

Youth and Crime

by Kathryn Stevenson, Jennifer Tufts, Dianne Hendrick and Melanie Kowalski

It is what every parent dreads. The phone rings. It's the police. They ask you to collect your child, who has just been charged with a criminal offence. Fortunately, very few parents receive such a phone call: contrary to popular belief, youth crime is neither widespread, nor is it rising. Just the opposite, in fact. In 1997 less than 5% of young Canadians aged 12 to 17 (approximately 121,000 youths) were charged with a federal statute offence. And the rate of youths charged has been declining steadily since 1991.

Nonetheless, some young people do get into trouble with the law. What happens in the life of a child that leads to criminal activity? Although experts disagree about motivations for crime and delinquency, most would agree that the risk of becoming involved in antisocial behaviour varies with both personality and social conditions. The first part of this article examines young offenders and their crimes; the second explores current theories about the causes of youth crime in the context of Canada's social and economic landscape.

Theft most common charge

Young people are most commonly charged with theft. In 1997 nearly half of youths charged (49%) were involved in property crime,¹ most often theft, and break and enter. Violent offences,² including assault and robbery, were much less frequent, accounting for about 18% of young people charged, while "other" Criminal Code and "other" federal statute offences made up the remainder of charges. In comparison, in 1987 a larger proportion of youths were charged with property crimes (67%) and a smaller proportion with violent crimes (9%) and all other offences.

The total number of criminal charges against youths increased between 1987 and 1991, peaked in that year and

then began to decline. By 1997 the rate was virtually the same as it was in 1987. In contrast, the violent crime rate for youths doubled (102%) over the decade. Some experts, however, question whether these figures indicate a real rise in violent crime or simply changing attitudes, resulting in an increase in the reporting of crime, particularly common

CST What you should know about this study

Most of the data in this article come from the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCR) and the Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCRII). In operation since 1962, the UCR is a nationally representative survey that records the number of criminal incidents reported to police. It collects information on the number of persons charged by sex and by an adult/youth breakdown. Incidents that involve more than one infraction are recorded under the most serious violation. As a result, less serious offences are undercounted.

The Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCRII) was developed in 1984 (and has since been conducted concurrently with the UCR) to provide detailed information on criminal incidents. Information collected by the UCRII includes the age and sex of the accused and the victim, the relationship of the victim to the accused, injuries sustained during a violent incident, location of the incident, and the presence of a weapon. The 1997 data, collected from 179 police departments in six provinces (New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, Alberta, Saskatchewan and British Columbia), represented about 48% of the national volume of crime. These data are not nationally representative.

1. Property offences consist of unlawful acts to gain property, but do not involve the use or threat of violence against a person.

2. Violent offences involve the use of, or threatened use of, violence against a person.

assault.³ For example, more aggressive “zero tolerance” strategies have meant that students involved in a schoolyard fight, who would previously have been disciplined by the school principal, are now more likely to be dealt with by the police and to become “justice statistics.”

Common assault, major assault and robbery constitute the majority of violent crimes, with common assault being by far the most frequent. On the other hand, the number of youths charged with homicide (54 youths in 1997)

represents a very small proportion of young people charged with a criminal offence (about 2 in 100,000). Over the last 10 years, the actual number of youths charged with homicide fluctuated considerably and ranged from a low of 36 in 1987 to a high of 68 in 1995.

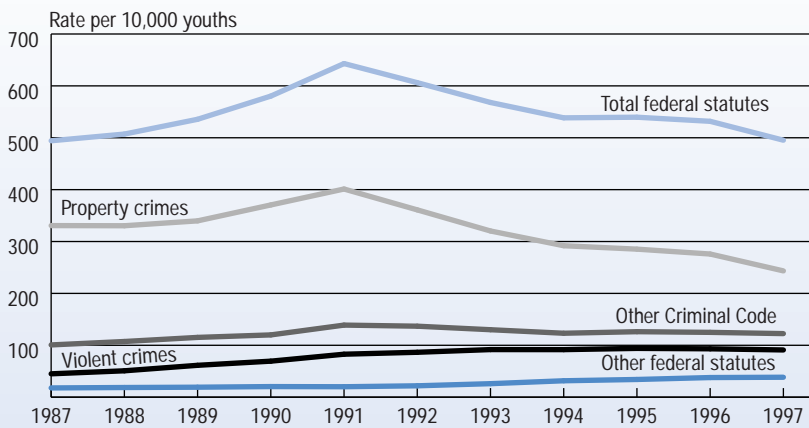
16- to 17-year-old boys are most likely to be charged

According to police data, the peak age for involvement in criminal activity differs for boys and girls. Girls aged 14 to 15 are most likely to be charged, while boys accused of crimes tend to be 16 to 17 years old. But while criminal activity continues as boys age, among girls it begins to decline at around 16 years.

The majority of young people involved in crime are boys (78% in 1997), although the gap between the sexes has been narrowing over the past decade (in 1987, 84% of youths charged were boys). Compared with 10 years before, the total charge rate in 1997 was 7% lower for boys and 38% higher for

3. Common assault is the least serious form of assault and includes pushing, slapping, punching, and face-to-face verbal threats. In contrast, major assault involves carrying, using or threatening to use a weapon against someone or causing bodily harm, or in the most serious case, maiming, disfiguring or endangering the life of a person.

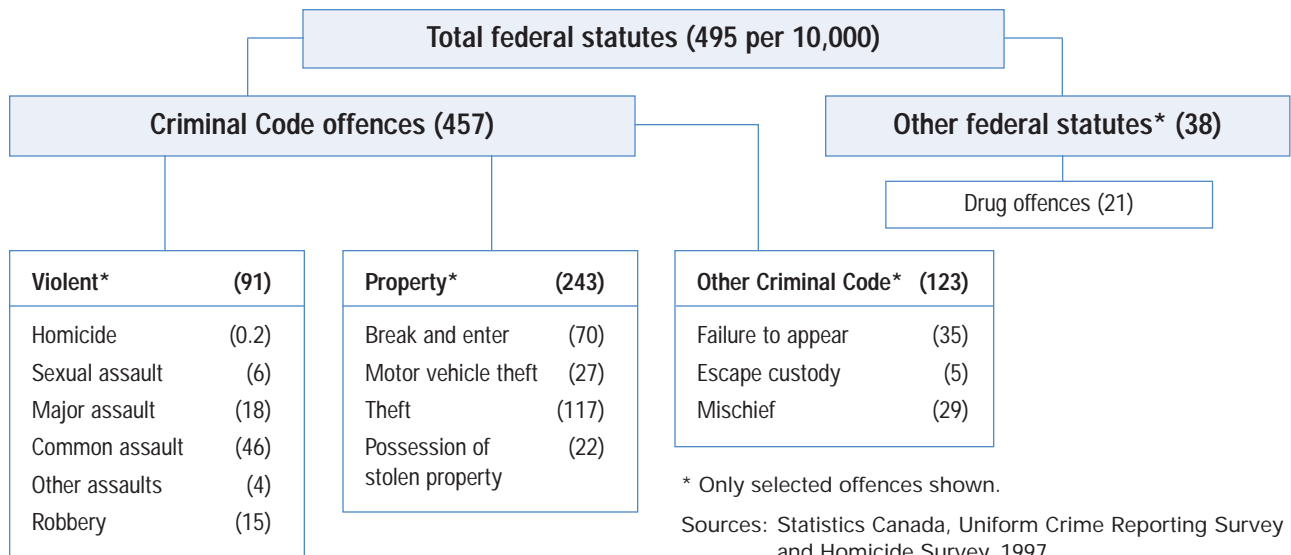
CST Since 1991, the total crime rate for youths has declined



Note: The rate of youths charged includes only those 12- to 17-year-olds who have been apprehended and charged by police. The police-reported crime rate may be affected by changes in the law, policing practices, community attitudes, the public's willingness to report crimes, and the use of alternative measures (actions other than judicial proceedings used to deal with a young person alleged to have committed an offence).

Sources: Statistics Canada, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey and Homicide Survey, 1997.

CST Youth crime rate per 10,000 youths for types of federal crimes



* Only selected offences shown.

Sources: Statistics Canada, Uniform Crime Reporting Survey and Homicide Survey, 1997.

girls. In the area of violent crime, the rates increased for both boys and girls, but much faster for girls: 85% versus 179% over the past decade. However, in 1997 the actual rate of girls charged with violent crime (47 per 10,000) was still substantially lower than that for boys (133 per 10,000).

Boys and girls tend to be involved in similar types of offences. The three most common crimes for young men were theft under \$5,000, break and enter, and common assault. Young women were also most often charged with theft under \$5,000, followed by common assault, and failure to appear in court.

Repeat offenders account for over 4 in 10 youth court cases

In 1996-97, over 40% of cases dealt with by youth courts involved repeat offenders (youths with prior convictions)

of whom 21% had one prior conviction, 10% had two and 11% had three or more. A previous study on recidivism, conducted in 1993-94, yielded very similar results, implying that repeat offenders represent a substantial proportion of youths involved with the justice system. This situation has not changed substantially over the past few years.

Like first-time offenders, repeat offenders are brought to court most often for property offences (59%). In terms of specific offences, however, repeat offenders are more likely to be involved in more serious infractions. For example, possession of stolen property represented 17% of all property offences for repeat offenders and 12% for first-time offenders. In contrast, the less serious crime of theft under \$5,000 accounted for 31% of all property offences for repeat offenders and 35% for first-time offenders. The same patterns held true for violent offences.

CST Victims of youth violence are usually other young people

When youths commit a violent act, other youths — young men in particular — are their most likely victims. In 1997, more than half (56%) of all victims of youth violence were other youths, 34% were adults while the remaining 10% were children under 12 years. Some 62% of victims were male; boys aged 12 to 17 accounted for 36% of all victims.

Most victims of youth violence know their assailant. Police data from 1997 show that 74% of victims knew the perpetrator in some way. For the majority (57%) of victims, the accused was an acquaintance, for 13% the accused was a family member, and for 4% of victims the accused was a close friend. Common assault was the crime most frequently perpetrated against both male and female victims. However, major assault and robbery were the second and third most common violent crimes against male victims, while females tended to be victims of sexual assault and major assault.

The vast majority of victims of violent youth crime do not sustain serious physical injuries. In 1997, 49% of victims reported that no injuries resulted from the incident and about 47% suffered minor injuries that did not require medical attention. Some 5% of victims experienced major injuries (medical attention was required), while 0.1% died.

Most youth violence occurs in a public place, such as a parking lot or public transportation. In 1997, 35% of victims were assaulted in a public place, 26% in private homes, 22% in schools, and 17% in commercial places and public institutions. The location of youth violence varied depending on the type of offence. Homes tended to be the predominant setting for sexual assaults and homicides, while public areas were most often the sites for robbery, major assaults and common assaults.

Offence	Victims		
	Total	Female %	Male
Common assault	53	57	51
Major assault	18	13	21
Robbery	14	8	17
Sexual assault	8	16	3
Homicide	0.1	0.1	0.1
Other*	7	6	8

Note: Excludes 21 victims (0.2%) whose sex was unknown.

* Includes all other violent offences.

Source: Statistics Canada, Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, 1997.

Repeat offenders are also more likely to be charged with multiple offences. Youths facing multiple charges per case are assumed to be more criminally active than those having only one charge per case. In 1996-97, half of first-time offenders were charged with multiple charges compared with 62% of offenders with one prior conviction, 69% with two and 72% with three or more prior convictions. Young men were more likely than young women to be repeat offenders: 43% versus 32%.

Both personality and society play a part in youth crime

Most experts agree that the risk of becoming involved in criminal activities is influenced by personal as well as social factors. Biological or genetic predisposition, alcoholism and drug abuse, mental illness, family structure, low income, dropping out of school, and unemployment are just a few of the factors that have been linked to young people's involvement in crime. In a recent public opinion survey, the majority of respondents felt that poor parenting and broken homes were the most important factors contributing to involvement in crime, followed by illegal drugs, a lenient justice system, poverty, low moral standards, unemployment, violence on television and lack of discipline in schools.⁴

Economic disadvantage, coupled with difficult family circumstances, is a common explanation for delinquency. Children living in low-income households can be affected by low-quality housing and transient, run-down neighbourhoods. Parental frustration may lead to substance abuse and violence in the home,⁵ which in turn may place children at risk of becoming involved with a delinquent peer group and potentially criminal activity. Indeed, according to the

National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), children in low-income households are at risk of indirect and physically aggressive behaviour that may persist from early childhood through adolescence.⁶

In 1996, more than 20% of children under 18 (1.5 million) lived in a low-income family. At the same time, some 17% of children were cared for by a lone parent. As many lone-parent families are economically disadvantaged, children growing up in these households may be especially vulnerable. NLSCY findings suggest that children from lone-parent families are at greater risk of emotional, behavioural, academic and social problems than children from two-parent families.⁷ However, data from this source also indicate that good parenting practices act to counter the impact of low income and negative peer pressure.⁸

Social bonds may help to prevent criminal behaviour

Delinquency is often explained by the absence of strong bonds to society. People who are "bonded" tend to have strong attachments to others who conform to society's goals and who participate in conventional work, education and leisure activities. A young person's ties to parents, teachers, community leaders and conforming peers are important sources of informal control that can help monitor leisure time and discourage criminal behaviour.⁹

4. Environics Research Group. 1998. *Focus Canada Environics 1998-1*. Ottawa: Environics.

5. Trocme, N. D. McPhee, K. Kwan Tam and T. Hay. 1994. *Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect*. Toronto: Institute for the Prevention of Child Abuse. Also Thompson, R.A. 1994. "Social Support and the Prevention of Child Maltreatment," *Protecting Children from Abuse and Neglect: Foundations for a New National Strategy*. G.B. Melton and F.D. Barry. (eds.) New York: Guilford.

6. Tremblay, Richard E., et al. 1996. "Do Children in Canada Become More Aggressive as They Approach Adolescence?" *Growing Up in Canada: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*. Ottawa: Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada (Catalogue no. 89-550-MPE, no.1).

7. *ibid.*

8. Landy, Sarah and Kwok Kwan Tam. 1996. "Yes, Parenting Does Make a Difference to the Development of Children in Canada." *Growing up in Canada: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*. Ottawa: Human Resources Development Canada and Statistics Canada. (Catalogue no. 89-550-MPE, no.1).

9. Sacco, V. and L. Kennedy. 1994. *The Criminal Event*. Scarborough: Nelson Canada. p. 64.

CST Multiple charges were most common among repeat offenders



Note: Excludes Nova Scotia data, Young Offenders Act and post-disposition offences.
Source: Statistics Canada, Youth Court Survey, 1996-97.

In the absence of social bonds, and with exposure to norms and beliefs that support law-breaking, criminal behaviour may be quick to surface. Within certain gangs, for example, violence and other criminal behaviour are not only acceptable, but also expected. Additionally, violent behaviour can also be learned through mainstream society (for example, through easy access and widespread exposure to violence on television, movies and video games) as a response to frustration or a technique for achieving goals.¹⁰

Dropping out of school linked to youth crime

Lack of attachment to school may be associated with youth crime. Students who leave school before graduating do so for many reasons, including boredom, the perception that school rules are too strict, associations with non-student friends who place little value on education and, in the case of many teenage girls, pregnancy. According to the 1991 School Leavers Survey (SLS), approximately 184,000 or 16% of all 18- to 20-year-olds had left school before graduating; as of 1995, the vast majority (160,000) had not returned. Almost 40% of school leavers were under 17 years when they left and 32% had no more than a grade nine education. The rate of leaving school was considerably higher for men (18%) than for women (10%).

Youths who leave school are more likely to become involved in other high-risk behaviour associated with crime. For example, according to results from the SLS, regular consumption of alcohol was more common among school leavers than graduates (18% versus 11%) as was use of soft and prescription drugs (30% versus 16%).¹¹ School leavers also experience higher rates of unemployment than graduates. In 1997, unemployment rates for youths without a high school diploma were almost two times higher than the corresponding rates for high school graduates and three times higher than those of university graduates.

Higher jobless rates may contribute to crime

Unemployment may lead to criminal activity when youths have no legitimate means of earning money. Being unemployed also reduces formal involvement in community life and can lead to an abundance of unstructured time, which in turn increases the risk of becoming involved in deviant or criminal activity.

In the early 1990s, it became increasingly difficult for young Canadians to find employment. Many adult workers

are hanging on to entry-level positions that have generally been available for youths. Furthermore, without job security or seniority, youths are primary targets for lay-offs during corporate restructuring. At around 22% in 1997, the unemployment rate for 15- to 19-year-olds was more than double that of the overall population. Summer jobs are also difficult to find, which, in turn, can affect job prospects after graduation. The percentage of 15- to 19-year-olds without job experience has more than doubled over the past decade, to 40% in 1997.

Summary

The risk of becoming involved in criminal activities has been associated with living in a lone-parent family, lacking adequate social bonds, belonging to a gang, dropping out of school and being unemployed. Other factors, which are much more complicated to measure, such as physical and sexual abuse, television violence and poor parenting, may also increase the chances of becoming involved in crime. In many cases, by the time youths become involved in the criminal justice system, they have already exhibited warning signs.

However, the proportion of youths charged with a crime has been declining for the past six years. In 1997, among those involved in crime, most were charged with theft under \$5,000. Although the gap in crime rates between the sexes has fallen over the past decade, the majority of young people charged continue to be 16- to 17-year-old males.

- This article was adapted from *A Profile of Youth Justice in Canada*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-544-XPE.



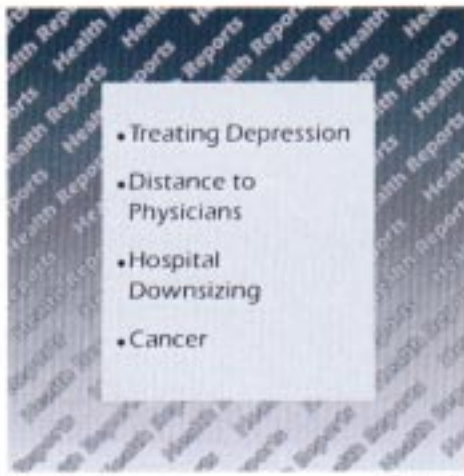
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10. Reiss, A. and J. Roth (eds.). 1993. *Understanding and Preventing Violence*. Washington D.C.: National Academy Press.

11. See also Galambos, Nancy L. and Lauree C. Tilton-Weaver. 1998. "Multiple-Risk Behaviour in Adolescents and Young Adults." *Health Reports* 10, 2:9-20. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 82-003-XPB.



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