

Confidence in the justice system: Visible minorities have less faith in courts than other Canadians

Overall confidence in five elements of the justice system has declined slightly since 2016

February 20, 2018 – As a Saskatchewan jury's [not-guilty verdict](#) in the trial of a white farmer accused of killing a young Indigenous man on his property prompts nationwide conversations about race and the Canadian justice system, a new public opinion poll from the Angus Reid Institute finds visible minorities considerably less likely than other Canadians to say they have confidence in criminal courts in their province.

The poll finds fewer than half of all Canadians (41%) saying they have either "complete confidence" or "a lot of confidence" in their provincial courts, and fewer than one-in-three self-identified visible minorities (32%) saying the same.

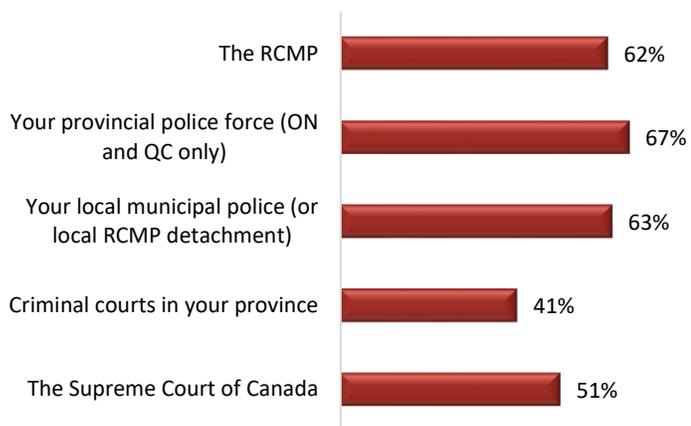
Visible minorities also express lower degrees of confidence in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, their local police force or RCMP detachment, and the Supreme Court of Canada.

Overall confidence in each of these institutions has declined somewhat since ARI [last canvassed this issue](#) in 2016, though Canadians remain much more confident in their justice system [than they were in 2012](#).

More Key Findings:

- Roughly one-in-eight Canadians (13%) say they have personally been the victim of a crime that involved the police in the last two years, but the proportion is higher in Western Canada and lower in Ontario and points east, as has typically been the case over the years
- Canadians in every province – whether crime is actually increasing there or not – are more likely to say criminal activity in their community has risen in the last five years than to say it has decreased. This proportion is however, considerably lower in Quebec than elsewhere

How much confidence do you have in each of these elements of the Canadian justice system? (Those saying "complete confidence" or "a lot of confidence" shown)



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from January 23 – 26, 2018, among a representative randomized sample of 1,520 Canadian adults who are members of the [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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- More than six-in-ten (62%) say the justice system is “too soft” on those who break the law, compared to just 4 per cent who say it is “too harsh.”

INDEX:

- **Visible minorities have less confidence in police, courts**
- **Confidence in justice system declines slightly, overall**
- **Canadians see crime on the rise – are they right?**
- **The regional picture – Quebec less likely to see crime increasing**
- **Most feel justice system is ‘too soft’ on criminals**

Visible minorities have less confidence in police, courts

The verdict in the Colten Boushie case prompted strong and immediate reactions around the country. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [tweeted](#) sympathy for Boushie’s family, and later invited them to Ottawa for meetings with government officials on possible reforms to the justice system. Protesters [took to the streets](#) from Halifax to Victoria, calling the verdict “an outrage,” and evidence of systemic racism in the Canadian courts.

At the heart of the frustration is a sense that the jury – which [did not include](#) any visibly Indigenous people – would have ruled differently if Boushie and the four other people who drove onto Gerald Stanley’s property in August 2016 were white, rather than Indigenous.

Forthcoming research from the Angus Reid Institute will look more closely at public opinion on the specifics of Stanley’s trial and the possibility of reform to the Canadian judicial system.

This survey, which was conducted before the jury delivered its verdict in the Boushie case, asked Canadians about their level of confidence in various elements of the justice system – a question Angus Reid has been asking every two years since 2012.

In [the 2016 edition of this survey](#), the Angus Reid Institute found that people who identified themselves as visible minorities were less likely than those who did not to say they had confidence in the RCMP and their local police force or RCMP detachment. At the time, visible minority confidence in other elements of the justice system – including provincial police and courts – was roughly on par with that of other Canadians.

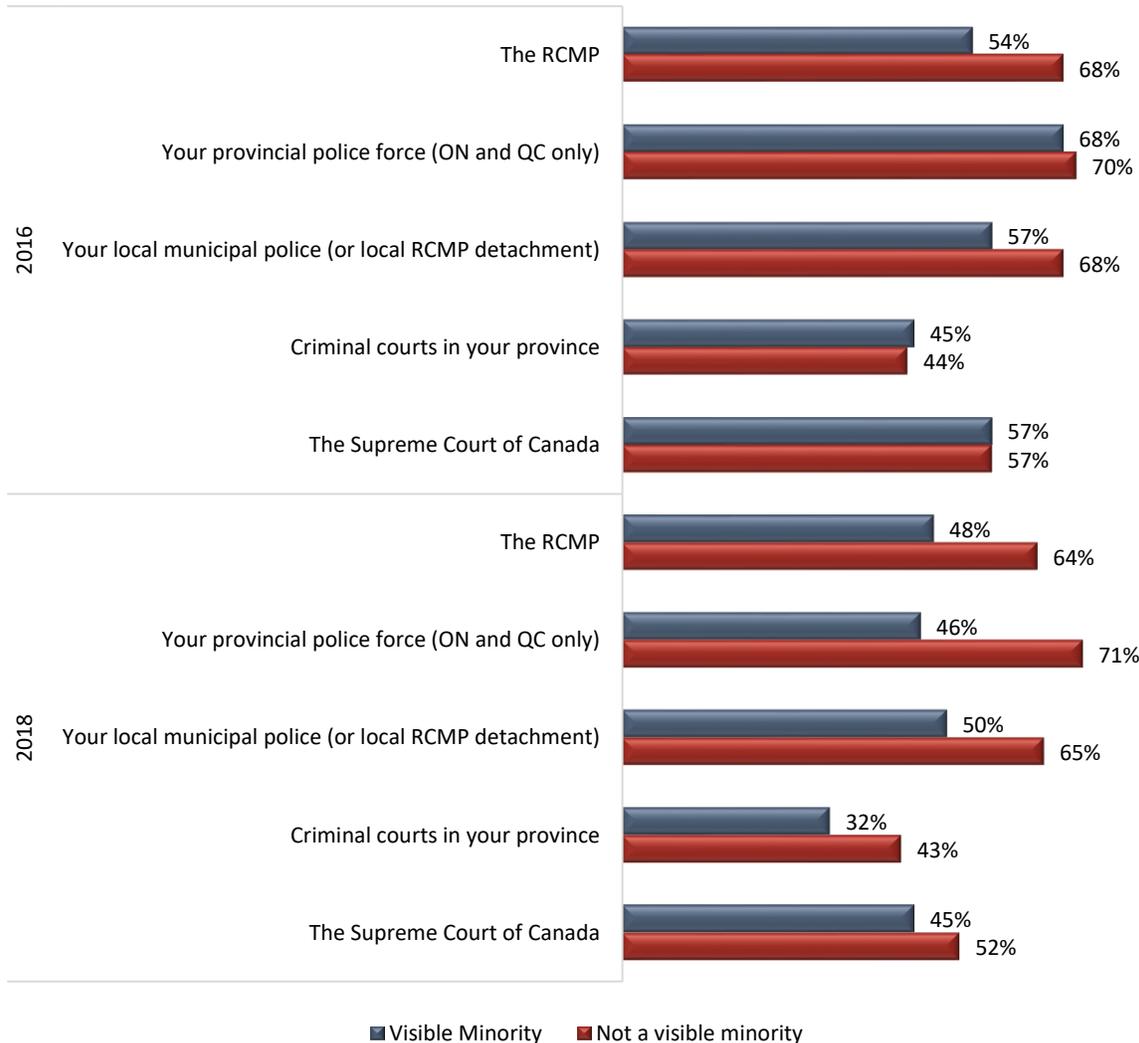
Today, visible minority confidence is lower across the board, including in areas where it was previously even with the level of confidence expressed by non-minorities.

Distrust in police and courts has long been the norm among minority communities in the United States, and in recent years the Black Lives Matter movement has drawn greater media attention to systemic inequality in that country. This survey’s findings suggest that this increased attention may also be affecting opinions on this side of the border, where [similar structural inequalities](#) exist.

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How much confidence do you have in each of these elements of the Canadian justice system? (Those saying "complete confidence" or "a lot of confidence" shown)



As the preceding graph shows, the most significant drop in confidence among visible minorities since 2016 is in assessments of provincial police. While 68 per cent of Ontario and Quebec residents who identified as minorities expressed confidence in these forces in 2016, the total expressing this view today is just 46 per cent.

Also precipitous is the 12-percentage point drop among visible minorities in their confidence in the Supreme Court of Canada. This change comes in a time span that saw Prime Minister Justin Trudeau appoint two new justices – Malcolm Rowe of Newfoundland and Labrador, and Sheilah Martin of Alberta. Some critics have expressed disappointment in the lack of racial diversity on the bench – both Martin and

Rowe are white – and argued that Trudeau [missed an opportunity to make some progress on this front](#) with his appointments.

Visible minorities' relative lack of confidence in courts, generally, is likely related to their answers to another question in this survey: just under half (48%) agree with the statement, "criminal courts do a good job determining whether an accused person is guilty," compared to six-in-ten (62%) of those who do not identify as minorities ([see comprehensive tables for greater detail](#)).

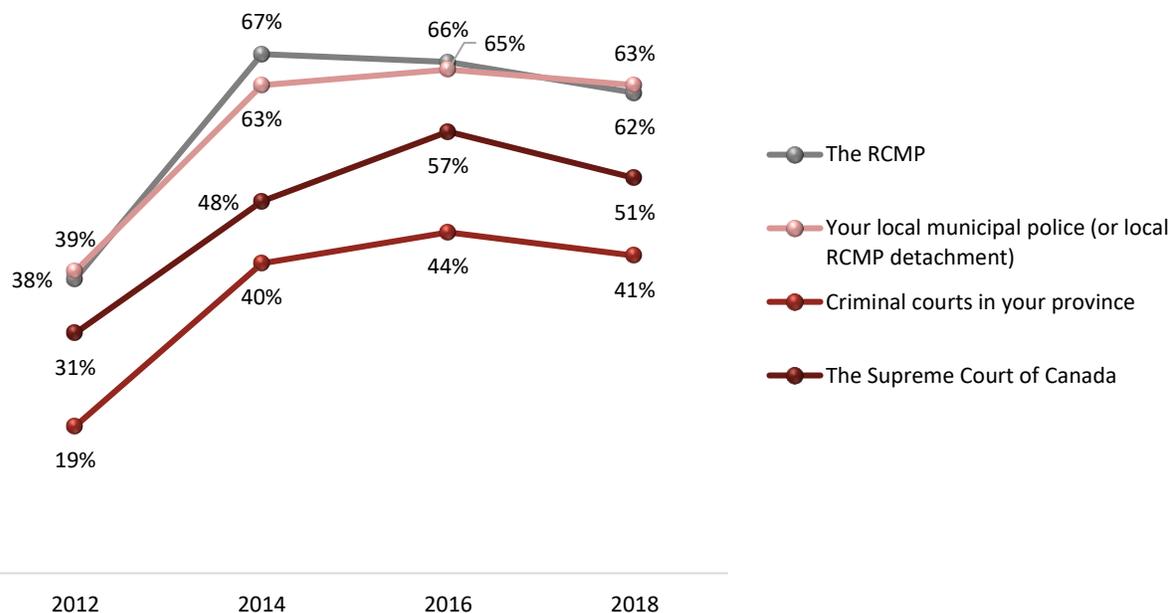
Confidence in justice system declines slightly, overall

In 2012, most Canadians [expressed a lack of confidence](#) in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, their local police forces, and the courts system – including the Supreme Court of Canada. These findings came after a number of scandals and investigations, including allegations from rank-and-file officers that RCMP leadership had "covered up" pension fraud, as well as inquiries into police [mismanagement](#) of the case of serial killer Robert Pickton and abuse of power in [other B.C. cases](#).

By 2014, however, an [Angus Reid poll found](#) confidence in the justice system to have improved significantly, to a level that remained fairly consistent in the Angus Reid Institute's [2016 installment](#) of this survey.

Today, confidence has declined slightly across the board, though it remains significantly higher than it was in 2012:

How much confidence would you say you have in the following elements of the justice system? (those saying "complete confidence" or "a lot of confidence" shown)



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These latest findings come as the federal police force prepares to pay out \$100 million to settle a class action lawsuit brought by former female officers alleging sexual harassment. As many as [4,000 former RCMP employees](#) are expected to come forward and file claims, a total approaching one-fifth of the 20,000 women who worked for the organization between 1974 and 2017.

Additional allegations – of sexual assault – have been made [in recent weeks](#) against retired RCMP doctors in Ontario and Nova Scotia. Dozens of complainants allege that each man performed invasive and unnecessary examinations on officers and recruits between the 1980s and early 2000s.

[Related: #metoo: Movement or Moment?](#)

The Boushie verdict has also caused controversy for the RCMP, which [is investigating](#) reports that an officer serving in the Prairies wrote in a private Facebook group that Boushie “got what he deserved.”

It's unclear to what degree any of these incidents affect confidence in the justice system – whether nationally or in the provinces in which they occur.

In Ontario, confidence in local, provincial, and federal police remains at 60 per cent or higher, while confidence in police forces is at its lowest in Atlantic Canada.

Atlantic Canadians and British Columbians are also more skeptical of provincial criminal courts than residents of other regions, while Quebec and Ontario are the only places where the Supreme Court enjoys majority confidence:

How much confidence do you have in each of these elements of the Canadian justice system?								
	Total (1520)	Region						
		BC (202)	AB (152)	SK (100)	MB (105)	ON (505)	QC (354)	ATL (102)
The RCMP	62%	56%	67%	61%	60%	60%	68%	55%
Your provincial police force (ON and QC only)	67%	-	-	-	-	68%	66%	-
Your local municipal police (or local RCMP detachment)	63%	62%	63%	67%	57%	64%	66%	47%
Criminal courts in your province	41%	28%	36%	38%	33%	44%	50%	29%
The Supreme Court of Canada	51%	43%	41%	39%	35%	56%	59%	45%

Canadians see crime on the rise – are they right?

For years, Canadians have reported that crime is on the rise in their communities – a belief that [hasn't always matched](#) empirical measures of crime frequency or severity in Canada.

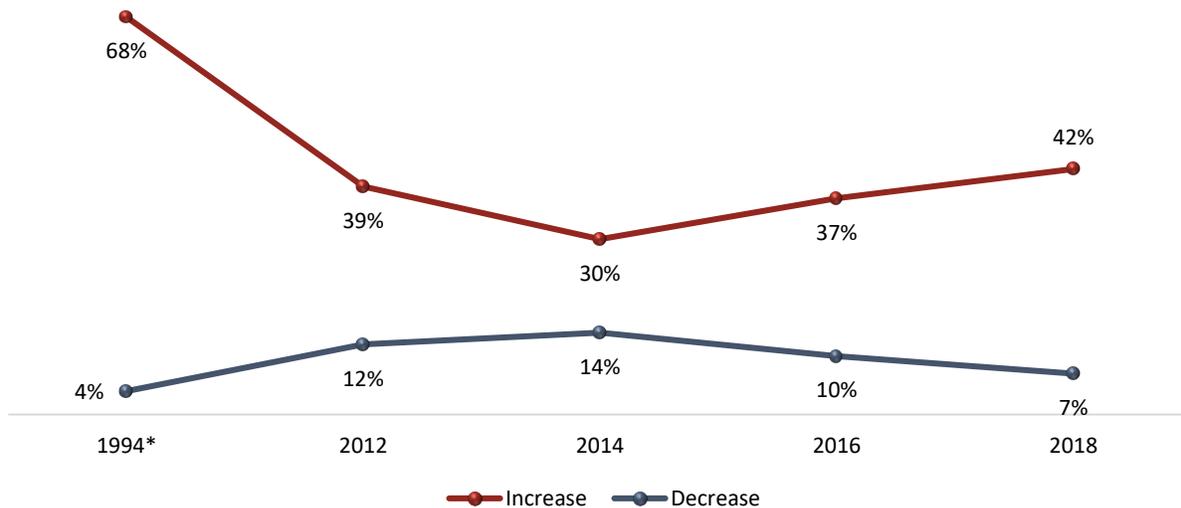
In this sounding, four-in-ten Canadians (42%) say they've seen an increase in crime where they live in the last five years, while fewer than one-in-ten (7%) say crime has been decreasing in that time period. The rest either say they've seen no change (39%) or are unsure (12%).

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The number of Canadians who believe crime rates have been increasing has grown since the Angus Reid Institute last asked this question in 2016, though it's still nowhere near the more than two-thirds who said crime had been rising in a 1994 Angus Reid poll:

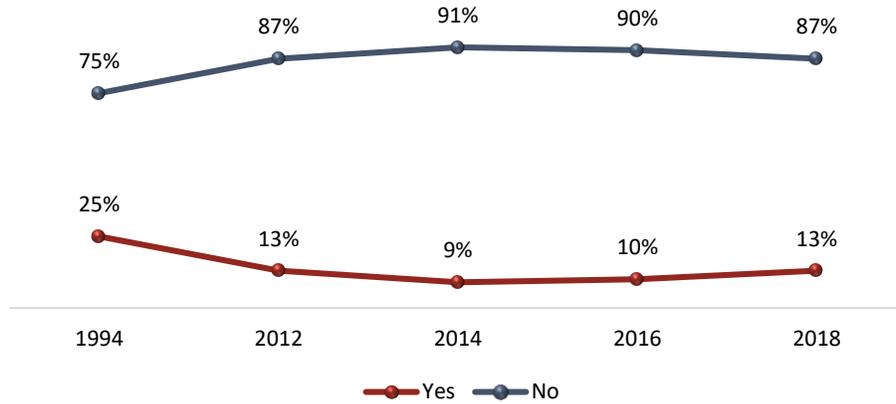
Over the past five years or so, would you say there has been an increase, a decrease, or no change in the amount of crime in your community?



*The 1994 question offered respondents two “increase” options: 24 per cent said there had been “a great increase” in crime in the preceding five years, and 44 per cent said there had been “a moderate increase.”

Similarly, Canadians are slightly more likely today than they were in 2016 to report having personally been a victim of a crime that involved the police, though here too, numbers pale in comparison to where they were in 1994:

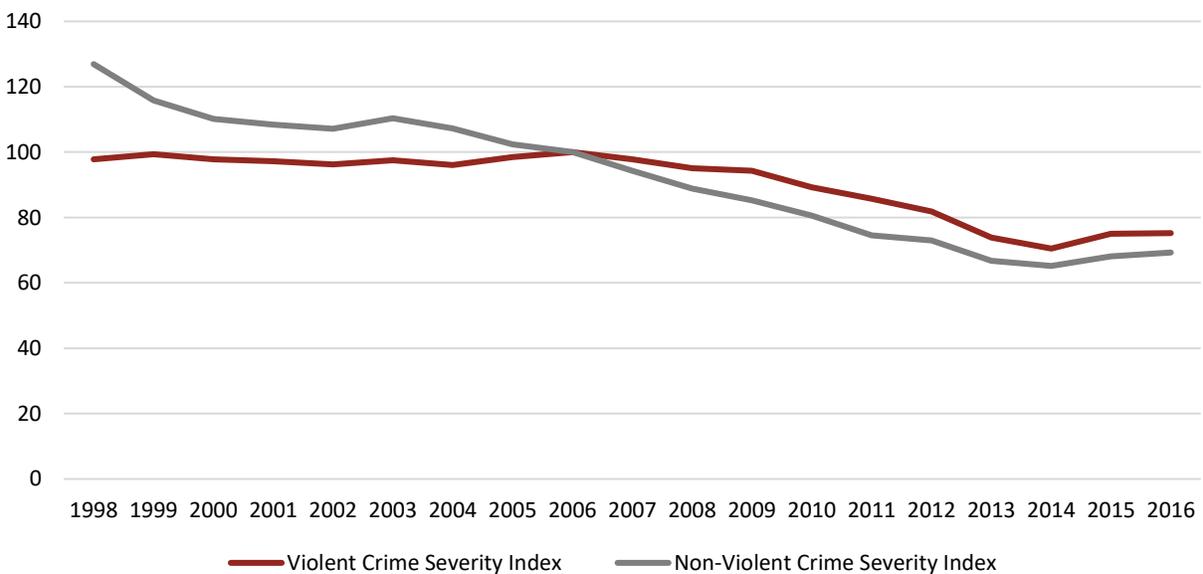
In the past two years, have you yourself been a victim of a crime that involved the police?



Each of these slight upticks – in the percentage of Canadians who have been victims of crime and in the percentage who believe crime is rising, generally – corresponds with Statistics Canada's [Crime Severity Index](#), which measures both the volume and seriousness of violent and non-violent crimes.

In 2015 and 2016 – the two most recent years for which data is available – both the violent and non-violent Crime Severity Indices have ticked up slightly after years of decline:

Crime severity index in Canada over time Source: Statistics Canada

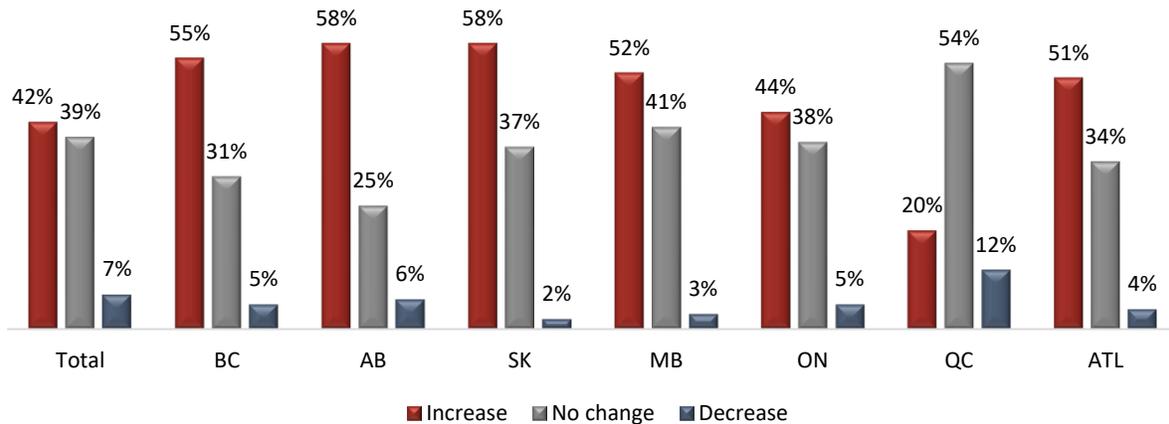


Crime rates in Canada remain near historic lows, of course, as the preceding graph illustrates. What remains to be seen is whether these recent increases are an anomaly or the end of the long-term trend of declining criminal activity in Canada.

The regional picture – Quebec less likely to see crime increasing

While four-in-ten Canadians say crime has increased where they live over the last five years, residents of Quebec have a drastically different perspective. The percentage of Quebecers who say they've seen an increase in crime is less than half the national average, and Quebec and neighbouring Ontario are the only two provinces in which that number is below 50 per cent, as seen in the following graph:

Over the past five years or so, would you say there has been an increase, decrease, or no change in the amount of crime in your community?



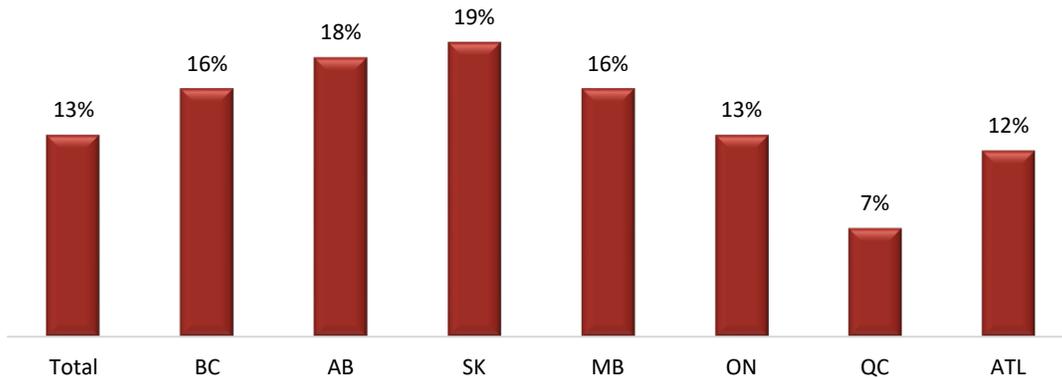
These findings again correspond with personal reports of victimization, which are higher in Manitoba and points west than they are in Central or Atlantic Canada:

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In the past two years, have you yourself been a victim of a crime which involved the police, such as an assault, a break-in, or some other type of crime? (Those saying "yes" shown)



Quebec's outlier status on both of these questions is rooted in reality. The province had the third-lowest Crime Severity Index in Canada in 2016, according to Statistics Canada, behind only Ontario and Prince Edward Island. Moreover, unlike Ontario, where crime rates rose slightly in 2015 and 2016, Quebec's rate continued its long-term decline in that period.

Likewise, crime rates in Western Canada are significantly higher than the national average – as they have been since the 1990s – a fact likely reflected in the larger number of people in those provinces who report having been victims and who perceive crime to be on the rise.

Most feel justice system is 'too soft' on criminals

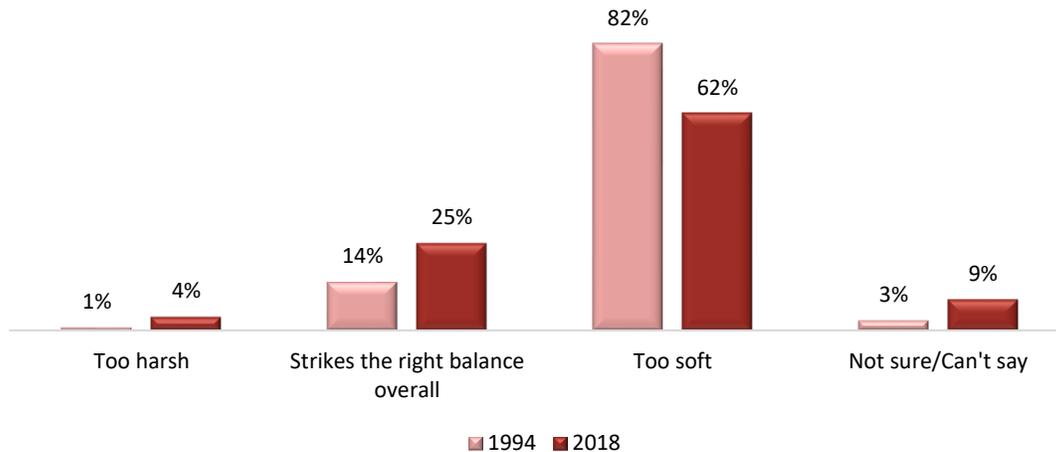
As is the case on other questions asked in this study, there have been noticeable changes in the way Canadians view the justice system's overall handling of criminal activity since Angus Reid asked in 1994.

Today, Canadians are still reluctant to consider their country tough on crime, but the percentage of people saying the justice system is "too soft" on those who break the law has declined 20 points in the last 24 years, while the percentage saying it strikes the right balance has nearly doubled:

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Do you think the justice system is too harsh in dealing with people who have broken the law, is it too soft on them, or does the justice system strike the right balance overall?



The view that the justice system is “too soft” overall is strongly related to age and political affiliation, with fewer than half of 18-34-year-olds saying this (47%), compared to seven-in-ten Canadians aged 55 and older (71%). Likewise, past Conservative Party of Canada voters are more likely to voice this opinion than those who supported other parties in 2015 ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

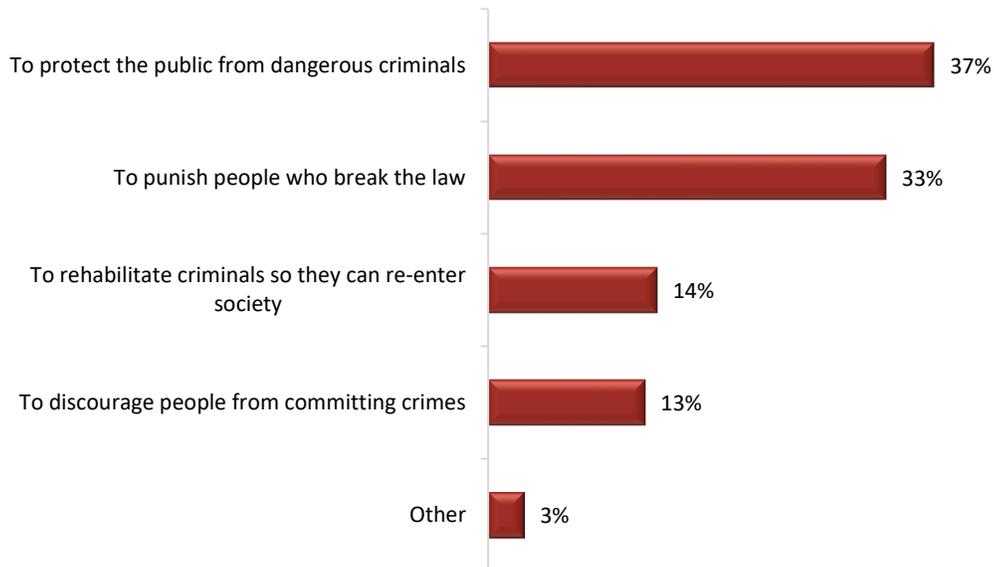
This pervasive view that Canada's justice system is too lenient may reflect, in part, Canadians' opinions on the overall purpose of the system. Asked to name the primary purpose of prison, most Canadians say it is either “to protect the public from dangerous criminals” (37%) or “to punish people who break the law” (33%). Relatively few people see jail as serving primarily a rehabilitative or deterrent purpose:

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Which of these is the primary purpose of prison?



While most Canadians see courts as insufficiently punitive in their sentencing, respondents to this survey largely see courts doing a good job determining guilt or innocence. Six-in-ten (60%) agree with a statement to this effect, though young women are notably less inclined to agree – and more likely to say they are not sure – than other age and gender groups ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

Regionally, Quebec is the province most likely to agree with each of the canvassed statements, as seen in the table that follows.

Summary of agreement with statements about the justice system								
	Total (1520)	Region						
		BC (202)	AB (152)	SK (100)	MB (105)	ON (505)	QC (354)	ATL (102)
Criminal courts do a good job in determining whether or not an accused person is guilty	60%	55%	61%	59%	56%	62%	62%	49%
The justice system treats every person fairly	37%	28%	38%	22%	28%	35%	50%	32%
Judges do a good job handing out punishments and sentences to people who commit crimes	46%	34%	44%	38%	40%	48%	52%	44%
The justice system has enough resources to efficiently process cases	31%	25%	20%	26%	26%	35%	38%	21%
The prison system does a good job of helping prisoners become law abiding citizens	23%	16%	19%	16%	17%	21%	36%	15%

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Page 12 of 12

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

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