization of financial and human resources. Section "C" presents statistics describing the offender population, including counts, admissions, demographics, characteristics, and status. Section "D" focuses on conditional release, both in terms of the granting and timing of conditional releases as

well as the outcomes of day parole, full parole and statutory release. Section "E", which is titled "Statistics on Special Applications of Criminal Justice", includes information on detention cases, judicial reviews of parole ineligibility for offenders serving life sentences, Dangerous Offenders, long-term supervision orders and pardons.

Although the CCRSO is designed to be comprehensive inasmuch as it addresses the major aspects of the functioning of the corrections and conditional release system, it is not intended to be exhaustive. It is properly named an "overview", and does not purport to be a complete compendium of statistics on correctional operations. Over the years, the committee has debated whether and how to expand the document. The result is that there has been some progression in the content, although the fundamental structure has not been altered.

Client feedback

In the second and subsequent issues of the CCRSO, a questionnaire was included asking readers whether they found the document useful, if there was anything in the presentation that was unclear, what additional topics they would like to see covered, and inviting general comments. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. The suggestions for additional topics have shaped the evolution of the CCRSO. Beginning with the year 2000 issue, gender

differences have been highlighted in statistics throughout the document. In 2001, we added some graphs and tables to provide more comparisons between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders. Statistics on the racial composition and religious identification of the federal offender population were added in 2002. From 1998 to 2002, the total number of graphs/tables increased from 35 to 48. This reflects the measured pace of growth in the document.

The CCRSO is published in the fall (November) each year. The document is posted in "pdf" format on the Web site of the Department of the Solicitor General (<http://www.sgc.gc.ca>) for easy public access. In addition, a limited number of copies are printed for distribution within the organizations of the Portfolio.

In summary, the CCRSO occupies a particular niche in performance measurement reporting. It presents an overview of statistics on corrections and conditional release, along with trends in the broader criminal justice system, in a format that can be readily understood by a lay audience. Accordingly, it serves as an important vehicle for informing the public on the major trends in the operations of corrections and conditional release. ■

¹ 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9

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