

Report for the Ministry of the Solicitor General Canada

by

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**Fear of Crime and Attitudes to
Criminal Justice in Canada:
A Review of Recent Trends¹**

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The views expressed herein are solely those of the author. This document is available in French. Ce rapport est disponible en français sous le titre: *La peur du crime et les attitudes à l'égard de la justice pénale au Canada : Bilan des dernières tendances*

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Executive Summary | i |
| Purpose of Report | 1 |
| <i>Overview</i> | 1 |
| I. FEAR OF CRIME | 2 |
| <i>International comparisons</i> | 5 |
| <i>Explaining declining levels of fear</i> | 7 |
| <i>Summary</i> | 7 |
| II. PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM | 8 |
| 1. Perception of crime as a government priority | 8 |
| 2. Importance of crime as a social problem | 11 |
| <i>Crime in the local community</i> | 13 |
| <i>Crime as a priority</i> | 13 |
| <i>“Prompted” Responding to crime as a problem</i> | 13 |
| <i>Crime in everyday life</i> | 15 |
| <i>Summary</i> | 15 |
| III. PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME TRENDS | 16 |
| <i>Optimism with respect to the future</i> | 18 |
| <i>Consequences of changing perception of crime rates</i> | 18 |
| <i>Summary</i> | 18 |
| IV. ATTITUDES TO PUNISHMENT-RELATED ISSUES | 19 |
| <i>Support for capital punishment</i> | 19 |
| <i>Confidence in the courts</i> | 20 |
| <i>Attitudes towards parole</i> | 20 |
| Fear of crime and punitive attitudes | 22 |
| Victimization history and attitudes towards the use of incarceration | 22 |
| V. RESPONDING TO PUBLIC MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT CRIME | 24 |
| <i>Targeting audiences</i> | 24 |
| <i>Styles of communication</i> | 25 |
| <i>Role of the news media</i> | 25 |
| <i>Use of spokespersons to communicate information about crime and justice</i> | 26 |
| REFERENCES | 27 |

FEAR OF CRIME AND ATTITUDES TO CRIMINAL JUSTICE IN CANADA: A Review of Recent Trends

Executive Summary

This report summarizes recent trends with respect to fear of crime and attitudes to criminal justice in Canada. It is based on a review of all recent research, including quantitative surveys and qualitative research such as focus groups. The goal of the report was to describe historical trends and to explore the relationship between fear of crime and attitudes towards criminal justice issues, particularly correctional subjects. Complete references to findings reported in this summary can be found in the main report.

1. Fear of Criminal Victimization

Although fear of victimization can be measured in a number of ways, the most frequently- posed question about fear of crime in Canada and elsewhere is the following: “*Is there anywhere in your neighbourhood that you are afraid to walk at night?*” This question has been used on surveys for the past 40 years.

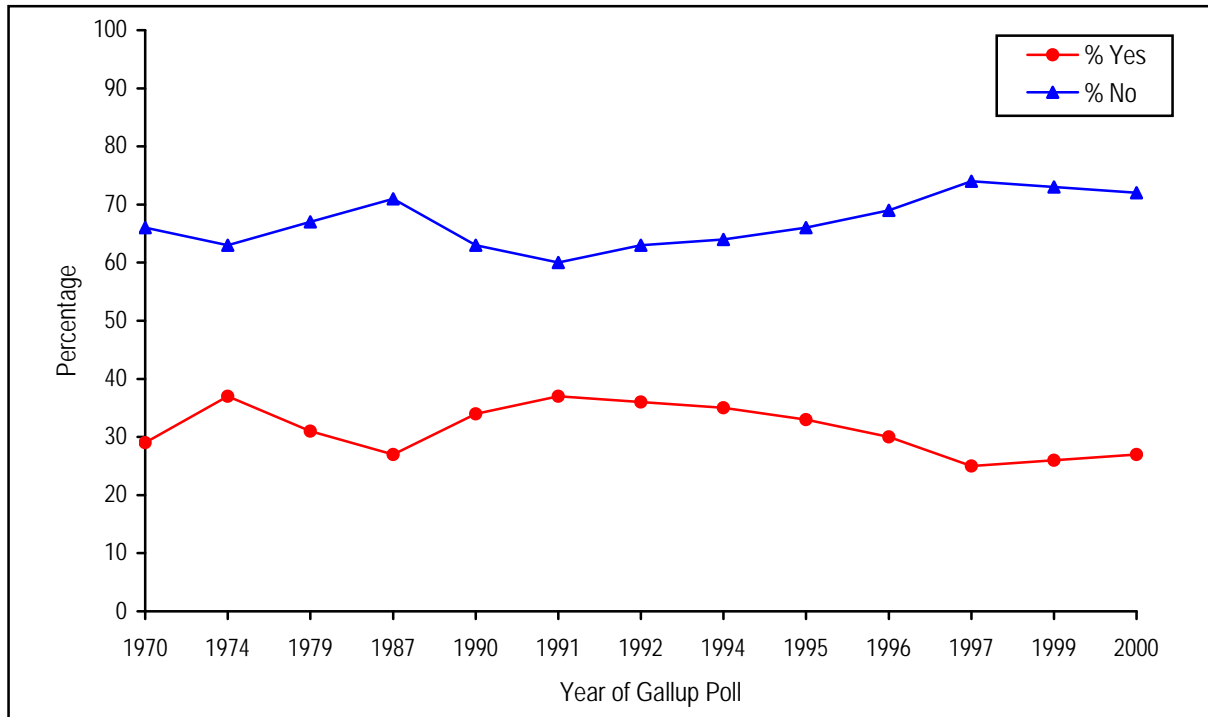
- Between 1976 and 1998, the percentage responding affirmatively has never attained one-third and never fallen below 22% on Environics polls.

Although there is little overall variation, there are substantial gender differences: on every administration of these surveys women reported higher levels of concern about criminal victimization, although they report similar rates of victimization.

- Almost two-thirds of women reported feeling somewhat or very worried waiting or using public transportation after dark, compared to 29% of men.

A slightly different fear question has been repeatedly posed by Gallup Canada: “*Is there any area around where you live, that is to say within a couple of kilometres, where you would be afraid to walk at night?*” There is a clear consistency with the Environics surveys: the percentage expressing fear was lower in 2000 than for many years. In addition, levels of fear have generally been consistent over the past few decades: 29% expressed fear of walking at night in 1970, and 27% 30 years later. The trend can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Responses to Fear of Walking at night Question (Gallup, 1970-2000)



The latest administration of the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by Statistics Canada showed an increase in the already high percentage of people reporting satisfaction with their levels of safety.

- The percentage of respondents responding that they felt “very safe” walking at night in their neighbourhood was 40% in 1988, 39% in 1993 and 43% in 1999.
- In 1999, three-quarters of the sample reported that they walk alone in their neighbourhood after dark, and almost nine out of ten (88%) reported feeling very or reasonably safe in doing so; this is an increase from 84% in 1993.

Summary

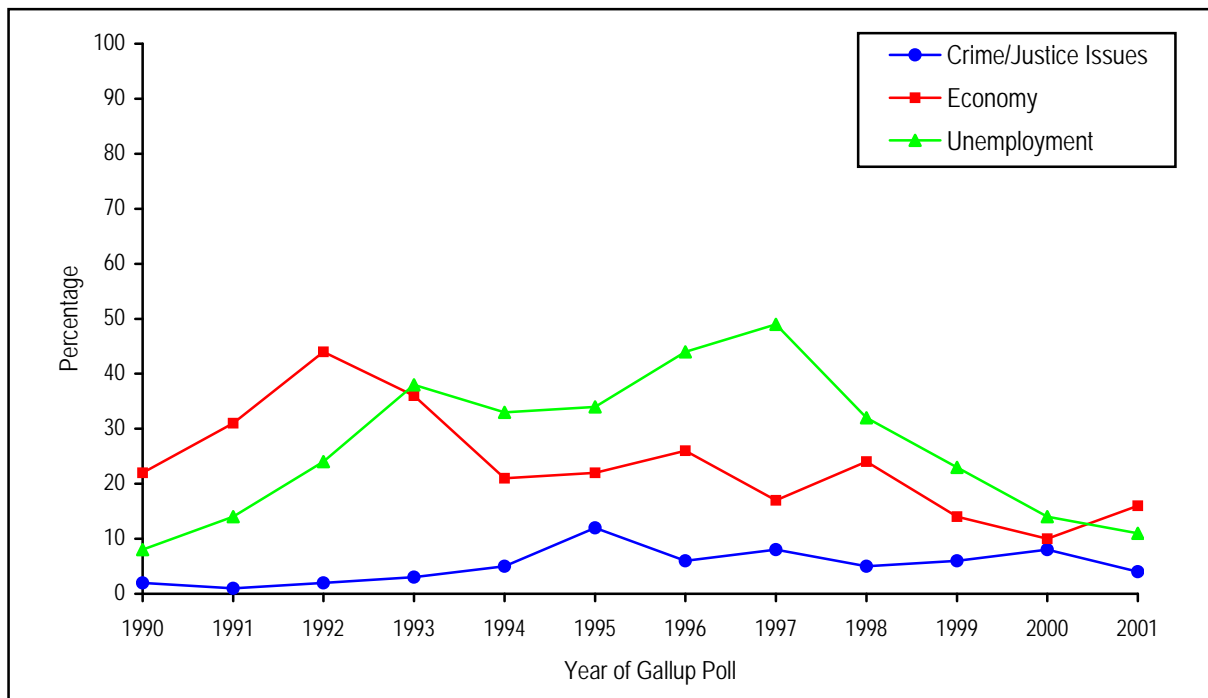
Most people report feeling safe from crime, although clearly there is important variation in terms of perceptions of safety. Levels of fear of crime have remained fairly stable over the past few years, although it appears that the percentage of respondents reporting that they are afraid has declined recently. This may be a response to the declining crime rates, and changing public perceptions of those rates.

2. Perception of Crime as an Important Problem

One way of understanding the importance of crime as a social problem is to see how Canadians rank crime in relation to other issues such as the national debt, health care or unemployment. The general finding is that when asked to rate the comparative seriousness of the problem in this way, crime lags far behind other issues.

- Less than one-third stated that they were “very concerned” about crime, compared to 69% when asked about health care and 58% when asked about child poverty. There has been little change over the past decade in the place that crime occupies in rankings of concern.
- Over the past 15 years, the percentage of the public identifying crime as the most important problem has never exceeded 5% or dropped below 2%.
- When asked, unprompted, to identify the issues that Canada’s leaders should be most concerned about, crime was cited by 5% of respondents in 2001, an increase from the average of 2% in 1990-93, and a decrease from the average of 7% over the years 1995-1999. Figure 2 presents the historical record of responses to this question.

Figure 2: Percentage identifying issue that Canada’s leaders should be concerned about



Summary

Taken together, the surveys conducted over the past few years suggest that in comparison with other social issues, particularly health care and the economy, crime does not generate high levels of public concern. When respondents are prompted to consider crime, the issue becomes more important, but this may not be the optimal way to measure public opinion. There is some evidence from several polls that concern over crime has been declining recently.

3. Perceptions of Crime Trends

The general finding from opinion surveys conducted in several countries over the past few decades is that most people believe that crime rates are rising, regardless of actual trends. For example, in 1994, a national survey found that over two-thirds (68%) of Canadians believed that crime rates had increased over the previous five years. In reality, crime statistics in 1994 showed a 5% decline, the third consecutive drop in police-recorded crime. With respect to violent crime, the contrast between public perception and reality was even more striking. In 1994 the violent crime rate declined by the largest margin since 1962, when the UCR began. Despite this, almost half the polled public thought that there had been a “great increase” in violent crime and a further 43% believed that there had been a moderate increase.

This perception of increasing crime rates appears to be changing, perhaps in response to the official crime statistics that have been declining now for eight consecutive years. This can be demonstrated with respect to adult and youth crime rates:

- A representative survey of Kingston residents conducted in 2000 found that just over half the sample believed that crime rates were decreasing or “staying about the same”.
- Less than one-third of respondents to a survey in 2000 were of the opinion that youth crime rates *in their neighbourhoods* had increased over the past five years.
- In 1999, 29% believed that crime in their neighbourhood had increased over the past five years; in 1993, almost half the sample held this opinion.
- The most recent GSS found that over half (54%) of Canadians believed that crime levels in their neighbourhood had stayed the same over the previous 5 years. Only 43% held this view on the previous administration of the GSS in 1993.

Summary

For many years, most Canadians held the view that crime rates were increasing, regardless of the trends in crime statistics recorded by the police or victimizations surveys. There is evidence that this view is now changing; members of the public appear to have begun to absorb the reality that crime rates are declining.

4. Attitudes to Criminal Justice Issues

There is evidence of some shifting in Canadians’ attitudes towards certain key criminal justice issues. Canadians appear less supportive of “Get tough” policies, and more supportive of liberal criminal justice programs such as parole:

- The percentage of the public endorsing capital punishment has fallen to a historic low of 52%, down from 73% in 1987.

- The percentage strongly supporting capital punishment declined from 46% in 1987 to 27% in 2001.
- % of public supporting parole (rather than flat-time sentencing) is high, and rising: in 1998, 75% of public favoured parole; in 2001, support for parole rose 5% to 80%.

Although conditional release has historically attracted a great deal of public criticism, a survey conducted in 2000 found very high levels of support for parole:

- fully 85% of respondents agreed with the statement that “*It is safer to gradually release offenders into society under supervision than to release them without conditions at the end of their sentence.*” Of these, almost two-thirds strongly agreed with the statement, and only 5% disagreed “strongly”.

5. Fear of Crime and Attitudes to the Criminal Justice System

One of the most recent studies drew upon the 1993 GSS data (see Spratt & Doob, 1997). The general conclusion of that study was that a significant relationship existed between fear levels and the valence of attitudes towards the criminal justice system: respondents reporting high levels of fear were significantly more likely to hold negative views of the police and the courts.

6. Victimization History and Attitudes towards the Use of Incarceration

One recent research report explored the relationship between victimization history, which might be said to affect fear of victimization, and attitudes towards the use of incarceration. This research analysed data from the 1999 GSS and found that fear was a significant predictor of punitiveness: respondents scoring high on a “fear index” were more likely to favour the imposition of imprisonment on offenders described in brief scenarios. Victimization history, whether it involved a violent crime or not, was not a significant predictor of attitudes towards the use of imprisonment.

Purpose of report

This brief report summarizes recent trends with respect to fear of crime and attitudes towards criminal justice in Canada.² It is based on a review of all available quantitative surveys and qualitative research studies (such as focus groups). Much of this research was commissioned by the federal Ministry of the Solicitor General or the Department of Justice Canada; other findings come from survey research companies such as Environics or Gallup Canada that repeatedly survey the views of the Canadian public on specific criminal justice issues.

The goal of the report was to describe historical trends and to explore the relationship between fear of crime and attitudes towards criminal justice issues, with particular emphasis on correctional subjects. Unfortunately, comparisons over time are not always possible for correctional issues. (For example, the 1999 General Social Survey asked a number of questions about parole, but these items were not employed on the previous administrations of the GSS.)

Generally speaking, studies have explored fear of crime or attitudes towards crime policies; few studies have permitted exploration of the relationship between fear and support for issues such as parole, or community corrections. The focus here is on aggregate and historical trends; little discussion is provided with respect to demographic variation except where differences are particularly striking. (For example, there are important demographic differences with respect to fear of criminal victimization). Additionally, this report does not seek to make detailed comparisons between trends in Canada and other jurisdictions, although some limited international data are presented.

Overview

Part I examines trends with respect to fear of crime. Parts II and III deal with what might be termed “perceptual” issues, including the importance of crime as a social policy priority for the government and public perceptions of crime trends. Part IV describes trends in public attitudes towards punishment issues and the complex relationship between fear of victimization and attitudes to specific criminal justice issues. Part V concludes with some recommendations to increase public knowledge of crime trends and to reduce levels of fear of victimization.

² For reviews of public opinion with respect to crime and criminal justice in Canada and elsewhere, the reader is directed to the following publications: Cullen, Fisher & Applegate, 2000; Hung & Bowles, 1995; Roberts, 1992; Roberts, 1995; Roberts and Stalans, 1997.

I. FEAR OF CRIME

There are several ways of measuring fear of crime. The most frequently posed question about fear of crime in Canada and elsewhere is the following: “*Is there anywhere in your neighbourhood that you are afraid to walk at night?*” This question has been used on surveys for the past 40 years. Results indicate little variation from year to year, but substantial gender differences constantly emerge, with female respondents reporting higher levels of fear and higher rates of fear and avoidance behaviours:³

- Between 1976 and 1998, the percentage responding affirmatively has never attained one-third and never fallen below 22% on Environics polls (Environics Canada, 1998).
- The 2000 Earnscliff survey found that over 80% of the respondents stated that they felt “very safe” or “reasonably safe” walking alone after dark in their neighbourhoods.

A slightly different question has been repeatedly posed by Gallup Canada: “*Is there any area around where you live, that is to say within a couple of kilometres, where you would be afraid to walk at night?*” The percentage responding affirmatively to this question is slightly higher, but there is little variation seen over time in either of the surveys. Standing at 27% in 2000, the percentage has remained fairly constant with the first benchmark measure in 1970. The percentage was lower in 2000 than for many years, and the responses to this question have generally been consistent: 29% reported being afraid in 1970, and 27% 30 years later, as can be seen in Table 1.

³ In her multivariate analysis of demographic variation using the International Crime Victimization Survey, Quann (2001) reports that only victimization experience, town size and gender were significantly associated with fear levels; see also Hung and Bowles, 1995 for discussion of demographic variation.

Table 1:
Responses to Fear of Walking at night Question (1970-2000)

| Year | % responding Yes | % No |
|----------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| 2000 | 27 | 72 |
| 1999 | 26 | 73 |
| 1997 | 25 | 74 |
| 1996 | 30 | 69 |
| 1995 | 33 | 66 |
| 1994 | 35 | 64 |
| 1992 | 36 | 63 |
| 1991 | 37 | 60 |
| 1990 | 34 | 63 |
| 1987 | 27 | 71 |
| 1979 | 31 | 67 |
| 1974 | 37 | 63 |
| 1970 | 29 | 66 |
| <i>Average</i> | <i>31%</i> | <i>67%</i> |

Note: table excludes unsure/ don't know responses; Source: Gallup Canada.

Table 1 suggests that public levels of fear of victimization have diminished somewhat in recent years. The average percentages reporting that they were afraid is lower in the later period (1997-2000) than the earlier (1970-79): 26% compared to 32%. The 2000 Gallup survey also generated important gender differences: 41% of women, but only 12% of men expressed fear of walking at night in their neighbourhood.⁴ Both statistics reflect declines from previous years.

Similar trends emerge from other surveys of the Canadian public. Environics Research has also tracked the fear issue, by means of a somewhat simpler question: “*Are you ever afraid to*

⁴This heightened level of fear among women generalises to include others: women are significantly more concerned (than are men) about the safety of their children (see Palmer, 1997).

walk at night in your neighbourhood?” Responses to this question have been equally stable, with the percentage responding affirmatively falling to 27% in 1998. The percentage of “yes” responses to this question never attained one-third, or declined below 22% over the period 1976 to 1998 (Environics Research, 1998).

Further evidence of a growing sense of personal safety among Canadians emerges from consecutive surveys conducted in 1999 and 2000 by Earnscliff. These polls revealed an increase in the percentage of respondents who reported feeling “very safe” (from 28% to 40%; see Earnscliff Research and Communications).

Although it is not an annual victimization survey (like the British Crime Survey), the General Social Survey (GSS) provides the most reliable indicator of Canadians’ self-reported levels of fear. The question regarding fear is slightly different: respondents are asked to indicate how safe they feel walking at night in their neighbourhood. The latest administration of the GSS showed an increase in the percentage of people reporting satisfaction with their levels of safety. There are 3 available administrations of the GSS: 1988; 1993; 1999.

- The percentage of respondents responding that they felt “very safe” walking at night in their neighbourhood was 40% in 1988, 39% in 1993 and 43% in 1999 (Hung & Bowles, 1995; Gartner & Doob, 1994; Besserer & Trainor 2000).
- In 1999, three-quarters of the sample reported that they walk alone in their neighbourhood after dark, and almost nine out of ten (88%) reported feeling very or reasonably safe in doing so; these levels represent an increase from 84% in 1993.
- In response to a general question (“*How do you feel about your safety from crime?*”), 44% of respondents reported being very satisfied in 1999, up from 40% in 1993.
- The GSS also asked respondents about “avoidance behaviours”. Responses in 1999 indicated that fewer Canadians felt it necessary to change their behaviour. Thus 27% of respondents stated that they “changed my activities or avoided certain places”, down from 31% in 1993 (Besserer & Trainor, 2000).

- It is important to note that there were no differences between 1993 and 1999 with respect to the percentage of Canadians who report installing security hardware in their homes, taking a self-defence course or getting a dog for protection. In 1993, 21% reported having installed security hardware; the figure in 1999 was approximately the same (22%).⁵ These results suggest that the increased levels of personal safety have not come about as a result of significant shifts in personal lifestyles.

Finally, it should be noted that levels of fear of crime vary considerably across Canada. Thus the 2000 Gallup survey found that the percentage of respondents who expressed fear at walking at night varied from a low of 14% in Atlantic Canada to a high of 39% in British Columbia (Gallup, 2000). In Vancouver, 53% of respondents stated they were afraid of walking at night, compared to 34% in Montreal.

International Comparisons

The International Crime Victimization Survey (ICVS) provides historical trends with respect to levels of fear. As with the other surveys discussed here, respondents were asked if they felt afraid walking in their neighbourhood at night. The two most recent administrations were conducted in 1996 and 2000. Comparison of responses to the fear of walking at night question reveals lower levels of fear in 2000 than 1996 (see Quann, 2001, Table 4). The ICVS also permits international comparisons with respect to fear levels. Results from the 2000 survey demonstrate that levels of fear are lower in Canada than many other western nations (see also van Dijk and Mayhew, 1997). Only three countries recorded lower levels of public fear (see Table 2).

⁵ The percentages reporting having taken a self-defence course or having obtained a dog were much lower: 3% in both 1993 and 1999.

Table 2:
International Ranking of Fear Levels

| Jurisdiction | Rank in terms of public levels of fear |
|---------------------|---|
| Switzerland | 1 |
| Portugal | 2 |
| Poland | 3 |
| Japan | 4 |
| Australia | 5 |
| Belgium | 6 |
| England and Wales | 7 |
| Spain | 8 |
| France | 9 |
| Northern Ireland | 10 |
| Scotland | 11 |
| <i>Canada</i> | <i>12</i> |
| Netherlands | 13 |
| U.S.A. | 14 |
| Finland | 15 |

Source: International Crime Victimization Survey (derived from Quann, 2001)

Explaining declining levels of fear

Research in the field has yet to fully explain changes in public levels of fear of victimization over time. There is some empirical support for the intuitive proposition that there is a positive relationship between victimization experience and levels of fear. The two most likely explanations for declining levels of fear of crime in Canada would appear to be (a) declining *actual* victimization rates; (b) changing perceptions of crime trends across the country (see later sections of this paper). Simply put, if Canadians are less likely to become victims, and are more likely to perceive crime rates to be falling, they are also more likely to report feeling safe. Both experience and perception therefore appear to play a role in determining levels of fear.

Summary

Most people report feeling safe from crime, although clearly there is important variation in terms of perceptions of safety. Levels of fear of crime have remained fairly stable over the past few years, although it appears that the percentage of respondents reporting that they are afraid has declined recently. As well, there has been a drop in the percentage of Canadians who feel it necessary to engage in “avoidance behaviours” in order to protect themselves from becoming a crime victim. The decreased levels of fear may be a response to the falling crime rates, and changing public perceptions of those rates.

II. PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

1. Perception of crime as a government priority

We begin with “Top of the Mind” responses to the following question: “*Thinking about the issues facing Canada today, which one would you say the Government of Canada should focus on most?*”. Crime does not place very high, as the following results in Table 3 reveal.

Table 3:

Crime as a Government Priority, 2000

| Issue | % of respondents identifying issue as the most important priority |
|-------------------|--|
| Health care | 33 |
| Education | 9 |
| Economy | 9 |
| Unemployment | 8 |
| Taxes | 7 |
| Debt | 6 |
| Poverty | 5 |
| Social programs | 3 |
| Environment | 2 |
| Immigration | 2 |
| Crime and Justice | 2 |
| National Unity | 2 |
| Other | 12 |

Source: Canada Information Office, 2000a

Considerable variation emerges with respect to the levels of concern about the importance of these social issues. Concern about crime tends to be much higher than the national average in British Columbia, and lowest in the Atlantic provinces.

Table 4 presents the historical record of responses to the question “*What issue should Canada’s leaders be most concerned about?*”. When asked, unprompted, to identify the issues that Canada’s leaders should be most concerned about, crime was cited by 4% of respondents in 2001, a decrease from the 6% average over the years 1996-1999 (Ipsos-Reid, 2001). Several conclusions may be drawn from these trends. First, crime does not attract particularly high percentages of responses. Second, by asking respondents to identify *the most* important issue, pollsters are employing an insensitive measure: concern about crime may increase significantly but still not attain the threshold of the single most important issue. Third, it is clear that there is more volatility associated with other issues such as the economy. This is apparent from the range of support for these issues. Public perceptions of economic issues are clearly more labile.

One explanation of this variability is that changes in the economy reflected in the consumer price index or the unemployment rate may have a more direct impact on public reaction. Downturns in the economy have a fairly rapid impact upon peoples’ lives. Crime rates, on the other hand, may not have the same effect on public perceptions; this may be due to the fact that news media coverage of crime does not typically reflect official crime statistics the way that news media coverage of the economy is fairly sensitive to the release of official indicators of the business cycle.

Table 4:

Percentage of respondents identifying (unaided) issue that Canada's leaders should be most concerned about

| Year | Crime/ Justice issues | Economy | Unemployment |
|----------------|------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| 2001 | 4 | 16 | 11 |
| 2000 | 8 | 10 | 14 |
| 1999 | 6 | 14 | 23 |
| 1998 | 5 | 24 | 32 |
| 1997 | 8 | 17 | 49 |
| 1996 | 6 | 26 | 44 |
| 1995 | 12 | 22 | 34 |
| 1994 | 5 | 21 | 33 |
| 1993 | 3 | 36 | 38 |
| 1992 | 2 | 44 | 24 |
| 1991 | 1 | 31 | 14 |
| 1990 | 2 | 22 | 8 |
| <i>Average</i> | 5 | 24 | 27 |
| <i>Range</i> | <i>11%</i> | <i>34%</i> | <i>41%</i> |

Source: Ipsos-Reid, 2001

2. Importance of crime as a social problem

The general finding from a number of surveys is that when asked to rate the comparative seriousness of the problem, crime generates less concern among the public than other issues.

- Less than one-third stated that they were “very concerned” about crime, compared to 69% when asked about health care and 58% when asked about child poverty (Perspectives Canada, 2001). There has been little change over the past decade in the place that crime occupies in rankings of concern.⁶
- Over the past 15 years, the percentage of the public identifying crime as the most important problem has never exceeded 5% (Enviroics Canada, 1998).
- In 2000, only 2% of respondents identified “crime and personal safety” as the single most important issue facing the country (Enviroics Canada, 2000).

An Ekos poll conducted in 2000 provides an exception to the general finding that crime is not high on a list of priority concerns for Canadians. Respondents were asked what priority the government of Canada should place on each of a number of areas, including crime and justice. A ranking of issues placed crime and justice relatively high, in fourth place, after health care, the environment and crime prevention, but ahead of [addressing] poverty, the unemployment rate, tax cuts and a number of other areas (Ekos Research Associates Inc., 2000). However, historical comparisons with respect to this question revealed a result consistent with the other polls: the percentage of respondents assigning a high priority to crime and justice has declined to 81% in 2000 from a high of 87% in 1994 (Ekos, 2000).

Another approach to the same question has been to ask respondents to rate the importance of crime as a problem. The general finding is the same: stability over time, with a recent decline in the percentage of people identifying crime as a problem.

- In 1984, 43% of sample identified crime as a problem; this percentage declined to 30% in 1998 (Enviroics Canada, 1998).

⁶ Five years ago, the percentage expressing this level of concern was almost the same: 31%.

The Perspectives Canada survey of 2000 asked respondents to state their level of concern with a series of social problems. The following table (5) reveals that crime trails all other social issues tracked in the survey, and by a significant margin. Moreover, little has changed over the past 4 years. The following table (6) makes the same point by demonstrating that more Canadians are unconcerned about crime than any other social issue.

Table 5:

Percentage of Canadians “very concerned” about various social issues

| Social Problem | % “very concerned” in 2000 | % “very concerned” in 1997 |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| Health Care | 69% | 57% |
| Child Poverty | 58% | n/a |
| Standard of Education | 52% | 49% |
| Environment | 45% | 47% |
| Homelessness | 43% | n/a |
| Level of Crime | 29% | 31% |

Source: Perspectives Canada, 2000

Table 6:

Percentage of Canadians expressing little concern with various social issues

| Social Problem | % of respondents choosing “unconcerned” or “very unconcerned” in 2000 |
|-------------------------|--|
| Level of crime | 32% |
| Homelessness | 14% |
| Environment | 10% |
| Standard of Education | 12% |
| Child poverty | 8% |
| Standard of health care | 8% |

Source: Perspectives Canada

Crime in the local community

The same phenomenon emerges when people are asked not about crime in general, or across Canada, but with respect to their own specific communities. The Focus Canada series of polls has asked the following question on several occasions: “*Would you say that crime is a very important, not very important problem or not at all important problem in your community?*” The percentage of respondents responding that crime was a very important problem in their neighbourhood declined from a high of 45% in 1990 to a low of 30% in 1998. (Environics Canada, 1998).

Crime as a priority

Further evidence of declining public concern over crime can be found in surveys conducted over the 1990s by the Environics Research Group. Concern about crime peaked in 1990, when almost half the sample expressed the view that crime was a “very important” problem. The percentage holding this view declined steadily to a decade low of 30% in 1998.

The Earnscliff surveys conducted in 1999 and 2000 also suggest that the percentage of Canadians identifying crime as a “high priority” is declining. In 1999, 49% chose this response; in 2000 it had declined a full ten percentage points to 39%. A similar pattern was observed for youth crime: 44% identified this as a high priority in 2000, down from 50% in 1999.

Additional evidence for the view that crime as a priority for Canadians is declining can be found in surveys conducted by Ekos Research Associates for the National Crime Prevention Centre. The following question has been posed eight times over the past seven years: “*Thinking not of just today, but over the next five years, what priority should the federal government place on crime and justice?*” The percentage indicating a high priority declined for six of these years, from 87% in 1994 to 77% in 1998. The average over the past three years has been 81%; this compares to an average of 85% over the period 1994-1996. While this is not a huge drop, it is consistent with a view that concern over crime is declining.

“Prompted” Responding to crime as a problem

A final way of examining the importance of crime as a problem is to provide respondents with prompted options. For example, in 2000, a national survey contained the following item: “*I am going to read you a series of two possible priority areas and I would like you to tell me which one you think should be given higher priority by the Government of Canada.*” (Canada Information Office, 2000). Respondents were then given a series of pairs of issues (e.g., crime/justice and unemployment). Using this method, crime and justice rises in the hierarchy of importance, as can be seen in Table 7.

However, a prompted format may generate an inflated ranking for crime and justice: the symbolic importance of criminal justice may result in a tendency of respondents to assign a higher priority to crime as an issue. Certainly the prompted methodology generates a rather different ranking of importance. In my view, the unprompted question remains a superior method.

Table 7:

Ranking of Issues, following prompted comparisons

| Rank | Issue |
|-------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Health |
| 2 | Education |
| 3 | Economy |
| 4 | Cost-effective operations |
| 5 | Crime and Justice |
| 6 | Environment |
| 7 | Unemployment |
| 8 | Taxation |
| 9 | Canadian Unity |
| 10 | Farm Income |

Source: Canadian Information Office, 2000

Crime in everyday life

On some occasions pollsters ask members of the public to relate the problem of crime to their “everyday life”. This approach to the issue generates the same outcome as surveys which ask people to rate the importance of crime as a social problem. Brillon, Louis-Guerin and Lamarche used this method in their survey in the mid-1980s, and found that only 5% of respondents cited crime as a concern in everyday life, compared to 46% who identified “personal financial problems”.

Summary

Taken together, the surveys conducted over the past few years suggest that in comparison with other social issues, particularly health care and the economy, crime does not generate high levels of public concern. When respondents are specifically prompted to consider crime as a problem, the issue becomes more important, but this may not be the optimal way to measure public opinion. There is some evidence from several polls that concern over crime has been declining recently.

III. PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME TRENDS

When asked about the purpose of sentencing, or the principal goal of the criminal justice system, most Canadians identify crime prevention. One consequence of this is that if people perceive crime rates to be rising inexorably, the public are likely to lack confidence in the criminal justice system. For this reason alone it is important to know something about public knowledge of crime trends.

For many years, a consistent finding from surveys in many countries was that approximately four-fifths of the public believed that crime rates were increasing (see Roberts & Stalans, 1997, for a summary). (It is important to point out however that residents of the UK and the US also share these misperceptions. The latest national survey of Americans found that almost half the sample believed that crime rates had increased, even though they have been declining for almost a decade (Belden Russonnello and Stewart, 2001)).

In 1994, a national survey by Angus Reid found that over two-thirds (68%) of Canadians believed that crime rates had increased over the previous five years. In reality, crime statistics in 1994 showed a 5% decline, the third consecutive drop in police-recorded crime (Hendrick, 1995). With respect to violent crime, the contrast between public perception and reality was even more striking. In 1994 the violent crime rate declined by the largest margin since 1962, when the UCR began (Hendricks, 1995).

Despite this, almost half the polled public thought that there had been a “great increase” in violent crime and a further 43% believed that there had been a moderate increase (Angus Reid, 1994). Similar findings emerged from a 1996 qualitative research project sponsored by the Ministry of the Solicitor General which concluded that: “*Across the groups studied in all cities, the majority of participants were under the impression that the incidence of crime had increased considerably*” (Angus Reid Group, 1996, p. 10). This suggests that there may be a considerable lag between the publication of crime statistics, and public perceptions of changes in crime rates.

Crime rates have been declining now for eight consecutive years (Tremblay, 2000). As well, victimization statistics also contradict the view held by many members of the public that crime rates are rising inexorably: the International Crime Victimization Survey, conducted on four occasions between 1989 and 2000 found that victimization rates declined by 15% over the period 1989-2000 (see Quann, 2001, Table 1).

However, public perceptions appear to be changing, perhaps in response to media coverage of the official crime statistics. This can be demonstrated with respect to adult and youth crime rates as the following findings make clear:

- The percentage of Canadians who erroneously believed that there had been a “great increase” in crime rates fell from 24% in 1994 to 17% in 1997.
- The percentage of respondents who correctly believed that crime rates had fallen, increased from 4 to 8% (Angus Reid, 1997).
- A representative survey of Kingston residents conducted in 2000 found that just over half the sample believed that the rate of crime was decreasing or “staying about the same” (EnviroNics Research Group, 2000).
- Less than one-third of respondents to the Earnscliffe survey in December 2000 were of the opinion that youth crime rates *in their neighbourhoods*⁷ had increased over the past five years.
- In 1999, 29% of the public believed that crime in their neighbourhood had increased over the past five years; in 1993, almost half the sample held this opinion.
- The most recent GSS found that over half (54%) of Canadians believed that crime levels in their neighbourhood had stayed the same over the previous 5 years. Only 43% held this view on the previous administration of the GSS in 1993.
- Consecutive surveys of the public in Alberta found that the percentage of respondents who felt that the violent crime rate was increasing fell from 50% in 1998 to 43% in 1999 (Angus Reid, 1999).

Considerable geographical variation emerges in response to questions about crime trends. For example, in 1997, the percentage of respondents holding the view that there had been a “great increase” in community crime rates over the preceding five years ranged from 9% in Atlantic Canada to 30% in British Columbia. This variation may explain why residents of B.C. assign a much higher priority to crime than do residents of the Atlantic provinces: in 1997, 42% of B.C. respondents cited crime as a priority for their community compared to only 10% of respondents in Atlantic Canada (Angus Reid, 1997).

Finally, the influence of the news media on public responses to this question can be seen with respect to hate crime.

Public Perceptions of Hate Crime

⁷ It is important to note however that estimates of youth crime at the provincial level as well as projections of youth crime trends were less rosy. Three-quarters of the sample believed that crime rates in “the province” had increased, while 58% expected that there would be more youth crime in five years time.

In 2000, almost half the respondents to a national survey said that hate crime in Canada is increasing. Since Statistics Canada does not collect data on this form of crime, the public perception must be based on the increase in media attention to incidents of hate-motivated crime. (Although a question on the GSS provides some information about hate-motivated crime, it was not posed prior to 1999; accordingly there are no historical comparisons to suggest that the incidence of this category of crime has been increasing.)

Optimism with respect to the future

The Perspectives Canada survey approaches the question of crime rates from the other direction: respondents are asked whether they believe that specific issues will improve or worsen over the forthcoming year. Responses indicate that Canadians feel reasonably optimistic about a number of social problems, including crime. Thus 47% of the sample surveyed in 2000 believed that the level of crime in their community would improve within the next 12 months. As with a number of other indicators examined in this report, this statistic has been fairly stable over the past four years. The percentage of Canadians with an optimistic outlook with respect to crime is higher than, or comparable to the equivalent statistic for other social issues (see Perspectives Canada, 2000).

Consequences of changing perceptions of crime rates

Although it would require additional analyses to establish the existence of a causal relationship, it seems likely that changing perceptions of crime rates are likely to influence both fear of crime and attitudes towards criminal justice. Some evidence exists already. For example, respondents who gave the federal government a good rating with respect to crime and justice were asked whether they could think of any recent actions or events that had influenced them (Canada Information Office, 2000a). Most respondents could not offer a reason for the positive ratings that they had given the government, but of those that could offer a reason, the second most cited option was that “crime rates were going down” (Canada Information Office, 2000a).

Summary

For many years, most Canadians held the view that crime rates were increasing, regardless of the trends in crime statistics recorded by the police or victimizations surveys. There is evidence that this view is now changing; members of the public appear to have begun to absorb the reality that crime rates are declining.

IV. ATTITUDES TO PUNISHMENT-RELATED ISSUES

There is some evidence of shifting in Canadians' attitudes towards certain key criminal justice issues in the area of sentencing and corrections. Canadians appear less supportive of "Get tough" policies such as capital punishment, and more supportive of liberal criminal justice programs such as parole.

Support for Capital Punishment

- The percentage of the public endorsing capital punishment has fallen to a historic low of 52%, down from 73% in 1987, 72% in 1994 and 69% in 1995 (Ipsos-Reid, 2001; Angus Reid, 1994; Angus Reid, 1995).
- The percentage strongly supporting capital punishment declined from 46% in 1987 to 27% in 2001.

Some explanations for these trends may include the following:

(i) declining crime rates, in particular the homicide rate, which in 1999 fell to its lowest level since 1967 (1.8 per 100,000 population; Tremblay, 2000);

(ii) increased media attention to murder cases involving wrongful convictions (e.g., Morin; Sophonow);

(iii) absence of strong political lobby for reinstatement; strong support for political party opposed to reinstatement;

(iv) decreased attention paid to crime and justice as an electoral issue in recent federal elections;

(v) negative publicity associated with some recent, high-profile executions in the U.S. (e.g., the execution of Faye Tucker in Texas).

Confidence in the courts

Attitudes towards the courts have been consistently negative. Here too, there is evidence of some change. A survey conducted for the Correctional Service of Canada in 1997 asked respondents how much confidence they had in the courts, local police, provincial police, the National Parole Board and CSC itself. In keeping with other polls, the police attracted the highest confidence ratings: over 90% of respondents had a lot or some confidence in the OPP.

- 67% of respondents expressed the same degree of confidence in the courts (Enviro-nics Research Group Limited, 2000).
- A national survey conducted in 1997 found a comparable pattern of results: 83% expressed confidence in the RCMP; over half expressed confidence in the courts (Angus Reid Group, 1997).
- In Alberta, a survey conducted in 1999 found that over half the sample had confidence in the courts (Angus Reid Group, 1999).
- The limited comparisons available from the GSS (1993 vs. 1999) suggest relative stability with some improvement in ratings of the courts: the percentage of Canadians who believed that the courts were doing a good job “helping the victim” and “providing justice quickly” improved somewhat from 1993 to 1999 (see Tufts, 2000).

*Attitudes towards parole*⁸

- the percentage of the public supporting parole (rather than flat-time sentencing) is high, and rising: in 1998, 75% of public favoured parole (Roberts, Nuffield & Hann); in 2001, responses to the identical question generated a split of 80-20 in favour of parole (Ipsos-Reid, 2001a).

⁸ The GSS cannot provide comparative data on attitudes towards prison and parole since questions about these areas were asked in 1999 for the first time.

Although conditional release has historically attracted a great deal of public criticism, the survey of Kingston residents⁹ conducted by Environics Canada in 2000 also found very high levels of support for conditional release:

- fully 85% of respondents agreed with the statement that “*It is safer to gradually release offenders into society under supervision than to release them without conditions at the end of their sentence.*” Of these, almost two-thirds strongly agreed with the statement, and only 5% disagreed “strongly”.
- In a similar fashion, the proportion of Canadians desiring a stricter parole system declined from 75% in 1993 to 65% in 1998 (Environics, 1998).

The possible explanations for this increase in support for parole may include the following:

- (i) absence of major parole-related tragedies;
- (ii) publication of low recidivism rates by offenders on parole;
- (iii) positive publicity associated with the celebration of the centenary of conditional release in 1999;
- (iv) generally positive coverage of corrections by news media, particularly a recent CBC series.

Although there is considerable support for conditional release as a general concept, there has been no change in the public’s attitude with respect to eligibility: most people still believe that parole should be restricted to certain offenders: this consistent finding emerges from research conducted in 1985 and 2000.

In 1985, the Canadian Sentencing Commission asked a representative sample of the public to state whether they thought that all inmates should be eligible for parole, only certain prisoners, or whether parole should be abolished. Results showed that 65% of the public favoured the first option (see Roberts, 1988). Fifteen years later, another representative sample was asked to agree or disagree with the statement that “*All offenders who are in prison should be considered for parole*” (Environics Research, 2000). Sixty-three percent of the sample strongly disagreed with this position, suggesting that there are clearly prisoners that the public see as being too dangerous to be considered for parole, or to have committed crimes the seriousness of which argues against conditional release prior to warrant expiry.

⁹ It may be the case that Kingston residents have a more positive view of correctional issues as a result of the presence of federal institutions in the area; however, these trends are matched by other surveys using broader samples of respondents.

Fear of crime and punitive attitudes

One of the most recent studies in the area of fear drew upon the 1993 GSS data (see Spratt & Doob, 1997). The general conclusion of that study was that a significant relationship existed between fear levels and the valence of attitudes towards the criminal justice system: respondents reporting *high* levels of fear were significantly more likely to hold *negative* views of the police and the courts. Of course this kind of analysis is purely correlational, and the direction of causality is unknown. We do not know whether fear of crime causes people to have negative views of the criminal justice system, or whether a negative perception of the system heightens levels of fear, as people believe that the system cannot prevent them from becoming crime victims.

As noted earlier, most surveys address fear of crime, or attitudes to criminal justice issues, but not both variables. This makes it hard to test relationships between fear and opinion; it makes it impossible to know whether changes in levels of fear of criminal victimization generate shifts in attitudes towards criminal justice policies, and offenders. The 1999 GSS is an exception; respondents were asked a series of fear-related questions (see above) as well as a number of questions about the criminal justice system.

Tufts (2000) analysed data from the 1999 GSS to test the relationship between punitiveness (support for prison as a sanction in specific crime scenarios) and satisfaction with personal safety. She found that respondents who were dissatisfied with their overall personal safety from crime were more likely to support the imposition of imprisonment in specific cases. Tufts and Roberts (2001) conducted multivariate analyses of the 1999 GSS data and found that fear was a highly significant predictor of preferences for prison.

Victimization history and attitudes towards the use of incarceration

Tufts and Roberts also explored the relationship between victimization history and attitudes towards the use of incarceration (see Tufts & Roberts, 2001). This research analysed data from the 1999 GSS and found that fear was a significant predictor of punitiveness: respondents scoring high on a “fear index” were more likely to favour the imposition of imprisonment on offenders described in brief scenarios.¹⁰ Victimization history, whether it involved a violent crime or not, was not a significant predictor of attitudes towards the use of imprisonment.

¹⁰ Each respondent was provided with a crime scenario and asked to choose between imprisonment or an alternative sanction.

These findings suggest that as fear levels increase, public support for the use of imprisonment, and public opposition to “rehabilitation” oriented correctional programs such as parole, is likely to increase. This straightforward empirical finding underlines the importance of developing strategies to reduce fear of criminal victimization. These strategies should include a component addressed at correcting public misperceptions of crime rates.

Finally, an under-explored issue is the relationship between victimization history and perceptions, rather than fear, of crime. It is not unreasonable to expect people who have been victimized to be more fearful of crime than non-victims, particularly when the victimization involved a personal injury offence by a stranger. However, it is also possible that being victimized also affects public perceptions of crime trends. As with a number of hypotheses raised in the course of this paper, the question has yet to be comprehensively addressed by multivariate statistical analyses. Nevertheless, there is clear evidence of an association between victimization history and perceptions of crime trends. This emerges from a number of public opinion surveys. For example, the 1997 Angus Reid poll shows that fully 25% of victims, but only 15% of non-victims, held the view that there had been a “great increase” in crime rates over the preceding five years.

V. RESPONDING TO PUBLIC MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT CRIME

Fear is of course subjective in nature; some people may feel fearful even in a safe environment. What is important is that members of the public have a realistic perception of crime trends. This requires communicating information about crime trends effectively. One difficulty with news treatment of crime statistics is that there is differential reporting, depending on the direction of the trend. When there are increases in crime rates to report, these hit the headlines: crime “soars” or “surges”. When crime rates fall, this is usually reported by the media, but in terms of tabloid news values, a small fall in crime has as little editorial allure: accurate but unmemorable coverage is the result.

Another way in which the reporting of crime can distort public understanding is that the release of crime statistics is an infrequent event. National crime figures appear only once a year. Thus once a year, there may be good news to report about crime. However, that leaves 364 days in which there is a constant stream of reports of individual crimes, usually offences involving serious personal injury. Crime statistics simply do not compel the same degree of public attention as serious crimes of violence; they do not appear as often; and they are much less memorable.

The only way that crime statistics are likely to remain in the public mind is if the news media place reports of specific crimes in a more general statistical context. This is unlikely to happen for two reasons. First, contextual information is not part of the media lens;¹¹ and second, reporting the details of, for example, a homicide while simultaneously noting that the homicide rates are at a 30-year low, is likely to be seen as insulting the relatives of the victim, for whom statistical trends are understandably totally irrelevant. Clearly, ways have to be developed of presenting crime and justice statistics in a manner which both emphasizes their limitations and communicates the realities underlying the statistics. Ironically, the more heated the climate of debate about crime, the more difficulty governments have in presenting an accurate view of crime trends to the public.

Targeting Audiences

Whatever institutional arrangements exist for providing information about the penal process, it will always be essential to identify and target key sub-groups of the population. To use the jargon of market research, audiences need to be properly segmented, and messages properly constructed to address different audiences. While some progress can be made in reaching the general public, it is almost certainly more efficient to reach separate sub-groups directly. Key groups are likely to include those who are either at the greatest risk of

¹¹ When an aircraft disaster is reported in the media, it is seldom accompanied by statistical information which would permit the public to evaluate the relative risk of air travel compared to, say, travel by private vehicle on crowded motor ways.

victimization, or who have the highest fear levels. One of the benefits of victimization surveys such as the GSS or the International Crime Victimization Survey is the identification of groups in these categories. This brief report has not summarized the demographic trends with respect to issues such as fear of crime and perceptions of crime rates, but a comprehensive analysis of demographic variation would be a necessary first step towards identifying key groups to whom messages about crime and justice should be directed.

Styles of communication

Once key audiences have been identified, they need to be provided with information in a way that is tailored to their specific needs and receptivity. This will entail using new technologies. Until recently, the mass media – first newspapers, television and radio – enjoyed a near-monopoly on access to the general public. Messages of any complexity had to be presented via the media, and those who wished to reach the public inevitably had to surrender some control over the process. The IT revolution has changed all this.

By now (2001) more than one North American adult in four has Internet access. The proportion of the population with Net access will obviously grow rapidly. There will be inevitable limits to the extent to which people seek out information about crime and punishment, but it is worth extending these limits as far as possible. Interactive websites constitute an ideal medium for rendering complex, detailed information about crime and punishment in an accessible way and for providing it in a manner that is at the convenience of the consumer. In addition, the sheer volume of information that can be made accessible in a website makes the Net an ideal vehicle for communicating the results of research.¹²

Role of the News Media

Some of the distortions in public understanding about crime and punishment stem from the influence of commercial news values. We have seen how vulnerable the courts are to selective and exaggerated reporting. How far then, can the media, and the tabloid press in particular, be encouraged or cajoled into a more responsible form of journalism? To be realistic, the most optimistic answer must be “not much”. However, we think that there are some things that can be done. Newspapers’ editorial policies on the coverage of crime may be moderated a little if their unintended consequences are pointed out to editors.

Often the way in which the media handle a crime story is less a function of news values than of ignorance; crime reports are seldom written by reporters who specialize in criminal justice. Reporters work to tight deadlines, often without any expert knowledge. For example,

¹² An additional advantage of web-based dissemination of information is that this method attracts a disproportionate number of younger individuals who have more malleable attitudes towards criminal justice. Accordingly, the potential for movement is greater than with more traditional print-based methods.

they report specific sentences in the context of the maximum penalty possible, or make comparisons with another case which was unique in some respect. Sentencing stories (and editorials) frequently blame judges for sentences that appear lenient, without realizing that many sentences reflect joint submissions from the defense and the Crown, and that in most jurisdictions, judges will not impose a sentence that differs from the joint submission.

Media personnel are prone to the same misunderstandings about crime and punishment as the layperson, and their reporting will reflect these misunderstandings. Those responsible for the management of the criminal process need to ensure that opinion-formers are properly supported with accurate information about criminal justice. Unfortunately, it can prove quite a demanding discipline for government departments to maintain an open information policy for journalists when they are equally concerned to control the spin that the media place on their policies. Journalists tend to be wary of being “co-opted” into delivering the government’s message. It is probably best in the long run that journalists have direct access to the statisticians and researchers who understand sentencing and crime statistics.

There are many things which could be done in most jurisdictions to improve the links between the media and the criminal justice process. These include appointing press officers (whether at central government, state or local level), improving media access to specialist staff such as statisticians and academics, and striving for the better use of technology to communicate statistical information to the press.

Use of spokespersons to communicate information about crime and justice

A number of polls have addressed the relative credibility of different groups and categories of professionals. Police officers generally generate the greatest confidence among members of the public. For example, one survey conducted in 1996 found that 35% of the public had a great deal of confidence in the RCMP, 30% in the police. This compared to 4% for parole boards and 11% for judges.

A more direct question was posed by Environics in 1998. Respondents were provided with a list of professions and then asked the following: “*When it comes to crime and solutions to crime, how believable are the following?*” Police chiefs headed the list: over two-thirds of the public found them to be always or usually believable. Victims groups generated almost as high a rating (66%). On the other hand provincial and federal government officials received much lower ratings: less than one third of respondents reported finding these groups “always or usually” believable. The lesson is clear: an attempt should be made to convey information about crime and justice through the professions in which the public repose most trust or confidence.

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