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# User Report

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT  
PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO CRIME  
AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE:

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTATION

NO. 1987-04

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## PREFACE

Public Opinion surveys are an important element in the discussion of social issues in Canada. The area of crime and criminal justice is no exception.

The purpose of this document is to summarize key findings from surveys which have elicited the public's views and concerns about crime and criminal justice in Canada. Some of these surveys have been undertaken by government departments others by universities or other non-governmental organizations.

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT  
PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO CRIME AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE**

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PART I

PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME

## 1.1 Crime as a National Problem

Q. How important is crime as a national problem compared to other issues such as unemployment or pollution?

A. The findings of this question from polls and surveys differ a great deal, and much of the difference seems to be related to how the question is asked. For example, when Canadians are asked by pollsters to state their views on a list of social problem which includes crime, they tend to rank crime as their second or third priority, after inflation and unemployment.

On the other hand, when respondents are asked without any prompting to suggest which national problems are of most concern to them, very few mention crime.

These findings suggest that while crime is a concern to many Canadians, it is typically not a constant preoccupation for many people.

Results of CROP 1977, 1978.

For each of the following problems, please tell me if you consider it very important, somewhat important, of little importance or not at all important for Canada.

	1977		1978	
	"very"	"somewhat"	"very"	"somewhat"
Unemployment	80	16	80	15
Inflation	78	17	79	17
Crime & Delinquency	72	22	69	25
The Environment	-	-	61	28
Energy	70	25	59	29
National Unity	61	24	59	25
Government Administration	60	28	59	29
Strikes	51	31	49	30
Bilingualism	41	33	37	33

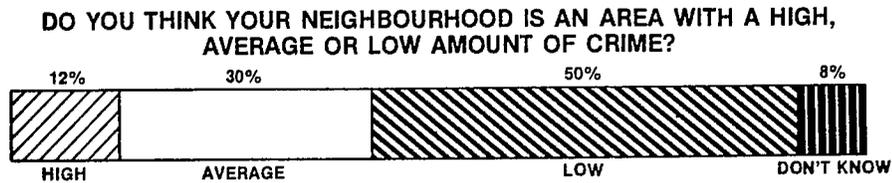
## 1.2 Crime as a Neighbourhood or City Problem

In the Canadian Urban Victimization Survey (1982), 61,000 people were asked a series of questions about their perceptions of crime:

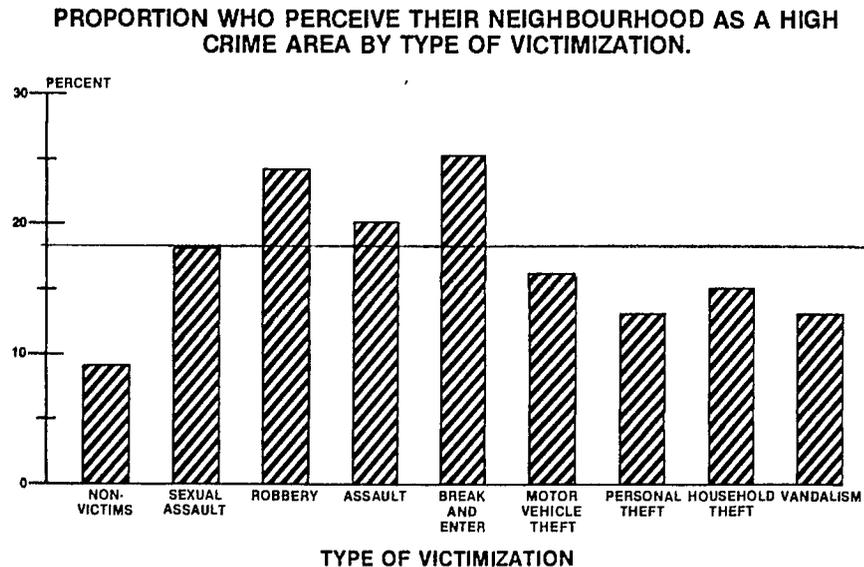
1. Do you think your neighbourhood is an area with a high amount of crime, an average amount of crime, or a low amount of crime?
2. How do you think your neighbourhood compares with the rest of     (city)     in terms of the amount of crime? Would you say your neighbourhood has much more crime; more crime; about the same, less crime; don't know?
3. In the last year or two do you think that crime has increased, decreased, or remained about the same: In your neighbourhood; What about in your city?
4. Do you think there is a serious crime problem in your neighbourhood? If so, what is the most serious crime problem?

1.2.1 Amount of Crime in the Neighbourhood

- Q. Do you think your neighbourhood is an area with a high amount of crime, an average amount of crime, or a low amount of crime?
- A. According to the Canadian Urban Victimization Survey (1982) a large majority thought the level of crime in their own neighbourhood was average (30%), or low (50%). By contrast, only 12% thought that the level of crime in their neighbourhood was high.



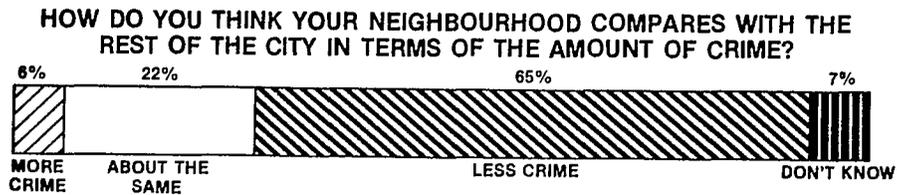
Those who had been victimized during 1981 had somewhat less positive opinions about the local crime situation (18% thought the level of crime was high), but 78% still rated their neighbourhood as having average or low levels.



1.2.2 Amount of Crime in Neighbourhood compared to Other Areas of the City

When asked to compare their neighbourhood with the rest of the city in which they lived, the majority (65%) believed that their own neighbourhood was much less afflicted by crime than others.

Q. How do you think your neighbourhood compares with the rest of ---- in terms of the amount of crime? Would you say your neighbourhood has much more crime; more crime; about the same amount of crime; less crime; much less crime; don't know.



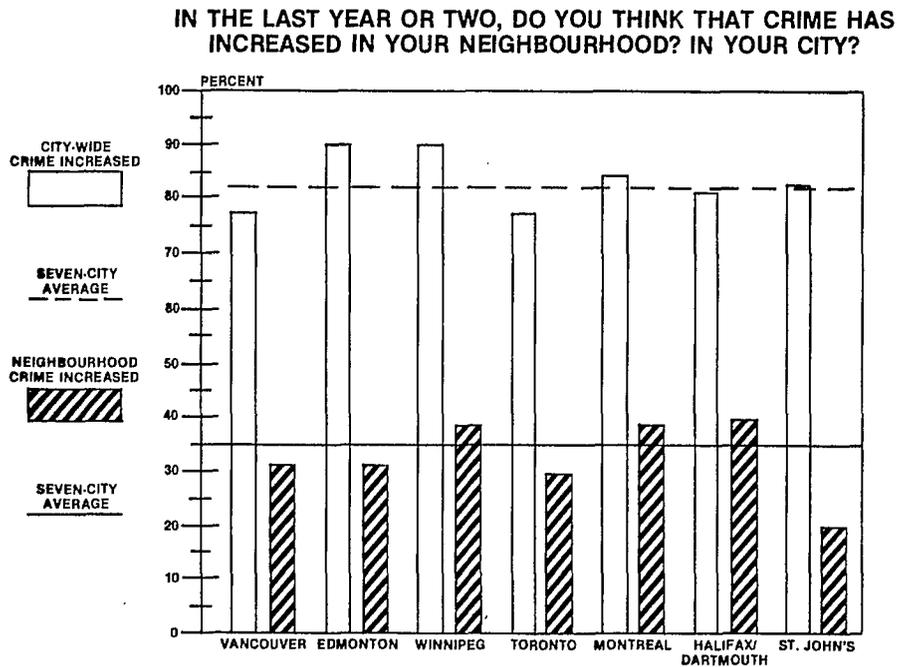
Source: Canadian Urban Victimization Survey (1982)

### 1.2.3 Perception of Changes in Amount of Crime

Q. In the last year or two do you think that crime has increased, decreased, or remained about the same?

A. Most survey respondents (81%) said they believed that crime had increased in their city in the year or two prior to the survey, and this corresponded roughly to increases in crimes recorded by the police.

Despite the widespread belief that crime was increasing generally, only 33% believed that crime in their own neighbourhood had increased.

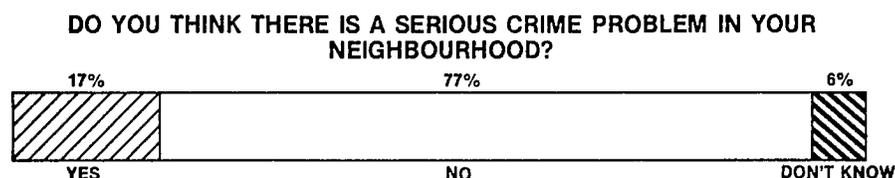


Source: Canadian Urban Victimization Survey (1982)

#### 1.2.4 Perceptions of the Seriousness of Crime in the Neighbourhood

Q. Do you think there is a serious crime problem in your neighbourhood?

A. Most Canadians (77%) think that the crime problem in their neighbourhood is not serious. Understandably, more victims than non-victims perceived that the crime problem in their neighbourhood was "serious" (25%), but a surprising 70% still said that the crime problem was not serious.



Source: Canadian Urban Victimization Survey (1982)

#### 1.2.5 Most Serious Crime Problem

Those who said there was a serious crime problem in their neighbourhood were asked:

Q. What is the most serious crime problem?

	<u>Percent</u>
Personal safety (robbery, assault, etc.)	27
Property loss (break-in, theft, etc.)	44
Vandalism	17
Disturbing the peace (noisy parties, etc.)	2
Drugs, alcohol	4
Prostitution	0
Other	3
Unstated	3

Source: Canadian Urban Victimization Survey (1982)

1.3 Violent Crime in Canada Compared to the United States

- Q. How does violent crime in Canada compare to the problem in the United States?
- A. Sixty-eight per cent thought our violent crime rate was greater than it is. In fact it is one-fifth that of the United States.

Correct estimate (i.e. much less)	28%
Small over-estimate of Canadian problem (i.e. somewhat less, one half as great)	39%
Large over-estimate or problem (i.e. same as greater than U.S.)	29%
Don't know/not stated	4%
	100%

Source: Gallup Poll, 1982  
Statistics Canada, Canadian Crime Statistics  
Annual Catalogue #85-205.  
U.S. Department of Justice, F.B.I.,  
Crime in the United States,  
Annual

PART II

FEAR OF CRIME

## 2.1 Feelings of Safety Walking in Neighbourhood

The concept most frequently used to measure fear of crime is feelings of safety walking alone in the neighbourhood. The Canadian Urban Victimization Survey (1982) posed the following question to 61,000 respondents aged 16 and older in seven major urban centres across the country:

Q. How safe do you feel or would you feel walking alone in your neighbourhood?

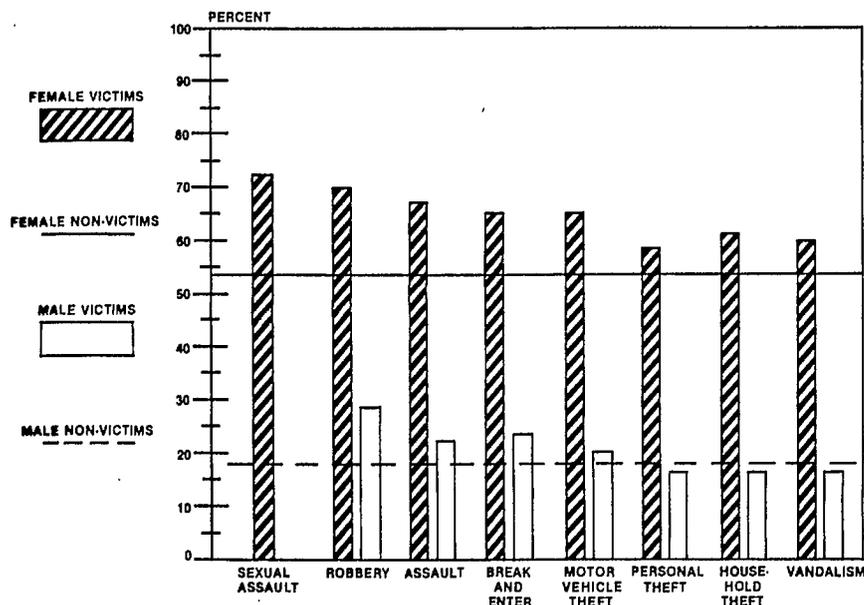
During the day?

How about after dark?

A. The vast majority (95%) stated that they felt safe or very safe walking alone during the day. Fewer people felt safe walking alone in their own neighbourhood after dark (60%) but they still form a distinct majority.

The greatest concentration of fear was among elderly people and women. For example over one-half (59%) of those aged 65 or older and 56% of women felt somewhat or very unsafe walking alone after dark compared to 37% of those under 65 years of age and 18% of men. The proportion of women who expressed fear for their personal safety increased to 62% of those who had been victimized in the survey year. Fear was especially prevalent among females who had been recent victims of sexual assault, robbery or assault.

PROPORTION OF VICTIMS WHO FELT UNSAFE<sup>(1)</sup> WALKING ALONE AFTER DARK BY SEX OF RESPONDENT.



(1) Combines "very unsafe" and "somewhat unsafe" categories.

PART III

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

### 3.1 Attitudes Toward the Police

#### 3.1.1. Public Satisfaction with Police

Q. How satisfied is the Canadian public with the service provided by the police?

A. Surveys and polls on this subject show that the public is highly supportive of the police, and most Canadians believe they are doing a good job overall. Victims of crime are somewhat more critical of the police than the general public.

Seven Cities

PERCEPTIONS OF POLICE BY POPULATION AND BY VICTIM STATUS

How Good Are Local Police At:	<u>Ratings</u>				Total %
	Good %	Average %	Poor %	Don't Know %	
Enforcing the Laws	58	28	6	8	100
Population	61	25	5	9	100
Non-Victims	53	33	8	6	100
Victims					
Responding Promptly to Calls	49	16	8	26	100
Population	50	15	6	29	100
Non-Victims	48	20	13	19	100
Victims					
Being Approachable and Easy to Talk To	62	16	6	16	100
Population	63	13	4	19	100
Non-Victims	61	20	9	11	100
Victims					
Supplying Crime Reduction Information	41	21	17	20	100
Population	43	20	15	23	100
Non-Victims	39	24	22	15	100
Victims					

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Canadian Urban Victimization Survey (1982)

### 3.1.2 Perceptions of Police Performance

- Q. How good are local police at enforcing the laws, responding promptly to calls, being approachable and easy to talk to, and supplying crime reduction information?
- A. Residents of seven cities in 1982 were more likely than not to give police an "average" or "good" rating on law enforcement, promptness in responding to calls, approachability and provision of information to public on ways to reduce crime. In all categories, victims were more likely to give poor ratings than were non-victims, and overall least satisfaction was expressed with regard to information supplied on crime prevention.

### 3.1.3 Victims' Satisfaction with Police Case Handling

In the Canadian Urban Victimization Survey (1982) victims who reported to the police were asked a series of questions to assess how well the police responded to their report. The questions were asked as follows:

1. Given the circumstances of the incident did the police come as quickly as you thought they should have. That is, do you think they did a good job, an average job, or a poor job, of responding promptly?
2. In general, for this incident were the police very courteous, somewhat courteous, or not at all courteous?
3. Do you think the police did a good job, an average job or a poor job of keeping you or your household informed of the progress or outcome of the investigation?
4. Overall do you think the police have done a good job, an average job, or a poor job of handling this incident?

#### PERCEPTIONS OF POLICE CASE HANDLING

##### Aspects of Police Behaviour

<u>Victim's Rating</u>	<u>Promptness</u>	<u>Courtesy</u>	<u>Keeping Victim Informed</u>	<u>Overall Case Handling</u>
	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>
Good	75	73	51	58
Average	13	22	19	24
Poor	12	5	30	17
Total	100	100	100	100

Eighty-two percent of the victims who contacted the police rated them as average or good in their overall handling of the case (range 71-88% in all seven cities), but 30% of these victims gave police a poor rating in keeping them informed about the progress of the case. Least likely to be satisfied were the victims of sexual assault and robbery.

#### 3.1.4 Police Powers

Q. How do Canadians feel about the amount of power the police in their communities have? Do they feel the police ever abuse that power?

A. Just over one-half (54%) of Canadians feel that the amount of power given the police is sufficient. One-quarter (26%) feel that the police don't have enough power and 13% feel they have too much power. Older respondents (55 and older), those with lower education and income are most likely to state that the police don't have enough power.

Notwithstanding that a very small proportion of the population perceives police powers to be excessive, 60% feel that the police frequently or occasionally abuse their power. Younger (18 to 34 years old), French speaking respondents and blue collar workers were most likely to indicate that the police abuse their power.

Source: Angus Reid, 1983.

### 3.1.5 Fair Treatment by Police

Q. Do Canadians receive fair treatment from the police, or are there certain groups who are treated better than others?

A. Four in ten respondents indicated that Canadians are treated unequally with regards to arrest and the same number feel that the police treat Canadians unequally with regards to bail or release from detention.

Those groups identified as being treated unfairly by police are native Canadians (46%), poor people (44%), other non-whites (43%) and juveniles (42%). Rich people were overwhelmingly identified as the primary beneficiaries of preferential treatment by the police (83%).

Source: Angus Reid, 1983.

### 3.2 Satisfaction with Court Sentences

Q. How satisfied is the Canadian public with the sentences imposed by Canadian courts on those convicted of criminal offences?

A. The results of polls show that the majority of Canadians (70 - 80%) believe the courts sentences are generally too lenient. When asked their views on sentencing practices for different categories of offenders, however, it is clear that Canadians believe sentences are too lenient only for those who commit crimes of violence. Furthermore, many favour non-carceral sentences for those who commit minor property and non-violent crime.

Comparative distribution of the opinions of a sample of the Canadian population (CROP 1980; N 979) and a sample from the provinces of Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba (GRAC, 1984; N 817) regarding the severity of sentences

The sentences pronounced by the courts are:	CROP	GRAC
too severe	2	4
just severe enough	18	18
not severe enough	70	72
don't know	0	6
Total	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>

Results of Gallup Polls of a sample of the Canadian population 1966 to 1986

In general, do you think the courts in this area deal too harshly or not harshly enough with criminals?

	<u>Too Harshly</u>	<u>Not Harshly Enough</u>	<u>About Right</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>
1986	3%	78%	12%	7%
1982	4	79	11	6
1980	4	63	19	14
1977	4	75	12	9
1975	4	73	13	10
1974	6	66	16	12
1969	2	58	22	18
1966	7	43	29	21

### 3.2.1 The Use of Imprisonment

Q. Does Canada rely on imprisonment as a punishment for criminal behaviour too heavily or not enough?

A. In a recent Gallup Poll, 49% of Canadians thought imprisonment was not used enough and 26% thought the use of imprisonment was just right.

In fact, Canada's rate of incarceration ranks higher than most western countries, such as England, France, Italy, and Denmark, although it is half that of the United States.

In your opinion, does Canada rely on imprisonment as a punishment for criminal behaviour...	
Too heavily	15%
Not enough	49%
Just right	26%
Don't know	10%
	100%

Source: CSC, Gallup Poll, 1984

### 3.3 Attitudes Toward Corrections

In 1984, Correctional Service Canada commissioned the Gallup Poll to conduct an indepth survey of the attitudes of the Canadian public toward the correctional system. Some of the findings are presented here.

#### 3.3.1 Inmate Employment

Q. Should inmates work at jobs in penitentiary?

A. Virtually all Canadians think inmates should work but are sharply divided on whether they should be paid. A high percentage of Canadians think the work or services should be to the benefit of non-profit agencies or government.

When serving a sentence in a penitentiary, do you think inmates should be required to work at jobs in the penitentiary or not?	
Yes, should	94%
No, should not	4%
Don't know	2%
	100%

#### 3.3.2 Inmate Pay

If inmates do work in the penitentiary do you think they should be paid or not?	
Yes, should	43%
No, should not	51%
Qualified	4%
Don't know	2%
	100%

Source: CSC, Gallup Poll, 1984

### 3.3.3 Prison Programs

Q. What program did Canadians identify as a priority in prison?

A. Learning to read and write and work training were most commonly cited as priority.

Which of the following programs for inmates should have top priority?	
Learning to read or write	51%
Training on work habits, i.e. training for employment in the community	41%
Completion of high school courses	6%
University level courses	1%
Don't know	2%
	100%

Source: CSC, Gallup Poll, 1984

### 3.3.4 Inmate Rights

- Q. What do Canadians think of the treatment of inmates and inmate rights?
- A. One-half of the population thought inmates had too many rights and 22% thought inmates rights were adequate. This compares with another question in which half of respondents thought inmates were treated too soft.

Some people have expressed the opinion that inmates have too many rights, whereas other people are of the opinion that they have too few rights. What do you think?	
Inmates have too many rights	54%
Inmates have too few rights	8%
Inmates' rights are adequate	23%
Don't know or not stated	15%
	100%

Do you feel that convicted offenders are treated too hard, too soft or about right?	
Too hard	3%
Too soft	49%
About right	32%
Don't Know or not stated	16%
	100%

Source: CSC, Gallup Poll, 1984

### 3.3.5 Security vs Programs

- Q. Where do Canadians think the emphasis should be placed within our penitentiaries?
- A. Public opinion is in favour of programs to assist offenders to return to the community even though some risk may be involved.

Which of these two statements reflects more accurately your opinion of where the emphasis should be placed within our penal institutions?	
Keeping the inmate securely confined and closely supervised even to the detriment of rehabilitative programs.	29%
Assisting the inmate to participate in programs that may assist their eventual return to the community even though some risk may be involved	63%
Don't know or not stated	9%
	100%

Source: CSC, Gallup Poll, 1984

### 3.3.6 Information about the Correctional System

Q. How adequate is public information about penitentiaries and parole?

A The majority of Canadians (65%) don't think they get enough information about prisons and parole in Canada. More than half (56%) think the media are not a reliable source of information.

Source: CSC, Gallup Poll, 1984

### 3.4 Release policies

#### 3.4.1 Early Release

Q. Should inmates receive short leave to prepare them for release?

A. Almost two-thirds of the population surveyed thought inmates should receive some time on the outside in order to prepare them for eventual release. Twenty-eight per cent said no. Interestingly, very few said it depends on the crime. Day parole and temporary absence programs have been used with great success to give inmates brief outside leave while under sentence to penitentiary.

Inmates should/should not receive short leaves which would help prepare them for their release.	
Yes	61%
No	28%
Depends on crime	1%
Qualified	4%
Don't know	6%
	100%

Source: CSC, Gallup Poll, 1984

### 3.5 Pardons

#### 3.5.1 Eligibility for Pardons

- Q. How do Canadians feel about the government's policy of granting a pardon to offenders who have been living in the community for several years after completing their sentence without committing another offence?
- A. A majority (67%) are in favour of limiting eligibility for pardons. Only 30% agree with the current policy which allows all ex-offenders to apply. Most of those who do not support this policy feel that those who have committed murder and other serious crimes should not be eligible (88%).

Source: CROP, 1981

### 3.5.2 Rights for Pardoned Offenders

- Q. Should ex-offenders have certain rights restricted even after they are granted a pardon?
- A. Canadians exhibit a high degree of tolerance for pardoned offenders. A clear majority feel that once an individual is pardoned they should have the right to vote in elections (92%), join the Armed Forces (92%), become a mail carrier (77%) or a lawyer (73%), serve on a jury (61%), or become a police officer (59%). At the same time, there is concern about protection of the public: only one in three respondents were in favour of granting pardoned persons the right to own a firearm.

Source: CROP, 1981

### 3.5.3 Access to Criminal Records

- Q. Once an individual has received a pardon, should the criminal record be widely available?
- A. There is further evidence of a willingness to give offenders a second chance, but at the same time the public is concerned about the potential danger posed by pardoned offenders. While relatively small proportions feel that criminal records should be available to prospective employers (32%) and banks, credit bureaus and insurance companies (29%), three-quarters (75%) support having them available to the police and courts. One in five (21%) feel the records should be destroyed.

Source: CROP, 1981

PART IV  
SPECIFIC POLICIES AND ISSUES

#### 4.1 Capital Punishment

##### 4.1.1 Public Opinion on Capital punishment

The wording of polls on capital punishment is key to the results obtained. For example, a majority of Canadians (83%) feel there should be capital punishment invoked for the murder of a prison guard or police officer. When asked a more specific question, we find that 15% don't favour the death penalty at all, some only in a few cases, and some in favour but with exceptions.

Only 42% felt there should be capital punishment for crimes of passion.

There should be capital punishment if a person kills a police officer or a prison guard.	
For	83%
Against	11%
Don't know	6%
	100%

No death penalty at all	15%
No, except in a few cases	28%
Yes, except in a few cases	30%
Strongly for death penalty	26%
	100%

If a person kills a spouse in a fit of anger?	
For	42%
Against	47%
Don't know	11%
	100%

Source: CSC, Gallup Poll, 1984

#### 4.1.2 Perceptions of Changes in Murder Rates

- Q. Has murder increased, decreased or stayed the same since capital punishment was abolished?
- A. Only about one-quarter of Canadians polled knew that murder rates have stayed the same since the abolition of capital punishment. Two-thirds believe incorrectly that murder rates have increased.

Correct estimate (i.e. stayed same)	27%
Over-estimate of problem (i.e. increased)	66%
Under-estimate of problem (i.e. decreased)	3%
Don't know/not stated	3%
	100%

Source: CSC, Gallup Poll, 1984  
Statistics Canada, Homicide in Canada,  
Annual Catalogue #85-209

## 4.2 Gun Control

### 4.2.1 Satisfaction with Control of Firearm Sales

- Q. How satisfied is the Candian public with laws relating to the control of firearms sales?
- A. In a Gallup poll conducted in September 1979, all groups polled felt that gun purchase laws should be more restrictive than they are.

By community size, the results showed that the larger the community in which the respondents lived the more likely they were to feel that laws should be more restrictive.

By sex, females were more likely to support more restrictive gun control laws than were males.

By age, the older the group polled the more likely they were to feel a need for more control.

By language group, French and English respondents scored about the same, whereas other language groups were significantly stronger in their views on more control of firearm sales.

The question asked was:

"Under the present law, an individual must be 16 years or over, must complete a police acquisition form and obtain police permission before purchasing a gun.

In your opinion, should this law be retained as it currently is, should it be made more restrictive, or should it be made less restrictive?"

	PRESENT LAW SHOULD BE:			
	Retained As Is	More Restrictive	Less Restrictive	Don't Know
National	28%	66%	4%	1%
Community Size:				
Over 100,000	22	74	3	1
10,000 to 100,000	31	65	3	1
Under 10,000	37	54	7	2
Sex:				
Male	33	59	6	1
Female	23	73	2	2
Age:				
18 to 29 years	34	61	5	*
30 to 49 years	30	65	4	2
50 years and over	22	71	4	3
Mother Tongue:				
English	29	65	5	1
French	32	63	3	2
Other	18	77	4	1
* Less than one percent				

In a second Gallup poll conducted in November 1981, using the same question as the September, 1979 survey, the results were very similar to those of the earlier poll.

In the second survey community size, sex and age were noted but the mother tongue category was replaced by geographical location. All areas conformed to the general pattern of favouring stricter controls, but Quebec and Ontario were significantly stronger in their opposition.

The question asked was:

"Under the present law, an individual must be 16 years or over, must complete an acquisition form and obtain police permission before purchasing a gun.

In your opinion, should this law be retained as it currently is, should it be made more restrictive, or should it be made less restrictive?"

	PRESENT LAW SHOULD BE:			
	Retained As Is	More Restrictive	Less Restrictive	Don't Know
National	24%	70%	4%	2%
Region:				
Atlantic	29	66	2	2
Quebec	19	77	3	2
Ontario	22	75	1	2
Prairies	33	58	8	2
British Columbia	27	62	6	5
Community Size:				
Under 10,000	31	63	5	2
10,000 to 100,000	24	68	6	2
Over 100,000	20	76	2	2
Sex:				
Men	30	64	4	1
Women	18	76	3	3
Age:				
18 to 29 years	25	68	5	2
30 to 49 years	30	66	4	1
50 years and over	18	77	2	3

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