



National Crime Prevention Centre
Centre national de prévention du crime

INCARCERATION IN CANADA

This fact sheet provides an overview of incarceration in Canada. The information provided focuses on the growth and costs of the corrections system and the value of alternatives to incarceration.

The National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention is the Government of Canada's \$32 million per year initiative to help Canadians deal with the difficult problems of crime and victimization. The National Strategy launched its second phase in 1998, contributing funding, expertise, knowledge, and tools to support grass-roots, community safety projects across Canada. In its work with communities, the National Strategy has placed a particular emphasis on children, youth, women, and Aboriginal people. The National Strategy reflects the Government's determination to prevent crime before it happens, and thereby reduce the social and economic burden of crime on all Canadians.¹

Crime and Incarceration Facts

- 75 percent of Canadians feel that the crime rate is increasing. However, Canada's 1998 crime rate was 8,355 offenders per 100,000 population—a decrease of 5.4 percent from the previous year and the sixth consecutive annual decrease.²
- From 1988 to 1998, Canada's annual average prison population rose 24 percent.³ The increase was particularly significant in the early 1990s but began to level off and decline in the latter years of this period.
- There are 4,900 young people in jail in Canada on any given day—an increase of 26 percent since 1987.⁴
- Aboriginal people account for a disproportionate percentage of the inmate population: less than 2 percent of Canada's adult population is Aboriginal, yet they represent 17 percent of all federal prisoners.⁵
- The annual cost to house an adult male inmate in a federal institution ranges from \$40,000 to \$70,000; for juvenile inmates, the average annual cost is \$100,000. For female inmates the average annual cost is \$108,000.

Total number of admissions to provincial/territorial and federal corrections, 1989 to 1998



CCJS, "Adult Correctional Services in Canada, 1997-98," *Juristat* 19 (4), p.3.



Who Are We Incarcerating?

The average federal inmate is:

- male (95 percent);
- 33 years of age;
- serving a sentence for robbery;
- serving a 45-month sentence.

The average provincial inmate is:

- male (91 percent);
- 32 years of age;
- serving a sentence for property offence (56 percent of all offences);
- serving a 44-day sentence.

Most prisoners suffer from social disadvantages. In 1998, 37 percent of inmates had an education below the grade 10 level (19 percent for other adult Canadians); 52 percent were unemployed at the time of their offence (versus 10 percent unemployment for other adult Canadians).⁶

The Overuse of Incarceration in Sentencing

In Canada, the majority of sentences are handed out for non-violent offences. In 1998, the violent crime rate fell by 2 percent—the sixth consecutive year that the rate has declined. In addition, a significant proportion of offences (65 percent), including the most violent ones, occur within the family or involve people known to the offender. Despite some well-publicized cases, random violence from strangers is not as prevalent in Canada as in the United States and other countries.

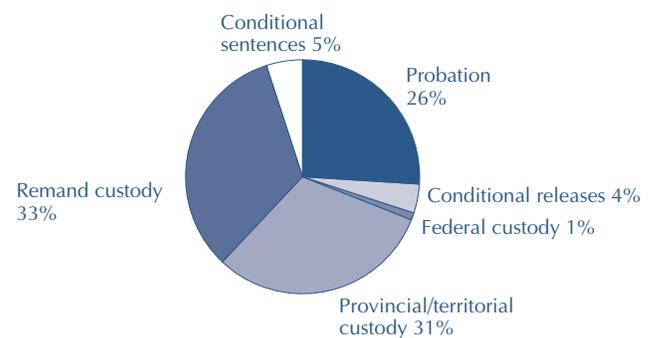
Generally, non-violent offenders pose a minimal risk to the public, yet they are incarcerated at enormous public expense. Research on incarceration and recidivism reveals two conclusions:

- prison produces slight increases in recidivism;
- there is a tendency for lower-risk offenders to be negatively affected by the prison experience.⁷

The Role of Incarceration in Preventing Crime

Imprisonment can play only a limited role in a crime prevention strategy. When restricted to violent offenders, and particularly those who are likely to re-offend, incarceration is necessary and effective. It is an expensive alternative, however, and should be reserved for this profile of offender. Unfortunately, sentences have become longer and incarceration rates have increased (which has resulted in a significant increase in the cost to the taxpayer). It is important to note that while the incarceration rate decreased slightly from 1993 to 1997, it still remains historically high.

Adult correctional population, 1997-98



CCJS, "Adult Correctional Services in Canada, 1997-98," *Juristat* 19 (4), p.4.

Three theories have been put forth in support of incarceration as an effective means of decreasing the crime rate.

- **Individual deterrence:** The prisoner may be deterred by the experience of incarceration and then returned to life in the community at the end of the sentence.
- **General deterrence:** The threat of punishment, especially imprisonment, will prevent people from committing crimes in the first place.
- **Incapacitation:** Crimes can be prevented by removing offenders from society and keeping them in prison.

The first theory has proven to be ineffectual. Over the past 20 years, research has shown the limits of incarceration as an effective individual deterrent. Other sentences, such as a period of supervision in the community under a probation order, can be just as effective as incarceration and, in some cases, more effective.⁸

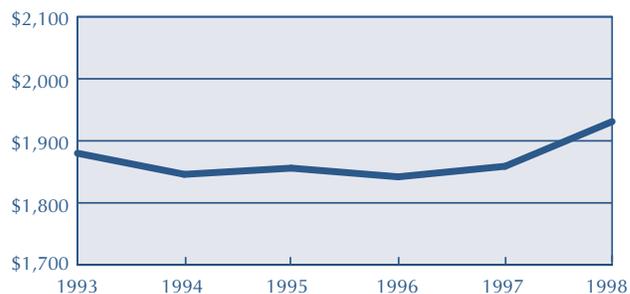
As for general deterrence, it is true that the fear of punishment deters people from committing crimes. Incarceration, however, is an expensive form of punishment. Alternative punishments, such as social sanctions, would likely be as effective in preventing crime (and much cheaper) than building more prisons and incarcerating more offenders.

Incapacitation is the best justification for incarceration. It must be applied selectively, however, because not all offenders re-offend. Imprisoning them all, particularly the non-violent offender, results in a considerable waste of government dollars.

The Cost of Incarceration

The annual cost of corrections in Canada is about \$2 billion. While this figure grows each year, spending on other social services has not kept pace. One way to reduce the number of inmates, and alle-

Justice spending on adult corrections (millions of dollars)



CCJS, "Justice Spending in Canada, 1997," *Juristat* 19 (12), p.4.

viate the financial burden of corrections, is to invest in the healthy development of children. For example, the Perry Preschool Project, a highly regarded American study of child development, reveals that children born into poverty who attend a day-care program have half as many criminal arrests, are less dependent on welfare, are more likely to complete high school, and have higher earnings than those who do not participate.⁹ The study also reveals that taxpayers saved \$7.16 for each dollar invested in the program. The preschool participants absorbed fewer resources because they were less likely to come into contact with the law.

Effective Correctional Treatment

Research in the field of corrections, particularly in the past 20 years, has demonstrated that appropriate service and treatment directed to the criminogenic needs of offenders reduces the likelihood of recidivism. These criminogenic need factors include substance abuse, unemployment, poor impulse control, sexual deviance, and lack of positive social ties. Although treatment programs and activities that address these deficits are often provided to offenders while they are incarcerated, interventions while in the community are crucial to ensure the safe and effective reintegration of the offender into the community.

Alternatives to Incarceration

To reduce costs, a system is required to develop non-prison sentences, while at the same time holding offenders accountable for their actions. In addition to probation and fines, this system would include a wide range of pre-charge and post-charge alternatives such as counselling, conferencing, and programming. Another important step would be to encourage local communities to take responsibility for these alternative measures. These measures would increase victim participation in the justice process, produce significant restitution payments, and facilitate community service work for offenders.

The Role of the National Strategy

Canada has a high rate of incarceration compared with other Western industrialized countries. Using social development initiatives, the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention works to reduce the incarceration rate by reducing the number of people who come into contact with the judicial system.

Research shows that early childhood experiences often influence later involvement in crime. The National Strategy's community-based projects tackle the root causes of crime, such as family abuse, parental neglect, difficulties in school, and lack of recreational and educational facilities. As a community finds ways to eliminate these root causes, the number of people who will turn to crime and, in turn, the number of people who will end up incarcerated, will decrease.

- 1 In July of 1994, the federal Minister of Justice and the Solicitor General of Canada, in consultation with the provinces and territories, appointed 25 volunteers from a multitude of disciplines to the National Crime Prevention Council. The Council's basic goals were to help governments at all levels co-ordinate their efforts to prevent crime and reduce victimization, and to help communities develop practical solutions for the problems they face in these areas. This fact sheet is a revision of a document originally published by the Council in 1997.
- 2 CCJS, "The Justice Factfinder, 1997," *Juristat* 19 (7), p.1.
- 3 CCJS, "The Justice Factfinder, 1997," *Juristat* 19 (7), p.9.
- 4 CCJS, "Justice Data Factfinder," *Juristat* 16 (9), p.16.
- 5 CCJS, "The Justice Factfinder, 1997" *Juristat* 19 (7), p.9.
- 6 CCJS, "The Justice Factfinder, 1997" *Juristat* 19 (7), p.9.
- 7 Paul Gendreau and Claire Goggin et al., "The Effects of Prison Sentences on Recidivism," *User Report 1999-24* (Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada, 1999) p.1.
- 8 I. Brownlee, "Intensive Probation With Young Adult Offenders," *British Journal of Criminology* 35 (1995), pp.599-612.
- 9 L.J. Schweinhart et al., *Significant Benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project Study through Age 27* (Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope, 1993).