

Backgrounder - Physical Safety – PSI 2003

The PSI monitors Canadians' concerns about physical safety by tracking four indicators: the level of violent crime, the level of property crime, and Canadians' perceptions of these types of crime in their own communities.

According to the hard data from 2002, Canadians' overall physical safety remained essentially unchanged from the year before, as violent crime rates rose slightly and property crimes fell slightly.

Violent crime

The PSI examines the most serious forms of violent crime (level 3) – that is, homicide, attempted murder, aggravated assault, and aggravated sexual assault – because these are the crimes about which Canadians express the greatest concerns, and the seriousness of these crimes leads to more reliable and comprehensive reporting.

The most serious forms of violent crime have decreased slightly since 1997, although overall violent crime has increased slightly. Canadians became slightly more concerned about violent crime over that period. Research shows that the fear of crime – particularly violent crime – is disproportionate to the true risk of being victimized. Even if people's fear of crime is “not justified” by objective data, it can still be a negative factor in their lives, often unnecessarily restricting their social activities.

DATA:

- Overall, the violent crime rate¹ in Canada increased by 1.3% between 2000 and 2001, the 2nd consecutive yearly increase. The rate rose from 981.1 violent crimes per 100,000 population in 2000, to 993.6 per 100,000 in 2001.² It should be noted that this national rate for violent crime remains considerably lower than it had been in 1992 (at 1,083.7 per 100,000), and that it had been decreasing from 1997 to 2000 but increased overall from 1997 (990.1 per 100,000) to 2001.
- The rate of level 3 violent crimes remained virtually unchanged in 2001, at 13.3 violent crimes per 100,000 population. This rate is lower than it was five years ago (14.6 violent crimes per 100,000 population in 1997) and it is significantly lower than in 1991, when the rate was 21.9 per 100,000.

¹ Violent crime incidents (numbering approximately 309,000 in 2001) include homicide, attempted murder, assault, sexual assault, other assaults, other sexual offences, abduction and robbery.

² Data on crime rates for 2002 were released after completion of this document, but the trends identified here remain virtually unchanged. Refer to Statistics Canada's website for those data.

- Six of 10 provinces reported an increase in violent crime: Saskatchewan (+8%), Nova Scotia (+5.8%), N.B. (+ 4.8%), Alberta (+3.8), PEI (+2.1), Ontario (+1.8) and Quebec (+0.3). The other provinces posted a small drop in their rates – the largest of which was in BC (-2.8%).
- Again in 2001, violent crime rates were highest in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, with rates of 1,802 and 1,620 respectively per 100,000 population, while Quebec and PEI recorded the lowest rates at 719 and 746 respectively per 100,000 population.

PERCEPTION: Are Canadians concerned about violent crime?

To gauge Canadians' sense of their physical safety, we asked how they would rate their families' safety in their own neighbourhoods with respect to violent crime.

- The vast majority of Canadians (72%) reported feeling very safe from violent crime in 2002, however, this figure was lower than five years earlier (77% in 1998).
- Residents of Alberta and Ontario felt the safest from violent crime, at 77% and 78% respectively.
- Quebec residents were by far the most fearful of violent crime in their neighbourhoods: only 60% of Quebecers reported feeling very safe in 2002. However, more felt safe this year than did last year (an increase of 1.3 percentage points).
- Canadians aged 25 to 44 were the most confident: the vast majority (75%) felt that their neighbourhoods were very safe from violent crime. Seniors were the least likely to share that sentiment, with only 65% feeling very safe. Far more people in this older age group reported feeling moderately safe.
- Men were slightly more likely than women to feel that their neighbourhoods were very safe from violent crime (72% compared to 71%).
- Canadians with high household incomes were significantly more likely than other Canadians to feel that their neighbourhoods were very safe from violent crime.

Property crime

Property crimes are unlawful acts with the intent of gaining property, but they do not involve the use or threat of violence. PSI focuses on two types of property crime that affect people most directly – breaking and entering into a residence and motor vehicle theft. Although property crime rates have fallen substantially over the last decade, hitting their lowest rate in 25 years, Canadians feel increasingly unsafe from property crime in their neighbourhoods.

DATA:

- The overall incidence of property crime has been declining steadily. In 2001, it dropped to 4,043 property crimes per 100,000 population – the lowest rate in more than 25 years.
- In 2001, the rate of property crimes committed by youth decreased by 3.3%, a much larger drop than in the rate for all age groups (-0.6%).
- Motor vehicle theft has been increasing gradually since 1990, while other forms of property crimes have decreased. This year, for the first time, the rate of motor vehicle theft exceeded the rate for

residential break and enter – a stark contrast to 1982, when the residential break and enter rate was more than double the rate for motor vehicle thefts.

- The property crime rate fell in seven provinces, with only Manitoba (+3.1%), BC (+1.2%) and Ontario (+0.7%) experiencing increases.
- The Atlantic Provinces had the lowest rates of property crime in Canada in 2001, and Newfoundland, with a rate of 2,283.8 property crimes per 100,000 population, was the lowest.
- BC continues to have the highest property crime rates among the provinces, at 6,451.2 property crimes per 100,000 population.

PERCEPTION: Are Canadians concerned about property crime?

- A majority of Canadians (65%) felt that their neighbourhoods were very safe from property crime. This was down slightly from 67% in 2001; in fact, the proportion of Canadians who feel very safe from property crime in their neighbourhood has been steadily decreasing for the last three years – it was 68% in 2000.
- 22% of Canadians thought that their neighbourhood was moderately safe from property crime – the same proportion as in 2000 and 2001.
- 13% said their neighbourhoods were unsafe – up from 12% in 2001, and steadily increasing since 1999.
- Among the highest-income households, 74% reported feeling very safe from property crime, while only 58% of the lowest-income households gave the same safety rating.
- Canadians under age 25 were the most likely to report that their neighbourhoods were very safe from property crime (68%).
- Regionally, residents of Atlantic Canada and Ontario were the most likely to report feeling very safe from property crime (74% and 71%, respectively); Quebec had by far the lowest proportion of residents who felt very safe (at 56%), while residents of BC (15.3%) and Quebec (15.2%) were the most likely to report feeling unsafe.