

PUBLIC FEAR OF CRIME AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Question: How does fear of crime relate to attitudes toward the criminal justice system?

Background: Criminal justice institutions and the policies that guide them can be heavily influenced by public attitudes. Public support for the police, courts and correctional institutions such as prisons and parole can be influenced by many factors. Understanding the factors that influence public perceptions could improve communication to the public and help in the development of new criminal justice initiatives.

One important factor influencing public attitudes is the fear of crime. Governments try to respond to the public's level of fear of crime by introducing new legislative measures that they hope will reduce levels of fear. Thus, understanding the links between fear of crime and attitudes towards the criminal justice system has implications for legislative policy developments.

Method: A review of the literature on the fear of crime and attitudes toward the criminal justice system was conducted. The review included both quantitative

and qualitative reports with a special focus on trends. That is, have levels of fear and attitudes changed over the years? One important focus of the review was on correctional subjects (i.e., imprisonment and parole).

Answer: Over the past 25 years, fear of criminal victimization has remained relatively steady with a small decline in recent years. On average, 31% of adult Canadians reported being afraid. However, women are more likely than men to report being afraid (41% vs. 12%). Fear of crime also varies with geographical location. Levels of fear are lowest in Atlantic Canada (14%) and highest in British Columbia (39%). Internationally Canada ranks 12 out of 15 countries, ahead of the United States but lower fear levels than countries such as the United Kingdom and France. Overall, most Canadians report feeling safe in their neighbourhoods and their perceptions of personal safety have increased in recent years.

Although almost one of three Canadians express fear of crime, dealing with crime is not seen as a high government priority. In a recent survey, only two per

cent of respondents saw crime as an area that the government should focus on, far behind issues of health care, education and the economy. When asked simply whether or not crime is a problem (not if it is a priority problem), the percentage of people saying that crime is a problem has decreased over time. The trend to increased feelings of safety may partly be explained by the public's awareness of decreases in the crime rate in Canada. Ten years ago the majority of the public believed that crimes rates were increasing whereas today, nearly half believe that crime rate will decrease over the next year.

Studies examining the attitudes of the public to the criminal justice system have shown that Canadians are not very supportive of "get tough" policies. Public support for capital punishment has fallen to a historic low and the majority of survey respondents prefer parole to incarcerating offenders until the end of their sentences. Support for punitive interventions and negative attitudes toward the criminal justice system however, are associated with fear of crime. People who report the highest fear levels showed the most support for incarceration and the greatest opposition to rehabilitation.

Policy Implications :

1. Most Canadians feel safe in their communities. Conveying these findings to the public is important to counter-balance media portrayals of crime as a pervasive problem.
2. Compared to other issues, the majority of Canadians do not view crime as a priority issue for the government. This information is helpful in ensuring that the government's response to the crime problem is kept in perspective.
3. Support for "get tough" remedies for dealing with crime is not very strong. Most Canadians agree with the view that rehabilitation and parole are important methods for reducing re-offending. Continued development of supervised release and rehabilitation programs is encouraged.

Source: Roberts, J. V. (2001). Fear of crime and attitudes to criminal justice in Canada: A review of recent trends. (User Report 2001-02). Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada.

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