

Police Reported Violent Crime: Childhood Factors in Adult Offenders

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Introduction

Problem

According to Statistics Canada, “Police-reported crime in Canada, as measured by the Crime Severity Index (CSI), increased for the second consecutive year, up 4% in 2022. The Violent CSI rose in 2022, reaching its highest point since 2007. Prior to this, the trend of crime rate was decreasing. The non-violent CSI also increased in 2022 but remained lower than before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.” (*Police-Reported Crime Statistics in Canada, 2022, 2023*).

The reasoning behind this increase is not well understood and likely multifaceted. One of the factors to consider are the backgrounds of offenders, which may provide insight into this emerging pattern. To potentially help this problem, programs and support groups could be introduced. The rationale of this research is that focusing on the background of offenders may help to prevent crime from happening by intervening with vulnerable populations at an early age. In addition, changing the way our judicial system prosecutes crimes may be helpful to prevent people from committing more crimes in the future.

Method

Investigations into previous studies from published and peer reviewed journals were researched, focusing on early life trauma and violent crime. Factors considered in these papers were used to inform the factors put into the questionnaire.

This investigation uses Statistics Canada's definition for violent offences, which is that they involve the use or threat of violence against a person, including homicide, attempted murder, assault, sexual assault and robbery. Robbery is considered a violent offence because, unlike other theft offences, it involves the use or threat of violence (Moreau, 2022).

In addition to the studies, surveys were sent out to individuals who work in crime prevention, such as the RCMP and police force (see Appendix 1). Participants were contacted using either email or a social media post. Participants who expressed an interest would either email back or reply to the post, and be sent the consent form and survey.

Data

Research Data

Since 1962, Statistics Canada has collected information on all reported criminal incidences by the Canadian police services through its annual Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) (Moreau, 2022). The collected information has all been put into tables (Figures 1 and 2). (*Table 5 Police-Reported Crime for Selected Offences, Canada, 2021 and 2022, 2023*)

Figure 1

Crime rate 2006 to 2022 (Table 5 Police-Reported Crime for Selected Offences, Canada, 2021 and 2022, 2023)

Year	Crime Severity Index 1	Violent Crime Severity Index 1	Non-violent Crime Severity Index 1
2006 *Index base year	100	100	100
2007	95.3	97.8	94.3
2008	90.6	95.1	88.9
2009	87.8	94.3	85.3
2010	82.9	89.2	80.5
2011	77.6	85.7	74.5
2012	75.5	82	73
2013	68.9	74	66.9
2014	66.9	70.7	65.4
2015	70.4	75.3	68.4
2016	72	76.9	70.1
2017	73.6	81.3	70.7
2018	75.6	83.6	72.6
2019	79.8	90.3	75.8
2020	74	88	68.7
2021	74.9	93.4	68.1
2022	78.1	97.7	70.9

Figure 2

Reported crime 2021 and 2022 (Table 5 Police-Reported Crime for Selected Offences, Canada, 2021 and 2022, 2023)

	2021 ^f	2021 ^f	2022	2022	Change in rate 2021 to 2022	Change in rate 2012 to 2022
	number	rate	number	rate	%	%
Total Criminal Code (excluding traffic offences) - "Crime rate"	2,063,335	5,398	2,206,454	5,668	5	1
Total violent crime	509,017	1,332	531,243	1,365	2	14
Homicide	796	2.08	874	2.25	8	44
Other violations causing death	106	0 ^s	86	0 ^s	-20	-25
Attempted murder	748	1.96	840	2.16	10	13
Sexual assault - level 3 - aggravated	126	0 ^s	123	0 ^s	-4	-12
Sexual assault - level 2 - weapon or bodily harm	617	2	627	2	0 ^s	50
Sexual assault - level 1	33,641	88	35,215	90	3	47
Sexual offence occurring prior to January 4, 1983 1	485	1	486	1	-2	...
Sexual violations against children	12,838	34	11,859	30	-9	168
Assault - level 3 - aggravated	3,960	10	4,124	11	2	4
Assault - level 2 - weapon or bodily harm	71,274	186	76,462	196	5	37
Assault - level 1	185,199	484	195,701	503	4	2
Assault against a peace officer	12,461	33	12,623	32	-1	4
Other assaults	1,922	5	2,061	5	5	-37
Firearms - use of, discharge, pointing	4,457	11.7	4,741	12.2	4	106
Robbery	18,618	49	21,864	56	15	-30
Forcible confinement or kidnapping	3,592	9	3,727	10	2	-9
Trafficking in persons 2	386	1	411	1	5	...
Extortion	6,845	18	9,717	25	39	401
Criminal harassment	27,178	71	27,324	70	-1	9
Uttering threats	87,799	230	87,292	224	-2	10
Indecent or harassing communications	27,497	72	26,503	68	-5	26
Non-consensual distribution of intimate images 3	2,491	7	2,524	6	-1	...
Offences in relation to sexual services 4	710	2	703	2	-3	...
Other violent Criminal Code violations 5	5,271	14	5,356	14	0 ^s	-4

Figure two shows the rate of crime per 100,000 people. The crime rate from 2021-2022 increased by 2%, and changed from 2012-2022 by 14%. This increase indicates that a factor(s) over the past few years has made crime more frequent. This demonstrates there is an increase in crime, but the factors contributing to this are not understood.

This consecutive increase recorded in the overall CSI may indicate a continuation of the upward occurrence in crime, recorded before the pandemic started. When lockdown restrictions were first enforced, the overall rate and severity of crime decreased. While in lockdown, the CSI

reported more non-violent crimes. Before this drop, the CSI had risen for five consecutive years starting in 2015, leading to a 19% increase over the five years. (Moreau, 2022)

The violent CSI rose 5% in 2022, following the 6% increase from 2021. In comparison, the increase in the Violent CSI in 2022, included higher rates of robbery, with an increase of 15%, extortion, with an increase of 39%, homicide, with an increase of 8%, and an increase in level 1 sexual assault, being increased by 3%. (Moreau, 2022). This steady increase of crime indicates the criminal justice system needs to be addressed.

Studies have shown, in the long-run, childhood trauma does play a role in a person's later mental health. According to an article written by Heather Dye (2018), early life trauma has negative and long-term consequences that can cause life-long medical and psychological deficiencies. These early life traumas can cause neurological changes that impact human development and significant changes in brain functioning. These changes are responsible for cognitive and physical functioning. This shows that traumatic experiences can lead to neurological changes, possibly making somebody more susceptible to committing crime.

Studies have also shown links of childhood experiences of abuse and neglect with serious long-life problems, these include depression, suicide, alcoholism, and drug abuse. Additionally, major medical concerns such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes in abuse and neglect have been linked to this. Important processes such as neurodevelopmental and psychological development are also affected by early abuse and neglect. Scientists have also begun to

understand the processes through which these experiences can change children's development, producing damaging mental, medical and social outcomes. These have opened up possible ways to intervene and potentially prevent maltreatment to mitigate these effects (Putnam, 2009).

A study by Boland et al., (2019), conducted a survey at a county jail in the Southern United States. It found that early-life exposure to childhood maltreatment, such as physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse, has been linked to psychological distress throughout a person's lifespan. This includes the development of personality disorders. People with this diagnosis are at an increased risk for criminal behaviour, and people with borderline and antisocial personality disorders are common in forensic settings. Based on the data, they concluded a relationship between childhood maltreatment and adult criminal behaviour, as mediated by maladaptive personality.

A study conducted in 2020 investigated coping mechanisms such as denial, self-isolation, and drug and alcohol abuse, and found that they are associated with childhood trauma survivors. This research also found that symptoms related to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem all had increased risk after childhood trauma. (Downey & Crummy, 2021) It seems reasonable to consider crime as another possible outcome not investigated in the study. Certain other effects can include alcohol abuse, drug misuse, and creating false images of themselves, specifically where victims underestimate the impact of their trauma.

Survey Data

The survey was divided into three sections. The first being demographical data such as age groupings, gender, race, and level of education. The next section was their position, this included them specifying their occupation and rank. Finally, the ranking section, this included a list of ranking questions. Participants were asked to rank a list of 10 possible childhood factors (11, including an option for “other”), possibly relating to crime later in life. These included the lack of a maternal figure, lack of paternal figure, physical abuse, exposure to substance usage, family history of mental illness, race, ineffective parent behaviour even when parents are present (this includes lack of supervision, parent being emotionally unavailable, low attachment to family, etc), peer delinquency (this includes reinforcement of deviant norms, peer pressure, searching for a sense of belonging, etc), and neighbourhood disadvantage (where they group up i.e. exposure to poverty, lack of community, violence, and a sense of hopelessness).

Out of the 45 people, the responses were varied across different provinces and territories; 46.7% of participants were from British Columbia, 22.2% of the participants were from Alberta, 8.9% of participants were from Ontario, 6.7% of participants were from Saskatchewan, 4.4% of participants were from Quebec. Nova Scotia, Yukon Territories, Newfoundland and Labrador, Manitoba, and Nunavut each had 2.2% representation in the sample.

The responses were spread out over different age groupings. 22.2% of the participants were 18–24 years old, 11.11% of the participants were 25–34 years old, 6.67% of the participants were

35–44 years old, 15.56% of the participants were 45–54 years old, 46.67% of participants were 55–64 years old, and 17.78% of the participants were 65+ years old.

The racial or ethnic identities of the participants were 93.33% of participants identified as white, 2.22% of participants identified as Japanese, and 11.11% of participants identified as Indigenous. The participants were given the option to provide multiple ethnic identities, thus, the total percentage is over 100%

The highest level of education the participants had were as follows; 28.89% of participants had a high school degree, 33.33% of participants had an undergraduate degree, 28.89% of participants had a graduate degree, and 8.89% of participants had a postgraduate degree.

The genders of the participants were evenly split, with 55.56% being female, and 44.4% as male.

When asked about their occupation, 97.78% of the participants were from the RCMP, 2.22% of the participants were with other police forces, and 0% of the people with other occupations who deal with criminal justice completed the form. The ranks of the participants were varied; 4.55% of the participants were assistant commissioners, 18.18% of the participants were staff sergeants, 13.64% of the participants were sergeants, 11.36% of the participants were corporals, 20.45% of the participants were Constables, 29.55% of the participants were retired, and 2.27% of the participants were reserve constables on an Indigenous reserve.

The average ranking of the factors were as follows:

Table 1

Factor	Average Rank	% of Participants who ranked in top 3
Ineffective parent behaviour	3.51/11	57.78%
Physical abuse	4.09/11	48.89%
Exposure to substance usage	4.47/11	40%
Peer delinquency	5.27/11	26.67%
Neighbourhood disadvantage	5.47/11	33.33%
Lack of maternal figure	6.02/11	28.89%
Lack of paternal figure	6.04/11	20%
Family history of mental illness	6.22/11	22.22%
Financial difficulties	6.44	15.56%
Race	9.78/11	0%

The option “other” was also given, allowing participants to choose something not listed, the two most common other factors were lack of education, and being put into foster care, group homes, and adoption.

Conclusion

The continuous rankings of surveyed individuals ranked factors such as: ineffective parent behaviour, abuse, and exposure to substance usage as first. They were higher ranked than factors such as race, lack of maternal/paternal figure, or family history of mental illness. This means nature and nurture are important aspects to consider while reforming the current legal system. If we can recognize factors in the early stages of life, it could make it easier to provide help and programs to help individuals who are at a higher risk to commit crime at a young age, giving them the best possible chance to have a good upbringing.

In modern times, there are more resources available to youth, such as the youth distress centres and call lines. Being offered these opportunities at a young age will hopefully help reduce the impact of these risk factors and result in a lower probability of committing crimes later in life.

There are several potential sources of bias in this survey worth considering. Firstly, participants were mainly contacted through the same mutual acquaintance, which means they may not be a representative sample of law enforcement officials. In addition, Statistics Canada only shows reported crime, this could mean crime isn't increasing, but the reporting of crime is. In addition, the majority of participants were from the RCMP, leading to potential perspective bias even within law enforcement as other groups, such as victims, criminals, or family and friends of criminals may have a different perspective. When asked about ancestry, over 90% of respondents responded as having white ancestry, which might also limit the range of perspectives.

In future investigations, I hope to focus more on the top three results of the survey, and investigate the effects they have on youth, and develop better strategies to support vulnerable youth. Additionally, connecting certain factors of the participants such as age, race, level of education, years in service, or gender may provide information to improve police training and to prevent wrongful prosecution.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix

Appendix 1

Calgary Youth Science Fair 2024

Survey Participants Urgently Needed

"Police Reported Violent Crime: Childhood Factors in Adult Violent Offenders".

My daughter is a grade 8 student doing the noted research project for the Calgary Youth Science Fair 2024. Her research topic has gone through the CYSF Ethics Review, and there is a CYSF Consent Form my daughter needs back before she can send out the survey. The survey is very short, collects demographics, and has questions relating to her research topic. As with all research, the more participants, the better.

Your participation would be greatly appreciated.

Please send me a DM ASAP if you are willing to participate, and I will have my daughter provide you with the consent form and questionnaire.