

Fact Sheet

#12

*in a series of fact sheets
that examine questions
frequently asked about
the criminal justice
system*

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Adult Provincial Prisons in Ontario: The current picture and trends

Canada's rate of incarceration is high when compared to that of other Western democracies (Chart 1).

The number of adults in Ontario prisons contributes significantly to the country's high rate of incarceration. The average daily number of people in provincial prisons for adults accounted for 59% of all adults incarcerated in Canada in 1996/97. The remainder were housed in federal institutions (Chart 2). Of all adults in provincial prisons in Canada, 39% were in

Ontario jails (Chart 3).

On any given day in 1997/98, 7,778 people were incarcerated in adult prisons operated by the province of Ontario. The majority are serving a provincial sentence of less than two years (those who are sentenced to two years or more are housed in federally-administered prisons). Of the 7,778 people held on any given day in provincial prisons, a significant number are on remand awaiting trial. A small percentage are people who

are being detained for immigration purposes and federally-sentenced offenders housed in provincial institutions temporarily awaiting transfer to federal institutions (Chart 4).

The average daily count does not reflect how many individuals are imprisoned in one of the Ontario provincial

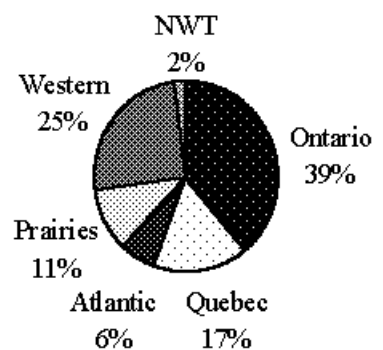
Chart 2

**Adults in Prison
Canada 1996/97**



Chart 3

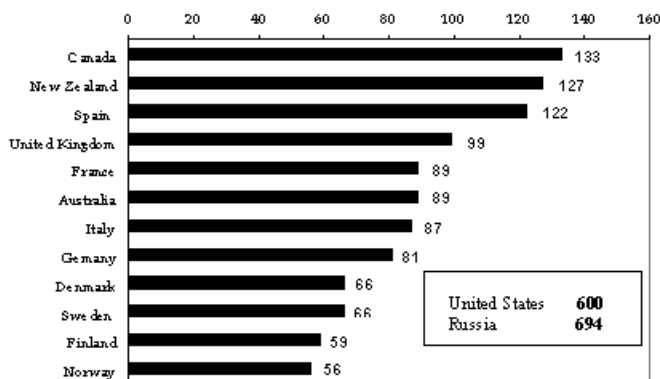
**Adults in Provincial Prisons
Canada 1996/97**



Source: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics

Chart 1

**Number of Inmates (per 100,000 total population)
1994-95**



Source: Council of Europe 1995

institutions in a year. In 1997/98, there were 83,940 admissions to Ontario prisons. The number of individuals would be less than the number of admissions because some may be incarcerated more than once in a year or recorded twice - once as on remand, then once again when sentenced. Still, the admission figure provides a better indication of how many people have been incarcerated during the year in an Ontario prison.

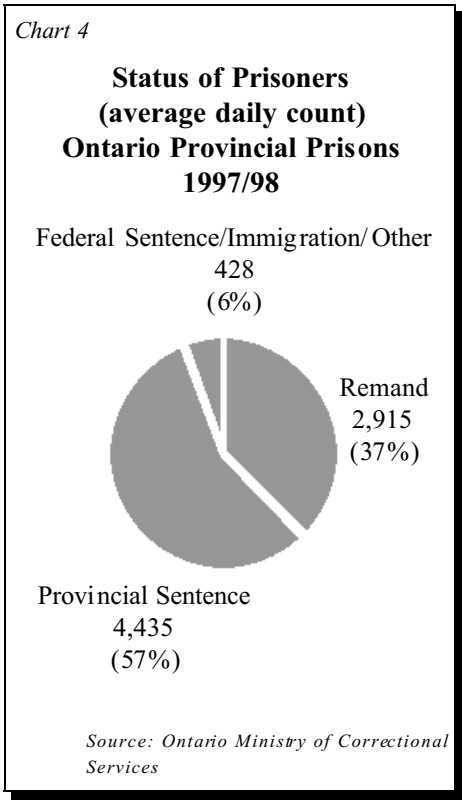
Almost one-third of those admitted under sentence are serving a sentence of less than one month. The majority of sentenced prisoners admitted (63%) serve a sentence of less than three months. Relatively few (15%) are serving a provincial sentence of between six month and two years less a day (Chart 5).

The majority (70%) of sentenced offenders are serving a sentence for a non-violent offence.

Crime rate down, average count up

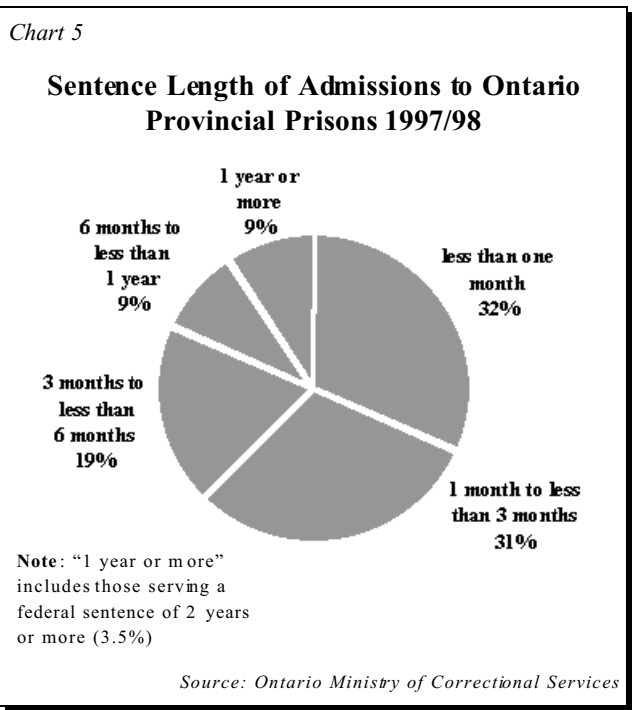
Since 1991/92, there has been a 14% decrease in the number of admissions to Ontario provincial prisons. This should not be surprising since crime rates have been steadily falling since the early 1990's. The decrease in sentenced admissions was responsible for the decrease in admissions overall. Remand admissions remained stable.

This drop in admissions, however, did not translate into similar declines in the average daily count. From 1991/92 to 1997/98, the average count actually increased 5%. While the average count of sentenced prisoners did decrease by 8% during this period, the remand population in prison on any given day increased by 28%.



More people in prison longer

The difference between the trends in admissions and the daily count indicates that, on average, people are being held in prison for a longer



period of time before release.

Remand figures show that more people were being held for longer periods before being released on bail in 1997/98 than in 1991/92. The period of time increased by only a few days on average but, because of the large number of people admitted on remand, even a few days leads to a significant increase in the average daily prison count. Factors which might contribute to the increase in the period held in prison on remand include:

- more people without the financial and personal resources needed to secure bail;
- cut-backs to Legal Aid;
- more demands on the court system without matching increases in resources; and
- limited support services for people in prison on remand, including Bail Supervision programs.

Sentenced prisoners were also serving a longer period of time in 1997/98 than they were in 1991/92. Factors which affect the period of time sentenced offenders spend in prison include:

- increase in sentence length, and
- decrease in the use of conditional release.

There is evidence that sentence lengths have increased. Relatively fewer people are serving sentences of less than a month while the percentage of those sentenced to one month but less than six months has increased. A shift in shorter sentences, even an increase of a few weeks, can have a significant impact on

Chart 6

Number of Admissions to Ontario Provincial Prisons 1991/92 to 1997/98

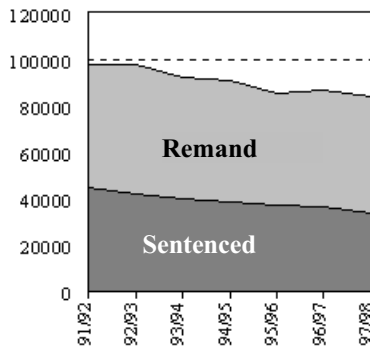
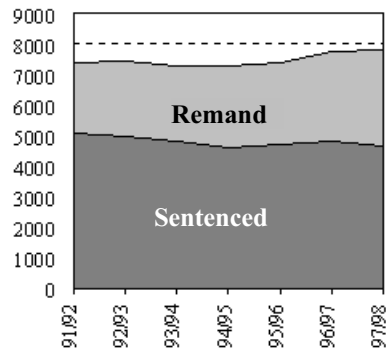


Chart 7

Average Daily Count in Ontario Provincial Prisons 1991/92 to 1997/98



Source: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics and the Ontario Ministry of Correctional Services

the average daily count. It should be noted that the percentage of those sentenced to six months or more has remained stable.

Use of conditional release drops

There is also evidence that there has been a significant change in the use of conditional release for provincial prisoners. One form of conditional release, Temporary Absence (TA), allows prisoners to be released for up to 15 days under supervision in the community, often to maintain employment/academic or family responsibilities. TAs also permit the conditional release of prisoners serving shorter sentences of less than six months. These people are not generally considered for parole because the length of their sentence does not allow time for the review process to be completed.

In 1997/98, there were 6,098 TAs activated compared with 20,583 in 1994/95 - a decrease of over 14,000. The decrease in TAs for academic and employment purposes - from 3,119 in 1994/95 to 439 in 1997/98 - has been particularly

disturbing since these activities are important factors that contribute to reductions to the likelihood of re-offending.

The use of parole for Ontario prisoners has also decreased significantly. Parole permits the release of the offender from prison to serve the rest of the sentence in the community while under supervision. The purpose is to promote the gradual

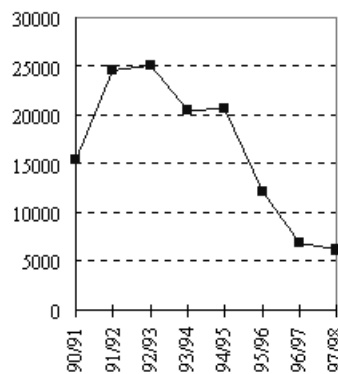
reintegration of the offender back into the community as well as maintain some control during the critical period just after his or her release. From 1994/95 to 1997/98, the total number of applications for parole (resulting in a decision to grant or deny), dropped by 36% and the number of paroles granted plummeted by 55%. This change in direction occurred after a almost a decade of relative stability in parole applications and decision-making.

The result has been a dramatic decrease in the number of people released on parole - from a high of 3,753 in 1993/94 to 1,194 in 1997/98. It should be noted that the rate of successfully completed paroles is high - ranging between 80% and 88% over the past decade. Most revoked paroles resulted from a violation of the parole conditions rather than the commission of a new offence. Very few (2% - 3% of all paroles) were revoked for a new criminal charge.

All individuals serving a provincial sentence who are not granted parole will be released after two-thirds of their sentence providing that they have

Chart 8

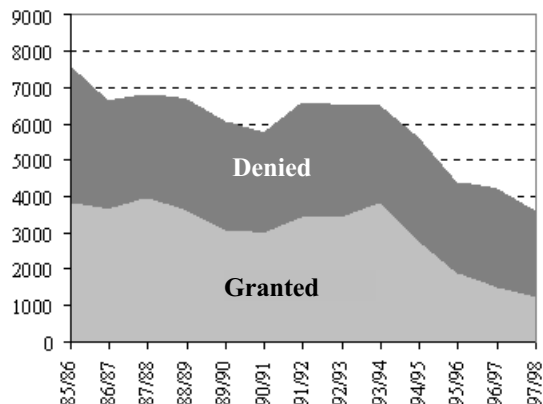
Number of Temporary Absences from Ontario Prisons 1990/91 to 1997/98



Source: Ontario Ministry of Correctional Services

Chart 9

Number of Parole Decisions Ontario Provincial Parole 1985/86 to 1997/98



Source: Ontario Board of Parole

not lost remission time due to misbehaviour. No period of supervision follows the release of these individuals. When parole is granted, the individual is supervised in the community until the end of his or her sentence.

It is important to note that the declines in the use of TAs and parole occurred at the same time that the provincial government closed all halfway houses for provincial offenders. Before the halfway houses were shut down in 1995, many people released on TAs (for employment or academic purposes) and some of those released on parole needing stable accommodation or other support

services would reside in halfway houses. The average daily count in halfway houses was approximately 400 just prior to closure.

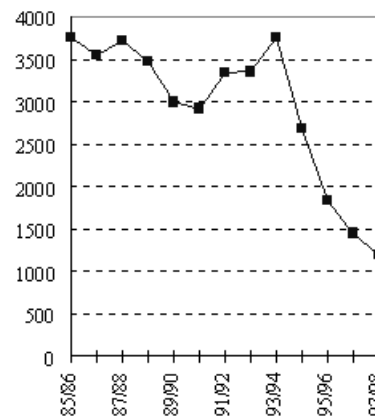
At the same time, the provincial government announced that it was introducing electronic monitoring to offset the impact of the closure of halfway houses, estimating 400 people on electronic monitoring on any given day. To date, the use of electronic monitoring has not even come close to meeting this objective. In 1996 (electronic monitoring was introduced in January, 1996), there were 70 people on electronic monitoring on any given day. In 1997, this figure decreased to 64. The demise of halfway houses has meant the loss of supportive housing for offenders which some need just after release to effectively re-establish themselves in the community.

Research shows that appropriate correctional interventions are more effective in reducing re-offending rates when they are delivered in the community than those that take place in a prison. Community-based alternatives are also less costly than imprisonment in human, social and financial terms. Therefore, care must

be taken to use incarceration with restraint and to employ community-based responses whenever possible. Some provincial governments have noted the high costs of incarceration and considered the research evidence on effective correctional interventions. As a result, they are taking steps to reduce their use of imprisonment through greater use of community alternatives. The facts show that this is not the case in Ontario.

Chart 10

Number of Releases on Ontario Provincial Parole 1985/86 to 1997/98



Source: Ontario Board of Parole

For further information on strategies proposed to move in the direction of an effective, just and humane correctional system, a paper is available through the John Howard Society of Ontario.

Effective, just and humane responses to crime and its causes

For more information, please contact us at:

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