

Use of Adult Sentences for Youth Offenders, 2023

Key findings from the 2023 National Justice Survey¹



What is the National Justice Survey?

The National Justice Survey (NJS) is an annual national public opinion research study conducted by Justice Canada, collecting the views, perceptions and knowledge of people living in Canada on important justice-related issues.

Youth who commit a criminal offence are typically sentenced under the youth criminal justice system (CJS), which is fundamentally different from the adult system. Respondents were asked under which circumstances, if any, should youth found guilty of an offence be given an adult sentence.²

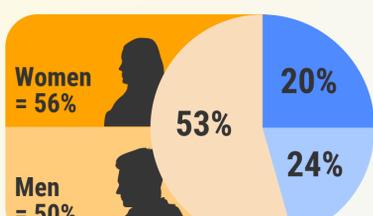
About **two-thirds** of respondents said the courts should consider giving an adult sentence to a youth if they are **found guilty of committing murder**, and similarly, about two-thirds of respondents indicated if the youth is a **repeat violent offender**.



12% of respondents said the courts should never give an adult sentence to a youth.

Black people (56% for murder and 52% for repeat violent offenders), Middle Eastern or North African people (44%, for repeat violent offenders only) and Latinx people (56%, for repeat violent offenders only) were **less likely to agree** with these circumstances (i.e., for murder and repeat violent offenders) than White people (66% and 67%, respectively).

Just over half of respondents **agreed certain limitations should be placed on adult sentences given to youth** (e.g., forbid life sentences), with **women being more likely to agree** than men.



East Asian/Southeast Asian people were **less likely to agree** (46%) than White people (54%).

Respondents from Quebec were **more likely to agree** than respondents from other regions, except for the Territories.



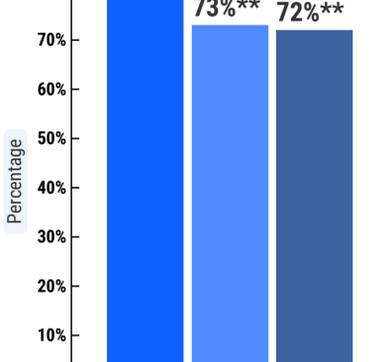
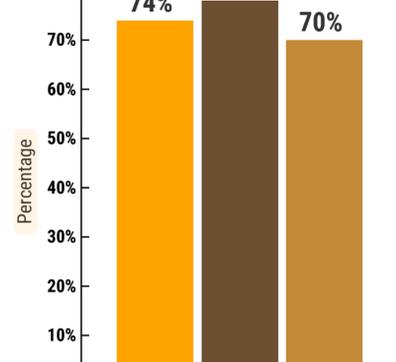
[^] Caution: Small sample size (≤ 50). Statistical testing not performed when $n < 30$ since statistical assumptions are not met.

* Symbol indicates a significant difference from the reference group (Quebec) at $p < .05$.



About three-quarters of respondents **agreed** that when youth receive an adult sentence, there should be a **process in place to periodically review** the case to ensure it is still appropriate.

Women were more likely to agree with this statement than men, as well as **younger respondents** in comparison to older respondents.

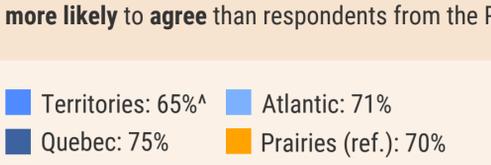


* Symbol indicates a significant difference from the reference category (men) at $p < .05$.

** Symbol indicates a significant difference from the reference category (18 to 34 years old) at $p < .05$.

Racialized people³ (77%)—particularly people with multiple ethno-cultural identities (87%)—were **more likely to agree** than White people (73%).

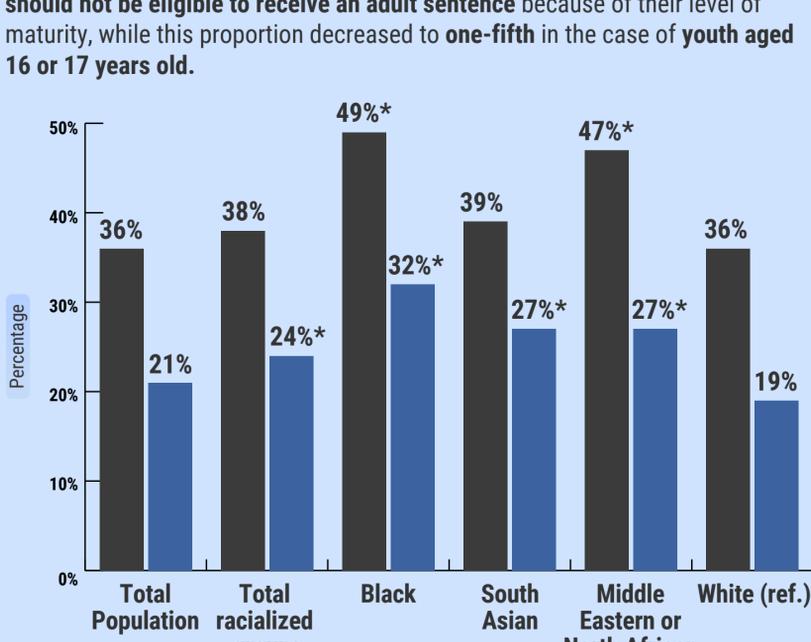
Respondents from British Columbia and Ontario were **more likely to agree** than respondents from the Prairies.



* Symbol indicates a significant difference from the reference category (Prairies) at $p < .05$.

Respondents were asked about a youth case's eligibility to receive an adult sentence if the young person is 14 or 15 years of age, and if the young person is 16 or 17 years of age.

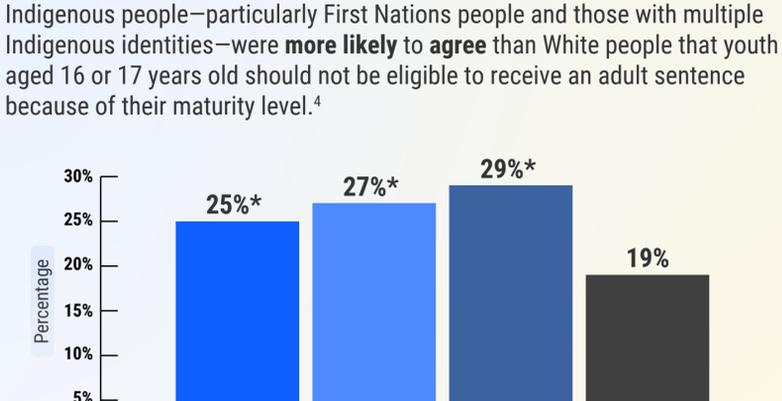
More than one-third of respondents **agreed youth aged 14 or 15 years old should not be eligible to receive an adult sentence** because of their level of maturity, while this proportion decreased to **one-fifth** in the case of **youth aged 16 or 17 years old**.



Black people and Middle Eastern or North African people were **more likely to agree** than White people that youth from both age groups should not be eligible to receive an adult sentence because of their maturity level.³

* Symbol indicates a significant difference from the reference category (White) at $p < .05$.

Indigenous people—particularly First Nations people and those with multiple Indigenous identities—were **more likely to agree** than White people that youth aged 16 or 17 years old should not be eligible to receive an adult sentence because of their maturity level.⁴



* Symbol indicates a significant difference from the reference category (White) at $p < .05$.

Source: 2023 National Justice Survey, <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/njs-snj.html>.

¹ Although all data points are presented, only statistically significant findings are noted. Percentages reported were weighted based on 2021 Canadian Census estimates. Graphs presented may not add to 100% as "Don't know" responses are not displayed.

² The *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (YCJA) governs Canada's youth criminal justice system, recognizing that while youth aged 12 to 17 must be held accountable for criminal acts, they are still maturing and have unique needs that should be considered when they come into contact with the criminal justice system. Compared to the adult criminal justice system, the youth system places greater emphasis on out-of-court responses, where appropriate, to allow early and effective intervention and provide community-based responses to youth crime while avoiding the negative effects of custody on the development of youth.

³ In addition, South Asian and Middle Eastern or North African people were more likely to agree than White people that youth aged 16 or 17 years old should not be eligible to receive an adult sentence because of their maturity level. No other differences were observed among respondents asked about youth aged 14 to 15 and adult sentences.

⁴ No differences were found with respect to youth aged 14 or 15 years old.