

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

CHANGING LIVES. PROTECTING CANADIANS.

Federal Offenders Serving Life Sentences: 2015-16 to 2019-20

More Indigenous and non-Indigenous men and women are serving life in custody and under community supervision.

Why we are doing this study

The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) administers sentences and provides rehabilitative opportunities to all offenders sentenced by the courts. An increasing number of long-term offenders both now and in the near future, particularly those serving life sentences, raises a variety of management issues. Data on the number of life sentences being served in custody and in the community help to place the situation in context and assist in the development of a differentiated approach for managing these populations, if required.

What we did

CSC routinely collects information on sentence administration and demographics for offenders under federal jurisdiction (those serving sentences of two years or longer). Data was gathered on those under federal jurisdiction in relation to serving a life sentence. These 2015-16 and 2019-20 year-end figures reflect the prevalence of those who were serving these sentences in custody and on conditional release in the community.

What we found

In Table 1, statistics show that the number and percentage of men federally serving life sentences has increased over the past five years (23.8% in 2015-16 and 25.4% in 2019-20). More specifically, the relative growth over time has increased by 329 offenders (or 6.3%). It is noteworthy to observe that Indigenous men display lower percentages of life sentences than their non-Indigenous counterparts and the data from 2019-20 indicates that the difference is widening.

Table 1: Life Sentences for Federal Men (%)

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Overall
2015-16	1,097 / 4,825 (22.7%)	4,077 / 16,953 (24.0%)	5,174 / 21,778 (23.8%)
<i>In-custody</i>	847 / 3,532	2,618 / 10,485	3,465 / 14,017
<i>Community</i>	250 / 1,293	1,459 / 6,468	1,709 / 7,761
2019-20	1,286 / 5,539 (23.2%)	4,217 / 16,143 (26.1%)	5,503 / 21,682 (25.4%)
<i>In-custody</i>	943 / 3,855	2,582 / 9,177	3,525 / 13,032
<i>Community</i>	343 / 1,684	1,635 / 6,966	1,978 / 8,650

Table 2 also shows that the number and percentage of women federally serving life sentences has increased over the past five years (17.1% in 2015-16 and 18.1% in 2019-20). In particular, the relative growth in women serving life sentences has increased by 38 (or 17.4%) offenders. As well, it is notable that Indigenous women have lower rates of life sentences than their non-Indigenous counterparts and by 2019-20 the contrast appears to be broadening.

Table 2: Life Sentences for Federal Women (%)

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Overall
2015-16	72 / 402 (17.9%)	147 / 877 (16.8%)	219 / 1,279 (17.1%)
<i>In-custody</i>	53 / 251	73 / 444	126 / 695
<i>Community</i>	19 / 151	74 / 433	93 / 584
2019-20	84 / 487 (17.2%)	173 / 929 (18.6%)	257 / 1,416 (18.1%)
<i>In-custody</i>	46 / 279	87 / 406	133 / 685
<i>Community</i>	38 / 208	86 / 523	124 / 731

What it means

Clearly, there are some relatively small differences in the numbers and percentages of Indigenous and non-Indigenous offenders serving life sentences. However, the contextual finding of continued growth in the number and proportions of those serving life sentences can affect significantly the composition of the custodial and conditional release populations as offenders with life sentences accumulate over time. This suggests that CSC continue to develop a range of strategies that offers variation in security, programming and supervision.

For more information

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