

**YOUTH CRIME IN CANADA:  
PUBLIC PERCEPTION  
VS. STATISTICAL INFORMATION**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper explores public misconceptions about the nature and extent of youth crime and the youth justice system's response to youthful offending.

A number of public misconceptions about youth crime are identified. It is shown that the public believes that youth crime is increasing dramatically, as is the seriousness of the crimes committed. The official statistics respecting the nature and extent of youth crime are then presented. It is concluded that public perceptions that youth crime is increasing in number and seriousness are not supported by the official data.

It is also shown that the public perceives the Young Offenders Act to be lenient and unable to effectively control the behaviour of young people. Official statistics respecting youth court dispositions are presented and the justice system's handling of young offenders is compared to that of adult offenders. It is concluded that the youth justice system is, in fact, highly punitive.

Reasons for the discrepancy between public perceptions and what the official statistics tell us about youth crime are explored. The role of the media and professional groups in shaping public attitudes is addressed.

The damaging effects of public misconceptions of youth crime are also explored. Among the detrimental effects of false public perceptions of youth crime are public intolerance, unnecessary legislation changes and inappropriate programming choices for young offenders.

The paper concludes with some suggestions for bridging the gap between public misconceptions about youth crime and the official statistics on youth crime. It is recommended, first, that public knowledge of the criminal justice system be improved, second, that the media become better informed about youth justice issues and more accurately report youth crime and third, that the fears which accompany public misconceptions about youth crime be respected and addressed.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Young Offenders Act (YOA) was enacted in 1984 to reconcile issues of responsibility and accountability with respect to young offenders. However, extensive coverage of youth crime in the media may initially lead one to conclude that present policies are ineffective given that crimes committed by youths appear to be increasing in number and seriousness. Indeed, youth crime in Canada has come to the fore as a public concern fuelled by beliefs that rates of youthful offending are escalating and that youth justice responses need to become harsher to deal effectively with this problem. Has youth crime seen a dramatic rise in numbers in recent years? Are the YOA and its enforcers too lenient with youths?

The proceeding pages will attempt to address these questions by looking first at the degree to which the public feels youth crime is a problem, as well as the popularity of the "get tough" mentality. Then, youth crime trends and youth court dispositions will be examined. It will be shown that the perception that youth crime is reaching epidemic proportions is not supported by the official statistics and research. As well, it will be seen that the YOA and its administrators are actually "tough" on youthful offenders, relative to adult offender treatment and considering the severity of punishments available in Canadian criminal law. Several explanations will be offered with respect to the discrepancy between the official statistics and public opinion and some suggestions will be made to address this situation.

## IS YOUTH CRIME OUT OF CONTROL?

### The Perceptions

Based on the number and content of media reports on youth crime, it can be inferred that the public is being led to believe that youth crime is increasing in vast and unmanageable numbers, as is the seriousness of the crimes committed. Indeed, as Doob, Marinos and Varma (1995, p. 22) point out:

There is, very roughly speaking, one young person charged every week to ten days for a homicide offence. To the extent that our media report these events on a national basis, it means that the public has enormous opportunities to hear about homicides committed by youth. Thus, as University of Ottawa criminologist Julian Roberts points out, it is completely understandable, if the media are reporting these quite regularly, for people to believe that there is an increase. We remember these recent reports, and assume that it must not have been "like that" a few years ago.

Although it has been noted that studies on public perceptions of youth crime are not plentiful (Hartnagel, personal communication, June, 1995), those that have been conducted suggest a public perception that youth crime is rising. A Calgary study of 464 residents, for example, found that roughly 30% of its respondents listed youth gangs or youth violence as the primary crime problem in the city (Collins, 1992). The yearly Macleans/CTV polls show a consistently high and increasing

number of Canadians claiming youth behaviour in their neighbourhoods has been getting worse: from 47% in 1990 to 79% in 1994 ("Macleans/CTV poll," 1993; McDonald, 1995). These polls also reveal that 76% of Canadians, up from 64% in 1992, feel that the behaviour of youths is "now worse or much worse" than it was a decade ago (Gates, 1997). A critical question to ask, then, is whether the criminal activities of the young have, in fact, been getting worse and becoming more frequent, which can be answered, in part, by looking at trends in youthful offending.

### **The Statistics**

Trends in the frequency and seriousness of youth crime can be charted from Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics' (CCJS) reports. Youth crime in these reports is measured by the number of charges laid against young offenders (aged 12-17 years), and/or by the number of cases processed in youth court. At first glance, the statistics appear to show significant increases in youth crime from 1986/87 to 1992/93; the 1992/93 report indicated a 27% increase in charges since 1986/87 and a 32% increase in cases heard at court (CCJS, 1994, August).

There are a number of important considerations in interpreting these statistics. First, it is important to note that the increase in charges against youth and cases in youth court correspond with a simultaneous increase in the size of the Canadian youth population. In addition, 81% of the charges that comprise the 27% increase are "administrative offences," including failures to appear in court, comply with terms of probation or complete community service orders in the time allotted. These offences consistently represented approximately one-quarter of all offences over the period. Further, Carrington (1995) has warned that 1986/87 statistics should be approached with caution when being compared to later statistics. This is because the YOA came into effect in 1984, and the statistics from the few years immediately following its enactment might not be reliable, considering the new inclusion of 16 and 17-year-old youths who typically commit more crimes than younger offenders 12 - 15 years of age. Given that 16 and 17-year-olds were gradually brought into the youth justice system over the first few years of the YOA's enactment, the statistics for the years 1986 and 1987 may have been affected by this transition.

While the youth crime rate was on the rise from 1986/87 to 1992/93, this has not been the case since. From 1992/93 to 1995/96, the overall youth court caseload rate decreased by 6.5%. The overall case rate has declined in recent years, but the violent crime case rate has increased by 3.5% and the drug caseload has risen by 103.1% (CCJS, 1997, October, p. 2).

Another important trend to consider is the number of youths charged for each criminal incident (Carrington, 1995). In his 1994 study, Carrington found that though the number of suspects for youth criminal charges between 1986 and 1992 remained relatively stable, the police had developed a propensity to charge more young suspects for each crime. Thus, the number of youth crimes did not necessarily increase but, rather, the number of young persons charged for each criminal incident had apparently risen.

Provincial and more localized crime rates provide an alternate measure of youth crime trends. The most extensive statistics of this nature come from Ontario. In the Ottawa region, for example, there have been recorded increases in youth crime charges in the metropolitan area, while the suburbs indicated large drops in the number of charges laid against youth (Hum & Bohuslawsky, 1994). Meanwhile, Peel Regional Police recorded a 5% rise in youth crime from 1988 to 1992 (Mitchell, 1993), while Metropolitan Toronto police found an increase of 59% in school crime between 1990 and 1993 (Crawford, 1994). It is speculated that the increase in school crime in Toronto reflects the "zero tolerance" policy toward youths currently practised in much of Ontario; all disruptive incidents within the school are reported to the police rather than informally handled by the school itself (McKeen & McConnell, 1994). These few localized studies reveal no identifiable trend in youth crime rates that is comparable to the national statistics. Nor do they lend support to a perceived increase in youth crime. They do, however, give a different point of view in highlighting specific areas of Canada.

Along with the belief that youth crime is widespread are the perceptions that youth crime is increasing in seriousness and in proportion to all crime (youth and adult crime combined). Again, however, the official statistics do not support such a belief. In terms of proportions, homicide rates are deemed to be among the most accurate indicators of crime trends. This is because the offence of murder affords little opportunity at any point in the criminal justice process for outside factors to bias a case's handling (ie., the seriousness of murder means reporting or charging rates for this crime should not change over time). National statistics show youths are responsible for approximately 47 murders each year (CCJS, 1996, p. 10) or roughly 8% of all homicides, a proportion that has remained unchanged for at least a decade. Less than one percent of cases heard in youth court are for murder, manslaughter and attempted murder (CCJS, 1997, October, p. 4).

Other national statistics also refute the belief that youth crime is growing in seriousness. Property crime comprises 48% of all youth court cases while violent offences represent only 21% of youth court cases (CCJS, 1997, October, p. 4). While the portion of youth court cases involving violent offences increased between 1986/87 (13%) and 1995/96 (21%), the increase has been largely attributed to a significant increase in minor assault cases (CCJS, 1997, October, p. 4). Minor assaults constitute 49% of violent crimes, and serious violent crimes constitute the other 51%. Serious violent crimes make up approximately 10% of all youth crime (CCJS, 1997, October, p.4). Others (Hackler, cited in Jeffs, 1993; Carrington, 1995) also attribute the increase in violent offence cases in youth court to increased reporting to police of such incidents as minor school yard scuffles, or of any unwanted touching of one youth by another that is legal grounds for an assault charge. This reporting increase can be attributed to society's growing intolerance for undesirable youth behaviour. Therefore, the data does not clearly indicate that youth crime is increasing in severity or becoming a larger proportion of all crime.

Smaller scale studies support the perceived increase in the severity of youth crime, but are not without their caveats. Provincial statistics for Nova Scotia show sharp rises in violent crime between 1986 and 1992, but researchers note that much of this increase, as in the national rates, can be attributed to increased reporting of minor assaults (Nova Scotia Youth Secretariat, 1993). A 1993 self survey taken by teachers in 881 Ontario schools found a 150% growth in violent incidents over 1987 rates (Crawford, 1994). As mentioned above, however, this may be due in large part to the formal handling of all incidents within Ontario schools. Edmonton police report an increase of 81% in 1991 over 1988 in assaults and sex offences committed by young offenders (Edmonton Police Service, 1992). As will be seen, however, police studies of crime must be used with caution. Further, any localized statistics must be approached with the possibility that a specific area's rates of youthful offending may be an anomaly. For example, in an area with a serious youth crime problem, the crime rates may indeed be alarming and accurate, but the area may merely have an unrepresentative concentration of youth crime. However, residents of the area will likely make generalizations about youth crime based on their experience.

While meaningful conclusions can be drawn from justice statistics, the limitations and biases that are present in such data must be noted. First, localized reports on crime rates are usually compiled by area police. As several authors point out (Fulton & Fisher, 1992; Jeffs, 1993), the decisions to lay charges, the severity of charges and even the data compilation itself are subject to possible police bias. Certain districts, for example, may be suffering from budgetary restrictions that could lead them to exaggerate a crime problem or lay more charges. This may be done in the hopes that the apparent increase in crime will lead to more financial support in future budgets. It is well known, too, that police tend occasionally to focus on a specific type of crime and concentrate their efforts on it (Jeffs, 1993). Such a concentration of efforts in any given year may seriously affect youth crime statistics for that year. Further, it has been found that the police tend to lay more serious charges against young offenders than may be expected in a given incident (Jeffs, 1993). This is done in anticipation of leniency and lesser charges (ie., a plea bargain) at a later point in the justice process.

### **Conclusions Respecting Increases in Youth Crime**

Judging from the available data, one cannot support the claim that youths in Canada are committing more crime than before or in proportion to all crime. Nor does it appear true that they are committing more serious crimes than in the past. Both localized and national data alike are subject to external biases such as growing public intolerance and collection differences. Smaller scale reports are more vulnerable to problems and suggest no discernible pattern in youth crime. Canadian statistics show that the number of charges laid against youth has been consistent with population increases; most youth crime is not serious but, rather, consists mainly of property offences; and violent offence rates have largely reflected activities of the public and police rather than youth behaviour. Indicators less vulnerable to external factors, such as murder and suspect rates, show no identifiable increases in youth crime.

## IS THE YOA TOO LENIENT? IS THERE A NEED TO GET TOUGH?

Perceptions that the YOA is lenient and does not effectively control youth behaviour are as popular as the belief that youth crime is rising dramatically. The next few paragraphs will outline manifestations of the belief that the YOA is lenient, and will examine the number and severity of dispositions that official statistics indicate young offenders are receiving.

### The Perceptions

Since the introduction of the Young Offenders Act, many Canadians have been frustrated due to a perceived leniency in the Act and its enforcement. A recent study conducted by Spratt (1996) found that 88% of respondents felt that youth court sentences were too lenient. A 1994 Angus Reid poll (as cited in Onstad, 1994) found that 92% of respondents were in favour of amending the YOA so that youths could be tried more easily in adult court, and 89% were in favour of boot camps for youths (p. 54).

Two studies by Hartnagel and Baron (1994, 1995) also reveal the public's perception of a lenient YOA. Members of both rural and urban communities in Manitoba and Alberta (approximately 1250 in each province) were asked to agree or disagree, on a seven-point scale, with three statements: (1) "A curfew for children under 16 is a good idea," (2) "Young offenders who commit a second offence should be tried in adult courts" and (3) "Youth courts have become too lenient with young offenders" (Hartnagel & Baron, 1994, p.5; Hartnagel & Baron, 1995, p.10). In response to the curfew statement, Albertans were 69.8% in agreement (with roughly half of all respondents strongly agreeing). In Manitoba, 67.5% agreed with the curfew (approximately two-thirds of these in strong agreement). Eighty-three percent of Albertans agreed with moving youths to adult court for repeat offences (about two-thirds of which strongly agreed), and 66.9% of Manitobans agreed (over half of which strongly agreed). Finally, the statement of the courts' leniency was supported by 86.9% of Albertans (two-thirds strongly agreeing) and 78.3% of Manitobans (approximately two-thirds strongly in agreement). These results clearly support a strong favouring of more punitive approaches toward young offenders.

Other activities also suggest the public's wish to "get tough" with young offenders. Alberta Chief Justice Ed Wachowich states that several studies he has reviewed show that members of the public feel judges are far too indulgent with young people (Teele, 1994). This sentiment even extends to schools in their handling of youth crime: 56% of those surveyed in an Ottawa-Carleton study thought school boards were not punitive enough in their treatment of youthful offenders (Dube, 1994). With respect to the YOA, there have been several community forums in Edmonton and Calgary that have called for a lowering of the minimum age of criminal responsibility and more regular transferring of young offenders to adult court (Jeffs, 1994). Further, the murder of Barb Danelesko in Edmonton led to a 64,000-name petition urging for a more punitive YOA (Grace, 1994). Public efforts to amend the Young Offenders Act sharply contrast the official data on youth crime.



## The Statistics

To properly respond to public cries of "get tough," the perceived leniency of the YOA must be examined. This can be judged, in part, by the youth court's use of the most serious disposition in Canada - custody. From the period of 1986 to 1993, for example, the number of guilty pleas in youth court remained steady at roughly two-thirds of all cases (CCJS, 1993, December), while the number of youths in custody rose 16%, comprising 30% of all youth dispositions in 1993. In 1995/96, custody was handed down in 34% of cases, and it currently accounts for about one-third of cases (CCJS, 1997, November, p. 7). Furthermore, a solid number (at one time reaching 61%) of custody dispositions in this period were accompanied by a second disposition. Half the custody orders given were for property offences. Given the above data, it is difficult to conclude that the YOA is lenient.

The harsh treatment of youths is even more apparent when the handling of youthful offenders is compared to that of adult offenders. For example, in 1997 the rate of detention for adults in Canada was 151 per 100,000; for youth, 209 per 100,000 were incarcerated (John Howard Society of Ontario, 1998). Furthermore, a study conducted by Bell and Smith (1994, cited in Doob et al., 1995) comparing median sentence lengths for adults and youths sentenced to custody found similar medians for a number of specific offences ranging from property crimes to sexual assault. Public perceptions of a lenient youth justice system can be further refuted by the following observation:

An adult will typically be released somewhere between the one third and the two thirds point in the sentence. A youth sentenced to a long period of custody can have that custodial sentence reviewed in youth court but this is relatively rare. (Doob et al., 1995, p. 65)

Therefore, while adult offenders rarely serve a full custodial sentence, it is not uncommon for a young offender to serve a custodial sentence in its entirety.

Provincial trends also challenge the public's perception of a lenient youth justice system. With the introduction of its "zero tolerance" policy, Ontario has led the provinces in a more punitive approach to youth crime. Ontario justice agents have been laying more charges and placing more youths in custody, at rates that have more than tripled between 1989 and 1993 (Owen, 1993). The present rate is twice that of British Columbia or Quebec. It has been estimated that 80% of youths in custody in Ontario were convicted of property offences, and that 70% of the total monies for young offenders is spent on keeping youths in custody. In light of the above data, it is difficult to comprehend the belief that youths are being treated leniently. Indeed, Doob et al. (1995, p. 67) assert that "they [young offenders] *may be* [emphasis in original] treated more leniently for some offences, but the overall pattern of custodial sentences does not demonstrate leniency."

## Conclusions Respecting the "Get Tough" Movement for Youths

Public attitudes toward the YOA and young offenders strongly support a movement away from the perceived leniency of the courts to a less discretionary and more punitive YOA. However, given that custody, the most serious disposition in Canadian criminal justice, is liberally used as a response to non-violent youth crime and at rates per 100,000 youth population far exceeding the detention rate for the adult population, one must ask how the YOA is not sufficiently punitive.

### **FACT VS. PERCEPTION: PROBLEMS AND EXPLANATIONS**

The discrepancies between public perceptions and statistical fact are such that Canadian society has been gravely misinformed about youth crime. To address the gap between the views of the public and the actual rates of youth crime, the role of the media and professional groups in shaping public attitudes toward youth crime will be explored. Further, the damaging effects of public misconceptions regarding youth crime will be examined. Both discussions will help not only to bring a close to the present gap between perception and fact, but also to understand how the public can become better informed.

#### The Role of the Media and Professional Groups

Many juvenile justice academics agree that the media are chiefly to blame for false public perceptions regarding criminal justice issues (Nova Scotia Youth Secretariat, 1993; Hartnagel & Baron, 1994, 1995; Gabor, cited in Hum & Bohuslawsky, 1994; Carrington, cited in McKeen & McConnell, 1994). The Canadian Sentencing Commission (1987), in a study of 800 Canadian newspapers, found that over half of the stories dealing with criminal justice had an element of violence in them, and one quarter dealt with homicide. Thus, violent crime is highly over-represented in the news media given that it comprises only 11% of all crime in Canada (CCJS, 1997, July, p. 3). When questioned in a follow-up study, editors of many of the surveyed papers admitted that they typically only report the worst types of crime, and the worst cases of those crimes. On the rare occasions that information is given with respect to sentencing, no minimum or maximum penalties for offences are indicated. Furthermore, only punishments that appear exceptionally lenient are deemed newsworthy.

With respect to young offenders, studies have found that the media typically portray youth activity of any kind in a wholly negative light (Yeager, 1995) and sensationalize rare incidents of youth violence by reporting them repeatedly over a number of days. Spratt (1996) sampled three major Toronto newspapers and found that fully 94% of youth crime stories involved violent offences. In actuality, less than 25% of Ontario youth court cases involve violence. On the other hand, the media typically ignore or discount adult acts of violence, which are far more frequent (McKeen & McConnell, 1994). This has led to the appearance of a chronic youth crime problem, exaggerated by the "lenient" YOA's prohibition of publicizing the identity of young offenders.

One would hope that the public would be informed on criminal justice issues to the extent of being able to recognize biases in the news media. However, in one study the media was cited as the primary source of criminal justice information for 95% of those surveyed (Canadian Sentencing Commission, 1987). Similarly, a survey conducted by the John Howard Society of Alberta (1996) which surveyed a sample of Albertans on their views on youth crime and crime prevention found that almost 75% of those surveyed got most of their information about crime from the media. Other studies have found similar degrees of reliance by the public on the media for criminal justice information (Hartnagel & Baron, 1994, 1995). The result of this reliance on the media for criminal justice information can be found in polls that test communities' knowledge of criminal justice and offence rates (Roberts, 1992). The public consistently overestimates the proportion of violent crime relative to all crime, as well as recidivism rates. When asked for maximum sentences and incarceration rates for specific offences, the strong majority of respondents consistently underestimate both. Finally, those who give the most inaccurate responses (ie., give the highest estimates of violent crime rates and the lowest estimates respecting sentencing options) rely exclusively on media sources for justice information. While media consumers may recognize that the media largely limits coverage to important and rare events, this awareness does not adequately impact upon their perception of crime rates (Sprott, 1996).

Thus, people's opinions are heavily influenced by the media. The specific types of youth crime stories that are deemed newsworthy tend to be those which can evoke feelings of anger and retribution in members of the public. These feelings inevitably lead to movements toward harsher youth justice measures. The media's continued favouring of recent events of youthful offending serves to reinforce and provide added momentum for the "get tough" movement. Ultimately, measures that could be taken to quell public fear and anger are discouraged.

High profile professional groups such as the police and government officials also bear responsibility for fostering inaccurate public perceptions of youth crime and the youth justice system. Proposed legislation tending toward "get tough" strategies suggest that youth crime is out of control and/or that the Young Offenders Act is too lenient. Similarly, the establishment of 'youth crime divisions' by police can be interpreted by the public as further indication of a youth crime problem that is out of control. Thus, the police and government officials alike perpetuate inaccurate perceptions of youth crime.

### **Problems Resulting From False Public Perceptions**

As alluded to in the foregoing discussion, the public intolerance that results from punitive attitudes may surface in several ways. For example, it may spur individuals to band together into lobby groups or initiate letter writing campaigns. More commonly, however, it will surface in individuals' reactions to undesirable youth behaviour. Informal methods of dealing with youths will continue to be put aside in the belief that they are ineffective, leading to heightened police intervention and more charges laid for otherwise minor incidents that historically would never see a courtroom. As previously noted, the increase in charges will give the appearance of a drastic increase in youth crime. This apparent increase is made public by the media, fuelling more anger and calls for action. In

response, judges are more punitive with youths, perceiving a need to reflect the will of the public in their sentencing practices (Roberts, 1992). As well, politicians are compelled to make unneeded changes to youth crime laws. This governmental response is exemplified in the YOA reforms recently passed by the federal government, which include an increase of the maximum custodial disposition from 5 years to 10 and automatic transfer of youths aged 16 and 17 years to adult court if charged with a serious offence ("Rock pushes crackdown," 1994). Such measures, it has been documented, can open new doors for even more negative public attitudes by supporting the perception that youth crime is serious enough to change laws and that punitive measures will indeed prevent young persons from offending.

A more pragmatic problem associated with public misconceptions of youth crime is the effects these misconceptions can have on programming choices. A public which perceives an increase in youth crime and a youth justice system too lenient to deal with the apparent problem will be inclined to demand tougher sanctions for young offenders. A public better informed about youth crime and successful responses to youthful offending will be inclined toward making more enlightened demands, such as alleviating the conditions which promote offending behaviour among young people. In an era of fiscal restraint, it is particularly important to ensure that money is not spent on programs for young offenders which are unnecessary:

We cannot afford to be manipulated into promoting harsh solutions for fictional problems. Panic-free social policy would use resources, largely wasted in enforcement and punishment systems, to promote healthier environments and hopeful opportunities for our youth. (The John Howard Society of Ontario, 1994, p. 4)

The key tool with which false public perceptions can be dispelled is the dissemination of accurate crime statistics. Yet, persons with strong attitudes in opposition to the statistics have been known to merely become confused and anxious once they are presented with official statistics (Doob, cited in Church Council on Justice and Corrections, 1995). Even worse, such persons often conclude that the data is inaccurate, or that it can be manipulated to support whichever view one wishes to present. This will discourage efforts to change public attitudes by publicizing accurate youth crime statistics to dispel myths. Thus, negative public perceptions of youth crime can do serious damage in terms of widening the gap between fact and opinion, as well as discouraging the use of youth crime statistics. The question that remains is how to address this dilemma.

## COUNTERING MISGUIDED PERCEPTIONS

Though limited, there is information that provides some direction and encouragement for future efforts to close the gap between official statistics and public opinion respecting youth crime. Hartnagel and Baron (1994, 1995), for example, found in their studies that some members of the public (44% of those polled) realize that incarceration does not deter youths from committing more crime. Rehabilitation was also seen by most as more important than making young offenders pay for

their crimes (64% agreed). Regarding the media, one study found that 57% of those surveyed thought that the media paid too much attention to crime stories, and another found 61% of the public dissatisfied with the lack of information on sentencing in media crime stories (Hartnagel & Baron, 1994, 1995). These findings suggest that the public's opinion with respect to crime may be more complex than first believed and that citizens would be responsive to more informative, less sensationalized media coverage.

It has been found that persons who are more informed about criminal justice issues tend to have more rational and less punitive convictions than those who have limited knowledge (Hartnagel & Baron, 1994, 1995; Church Council on Justice and Corrections, 1995). One study gave individuals the opportunity to play the role of a judge for a mock young offender case, based loosely on actual cases (Blanchfield, 1994). It was found that when subjects had access to the same amount of information as a judge, dispositions ordered by the individuals closely matched those given in actual cases. Other studies of this type yielded similar results (Canadian Sentencing Commission, 1987). Given these findings, it seems essential that effective methods of informing the public be found. Given the public's reliance on the media, an obvious first step would be to ensure that accurate data and full accounts of cases are given to the news media. If, for example, information on the maximum sentence available for a specific offence is included in a news item about the sentence an offender has received, those who are exposed to the report are in a better position to judge the appropriateness of such a decision. Dissemination of complete and accurate information in this way will no doubt aid in changing public perceptions of youth crime, and may quiet some of the misguided cries of "get tough." Professional groups such as the police and government officials must be active participants in the dissemination of accurate information about youth crime. Given the credibility which the public could reasonably be expected to give to the police and government officials, the participation of these professional groups is required to provide the clout necessary to influence public opinion.

Before any further steps to educate the public are taken, however, one must take heed of a finding by criminologist Tony Doob (cited in Church Council on Justice and Corrections, 1995). He states that informing the public on criminal justice issues must neither confuse individuals nor insult their present views. Their perceptions, though artificially created by the media, are accompanied by genuine fear. Typically, this fear has been seen by critics as irrational because it is rooted in false beliefs. In changing people's perceptions, however, it is important to acknowledge and address this fear, not to dismiss it.

Public opinion respecting youth crime is not as simplistic as first believed. There is evidence that people can and will accept information from other sources than the media, and may reach more accurate conclusions if given enough information. The key appears to be in acknowledging and addressing the fear of crime individuals harbour when attempting to educate them.

## DISCUSSION

Although data on public perceptions of youth crime is not readily available, the studies that do exist can be generalized into two common views: (1) the number of youthful offenders in Canada is on the rise relatively and absolutely, especially in terms of violent offences, and; (2) the YOA is not punitive enough to deal effectively with youths, leading to the conclusion that harsher measures must be undertaken. National statistical data lend no support to these views, and smaller scale studies are inconclusive. Both types of data are subject to biases and methodological flaws. Many experts agree that the media are primarily to blame for creating distorted perceptions and keeping the public ill-informed, given the public's reliance upon them. Government and police responses perpetuate the myth of the seriousness of youth crime through, for example, efforts to amend the Young Offenders Act and introduce tougher sanctions for young offenders. The continuation of these beliefs can serve to frustrate attempts to educate the public and bring views in line with the official statistics. Evidence exists that members of Canadian society can become better informed and make more enlightened decisions. This can be accomplished through, first, improved public knowledge of the criminal justice system, second, a better informed media accompanied by more accurate media reports and third, efforts to respect and address the very real fears that accompany public misconceptions about youth crime.

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