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Insights on Canadian Society

Trends in police-reported drug crime in Canada

by Adam Cotter and Shana Conroy

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INSIGHTS ON CANADIAN SOCIETY

Trends in police-reported drug crime in Canada

by **Adam Cotter** and **Shana Conroy**

Overview of the study

Using data from the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, this article examines police-reported drug offences in Canada over time.

- After 12 consecutive years of decline, the rate of police-reported drug crime increased in 2024 to 128 incidents per 100,000 population but remained well below its historic peak (330 incidents per 100,000 population in 2011). The legalization of non-medical cannabis and shifts in police practices and enforcement have contributed to these changes.
- Contrary to the long-term drug crime trend, the rate of drug crime increased 13% from 2023 to 2024. The year-over-year increase was the result of more incidents for most types of drug crime, led by cannabis (+2,272 incidents), cocaine (+1,462) and non-heroin opioid (+1,105) offences. The largest increases were noted for possession (+3,435 incidents), trafficking (+1,113), and importation and exportation (+1,060) offences.
- In 2014, possession offences accounted for 75% of all drug crime. By 2024, the proportion had dropped to 42% as offences related to trafficking, importation and exportation, production and other offences accounted for a larger proportion.

SPECIAL EDITION ISSUE OF INSIGHTS ON CANADIAN SOCIETY

The special edition issue of *Insights on Canadian Society* expands Statistics Canada's flagship social publication to offer policy-relevant articles united across a common theme, leveraging visuals and accessible multimedia formats. This issue focuses on the makeup of Canadian society in times of transformation, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities shaping the future. This article is featured within this issue.

Introduction

Drugs and problematic substance use are ongoing health and societal concerns in Canada, and such concerns may be exacerbated because of associations with crime, victimization and threats to public safety. For instance, the supply and distribution of drugs may involve organized crime, individuals may commit crimes to acquire drugs or while under the influence of drugs, victims of crime may use drugs to cope following victimization, and recreational drug use may involve criminalized substances. Many jurisdictions in Canada have focused on health and harm reduction approaches to minimize the negative consequences associated with drugs; however, there have been recent calls for increased involvement by the criminal justice system in drug issues.

Previous analysis has focused on contact with the criminal justice system among those who experienced a drug overdose, providing insight into their socioeconomic characteristics and their levels of involvement with police.[1] However, the most recent comprehensive analysis of drug crime in Canada is over a decade old,[2] predating significant developments—including the legalization of non-medical cannabis in Canada in 2018 and a notable escalation of the opioid overdose crisis.[3] Further, in recent years, there have been changes to police practices and enforcement and the guiding principles of legislation related to drug offences in Canada.[4]

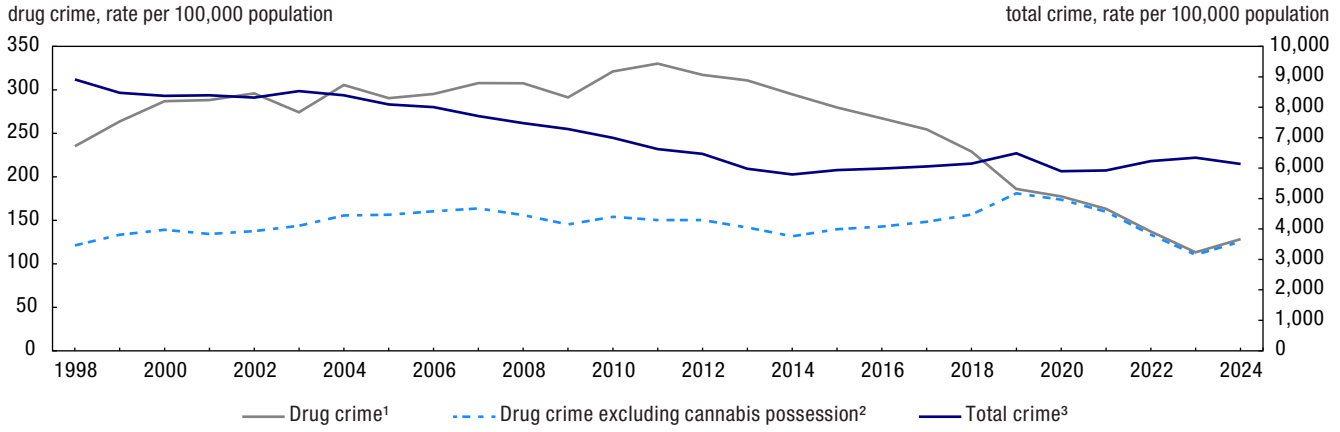
This article uses data from the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey[5] to examine police-reported drug offences in Canada over time, including possession, trafficking, importation and exportation, production and other crimes. It should be noted that the data reflect incidents that were detected and reported by police services in Canada.

After reaching a historic peak in 2011, police-reported drug crime has generally declined, driven by the decrease in cannabis offences

Over 2.5 million incidents of crime were reported by police services in Canada in 2024. For a small proportion (2.1%), or 53,002 of these incidents, a drug offence—including offences under the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* (CDSA) and the *Cannabis Act*—was the most serious violation in the incident.[6]

The rate of police-reported drug crime in 2024 was 56% lower than a decade earlier, in 2014 (128 incidents per 100,000 population versus 295) (Chart 1).[7] Further, the rate reported in 2024 remained

Chart 1
Police-reported incidents of crime, by type, Canada, 1998 to 2024



1. Includes incidents where the most serious violation was a drug offence.
2. Excludes incidents where cannabis possession under the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* or the *Cannabis Act* was the most serious violation. Includes incidents where the most serious violation was any other type of drug offence.
3. Includes incidents where the most serious violation was a drug offence, as well as violations under the *Criminal Code* and other federal statutes.
Notes: Data reflect the most serious offence in the incident. All years are shown where comparable data are available. In 2018, the *Cannabis Act* received royal assent and came into force. Rates are calculated on the basis of 100,000 population. Populations are based on July 1 estimates from Statistics Canada's Centre for Demography.
Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey.

well below the historic peak recorded in 2011 (128 incidents per 100,000 population versus 330).

The overall trend of decline in drug crime can be attributed, in large part, to changes to the legal status of non-medical cannabis. In 2018, non-medical cannabis was legalized in Canada, with the *Cannabis Act* receiving royal assent in June 2018 and coming into force in October 2018. The act created a framework to control the production, distribution, sale and possession of cannabis.[8] The rate of drug crime in 2024 (128 incidents per 100,000 population) was 31% lower than in 2019 (186), the first full year of data following the legalization of non-medical cannabis.[9]

While cannabis offences—particularly possession—have historically accounted for most police-reported drug crime, there has been a notable shift following the legalization of non-medical cannabis. For instance, in 2014, there were nearly 70,000 cannabis offences in Canada, which accounted for two-thirds (66%) of all drug crime. In 2024, cannabis offences accounted for a far smaller number (8,879) and proportion (17%) of all drug crime (Table 1). In 2024, cannabis offences under the *Cannabis Act* were most often related to importation and exportation (66%), while smaller proportions were related to possession (13%), distribution (7%), sale (7%), production (3%) and other crimes (4%).

> The rate of drug crime in 2024 was 31% lower than in 2019, the first full year of data following the legalization of non-medical cannabis.

Table 1
Police-reported incidents of drug crime, by type of drug and type of violation, Canada, 2024

Type of drug and type of violation	number	percent[1]	rate	Rate change from 2023	Rate change from 2019	Rate change from 2014
				percent		
Type of drug						
Cannabis	8,879	17	22	30	-51	-89
Cannabis Act	8,875	17	21	31	-50	…
Controlled Drugs and Substances Act	4	0	0	-76	-99	-100
Cocaine	14,504	27	35	8	-15	-23
Heroin	883	2	2	-5	-75	-62
Opioid (non-heroin)	5,235	10	13	23	26	…
Methamphetamine (crystal meth)	8,634	16	21	3	-46	18
Methylenedioxyamphetamine (ecstasy)	227	0	1	2	-69	-63
Other[2]	14,640	28	35	16	-15	15
Total	**53,002**	**100**	**128**	**13**	**-31**	**-56**
Type of violation						
Possession	22,303	42	54	11	-37	-76
Trafficking	18,777	35	45	3	-9	-25
Importation and exportation[3]	9,882	19	24	53	-40	649
Production	427	1	1	-9	-67	-89
Other[3,4]	1,613	3	4	1	-45	4,366
Total	**53,002**	**100**	**128**	**13**	**-31**	**-56**

0 true zero or a value rounded to zero
… not applicable
1. Reflects the proportion of drug crime.
2. Includes all other substances or precursors under the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* not otherwise specified, as well as the offence of possession, production, sale, importation, or transportation for use in the production of or trafficking in a controlled substance.
3. The percent change between 2014 and 2024 should be interpreted with caution. Certain drug offences were added to the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey when the *Cannabis Act* came into force in 2018. The increase is primarily due to the creation of these new offence categories.
4. Includes distribution, sale and other offences under the *Cannabis Act*, and other offences under the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act*.
Notes: Data reflect the most serious offence in the incident. In 2018, the *Cannabis Act* received royal assent and came into force. Rates are calculated on the basis of 100,000 population. Populations are based on July 1 estimates from Statistics Canada's Centre for Demography.
Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey.

Overall, there were 22 cannabis offences per 100,000 population in 2024, down 89% from 194 offences in 2014 (Chart 2). Therefore, the long-term decline in the overall rate of drug crime is primarily attributable to the decrease in cannabis offences after legalization.

Excluding all cannabis possession offences—which, as mentioned, used to account for most police-reported drug crime—the rate of drug crime was still 5% lower in 2024 than it was in 2014 (126 incidents per 100,000 population versus 132). The difference was even greater compared with 2019—the first full year following legalization—with the rate of drug crime excluding cannabis possession offences being 31% lower in 2024 (181 versus 126).

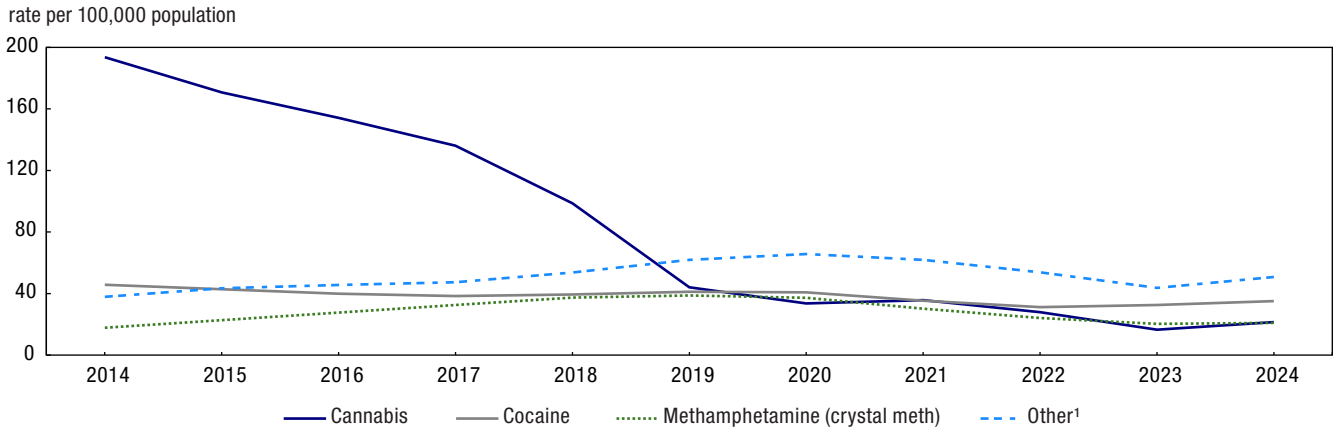
> The year-over-year increase since 2023 was the result of more incidents for most types of drug crime.

Contrary to the long-term decline, rates of police-reported drug crime rose from 2023 to 2024

After 12 consecutive years of decline, the rate of police-reported drug crime increased 13% from 2023 to 2024, from 113 incidents per 100,000 population to 128 (Chart 1). The year-over-year increase since 2023 was the result of more incidents for most types of drug crime, led by cannabis (+2,272 incidents), cocaine (+1,462) and non-heroin opioid (+1,105) offences.[10] In terms of the type of violation, the largest increases were noted for possession (+3,435 incidents), trafficking (+1,113), and importation and exportation (+1,060) offences. Non-heroin opioids had the largest increase for possession offences (+1,003 incidents), while cocaine had the largest increase for trafficking offences (+885) and "other" drugs had the largest increase for importation and exportation offences (+1,072).

Despite the recent annual increase, the rate of drug crime in 2024 (128 incidents per 100,000 population) remained notably lower than the rates for other offence types, including property crime (3,236), violent crime (1,433) and crime overall[11] (6,134).

Chart 2
Police-reported incidents of drug crime, by type of drug, Canada, 2014 to 2024



1. Includes heroin, non-heroin opioids, ecstasy and all other substances or precursors under the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* not otherwise specified.
Notes: Data reflect the most serious offence in the incident. In 2018, the *Cannabis Act* received royal assent and came into force. Rates are calculated on the basis of 100,000 population. Populations are based on July 1 estimates from Statistics Canada's Centre for Demography.
Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey.

Of all drug offences, those related to cocaine were the most prevalent, accounting for more than one in four drug crimes (27%) (Table 1). These were followed by cannabis offences (17%) and methamphetamine offences (16%), while a smaller proportion involved non-heroin opioids like fentanyl, morphine and oxycodone (10%); heroin (2%); and ecstasy (less than 1%).[12]

Among the provinces and territories in 2024, the highest rate of drug crime, by far, was in the Northwest Territories[13] (2,591 incidents per 100,000 population), followed by Yukon (555) and British Columbia (251) (Table 2).[14] The lowest rates were in Ontario (70), Nova Scotia (95) and Prince Edward Island (104). Most of the increase in drug crime from 2023 to 2024 was attributable to increases in British Columbia (+4,742 incidents) and Quebec (+1,903).

Drug crime was lower overall in census metropolitan areas (CMAs)—that is, Canada's largest urban centres—than outside CMAs (108 incidents per 100,000 population versus 189) in 2024.[15] Among the 10 most populous CMAs, Vancouver (269), Québec (152) and Montréal (116) had rates that exceeded the CMA average.[16] Together, they accounted for 45% of all incidents of drug crime in the CMAs.

Table 2
Police-reported incidents of drug crime, by province or territory and selected census metropolitan area, 2024

Province or territory and selected census metropolitan area	number	rate	Rate change from 2023	Rate change from 2019	Rate change from 2014
			percent		
Newfoundland and Labrador	1,137	209	13	28	-9
Prince Edward Island	186	104	10	13	-42
Nova Scotia	1,024	95	1	-16	-72
New Brunswick	966	113	-2	-27	-48
Quebec	12,605	139	15	-37	-49
Ontario	11,364	70	1	-29	-68
Manitoba	2,109	141	0	-10	-46
Saskatchewan	1,829	148	-4	-29	-55
Alberta	5,985	122	-7	-38	-62
British Columbia	14,283	251	45	-35	-51
Yukon	259	555	29	-6	-21
Northwest Territories	1,159	2,591	55	231	130
Nunavut	68	165	-15	69	-76
Canada[1]	**53,002**	**128**	**13**	**-31**	**-56**
Census metropolitan areas[2]	**33,531**	**108**	**14**	**-32**	**-56**
Toronto[3]	3,624	57	3	-4	-71
Montréal	5,392	116	7	-58	-46
Vancouver	8,357	269	35	-25	-37
Calgary	1,412	79	-81	-17	74
Ottawa–Gatineau	1,011	61	11	-32	-75
Ottawa[4]	503	39	0	-40	-76
Gatineau[5]	508	140	25	-18	-71
Edmonton	1,546	94	11	-43	-67
Winnipeg	507	55	-1	-28	-61
Québec	1,339	152	24	10	-38
Kitchener–Cambridge–Waterloo	398	56	-3	-38	-82
Hamilton[6]	637	101	19	-35	-67
Non-census metropolitan areas	**19,471**	**189**	**13**	**-25**	**-54**

0 true zero or a value rounded to zero
1. Includes the Canadian Forces Military Police Group.
2. Includes all census metropolitan areas (CMAs); however, only the 10 largest CMAs are shown below. As of the 2016 Census of Population, Belleville–Quinte West (formerly known as Belleville) and Lethbridge became CMAs. As of the 2021 Census of Population, Fredericton, Drummondville, Red Deer, Kamloops, Chilliwack and Nanaimo became CMAs.
3. Excludes the portions of Halton Regional Police Service and Durham Regional Police Service that police the Toronto census metropolitan area (CMA). Halton Regional Police Service and Durham Regional Police Service are included in the CMA total.
4. Ottawa refers to the Ontario part of the Ottawa–Gatineau census metropolitan area.
5. Gatineau refers to the Quebec part of the Ottawa–Gatineau census metropolitan area.
6. Excludes the portion of Halton Regional Police Service that polices the Hamilton census metropolitan area (CMA). Halton Regional Police Service is included in the CMA total.
Notes: Data reflect the most serious offence in the incident. In 2018, the *Cannabis Act* received royal assent and came into force. Rates are calculated on the basis of 100,000 population. Populations are based on July 1 estimates from Statistics Canada's Centre for Demography. A census metropolitan area (CMA) consists of one or more neighbouring municipalities situated around a major urban core. A CMA must have a total population of at least 100,000, of which 50,000 or more live in the urban core. To be included in the CMA, adjacent municipalities must have a high degree of integration with the central urban area, as measured by commuting flows derived from census data. A census agglomeration must have a core population of at least 10,000.
Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey.

Long-term decline also observed for offences involving other types of drugs

Despite the increase in police-reported drug crime from 2023 to 2024, the long-term trend remains a decline. Though this has predominantly been driven by the legalization of non-medical cannabis and the subsequent drop in cannabis offences, some other drug offences have declined as well. For instance, the rate for cocaine offences was 23% lower in 2024 than it was in 2014 (35 incidents per 100,000 population versus 46) (Table 1; Chart 2).

In 2017, "opioids (non-heroin)" was added as a category to the UCR Survey to capture information about offences involving this type of drug.[17] The rate for non-heroin opioid offences peaked in 2021 (16 incidents per 100,000 population), and by 2024, the rate declined to 13 incidents per 100,000 population.

Police-reported possession offences less common compared with a decade earlier

The nature of police-reported drug crime has also changed over time. In 2014, three-quarters (75%) of all drug crimes were possession offences, a proportion that has steadily dropped since, accounting for 42% of drug crime in 2024 (Table 1). Trafficking, importation and exportation, production and other offences now account for a greater proportion of drug crimes, compared with a decade earlier. The decline in possession offences—from 222 incidents per 100,000 population in 2014 to 54 in 2024—is related to the legalization of non-medical cannabis, which accounted for a large proportion of possession offences prior to 2018.

While possession offences have seen the largest decline by far, rates of trafficking and production were also lower in 2024 than in 2014. Drug offences related to importation and exportation were less common than possession and trafficking offences; however, they were the exception to the trend as they had a higher rate in 2024 than in 2014 (24 incidents per 100,000 population versus 3).[18]

> Both the long-term decline and the recent increase from 2023 to 2024 may also reflect other factors, such as changes in policing practices and enforcement.

Both the long-term decline and the recent increase from 2023 to 2024 may also reflect other factors, such as changes in policing practices and enforcement. For example, declines in possession offences may be due to changes in police charging practices in response to factors such as the guidelines issued by the Public Prosecution Service of Canada.[19] These guidelines directed prosecutors to focus on prosecutions for the most serious drug offences—including those that pose a risk to public safety—and to otherwise pursue suitable alternative measures and diversion from the criminal justice system for simple possession offences under the CDSA.

Changes at the provincial level may also influence national trends. For instance, British Columbia's exemption from the CDSA by Health Canada for the personal possession of small amounts of certain illegal drugs came into effect on January 31, 2023, leading to a decline in the number of possession offences in that province until it was amended in 2024.[20]

Smaller proportion of police-reported drug crimes are solved compared with a decade earlier, but most solved incidents still result in charges

In general, the proportion of drug crimes cleared (that is, solved) by police has declined over the past decade. In 2024, just over half (52%) of drug crimes were cleared, a slightly smaller proportion than in 2019 (54%), and a notably smaller proportion than in 2014 (80%). This decrease in clearance rates is reflective of trends seen among other offence types and crime in

general. It may also reflect the changing nature of drug crime and the decrease in possession offences, which typically require little investigation.

Although the clearance rates of drug crimes have fallen from 2014 to 2024, most cleared drug crimes still result in charges. In 2024, 75% of cleared drug incidents (20,691 incidents) resulted in the laying or recommendation of charges, while the other 25% (6,967) were cleared otherwise.[21] By contrast, 59% of cleared drug incidents in 2014 resulted in charges being laid or recommended, while 41% were cleared otherwise.

These incidents of drug crime involved 32,991 accused persons in 2024, or 92 accused persons per 100,000 population.[22] Of these, the vast majority (97%) were adults, while a small proportion (3%) were youth aged 12 to 17.[23] While adults have consistently accounted for the large majority of those accused of a drug crime, the proportions have somewhat shifted: in 2014, 86% of persons accused were adults and 14% were youth.

Conclusion

For many years, before and after the legalization of non-medical cannabis, police-reported drug crime declined in Canada, largely driven by the decrease in possession offences. However, police-reported drug crime rose in 2024, as offences involving most types of drugs increased relative to 2023.

While cannabis offences—particularly possession—have driven the long-term decline, police-reported crime involving other drugs has also decreased. In addition, a long-term decline emerged across nearly all provinces and territories.

Drug crime is not the only indicator of the societal impact of drugs; other factors, such as the level of drug use, the number of overdoses and the extent of the impact on the health care system, may also be considered. However, analyzing trends in police-reported data highlights the ways that drug crime and police practices and enforcement have changed, which may reflect overarching social trends.

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Data sources

Data in this article are from the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey, a census of all crime known to police services in Canada. Some crimes are never detected or brought to the attention of police.

The UCR Survey was revised in 2018 to update the definition of founded crime and expand response categories for clearance status.[24] These revisions had a minimal impact on police-reported drug crime.

One incident can involve multiple offences. To ensure comparability, data presented in this article are based on the most serious violation in the incident. Police determine the most serious violation according to standardized classification rules in the UCR Survey that consider, for instance, whether the offence is violent, as well as the maximum penalty imposed by the *Criminal Code*.

Notes

1. Brennan and Mazowita, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2021.
2. Cotter et al., 2015.
3. See, for example, Sanmartin et al., 2021.
4. For instance, in 2022, the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* was revised to state that problematic substance use should be addressed primarily as a health and social issue and that judicial resources are more appropriately used in relation to offences that pose a risk to public safety, as opposed to simple possession.
5. The UCR Survey collects information about offences related to cannabis, cocaine, heroin and other opioids, methamphetamine (crystal meth), methylenedioxyamphetamine (ecstasy), and all other substances under the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act*. As of 2018, information is also collected about offences under the *Cannabis Act*.
6. Police may—but are not required to—report up to four violations per incident when responding to the UCR Survey. However, most data presented in this article are based on the UCR Survey's aggregate data, which include only the most serious violation in the incident.
7. Percentage changes are based on unrounded rates.
8. Health Canada, 2022; Health Canada, 2018.
9. According to the 2023 Canadian Substance Use Survey (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2025), around one in three Canadians aged 15 and older living in the provinces (32%) reported having used cannabis in the preceding 12 months. By comparison, around 1 in 13 (8%) reported having used an illegal substance over the same period.
10. There was also a year-over-year increase of 2,351 incidents involving other substances listed under the CDSA not further specified.
11. Crime overall includes drug crime, property crime and violent crime, as well as other violations under the *Criminal Code* and other federal statutes.
12. The remaining 28% of drug crime involved other substances listed under the CDSA not further specified.
13. The vast majority of the 1,159 incidents of drug crime in the Northwest Territories were cocaine trafficking (72%) and cocaine possession (17%) offences.
14. Rates in the territories are often higher than in other areas, partly because of their relatively smaller population. See Table 2 for incident counts.
15. See the note in Table 2.
16. The rate of drug crime in Gatineau (the Quebec part of the Ottawa–Gatineau census metropolitan area) was higher than the national average in 2024 (140 incidents per 100,000 population versus 128); however, the rate in Ottawa–Gatineau was not higher than the national average.
17. Prior to this change, these offences were captured under "other" drugs.
18. Changes in offences related to importing and exporting drugs may be due in part to operational conditions and reporting of seizure cases involving the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's Federal Policing No Case Seizure team, the Canada Border Services Agency and the Canada Post Mail Centre. These cases are forwarded for processing and investigation and, as a result, may not always be reported by police the same year they occur. Therefore, year-over-year changes for these offences should be considered with caution.
19. Public Prosecution Service of Canada, 2020.
20. Because of concerns about problematic substance use in public settings, the exemption was amended in May 2024 to apply to adults only in specific locations: where they are in a designated health care clinic, where they are unhoused and sheltering in accordance with all applicable laws, and where they are in a private residence. This amendment again provided police authority to arrest, warn or charge, and seize illegal substances outside the scope and criteria of the amended exemption, including in public spaces. The number of police-reported possession offences increased following the amendment.
21. Cleared otherwise includes, for example, the incident being cleared because of departmental discretion, via a diversionary program or for reasons beyond the control of the department (e.g., policy or procedure).
22. This includes accused persons aged 12 and older because those younger than 12 cannot be held criminally responsible. Similar to trends observed for drug crime overall, the rate of accused persons was notably lower in 2024 compared with 2019 (-40%, 153 accused persons per 100,000 population) and 2014 (-74%, 357). Data on accused persons are from the UCR Survey's trend database.
23. In 2024, 74% of accused persons were men, 23% were women, 3% were boys aged 12 to 17 and 1% were girls aged 12 to 17. This excludes accused persons whose age or gender was coded as unknown.
24. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2018.

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