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Random violence skews crime perception

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Acts of random violence are the main reason for misperceptions of the amount of criminal activity in Canada and how strictly it is dealt with, the author of a federally sponsored study says.

The study for the Justice Department, conducted by University of Ottawa criminologist Julian Roberts, compared results from several years' worth of opinion polls with trends in reported crimes and victimization surveys. It is the first to look at what Canadians actually know about the criminal justice system and how they want legislators to fix it.

Because of public pressure on politicians to toughen sentences and parole eligibility, crime has become a key issue on the federal agenda and on many provincial and municipal ones.

Dr. Roberts' study, *Public Knowledge of Crime and Justice: An Inventory of Canadian Findings*, has not been publicly released but may be in the new year, according to sources in the Justice Department.

Among the findings are these:

- Although two-thirds of Canadians believe crime rates have risen during the past five years, such rates generally have remained stable.
- Most Canadians believe homicides are increasing more quickly than any other crime. In fact, the rate has remained relatively stable

for 30 years and actually has begun falling, especially since the abolition of capital punishment. In 1977, the year after abolition, it was 3.06 per 100,000 population. By 1992 the rate was 2.7 per 100,000.

- Although most Canadians believe that breaking-and-entering is on the rise, this too is a misperception. In 1980 there were 26.3 such incidents reported to police for every 1,000 households. In 1990 the rate was 22.4 per 1,000 households. A recent survey conducted by Statistics Canada also showed that rates of such crimes had fallen 7 per cent between 1988 and 1993.

- The widespread view that gun use is becoming more common in crimes is also false. Thirty-seven per cent of all robberies committed in 1978 involved a firearm, but by 1990 this had fallen to 26 per cent. The proportion of homicides involving a gun has risen slightly, from 32 per cent in 1980 to 34 per cent in 1992.

- A growing proportion of Canadians (85 per cent in 1992) feel that sentences are not harsh enough. When questioned, however, they consistently underestimated the proportion of convicted criminals sent to prison.

- Canadians are highly anxious about what they perceive to be lax parole rules but, again, this is based on a misperception. They tend to believe that more than half of prisoners get parole and that more parole than ever is being granted. In fact, the federal parole-

granting rate stands at 64 per cent, roughly where it has been for a decade.

- Contrary to public opinion, the majority of those paroled complete their terms in the community without committing another crime. Between 1978 and 1988, nearly three-quarters were successfully paroled. Parole was revoked for 12 per cent because they committed new crimes.

"The system is not the lenient joke people believe it to be," Dr. Roberts said yesterday from Ottawa. "Everything's not fine, but the problems are not necessarily what the public believes them to be."

Several factors have produced such an extensive list of misperceptions, he said. The most influential, though, were well-publicized acts of random violence that took place in 1994.

One was the drive-by shooting of Nicholas Battersby in Ottawa in March. Another was the shooting of Georgina Leimonis at a Toronto restaurant the next month.

Such sensational cases leave a lasting impact and heighten the public's view that danger is everywhere, Dr. Roberts said. He cited psychological literature showing that for years after a major plane crash, people wildly overestimate the risks of flying.

And because the public believes crime to be a simple phenomenon, there is tremendous support for easy answers such as harsher sentences, he said.

The article EM9424 reprinted above is used in Figure 7.1 of the STAT 220 Course Materials, in Chapter 1 of the STAT 231 Course Materials and in Statistical Highlight #40.