

Population aging and the federal inmate profile of 2010!

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“Demographics explains about two-thirds of everything”²

In 1996, David K. Foot’s *Boom Bust and Echo: How to Profit from the Coming Demographic Shift* became a best seller and helped popularize public discussion on issues related to the aging of Canada’s baby boomers.³

Canadian society was transformed by the baby boom generation, which Foot defines as those born in the two decades following WW II (1947–1966). This birth cohort was of unprecedented size and persons born in this generation totalled 9.8 million people or almost 33% of the Canadian population as of the 1996 census. As this huge birth-cohort flooded in succession through one public institution after another, a massive restructuring began to occur, beginning first in the pediatric wards, then the kindergartens, the elementary and secondary schools, before finally spilling into the universities and the job market.

An issue that Foot also talks about, although it got less play in the media, is the impact of the aging boomers on crime rates.⁴

Demography and crime

The baby boom had a tremendous impact on Canada’s criminal justice system as boomers began

in the early 1960s to enter into their most crime-prone years. Traditionally, North American society’s youth population, those from their teens through to about thirty, are the highest crime-risk group. Baby boomers began to enter their teenage years in 1960 and didn’t reach thirty until 1977. The youngest of the boomers, meanwhile, only began entering their teens in 1979 and didn’t reach thirty until 1996.

The boomer generation therefore passed through their high crime-risk years over a period spanning from 1960 to 1996. As the large number of boomers swelled this crime-prone age group, crime levels began to increase. Crime rates increased throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

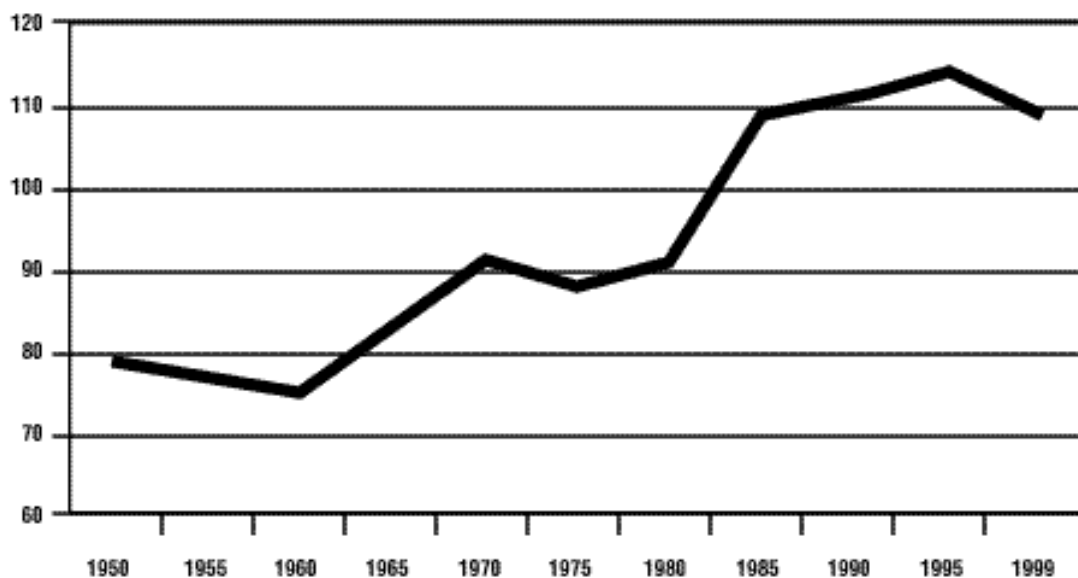
Now, however, all the boomers have aged beyond thirty and crime rates have been dropping since the early 1990s. One reason for this is that the follow-on (i.e., the baby bust and boomer echo) generations are much smaller in size so there is a smaller high crime-risk population.⁵

The demographics of imprisonment

As we might expect, with rapidly growing crime, Canada’s prison populations also grew significantly from the 1960s through to the 1980s. This can be seen in Figure 1, which shows the increase in the

Figure 1

Adult Penal Population in Canada per 100,000.



Source: Adult Correctional Services in Canada (CCJS, annual).

adult (federal and provincial) incarceration rate in Canada since 1950.

The adult incarceration rate started to increase in 1960 and continued upward — with the exception of a lull from 1970 to 1980 due to the introduction of a new parole system — for the next three decades. The incarceration rate peaked at 114 adult inmates per 100,000 population in 1995, at which point the rate was 52% higher versus the 75 per 100,000 recorded in 1960. Now that the crime rate has been in decline for several years, incarceration rates seem likely to follow.

Which way will crime and imprisonment rates go?

Does the aging of the boomers foretell a continued decline in crime and imprisonment rates over the coming decade? Foot suggests a mixed future. On the one hand, there will be fewer youth, so violent crime rate should continue to decline as boomers move out of their violent years and into their fraud and white-collar crime years. On the other hand, the lull in the growth of youth and violent crime may be short-lived because baby-boom echo kids, a larger cohort than the baby bust generation, is about to enter their crime-prone youth years.⁶ Moreover, he notes that teenagers

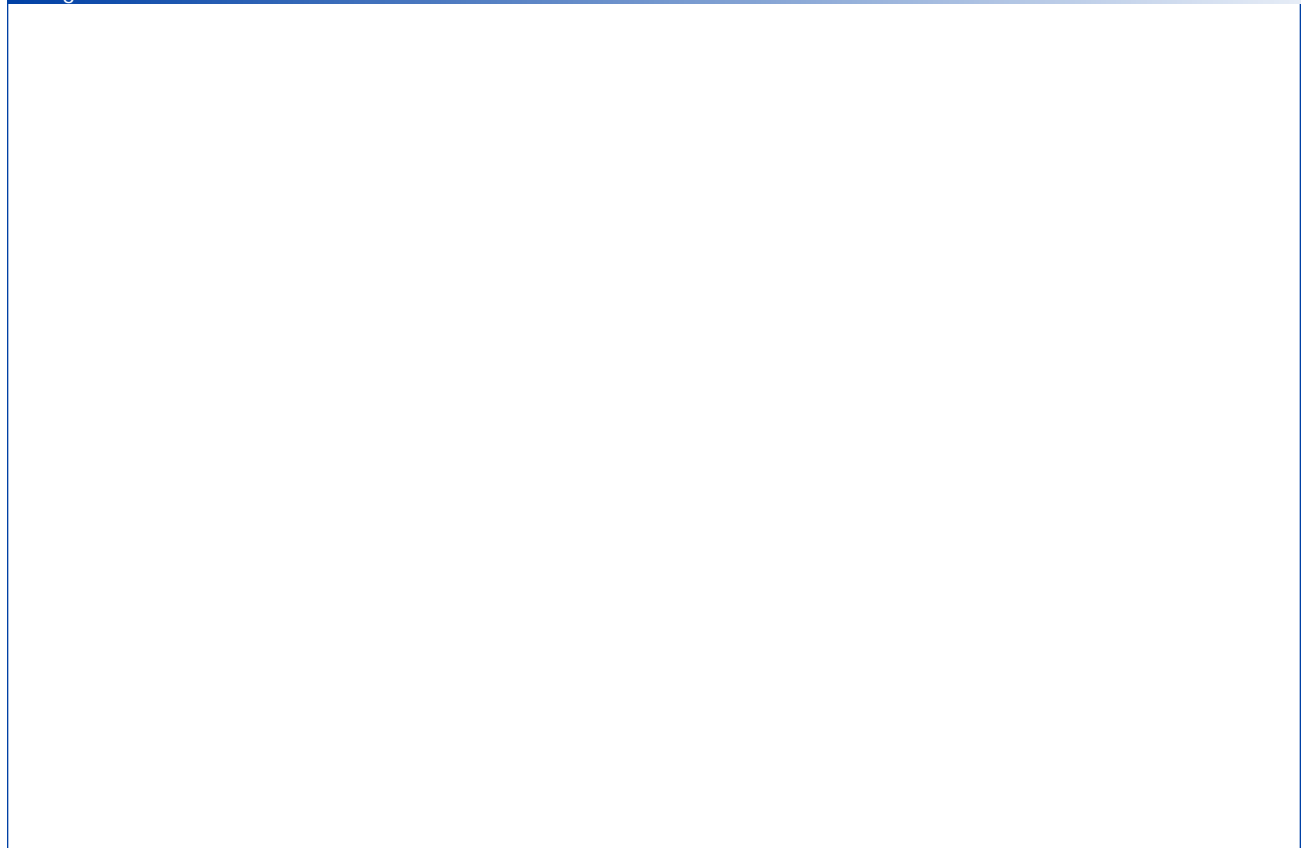
may be becoming more violent and that older people are more fearful of crime. Thus, he warns that our police forces will remain busy and demographics offer no reason for anyone to feel complacent about crime.⁷

Aging reduces pressure on crime and incarceration rates

The “aging” of the boomer population will continue to be the central demographic trend dominating Canadian society for the coming decade. Society’s crime-prone youth population will increase slightly, as the echo-generation youth begin to enter this group in large numbers over the next decade. However, there are about 3 million fewer echo-generation members than boomers, so the impact should be nowhere as large as the 1960s, and will also be offset by a decrease in the baby bust generation. This can be seen from Statistics Canada’s population projections for males for the coming decade.

There will be very little upward demographic pressure on crime or incarceration rates, since the incarceration rates for 18–29 and 30–39 age groups have become very similar in recent years. Figure 2 indicates the projected size of the various age groups over the next decade.

Figure 2



Source : Statistics Canada, Demography Division

According to the projections, by 2011 there will be a modest increase in the size of Canada's 18–29 year old male population (up about 180,000). However, this increase will be offset by a similar decrease in the population ages 30–39. The size of the population ages 40–49 at the end of the decade will be virtually identical to what it was at the beginning. The population over age 50 will increase by more than a million, from about 4.2 million to about 5.6 million by 2011. Finally, the population of young males ages 10–17 is projected to increase and then decrease slightly, all within the decade, from 2.12 million in 2000 to 2.07 million in 2011. So there is no new youth high-risk demographic wave waiting in the wings.

The admission risk of youth is declining

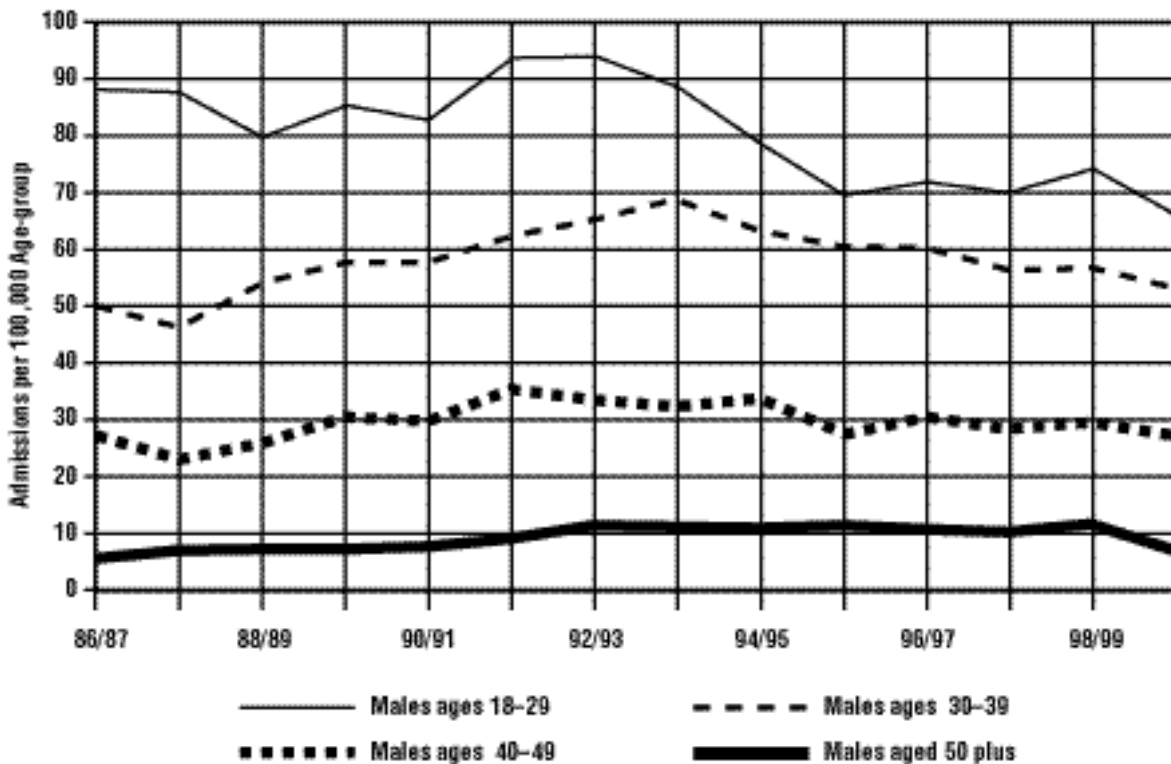
It was noted earlier that the highest crime-prone years were also the highest incarceration-risk years. Federal admission statistics suggest, however, that the risk rate for young adults is declining.

A youth admission-risk bias is evident in federal admission statistics. In fiscal year 1986–1987, the date to which reliable electronic files can go back, there were 88 males aged 18–29 admitted to federal prison for every 100,000 male aged 18–29 in the population. The corresponding federal admission rates for males 30–39 was 50; for males 40–49 it was 28; and for males 50 years and older it was 5 per 100,000 males (see Figure 3).

The age-related admission risk rate has narrowed between the younger and older groups over the past six or seven years. Fifteen years ago, the differences in the admission rates for the various age groups was much greater than today.

After 1993–94, the rate for all ages has declined. In fiscal year 1999–2000, for example, the federal male admission rate for males aged 18–29 years was 67 per 100,000 males in the population; for males 30–39 it was 55; for males 40–49 it was 28; and for males 50 plus it was 8.

Figure 3



Federal admissions will continue to decline to 2010–2011

Estimating the number and ages of federal admissions in 2010–2011 requires we make some assumption regarding admission-rate trends. For this article, we have chosen to highlight two scenarios:

1. The first scenario assumes that the federal male Warrant of Committal admission rate will remain constant over the next decade (e.g., the same in 2010–2011 as it was in 1999–2000. This is labelled “Scenario a” (in Table 1);
2. The second scenario assumes that federal male Warrant of Committal admission rates will decline

at the pace between 1999–2000 to 2010–2011, as it did between 1990 and 1999. This is labelled as “Scenario b” (in Table 1).

Under the no-change scenario (“a”), the number of federal male Warrant of Committal admissions in fiscal year 2010–2011 will be slightly higher than today (4,240 versus 4,093). This is because the male population of Canada is projected to increase by about 12% over the next decade. If the admission rate (or crime rate) remains steady, the net effect is an increase in the number of admissions projected for fiscal year 2010–2011.

Under the second scenario (b), the number of federal male Warrant of Committal admissions in fiscal year

Table 1

Table 1: Estimates of Federal* Male Admission to 2010			
Male adult population and projections, by age group	June 1990	June 1999	Projected – June 2010**
18–29 years	2,596,700	2,542,089	2,712,945
30–39 years	2,250,800	2,543,760	2,283,867
40–49 years	1,756,900	2,408,394	2,602,441
50 years or more	3,066,400	3,939,797	5,401,055
Male adult population — Total	9,670,800	11,434,040	13,000,308
Male admissions and projections, by age group	FY 1990–1991	FY 1999–2000	FY 2010–2011
Scenario a: admission rates remains constant ***			
18–29 years	2,155	1,695	1,810
30–39 years	1,311	1,394	1,252
40–49 years	531	681	736
50 years or more	217	323	443
Male admission — Total	4,214	4,093	4,240
Scenario b: admission rates decline at 1990–1999 rates ****			
Male WOC Admission 18–29 years	2,155	1,695	1,454
Male WOC Admission 30–39 years	1,311	1,394	1,178
Male WOC Admission 40–49 years	531	681	690
Male WOC Admission 50 years or more	217	323	374
Male WOC Admission — Total	4,214	4,093	3,697
Male admission rates (per 100,000 and per age group)	FY 1990–1991 (Actual Rate)	FY 1999–2000 (Actual Rate)	FY 2010–2011 (Continuation of 1990–1999 Trend)
18–29 years	83	66.7	53.6
30–39 years	58.2	54.8	51.6
40–49 years	30.2	28.3	26.5
50 years or more	7.1	8.2	6.9
Male – Total Admission rate	43.6	35.8	29.4

* A Federal sentence is 2-year or over.

** Statistics Canada Demography Division: Population and projections to 2011.

*** OMS data and Research Branch projections (Warrant of Committal (WOC) admissions only).

**** E.g., the admission rate declines in the same proportion between 2000 and 2010 as it did between 1990 and 2000.

2010–2011 would be smaller than today (3,697 versus 4,093). This is because the male population of Canada is projected to increase by about 12% over the next decade but the admission rate (or crime rate) is expected to decline at about the same rate as it has over the previous decade. The net effect is a smaller, but older, projected admission cohort in fiscal year 2010–2011.

The changing composition of crime

Foot predicts that the boomer aging will lead to a different mix of crimes being committed. He notes how demographics can explain the different growth rates in types of crime over the past three decades. “We experienced major growth in property crime during the 1960s and 1970s, when large numbers of baby-boomers were passing through their break-and-enter years. A shift in growth from property crime to violent crime occurred over the 1980s, as the last of the boomers moved out of their teen years into their 20s and early 30s.”⁸

The violent crime rate in Canada has generally declined since 1993, and Foot suggests this trend should continue as the large wave of baby-boom criminals moves out of its violent years and into its fraud years. White-collar crime may increase because of population aging.

As far as youth crime — especially youth violence — is concerned, the police and court-reported statistics tell a consistent story. Young offender crime — and violent crime — rates are dropping.⁹ The rate of youths charged with criminal offences has continued to decline since 1992, including a 7% drop in 1999. This decline was evident in all offence categories: the rate of youths charged with property offences declined 11%, violent crime dropped 5%. In total, youths were charged with Criminal Code offences at a rate of 4,100 per 100,000 youths, compared to about 5,200 a decade ago (a drop of 21%).¹⁰

Another crime-shift prediction — towards more fraud and related crimes — has also not occurred. Indeed, the only crime category that has shown an increase is drug related (perhaps this indicates the echo generation are mimicking their parents’ generation’s own youthful behaviour).

The crime statistics of Canada indicate that crime is down to levels not seen since the 1970s. According to the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, the crime rate as reported by police decreased by 5% in 1999, the eighth consecutive annual drop.¹¹ Not only were crime rates at their lowest level since 1979, but the rate for all major crime categories was also down.

Homicide rates are down 4.7% in 1999 and the homicide rate has generally been falling since the

mid-1970s. The 1999 rate of 1.8 homicides per 100,000 population is the lowest since 1967.

The rate of violent crime in 1999 declined for the seventh consecutive year and was down 2% from the previous year. All major categories of violent crime decreased in 1999, including attempted murder (–9%), sexual assault (–7%), assault (–2%), and robbery (–2%).

The property crime rate dropped 6%, continuing the general decline that began in 1991. All major property crime categories have decreased in 1999, including breaking and entering (–10%), motor vehicle theft (–4%), theft (–6%), and fraud (–5%). There is no evidence that youth are becoming more violent, though there are certainly too many spectacular incidents. The rate of violent crime is down, but so are the rates for fraud and other property crimes. Whether this continues is unknown, but demographics does not appear to be making the situation worse.

Aging and fear of crime

Fear of crime is probably the most dangerous shift we face. Why is fear of crime so at odds with actual crime statistics? David Foot suggests a demographic explanation: the crime rate is down for the simple reason that we have fewer people in the crime-prone youth age-groups, and conversely, the perception of crime is rising in this aging population because older people generally are more fearful of crime.¹²

Violent crime rose by a worrisome 49% between 1984 and 1994, largely because boomer criminals were reaching the age when all criminals are more likely to commit violence. Thus, the small dip in the overall crime rate by the mid-1990s (when Foot wrote this — note that crime has continued its decline since 1996) did not make our cities seem significantly safer. The public perception is right, says Foot: our cities in the mid-1990s were much more dangerous places than they were in the mid-1980s.¹³

However, are they really that much more dangerous in 1999 than in 1980? The answer is not easy to arrive at. However, a danger is that, because of our fears, we may overreact and invoke erroneous policy. The rapid increase in violent crime through the 1980s and early 1990s was due almost exclusively to common assaults and level 1 sexual assaults that exploded after the assault laws were revised in 1982.¹⁴ However, the most serious violent crime of all — murder — has actually declined since 1976. So, were our cities safer in 1990 than in 1976? Yes, certainly, far safer if “safe” is defined as the likelihood of being murdered. No, not as safe if “safe” is defined as the likelihood of common assault or sexual assault.

Conclusions

The “aging” of the baby boomers should contribute to a decline in crime and imprisonment over the next decade. Whether this lowering of risk continues to lead to lower crime and incarceration rates depends, however, on other factors as well. One key factor is how well we manage the fear of crime itself. If we react to fears of crime by pursuing harsher criminal justice policies, we will likely not contribute to the long-term reduction of risk.

American politicians have often found it in their self-interest to use fear of crime as a strategy to win elections, by promising to wage war on crime.¹⁵ It is ironic that in the United States, as in Canada, crime rates have been declining since 1991. However, by waging war on crime they have managed to double their prison population without making the United States a noticeably safer society than Canada. We would do much to advance the public interest if we can better manage the fear of crime than our American neighbours. ■

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² Foot, D.K., D. Stoffman (1996). *Boom, Bust & Echo: How to Profit from the Coming Demographic Shift*. Toronto, ON: Macfarlane, Walter & Ross, p. 2. The Introduction argues why demographics explains about “two-thirds of everything.”

³ Various government agencies in the 1980s had begun reviewing the consequences of population “aging.” However, it was Foot’s best-selling book that caught the public imagination, raising awareness of the many possible policy consequences (e.g., pensions and housing prices, etc.). The federal government created a Review of Demography and its Implications for Economic and Social Policy in April 1986, directing it to study possible changes in the size, structure and distribution of the population of Canada to 2025. A report from this Review, *Charting Canada’s Future: A Report of the Demographic Review*, (Health and Welfare Canada, 1989) discussed how these changes might effect Canada’s social and economic life.

⁴ *Op cit*: Foot’s discussion relating to crime trends can be found in Chapter 7, p.127.

⁵ Starting in 1991, Canada’s rising crime rate began to turn down. By 1999, Canada had experienced eight consecutive years of decline in the crime rate, which reached its lowest level since 1979. See Sylvain Tremblay, *Crime Statistics in Canada*, 1999. The Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada, July 2000.

⁶ For example, in 1996 the baby bust generation (those born from 1967 to 1979) numbered 5.4 million persons whereas the baby-boom echo (born 1980 to 1995) numbered 6.9 million. However, both generations pale in size when compared to the boomers, who numbered 9.6 million.

⁷ *Op cit*: Boom, Bust & Echo (p.143).

⁸ *Op cit*: Boom, Bust & Echo (p.141).

⁹ *Ibid*. p. 141-142.

¹⁰ See for example, *Male Young Offenders in Canada: Recent Trends*. R.L. Sinclair and R. Boe, Research Branch, Correctional Service Canada. Research Brief No. B-22 (1998); and *Female Young Offenders in Canada: Revised Edition*. C.A. Dell and R. Boe, Research Branch, Correctional Service Canada. Research Report No. R-80 (1998).

¹¹ *Op cit*: Crime Statistics 1999.

¹² *Op cit*: Boom, Bust & Echo (p.140).

¹³ *Ibid*: p. 141.

¹⁴ The rate per 100,00 of level 1 (i.e., minor) sexual assault incidents increased from 41 in 1983 to 116 by 1993. Level 2 and 3 sexual assault (incidents involving a weapon or resulting in bodily harm) remained relatively unchanged at 4-5 per 100,000 throughout the period. See: *A Graphical Overview of Crime and the Administration of Criminal Justice in Canada, 1997*. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada (Cat. 85F0018XPE), p. 17.

¹⁵ Davey examines the effect of waging a war on crime by comparing crime and imprisonment in adjacent states, where one Governor used the strategy and another did not. In North and South Dakota, for example, crime rates have always been similar but the incarceration rate is now twice as high in the latter since a Governor ran for election on a get tough on crime platform. See J.D. Davey (1998), *The Politics of Prison Expansion: Winning Elections by Waging War on Crime*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Coming up in the January 2001 issue of *FORUM on Corrections Research*

The January 2001 issue of *FORUM* will be dedicated to Reintegration Levers.

The May 2001 issue of *FORUM* will present a Special Issue of *Research Summaries*: R-56, 1997 to R-100, 2000.

The September 2001 issue of *FORUM* will focus on Alcohol and Drugs.