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Costs of Criminal Trajectories

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Since the mid-1990s, there has been a growing interest in efforts to estimate the monetary costs of crime. This increase is likely the result of significant methodological advances and the increasing recognition that such information could be used to conduct cost-benefit analyses of crime reduction programs, in terms of quantifying the savings from avoided crimes. Estimating the cost of criminal offending also helps justify investments in developmental crime prevention programs, which aim to steer at-risk youth away from potentially long, costly criminal careers. However, there is a lack of data on costs associated with criminal careers in the Canadian context.

STUDY AIMS

The present report aims to contribute a Canadian perspective to existing literature on the cost of crime. The primary objective of the present study was to estimate the accumulated monetary cost of the crimes committed by high-risk youth over their criminal careers, using a sample of offenders in Ontario.

METHODS

The study sample comprised 386 high-risk male offenders who had been sentenced between 1986 and 1997 as juvenile offenders to one of two open custody facilities in Toronto, Ontario. Offenders were, on average, 17.7 years at the time of admission into the facility. For the purposes of this study, the follow-up period was standardized to 15 years to ensure that all participants had a uniform interval of follow-up. Over the follow-up period, the sample amassed a total of 7,257 convictions for criminal offences, to which costs were attached based on the research literature. The costs of crime were reported according to subgroups of offenders, based on their longitudinal pattern of offending: (1) low-rate; (2) medium-rate; and (3) high-rate offenders. The estimated costs were further broken down according to whether they were: (1) victim costs; (2) correctional costs; or (3) other criminal justice system costs (e.g., policing, courts).

RESULTS/OUTCOMES

The aggregated cost of offending, according to official convictions in court for the 386 males over the 15-year follow-up interval, was approximately \$671 million. Victim costs accounted for around \$183 million; correctional costs totalled about \$122 million; and other criminal justice system costs amounted to approximately \$367 million. The average cost per offender was \$1.74 million over 15 years, or \$115,945 per person per year.

As expected, there were considerable differences in the average cost of crime per individual across the three subgroups of offenders. In these analyses, it was found that low-rate offenders cost about \$2 million each; medium-rate individuals approximately \$5 million each; and high-rate offenders around \$12 million each. The main costing results are summarized in the table below:

CATEGORY	Victim Costs	Correctional Costs	Other CJS Costs (e.g., policing, courts)	TOTAL	Average Cost per Offender
Low-Rate Offenders (N=240)	\$66,030,714	\$47,789,158	\$143,367,474	\$257,187,346	\$1,954,658
Medium-Rate Offenders (N=114)	\$59,815,645	\$49,858,988	\$149,576,963	\$259,251,596	\$5,403,879
High-Rate Offenders (N=32)	\$56,756,340	\$24,531,619	\$73,594,857	\$163,882,816	\$12,109,071
TOTAL ALL OFFENDERS (N=386)	\$182,602,699	\$122,179,765	\$366,539,294	\$671,321,758	\$1,739,715

DISCUSSION

The cost of criminal offending incurred by this sample of 386 high-risk male offenders in Ontario was substantial. Furthermore, across the different criminal trajectories, costs were disproportionately higher for the small group of high-rate offenders, and disproportionately lower for the large group of low-rate offenders. These findings reinforce the idea that even within a high-risk offender sample, there is considerable heterogeneity in longitudinal patterns of offending, and thus the cost estimates associated with it.

SUMMARY AND/OR CONCLUSIONS

The exercise of estimating the costs of crime in Canada is important, as the results may inform policy decisions about resource allocation for crime prevention and reduction. Investments in strategic prevention and early intervention programming have a high potential of offsetting the monetary costs incurred over a lengthy criminal career. For example, in a recent analysis of the Stop Now and Plan® (SNAP) program, a Canadian-based early intervention program, it was found that for every \$1.00 invested in the program, between \$3.07 and \$5.64 was saved in costs of crime expenditures over a nine-year follow-up period.

REFERENCES

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