

JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



## Evidence-Based Criminal Justice Policy for Canada:

## An Exploratory Study of Public Opinion and the

## Perspective of Mental Health and Legal Professionals

### Key Details

#### KEY WORDS

Evidence-based crime and justice policy, reforms, public safety, public opinion, Canada

#### POPULATION GROUP

Youth in conflict with the law

#### STEPPING UP THEMES

Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety;  
Coordinated & Youth Friendly  
Communities

#### RESEARCH ORIGIN

Canada

#### SOURCE

Academic

**“The revised sentencing principles of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (2002) have shifted juvenile justice away from the use of restorative, rehabilitative principles, despite ample research that supports treatment-based programs and community reintegration plans.”**

### 1. What is the research about?

Changes in Canadian criminal justice acts, which are often not evidence based, are frequently in response to demands from the Canadian public based on their inaccurate perceptions of crime.

This study examined the effect of access to evidence on public opinions of justice policy. The research focused on Bill C-10’s changes to the criminal justice act:

1. Expanded the definition of violent offences in the Youth Criminal Justice Act
2. Adult sentencing imposed on youth aged 14 to 17 for serious violent offences
3. Tightened regulations around conditional release
4. Increased use of mandatory minimum sentences

### 2. Where did the research take place?

The study took place in Vancouver, Canada, while some participants were also recruited through social media sites online.

### 3. Who is this research about?

Two groups of individuals were recruited for this research. The first group was the Canadian public, those who were over 19 years of age. They were predominantly Caucasian, educated, and employed. The second group was International Criminal Justice professionals, who work internationally with adults or youth currently involved with, or at risk of becoming involved with the criminal justice system. They were predominantly Caucasians residing in North America.

### 4. How was the research done?

The researchers used pre-post survey data that included scales and open-ended questions. Participants were asked their opinions of Bill C-10 amendments to the Criminal Justice Acts before and after a presentation of social science evidence.

### 5. What are the key findings?

When presented with the following summarized evidence, the study found that the opinions of the participants did change. For the public participants, there was a **greater disagreement** with the underlying assumptions of the Bill C-10 amendments after being presented with the information:

- In Youth Criminal Justice Act Bill C-10 amendment, the new definition of violent offences is based on the assumption that the youth has foresight, which is counter to research that finds that youth are psychologically less mature and less able to understand and use moral judgment during decision-making
- Although youth crime and violent youth crime have both decreased over the past decade, Bill C-10 creates harsher punishments rather than giving youth the support they need to rehabilitate into the community
- Tightened conditional release means higher rates and longer terms of incarceration for youth, rather than giving them an opportunity to reintegrate into the community in a supported and monitored manner
- Mandatory minimum sentences disregard the circumstances surrounding an individual case, are ineffective as deterrents, and have further negative impacts on vulnerable offenders, such as lengthier stays in prisons

### **6. Why does this research matter for youth work?**

The results support the paradigm shift to evidence-based justice policy and the importance of educating Canadians in order to increase awareness of Canadian policies and social science research. This shows that youth justice advocacy groups can focus on informing the Canadian public of the complex issues to be considered in matters of criminal justice, which would then impact public support for proposed criminal justice changes. It also highlights the importance of knowledge mobilization to ensure that social science research is not conducted in vain. There should be increased efforts to share the fruits of research to the general public, so that youth benefit from policies that reflect their actual needs.



Bousfield, N. K., Cook, A. N., & Roesch, R. (2014). Evidence-based criminal justice policy for Canada: An exploratory study of public opinion and the perspective of mental health and legal professionals. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*, 55(3), 204.