

# Fact Sheet

#2 in a series of fact sheets, published by the John Howard Society of Ontario, examining the questions most frequently asked about the criminal justice system.

## Changes in reporting mask violent crime trends

### What is really happening with violent crime rates?

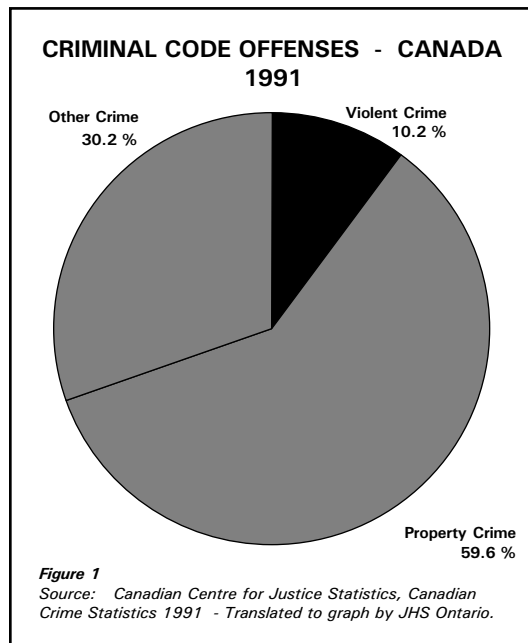
Violent crime represents a relatively small percentage of all Criminal Code offences, but because of the serious nature of the offences, it is violent crime that we fear the most.

Believing that rates of violent crime are increasing dramatically makes us feel more vulnerable and at risk. Increasing public fear of crime results in demands for more incarceration and for longer sentences. The fact is, however, that official statistics and media reports can be very misleading. No amount of violent crime is acceptable, but being panicked into costly and ineffective responses to crime by incomplete information is not acceptable either. In this Fact Sheet we will explore violent crime statistics and victimization studies in order to show why we have been saying, "Now is not the time to panic".

The evidence suggests that while the *rate* of violent crime in Canada has not been increasing dramatically the *reporting* of violent crime has increased. This is particularly the case with the reporting of assault offences not involving serious injury or a weapon (assault level 1 and non-sexual assault level 1).

*It is important to understand that even a small increase in the rate at which*

*the public reports crime to the police can result in a large increase in police reported crime rates.*



According to the 1987 Canadian victimization survey, an estimated 1,104,000 violent offences were *not* reported to the police. If an additional 1% of these victimizations were reported, 11,040 offences would have been added to the reported number of violent crimes for that year (i.e., 219,381 + 11,040 = 230,421), representing an increase in violent crime of 5%

The entire increase in the violent crime rate over the 1987 - 1991 period (28.4%) might be accounted for by an increase in victimization reporting of slightly more than 1% each year.

The issues relating to violent crime generate strong feelings of anger and fear - that is to be expected - but, if we are to take the best course of action to reduce violent crime, we must also use our intellect and examine the facts carefully. Exaggerated claims, misunderstood statistics, and panic responses are not helpful or likely to result in effective social policy.

### Critical analysis of statistics essential

The primary source of Canadian crime statistics is the Uniform Crime Reporting system (UCR) developed by Statistics Canada in 1962. This survey is completed by the federal, provincial and municipal police and contains only information on crimes which are reported by police.

Researchers and statisticians always caution the reader that increases in violent crime as defined by UCR data may be partly due to changes in reporting practices of citizens and the police.

But, how much of the increase in crime is really attributable to changes in reporting practices?

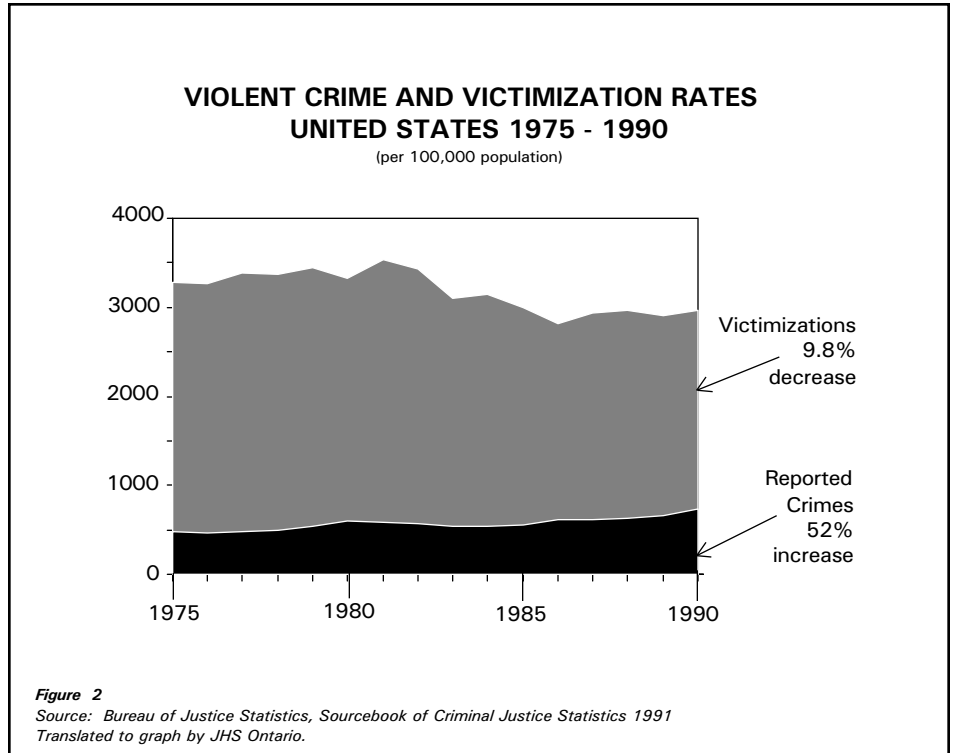
Comparing trends in reported crime with estimates of actual crime based on victimization studies helps to illustrate the effect of changing reporting practices.

Canadian victimization data are available for 1982 and 1987 but, because the groups surveyed and the methodology used differ, the data cannot be compared and trends cannot be identified. In the United States, however, national victimization studies have been conducted annually since 1973.

**What does the U.S. information on crime tell us?**

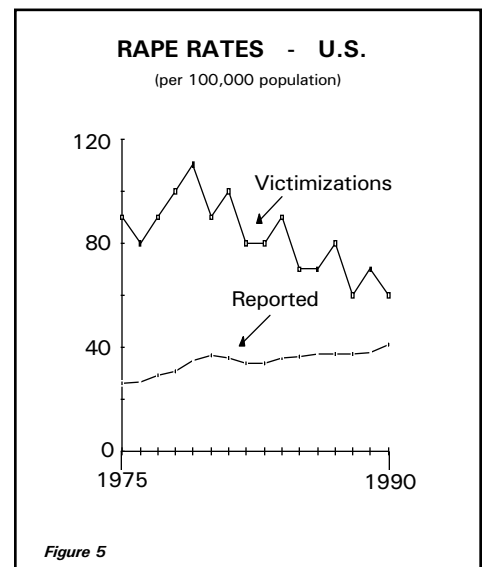
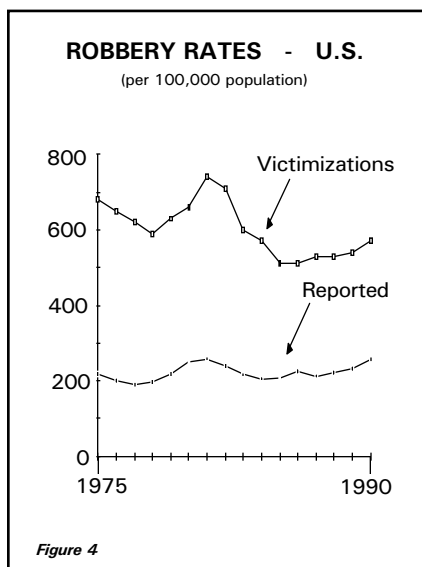
American data show that changes in reporting practices can generate quickly escalating violent crime statistics when, in fact, violent crime is actually stable or even declining.

An analysis of trends in the rates of specific violent offences in the United States shows the convergence between reported crime and victimization estimates. Figures 3, 4 and 5 show this converging pattern with the three key indicators of violent crime in the United States.



It is worth noting that the Canadian equivalent of assault level 1 (not involving serious injury or use of a weapon) is not classified as a violent crime in the United States. As the Canadian data which follow will show, most of the increase in the rate of violent crime in Canada is attributable to this lowest level of violent crime.

**While the U.S. rate of reported violent crime rose 52% between 1975 and 1990, the violent crime rate measured by victimization surveys declined by 9.8%.**



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 1991  
Translated to graph by JHS Ontario.

## Most violent Crime in Canada stable

In Canada, the least serious offences account for *virtually all* of the growth in official violent crime between 1984 (after the laws for assault and sexual assault changed) and 1991. As Figure 6 shows, when the lowest levels of violent crime are excluded, there has been very little change in the rate of violent crime.

*The irony here is that our success in addressing issues of violence may result in us believing that we are more at risk.*

Trends in assault level 1 and sexual assault level 1 are more likely to be reflective of changes in reporting practices rather than changes in the rate of actual assaults. When sexual assault level 1 and assault level 1 are excluded from the violent crime rate (Fig. 6), the pattern is similar to that of property crime rates over the same period (Fig. 7).

It is likely that the patterns of crime reflected in property and "other" violent crime (Fig. 6 & 7), are a more accurate reflection of actual trends.

many years after the offence took place. More charges are being laid in cases of domestic assault as police are now required or expected to lay charges for offences which, in the past, would have been dealt with informally and not recorded.

Because the worst cases of violent crime have always had a high rate of reporting, we should expect to see the greatest changes with the least serious offences (Fig. 6).

Assault cannot be tolerated, dismissed, or ignored. But neither should increased reporting of these incidents lead Canadians to the conclusion that our society is becoming *more* violent and that Canadians are more at risk than they were in the past.

Attempts to address previously hidden or tolerated violence will result in more reporting of those offences and, in turn, an increase in the rates of those offences should be expected. The irony here is that our success in addressing issues of violence may result in us believing that we are more at risk.

## Violence less tolerated

Assaultive behaviour - particularly sexual assaults, domestic assault, and child abuse - has been the target of legislative action, public education and media attention within the past decade. Citizens and police have been encouraged, and in some cases required, to report and record offences.

As we turn our attention and criminal justice resources to combat violent crimes that were "tolerated" in the past, we should *expect* to see a disproportionate increase in the rate at which these offences are reported.

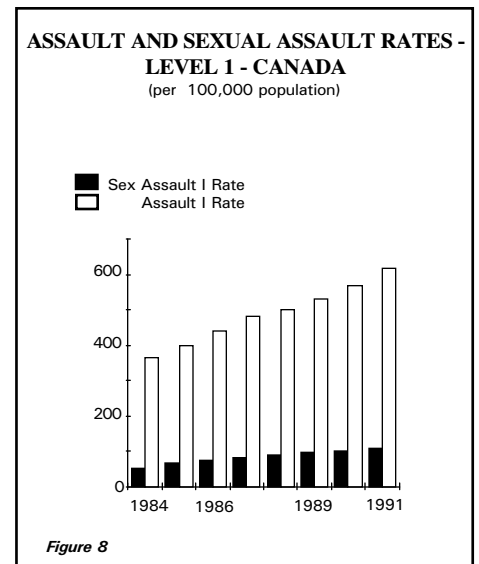
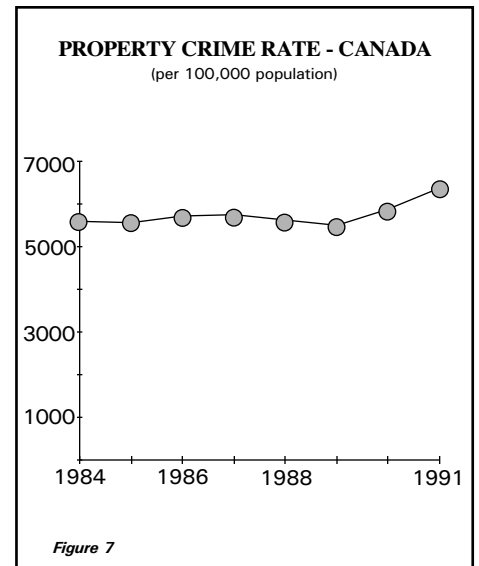
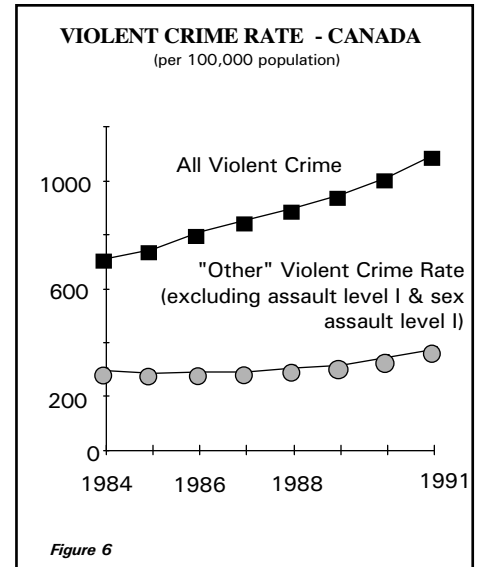
For example, fights between youths appear to be tolerated much less now than was the case in past years. The police are more likely to be called and, therefore, more charges are laid.

Sexual assaults on children are now being reported more frequently - often

## Legislative changes can affect reporting practices.

New legal definitions of criminal behaviour affect how police charge offenders. For instance, the rate of sexual offences began to increase dramatically in 1983 - the year of the criminal code changes for sexual assault.

As Figure 8 shows, the rates for sexual assault as compared to those for general assault are relatively low. At the same time, the increase in the number of general assaults has been much greater than is the case with sexual assaults, even though the rate of increase has been greater with sexual assault. *Even a small shift in charging practices from assault to sexual assault would generate a large increase in the officially recorded rate of sexual assaults.*



Source: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Canadian Crime Statistics (1984 - 1991) - Translated to graph by JHS Ontario (Figures 6, 7, and 8)

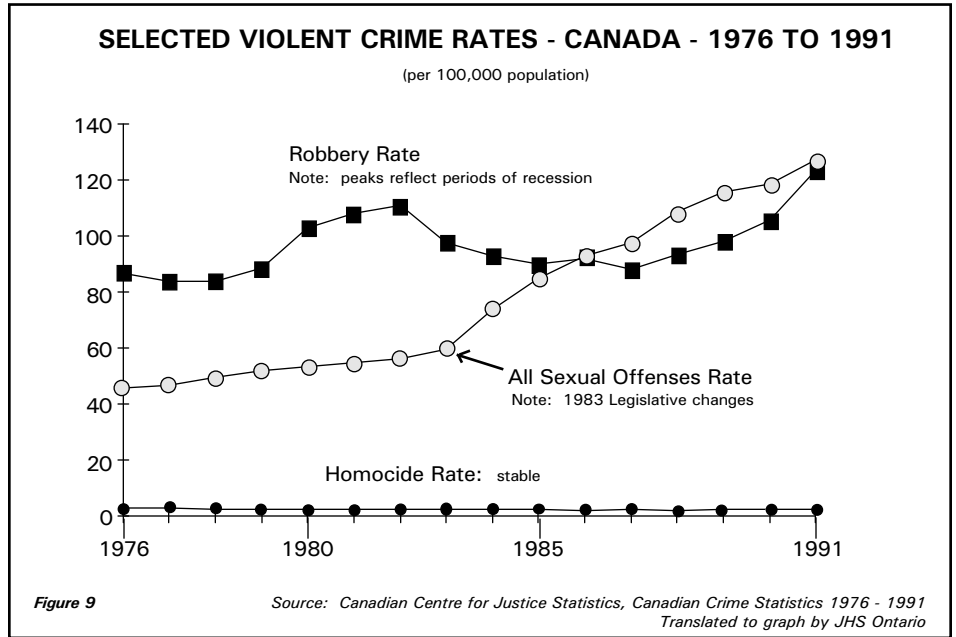
**Robberies linked to tough times**

As Figure 9 shows, other violent offences not affected by legislative changes show very different trends. The homicide rate was relatively stable between 1976 and 1991. The pattern of robbery rates have traditionally mirrored the economic conditions of Canada with the peaks occurring during periods of recession and high unemployment.

**Most violent crimes not reported to police**

Victimization studies in Canada show that only about 30% of violent crimes are reported to police. Victims frequently report that "the offence was too minor" or that "there was nothing the police could do" as the reasons for not reporting. In other cases, such as domestic and sexual assault, victims may be reluctant to report due to fears about reprisals or the impact on the family of a public prosecution.

*Considering that about 70% of violent crime goes unreported, there is obviously room for enormous growth in the official violent crime rates whether or not there is any change in actual rates of violent crime.*



**Public policy choices shaped by public perception of violent crime**

It seems likely that some violent crime is increasing while other violent crimes are remaining level or even decreasing. What is certain, however, is that the changes in the rate of violent crime are much more gradual than official crime statistics suggest.

A critical analysis of violent crime is essential to the development of good public policy in criminal justice. Much

more Canadian research is necessary if we are to determine whether violent crime is actually increasing, the nature of the increase, who is being victimized, the causes of the increase, and how it can be prevented.

We cannot afford to be either paralysed by sensational reports of increasing violent crime or pressured to adopt short-sighted solutions. With a better understanding of what is really happening with violent crime rates, an environment can exist which allows for careful and thoughtful analysis and proposals.

**The John Howard Society is an organization of citizens who accept responsibility for understanding and dealing with the problems of crime and the criminal justice system.**

If you would like more information about the Society or feel that you would like to contribute to the work of the Society please write or contact us by phone at:



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