

PODCASTS & PUNISHMENT: TRUE CRIME PODCASTS AND OPINIONS ON THE  
DEATH PENALTY IN CANADA

By

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### **Abstract**

True crime podcasts are very popular in Canada and across the world. Despite this, little research has been done on the genre and what its impact may be on Canadian listeners. Using data from a survey on 455 true crime podcast consumers in Canada, this study identifies common listener characteristics and participant support for the reinstatement of the death penalty. Relationships between high podcast consumption, participation in crime and justice activism, and support for the death penalty are explored, and opportunities for future research are discussed.

*Key words:* true crime podcasts, death penalty in Canada, capital punishment

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## **Podcasts & Punishment: True Crime Podcasts and Opinions on the Death Penalty in Canada**

### **Introduction & Background**

True crime podcasts have greatly expanded in popularity since the launch of the podcast *Serial* in late 2014. True crime is currently one of the most popular genres of the podcasting medium, with three of the top five global podcasts at the time of writing being from that genre (Chartable, n.d.). Despite their popularity, true crime podcasts, and the true crime genre in general, have been met with criticism, with some believing that the genre is exploitative (Verdier, 2021), that it creates an elevated fear of crime (Hollis et al., 2017), and that it serves as propaganda for law enforcement (otherwise known as "copaganda") (Moskowitz, 2020; Discover Pods, 2021).

The fact that media affect the public's perceptions of crime and justice is well examined (Pfeiffer et al., 2005). For example, Kort-Butler and Sittner Hartshorn (2011) found that consuming fictional crime dramas was related to higher support for the death penalty. True crime podcast listeners offer a new group to explore this phenomenon, especially when considering that creators often invite listeners to participate in crime and justice related activism, such as signing petitions or attending protests in support of aspects of cases featured on the podcast. One such instance is when, in 2019, listeners of the podcast *Canadian True Crime* were invited to attend a protest in Ottawa in support of Victoria Stafford's family. The family was protesting to change Correctional Services Canada's policies on the notification of the whereabouts and status of offenders to the families of victims (Lee, 2019).

These types of events are important because public opinion can affect policy changes (Government of Canada, n.d.). Therefore, if true crime podcasts affect listeners' perceptions of

crime and potentially get them involved in such campaigns, they may then also be indirectly changing crime and justice policy. The potential effects of true crime podcasts may become apparent not only through participating in activism, but also through electing politicians whose platforms align with major criminal justice themes featured in true crime podcasts.

Due to the accessible nature of podcasts, consumers can download podcasts produced anywhere in the world at no cost on an Internet browser or on a smartphone app. Many true crime podcasts, including the most popular in the genre such as *Serial* or *My Favorite Murder*, are produced in the United States and very often feature cases from that country. Some of these cases feature capital punishment as the sentence for the convicted killer, which is at times deemed appropriate or even celebrated in American true crime podcasts. For example, while recounting the crimes of serial killer Ted Bundy during a 2017 live episode of *My Favorite Murder*, host Karen Kilgariff states: “But the good news is, he was convicted on all counts and he was sentenced to death. And on January 24<sup>th</sup> 1989 Ted Bundy was executed in the electric chair in Florida” (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2017, 1:09:25). Co-host Georgia Hardstark replies “Good!” and the live audience then cheered (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2017, 1:09:35). Exposure to such narratives about capital punishment through this medium may be influencing listeners in Canada (and elsewhere) to seek its reinstatement the death penalty.

True crime podcasts are a relatively new area of criminological study (Yardley et al., 2019). This study employed a primarily exploratory survey to gather preliminary information about true crime podcasts listeners, their participation in crime and justice activism, and their views on reinstating the death penalty in Canada. This research is important as it could assist in better understanding the links between opinions on criminal justice and a relatively new media form. It will allow us to better understand the potential influence of true crime podcasts on the

opinions of Canadian listeners on this and other policies, and to develop theories about true crime podcasts and true crime media in general.

### **True Crime Podcasts**

Research into true crime podcasts is a new area of study in the field of criminology (Yardley et al., 2019). True crime podcasts appear to offer a new opportunity to study this aspect of the field because of the medium's role in "popular criminology", that is, the non-academic manner of making sense of crime and society's responses to it (Yardley et al., 2019). An example of popular criminology in action is how media representations of sexual and intimate partner violence have been shown to impact the public's attitudes on violence against women (Vitis & Ryan, 2021). While other media formats are also considered popular criminology, such as news media and traditional documentaries (Yardley et al., 2019), podcasts offer listeners the chance to consume content in different, more convenient ways such as outside of internet access (Cunsolo, 2019). This may make them appealing to a wider audience as compared to traditional televised content.

The accessible nature of podcasts allows them to be produced relatively easily and inexpensively (Vitis & Ryan, 2021), meaning that those who produce and host true crime podcasts are not necessarily knowledgeable in criminology, criminal justice, criminal law, and/or journalistic standards and practices. While *Serial* was hosted by journalist Sarah Koenig, many of the top true crime podcasts are hosted and produced by people of a variety of different backgrounds such the comedians who host *My Favorite Murder* and the former software salesperson and who hosts *Crime Junkie*. This variety of styles and approaches, as well as the amateur nature of many of these podcasts, may be having different effects on listeners and



popular criminology. This is especially noteworthy when considering that a 2019 study of true crime podcasters by Bolling found that all four participants felt strongly about using their podcast as a means to educate their audience about the criminal justice system (Bolling, 2019). Listeners of true crime podcasts have also noted that they consume them for entertainment and because they view them as a source of information (Vitis & Ryan, 2021; Bolling & Hull, 2018). The marrying of these intentions from both producers and consumers suggests that more critical examinations of the genre from the fields of criminology and criminal justice is needed.

True crime podcasts and consequences of listening to them have been studied from the perspective of other disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, and communications, and, at times, from a criminological or criminal justice perspective. Many of these provide insight on the demographics of true crime podcasts listeners. A 2021 criminological study on listener patterns and perceptions of true crime podcasts listeners in Australia found that 92% of participants identified as being between the ages of 18 and 34 (Vitis & Ryan, 2021). A 2018 communications study conducted on the motivations of true crime podcast listeners found that 62% of their sample stated being between the ages of 18 and 34 (Bolling & Hull, 2018).

The true crime genre is often critiqued for disproportionately focusing on white victims, with their stories told by white voices (such as podcasters) (Green, 2020). It is then not surprising that the audience of true crime podcasts has largely identified as white, such as in Bolling and Hull's study which found that 89% of their sample identified as Caucasian (white) (Bolling & Hull, 2018). Another study found that their sample of listeners of the true crime podcast *My Favorite Murder* "predominantly identified as female and Caucasian" (Pavelko & Myrick, 2019, p. 166).

Pavelko and Myrick's finding of a predominantly female audience (2019) is mirrored in other studies. The 2021 Australian study on true crime podcasts found that 88% of respondents identified as female (Vitis & Ryan, 2021), while 73% of Bolling and Hull's 2018 study participants identified as this gender (Bolling & Hull, 2018). Research on why women are drawn to true crime has suggested that women are attracted to the genre because of their higher fears of being a victim of a crime, despite the fact that, statistically, men are the more likely victims (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). This fear may be leading women to seek out ways to avoid being victimized, such as by consuming true crime and learning about what motivates people to kill and how victims are chosen (Vicary & Fraley, 2010).

As noted above, true crime podcasts have been criticized for exploiting victims of crime and their families (Verdier, 2021). When surveyed on this issue, listeners of true crime podcasts seem divided: 54% agreed that true crime podcasts honour victims of crime, while 27% agreed that it exploits them (Vitis & Ryan, 2021). One response to this criticism would be that true crime podcasts bring awareness to certain cases or issues, and, at times, succeed in seeking justice for a victim (or wrongfully convicted person). Feminist researcher Pâquet (2021) analyzed two serialized true crime podcasts that focused on the inconclusive investigations of the murders of two women in Australia. She argues that the podcasts helped draw support from the public for these cases after traditional institutions of justice had failed them, and both cases were re-opened for investigation (Pâquet, 2021). Slakoff's (2022) qualitative analysis of four serialized podcasts of cases featuring intimate partner violence (IPV) found that the podcasts provided a more accurate depiction of IPV than traditional news media, but that the focus on the physical abuse was sensationalized, despite it not being as common as the psychological and emotional abuse present in these cases (Slakoff, 2022).

Despite some criticisms of true crime podcasts, some studies have explored their positive aspects such as the motivations for and consequences of listening. Pavelko and Myrick (2019) surveyed listeners of the podcast *My Favorite Murder* who had been diagnosed with a mental illness and discovered that these users found listening to the podcast to be a helpful coping mechanism (Pavelko & Myrick, 2019). The social media communities created for fans of this podcast were also found to be helpful social supports for those with mental illness (Pavelko & Myrick, 2019). The Bolling and Hull study on true crime podcast listener motivations similarly found that the social interaction that true crime podcasts communities provide were a motivator for listeners (2018). Other common motivations for tuning in to true crime podcasts included entertainment, convenience, and boredom (Boling & Hull, 2018).

Crime media, including news media, often demonstrate a preference for reporting on violent crime, leading to the creation of the popular adage “It if it bleeds, it leads” (Serani, 2011). This phrase refers to the news media’s tendency to lead with stories about violent crime due to the high ratings that these kinds of stories attract (Serani, 2011). Research suggests that crime media, in the form of true crime and crime dramas such as *Law & Order*, respond to the public’s “unending thirst for information on bizarre and violent crime” (Dowler et al., 2006, p. 839). As violent crimes seem to be the main focus of true crime podcasts, this medium is not exempt from feeding into the public’s fascination with this subject matter. Vitis and Ryan’s research on true crime podcast listeners in Australia found that listeners have an overwhelming preference for violent crime when choosing a podcast, with 91% of respondents stating they prefer podcasts about serial killers, followed by missing person’s cases (69%), stranger homicide (60%), and intimate partner homicide (54%) (Vitis & Ryan, 2021). Non-violent crimes such as white collar crime and organized crime were ranked lower at 19% and 39% respectively (Vitis & Ryan,

2021). Preferences for these types of cases may be explained by the primarily female audience and their motivation of learning how to avoid violent victimization, as mentioned above.

### **Capital Punishment**

The first recorded use of the death penalty as punishment for various crimes can be traced back to the Code of Hammurabi in the eighteenth century BC (Death Penalty Information Centre [DPIC], n.d.). The death penalty remained a common punishment for many crimes over the centuries in many parts of the world, though William the Conqueror disallowed all executions during the tenth century except during times of war (DPIC, n.d.). However, capital punishment regained favour during Henry VIII's reign and, by the 1700s, was the punishment of choice for 222 different crimes (DPIC, n.d.).

Today, according to Amnesty International (2021), a total 144 countries have banned the death penalty either in law or in practice. The five countries with the most executions in 2020 were China, Iran, Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia with over 483 executions combined, though the exact number is in reality likely higher due to China (and perhaps others) keeping its execution data secret (Amnesty International, 2021).

The United States is unique in the Western world for being one of the few democratic and developed nations to actively use capital punishment (Worley, 2018). It is also the only country in the Americas to have held executions in the last 12 years (Amnesty International, 2021). In the United States, where laws for use of the death penalty as punishment are governed by individual states, a total of 25 states have active death penalty laws, while three (California, Oregon, and Pennsylvania) have moratoriums on the practice in place (World Population Review, 2022). As of 2022, some states that abolished the death penalty for murder in the past, such as Virginia and

Illinois, have attempted to reinstate it as punishment for the killing of police officers (DPIC, 2022). In January 2022, Virginia state senator Bill DeSteph introduced a bill to restore capital punishment in the case of the murder of a law enforcement officer (Gooding, 2022). This bill was introduced less than a year after the state of Virginia abolished the death penalty in March 2021 (Gooding, 2022). Also in January 2022, Illinois State Representative Dave Severin introduced a bill that would allow juries to select the death penalty for anyone convicted of killing a police officer in Illinois, despite the fact that the death penalty in that state was abolished in 2011 (Baillie, 2022). The politicians cited support for law enforcement and accountability for the convicted murderers as reasons for reinstating capital punishment for these cases (Gooding, 2022; Baillie, 2022).

In Canada, the death penalty for murder was abolished in 1976, though the last execution was held in 1962 (Gendreau & Renke, 2020). In 1998, capital punishment was completely eliminated in Canada when it was removed as a punishment for military offences (Gendreau & Renke, 2020). In 1987, a bill to reinstate capital punishment in Canada failed to pass in the House of Commons by a vote of 148 to 127 (Gendreau & Renke, 2020). No government has attempted to reinstate the death penalty since, and both political parties that had advocated for its reinstatement, the Reform Party and the National Advancement Party of Canada, have since been dissolved or merged with other parties (Rancourt et al., 2020).

Despite the lack of political action on reinstating capital punishment in Canada, public discourse on this topic remains contentious (Rancourt et al., 2020). Support for the reinstatement of the death penalty in Canada in the last decade has ranged from 63%, according to an Angus Reid poll in 2012 (Brennan, 2012), to 41.26% in 2015 as found in the Canadian Election Study (Rancourt et al., 2020), and finally to 51% in 2020 (Research Co., 2020). Rancourt et al. (2020)

report that studies have demonstrated that support for the death penalty among Americans is strongest in certain socio-demographic groups: those who are male, conservative, white, protestant, and/or married tend to support the death penalty more than their counterparts. Rancourt et al.'s 2020 study on attitudes towards the death penalty found that favouring conservative parties, distrusting the government, and scoring high on the "law and order" scale were significant predictors of supporting the death penalty for both Canadians and Americans. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that Canadians who support the death penalty would mirror the American socio-demographics associated with this attitude.

Those who are in favour of the death penalty as a punishment for murder argue that it acts as a general deterrent, preventing people from committing murder if they think they will face such a harsh punishment (Bohm, 2014). Proponents also state that the death penalty is adequate retribution in cases of murder, because the punishment fits the crime, and point to the benefit of removing the killer from society with absolute certainty through this kind of incapacitation (Bohm, 2014). Those in favour of the death penalty reassure its critics by stating that this sentence is actually quite rare in the United States, as shown by the fact that less than 1% of those convicted of homicide receive a death sentence (Worley, 2018).

In contrast, opponents of the death penalty argue that there is no evidence to support that capital punishment is an effective deterrent and that states with the death penalty actually have the highest murder rates (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], n.d). In addition, it is argued that capital punishment is very costly in time and resources to the justice system because of all the additional steps and appeals that those convicted may take to overturn their convictions or reduce their sentences, such as the automatic review of these cases by a state supreme court (Worley, 2018). Moreover, opponents of capital punishment claim that this type of sentence is

not productive, perpetuates an overly vengeful type of retribution (Bohm, 2014), and runs the risk of executing innocent people (ACLU, n.d.).

## **Research Question**

What are the opinions of true crime podcast listeners in Canada on the death penalty?

## **Methods**

### ***Data and Sampling***

Study approval was received from the Mount Royal University Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) on January 24, 2022. Survey data were collected from January 24 to January 31 2022 via an anonymous online survey administered through Google Forms. The survey consisted of approximately 40 questions divided into several sections: demographics, true crime podcast consumption habits including how much time they spend listening to true crime podcasts on a weekly basis; opinions on the death penalty; opinions on mandatory minimum sentences and judge discretion in sentencing; and opinions on police and the Defund the Police movement. For the purposes of this paper, only the questions regarding views on the reinstatement of the death penalty will be analyzed.

Participants were primarily recruited via online communities on Reddit and Facebook related to true crime podcasts or that are dedicated to finding participants for surveys. The following Facebook communities were used for recruiting participants: “MFM - BC Murderinos”, “Dark Poutine’s Yumber Yard v2.0”, Cowtown Murderinos (Calgary)”, “MFM Murderinos – Saskatchewan”, “Not Another True Crime Group”, and “Ask Nova Scotia (Advice, Opinions, Recommendations etc.)”. As for Reddit.com forums, the following

communities were used: SampleSize, Casefile, MyFavoriteMurder, TrueCrimeDiscussion, and LOPTL (the community dedicated to true crime podcast Last Podcast on the Left).

Permission to post in these groups, where required, was sought and granted in all the groups and communities named above. A brief recruitment script describing the survey, including the participant criteria, participation requirements, researcher contact information, and a direct link to the survey was posted to these groups. In addition, targeted ads were posted via Google Ads, publicizing that participants were wanted for a study on true crime podcasts. The ads were targeted towards Canadian residents 18 years of age and older and who had shown interest in pages and websites related to crime and true crime podcasts. As this study is interested in finding out what listeners think about topics related to criminal justice policy in the Canadian context, 18 years was chosen as the minimum age because this is the voting age in this country. Therefore, this is the age at which most listeners would reasonably be expected to act upon their thoughts on public policy through voting. Costs associated with the targeted ads were incurred by the author using personal funds.

### ***Dependent Variables***

**Support for reinstating the death penalty in Canada.** To measure support for reinstating the death penalty in Canada, the question “Would you support or oppose reinstating the death penalty for murder in Canada?” was replicated from a poll conducted by Canadian public opinion firm Research Co. on the death penalty in Canada in March 2020. This was a four-point Likert scale with the option to Strongly Support, Moderately Support, Moderately Oppose, Strongly Oppose, and a fifth “Not sure” option.



Five questions on conditional approval of the death penalty were added to gauge if types of crimes or offenders commonly covered on true crime podcasts, such as serial killers, would garner differing levels of support from participants. The first conditional option was for someone convicted of multiple murders, another for someone convicted of murdering a child, and a third for someone convicted of murdering someone as part of a hate crime. A fourth question about conditional approval of the death penalty for someone convicted of murdering a peace officer was added as a means to address the criticism that the true crime genre is police propaganda. The fifth condition asked participants for their support on reinstating the death penalty in Canada for a murder committed as part of a terrorist act. This option was added with the intention of being a neutral condition as terrorist crimes are not commonly covered on true crime podcasts. The same Likert scale format as the original Research Co. question was used for these conditional approval questions.

### ***Main Independent Variable***

**Time spent listening to true crime podcasts.** It can be considered difficult to quantify how often and for how long participants must listen to true crime podcasts to be considered “regular listeners”, because media consumption habits vary between individuals. However, by asking participants to identify as “regular” listeners, it was conceived that this attracted participants who currently tend to seek out this kind of content, rather than those who have listened to true crime podcasts in passing or who have consumed the genre in the past but no longer do so. While all participants self-identified as regular listeners of true crime podcasts, levels of consumption were expected to vary between participants. To examine this, participants were asked to estimate how many hours, on average, they spend listening to true crime podcasts

per week. This variable was then split participants into two groups to compare their views on the death penalty.

### ***Additional Independent Variables***

Participants were asked a series of questions about demographics such as gender, age, years of education, political views, and province of residence. In addition, questions about true crime podcast consumption habits were included: participants which true crime podcasts they listen to regularly, and motivations for listening. A list of the top ten true crime podcasts in Canada according to Apple Podcasts at the time of survey-writing was provided for listeners to choose from, and space was provided to include additional podcasts not listed. As for motivations for listening, options were replicated as per the results of Boling & Hull's 2018 study on this topic.<sup>1</sup>

Participants were also asked about any previous involvement with the Canadian criminal justice system in the following capacities: as a justice professional or volunteer, a victim of a crime, an accused person, as a family member of a victim or accused person, a jury member during a criminal trial, or as a witness testifying in criminal court. These options were replicated from the 2017 National Justice Survey 2017 administered by EKOS Research Associates Inc. on behalf of Justice Canada.

Participants were asked if they had ever participated in crime and justice related activism after being invited to do so by a true crime podcaster. This kind of activism was defined to encompass the wide range of behaviours related to crime and justice that are commonly encouraged by true crime podcasts. These were based on the author's own experience consuming

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<sup>1</sup> A full list of these podcasts and motivations can be found in the copy of the survey included in the Appendix.

true crime podcasts and engaging in communities dedicated to them. For example, the true crime podcast *That's Messed Up: An SVU Podcast* holds a segment on each episode dedicated to connecting listeners to additional resources and actions related to the crime covered each week. This podcast also posts about these on their Instagram page. The activist behaviours listed in the survey were largely influenced by this segment and included the following: signing petitions, donating to charitable causes, accessing additional resources such as books and articles, and spreading the word to family and friends.<sup>2</sup> The questions about prior involvement in the criminal justice system and participation in crime and justice related activism were included to further analyze any potential relationships between these experiences and participants' opinions on the topics in this survey.

### ***Methods of Analysis***

As this survey was composed of mainly nominal variables and yielded data that was not normally distributed, the primary method of analysis employed in this study was cross tabulations with chi square tests of independence. Cross-tabulations are used to organize two (or more) mutually exclusive groups of categorical data into a table consisting of one variable in the column and the other in the row (Qualtrics, n.d.). The table will include frequency counts and percentages in each cell that correspond to the characteristics in question (Qualtrics, n.d.). Having the data arranged this way allows researchers to determine if there is a relationship between a certain metric and another independent variable by comparing percentages between groups within the second variable (Qualtrics, n.d.). In this study, the metric being examined is support for the reinstating the death penalty in Canada, while the independent variables

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<sup>2</sup> A full list can be found in the copy of the survey included in the Appendix.

introduced to observe any relationships include education levels and level of true crime podcast consumption.

The chi square test of independence then allows researchers to determine if the difference between groups is due to randomness or to a potential relationship (Dartistics, n.d.). This is accomplished by calculating the expected frequencies for each cell in the table, subtracting the expected values from the observed value, and squaring the result (Qualtrics, n.d.). The sum of the chi squares is then compared to the critical chi square value, which is determined based on the degrees of freedom in the data set and the desired alpha level (Dartistics, n.d.). Degrees of freedom are calculated by multiplying the number of rows in the cross-tabulation minus one and the number of columns minus one, while the alpha level will depend on the level of significance desired by the researcher (Dartistics, n.d.). The level of significance sought for the chi square test in this study was 0.05 or less, as is typical in social science research. Critical chi square value tables are found in most research and statistics textbooks or can be found using an online calculator (Dartistics, n.d.)

To complete the cross-tabulations, the four-point Likert scale questions on the use of the death penalty were recoded into binary variables consisting of Support (Strongly Support and Moderately Support) and Oppose (Moderately Oppose and Strongly Oppose) groups, while “Not sure” responses were recoded as missing.

To create the other independent variables required for cross-tabulations, participants were separated into several mutually exclusive groups. These included groups commonly used in social science research such as gender and education level. Participants were also split into groups based on past participation in true crime related activism, prior involvement in the criminal justice system, and level of true crime podcast consumption. The latter groups were

created based on average hours spent listening to true crime podcasts per week: the sample average was 10.04 hours per week (standard deviation of 11.10 hours), and the median was 6 hours, indicating positively skewed data. Schaffer (2021) reports that the average podcast consumer listens for 6 hours and 39 minutes per week. Due to the similar central tendency finding in this study, the sample was divided into two groups: the lower consumption group, who listened to true crime podcasts for 6 hours a week or less, and the higher consumption group, who listened for more than 6 hours.

## **Results**

### ***Participants Demographics***

The sample collected consisted of 455 participants. Of these, 93.79% (423) identified as female, 3.99% (18) as male, 1.11% (5) as non-binary, and the remaining 1.11% (5) as other. A total of 88.08% (399) of participants identified themselves as white/Caucasian, 4.64% (21) as First Nations, Inuit or Métis, 4.42% (20) as bi- or multi-racial, and the remaining 2.86% of the sample consisted of individuals who identified as East Asian, Southeast Asian, Arab, or Hispanic. The sample included participants from all ten Canadian provinces but none of the territories. Of the provinces, Nova Scotia provided the most participants (111), representing 24.50% of the sample, followed by British Columbia with 110 participants or 24.28%, and Alberta with 96 participants or 21.19% of the total sample.

In terms of political alignments, 59.10% of the sample selected the New Democratic Party (NDP) as the federal party that best aligned with their views, followed by the Liberal Party of Canada at 23.19%, and the Conservative Party of Canada at 8.98%. The remaining 8.73% of the sample selected other political parties. The mean age of participants was 34.43 years ( $SD =$

8.74). Participants held, on average, 15.82 years of education ( $SD = 2.67$ ), about equivalent to a post-secondary degree.

### ***Podcasts Consumption Habits***

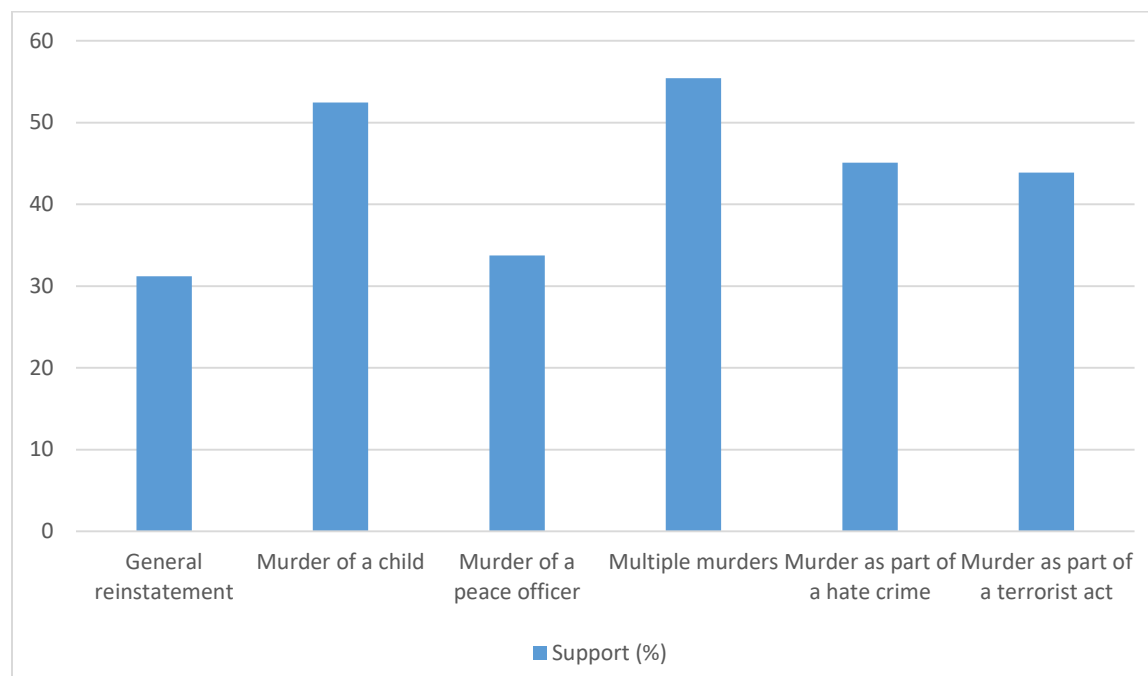
The average time spent listening to true crime podcasts per week was 10.04 hours ( $SD = 11.10$ ), while the median was 6 hours. The three most popular true crime podcasts in this sample were Canadian True Crime, with 52.09% of respondents stating that they listen to this podcast regularly, followed by My Favorite Murder (48.13%), Someone Knows Something (35.38%), Crime Junkie (34.29%), and Dateline NBC (31.65%). When asked about their motivations for listening to true crime podcasts, 75.60% of respondents selected liking mysteries, 67.91% selected the convenience of the medium for exploring their interest in true crime, 64.18% selected enjoying learning more about the criminal mind, and 56.04% stated that podcasts help them learn more about the criminal justice system.

### ***Participation in Activism***

When asked if they had ever participated in crime and justice related activism after being invited to do so by a true crime podcasts, 36.32% of respondents said yes. The most common type of activism respondents engaged in was accessing an additional resource such as a book or article (94%), followed by signing a petition (87.80%), following a justice-related social media page or account (78.40%), and making a donation to a justice-related cause (41.80%).

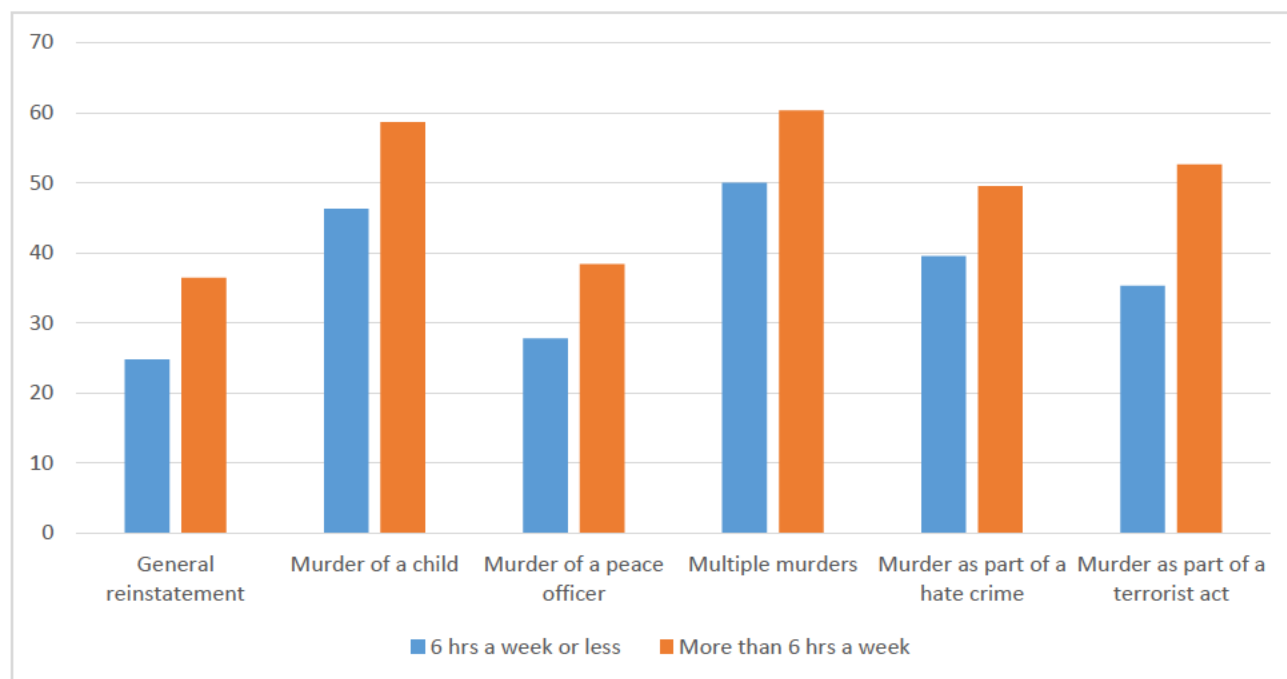
### *Opinions on Reinstating the Death Penalty*

**Figure 1: Levels of support for reinstating the death penalty in Canada, by condition**



As shown in Figure 1, it was found that a total of 31.19% of participants supported reinstating the death penalty in Canada. Participants were also asked if they supported the death penalty in certain circumstances: someone who was convicted of the murder of a child, the murder of a peace officer, the murder a person as part of a hate crime, for someone convicted of a terrorist act, or for someone who was convicted of multiple murders. Of these conditions, support for reinstating the death penalty was highest for those convicted of multiple murders at 55.43%, followed by those convicted of murdering a child at 52.46%.

**Figure 2: Comparison of levels of support for reinstating the death penalty in Canada between groups based on hours spent listening per week, by condition**



\*  $\chi^2 = 6.315$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .012$ ;  $\chi^2 = 6.071$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .014$ ;  $\chi^2 = 4.973$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .026$ ;  $\chi^2 = 4.332$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .037$ ;  $\chi^2 = 3.888$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .049$ ;  $\chi^2 = 11.575$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = <.001$

**Table 1: Support for reinstating the death penalty in Canada by Hours spent listening per week**

		Hours spent listening per week	
		6 Hours or less per week (n=210)	More than 6 hours per week (n=184)
Reinstating the death penalty in Canada	Support	24.76%	36.41%
	Oppose	75.24%	63.59%

\*  $\chi^2 = 6.315$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .012$ .

Table 1 and Figure 2 detail that the higher podcast consumption group consistently demonstrated stronger support of the death penalty. As noted above, 31.19% of all respondents support reinstating the death penalty. It was found that those in the higher consumption group



(more than 6 hours per week) supported reinstating the death penalty 11.65% more than those in the lower consumption group (6 hours per week or less). Those in the higher consumption group supported reinstating the death penalty more than those in the lower consumption group for every condition listed above, as shown in Graph 2.

**Table 2: Support for reinstating the death penalty in Canada by Participation in crime and justice activism**

		Past participation in crime and justice-related activism	
		Yes (n=138)	No (n=242)
Reinstating the death penalty in Canada	Support	21.74%	37.19%
	Oppose	78.26%	62.81%

\*  $X^2 = 9.710$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .002$ .

Participants who stated that they have not previously participated in justice related activism after being invited to do so by a true crime podcast supported reinstating the death penalty 15.45% more than those who have, as shown in Table 2. There was no difference in support for reinstating the death penalty between participants who had prior involvement in the criminal justice system.

**Table 3: Support for reinstating the death penalty in Canada by Education level**

		Education level			
		High school diploma or less (n=54)	Some post-secondary (n=121)	Bachelor's degree (n=137)	Post-graduate degree (n=105)
Reinstating the death penalty in Canada	Support	41.44%	48.76%	18.98%	20.00%
	Oppose	55.56%	51.24%	81.04%	80.00%

\*  $X^2 = 37.481$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p = <.001$ .

As shown in Table 3, those with lower levels of education supported reinstating the death penalty more than those with higher education levels: those with some post-secondary education supported reinstating the death penalty 29.78% more than those with a bachelor's degree, and 28.76% more than those with a post-graduate degree. Those with a high school diploma or less supported reinstating the death penalty 22.46% more than those with a bachelor's degree and 21.44% more than those with a post-graduate degree.

## **Discussion**

The demographics of this sample are consistent with those of previous studies on listeners of true crime podcasts: like in studies by Vitis and Ryan (2021) and Bolling and Hull (2018), participants were overwhelmingly female, white, and young. This is also consistent with the fact that women appear to consume more true crime than men (Vicary & Fraley, 2010).

The 2020 poll by Research Co. used to guide this study found that 51% of Canadians support reinstating the death penalty for murder in Canada, compared to just 31.19% of respondents in this survey. The Research Co. poll found that 47% of female respondents, 47% of respondents aged 18-34, 49% of those aged 35-54, and 37% of respondents who identified as NDP voters supported reinstating capital punishment for murder in Canada. This study's findings are not consistent with the general public's opinions as reported by Research Co.'s study, considering the fact that this study's sample was 93.79% female, with a mean age of 34.43 years, and that 59.10% chose the NDP as their preferred federal political party. Overall support for reinstating the death penalty was substantially lower from true crime podcast listeners than would have been expected based on these demographics. One explanation could be the relatively high education level of this sample, with 58.03% of respondents holding a bachelor's degree or

more. The Research Co. poll did not include analyses based on education, but this study found that those with a bachelor's degree or more supported the death penalty much less than those with lower education levels (see Table 3).

This study's findings are also curious when compared to previous research completed on Americans which found that being male, conservative, white, protestant, and married were significant predictors of supporting the death penalty (Rancourt et al., 2020). Of those socio-demographic factors, this study found one similarity in that most participants were white and showed some support for the death penalty. In contrast, most of the participants were female and over half the sample supported the NDP (a left-wing political party in Canada), yet still showed some support for the death penalty. This is interesting especially considering that support in this sample based on these demographics was lower than would have been expected based on results from the 2020 Research Co. poll as detailed above. Perhaps some research on the socio-demographic factors that predict support for capital punishment in Canada would provide insight on this paradoxical finding. Finally, though this study did not survey participants on their religious affiliations and marital status, this could be an avenue for future research to examine if these factors are predictors of support for the death penalty in the true crime podcast audience.

It is noteworthy that support for the death penalty increased when participants were asked about its use in specific circumstances: 55.43% of respondents state supporting the death penalty for someone convicted of multiple murders and 52.46% support it for someone convicted of murdering a child. Support was higher for every circumstance provided than it was when questioned about general support for the death penalty, which perhaps indicates that participants actually support the death penalty more than originally stated once they are reminded of especially heinous crimes that could be punished by death.

As true crime podcasts often feature cases involving serial killers (e.g., Ted Bundy and John Wayne Gacy) or missing or murdered children, (e.g., JonBenet Ramsey), it is not surprising that these two conditions had the most support from true crime podcasts listeners. The frequency of coverage of these types of cases and the common use of capital punishment for these offenders in certain jurisdictions may be informing these opinions, but more research is required to support this assumption. While hate crimes are also regularly featured on true crime podcasts support for the death penalty under this condition (45.08%) was lower than the previous two conditions. The peace officer condition garnered the least support from the sample with only 33.74% supporting the death penalty under this condition. This is important because the murder of a peace officer is considered more serious than other homicides in Canada as demonstrated by the fact that it is automatically considered first degree murder. This result does not seem to lend support to the criticism that true crime podcasts act as “copaganda”, because support for the death penalty in this circumstance would be expected to be higher to reflect the relative importance that respondents would put on the murders of peace officers such as police officers. However, this is only one part of the overarching copaganda theory.

It is noteworthy that the higher podcast consumption group had higher support for reinstating the death penalty than the lower consumption group. This is in line with Kort-Butler and Sittner Hartshorn’s 2011 finding that consumption of crime dramas was a predictor for support for the death penalty. As the cases covered in true crime podcasts are real, this may be an additional factor that is influencing opinions on the death penalty in this study. Conceivably, the prolonged exposure to true crime cases is what is influencing the high consumption group to hold more punitive opinions, but more research on other punitive policies and attitudes should be conducted to support this hypothesis.

Conversely, those who had previously engaged in crime and justice activism opposed reinstating the death penalty in Canada more than those who had not. This could be because the activities engaged in, such as reading a book or signing a petition, provided more nuanced accounts of the criminal justice system that may make these participants more hesitant to support more punitive measures. Participation in these behaviours likely also exposed participants to real victims and/or offenders as opposed to “characters” in a podcast, which emphasizes their humanity. This relationship should be explored further to determine which factors, if any, may be influencing it.

## **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. The sample of participants, while an adequate size to represent the population of true crime podcast listeners in Canada, was not randomly selected and was not reflective of the greater Canadian population in terms of gender, race, geography, and political views. Random sampling would have been difficult to achieve under the circumstances of this project, but perhaps future research on this topic using larger samples of the general population could include questions on true crime podcast consumption.

Recruitment methods could have had an impact on the demographics of the participants in this sample. For example, as participants were recruited via pre-formed social media groups, this may have impacted the age range, gender, and location of respondents. The Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) approval only permitted the recruitment of participants in the methods and social media groups listed in the application, preventing additional communities and sampling methods (such as snowball sampling) to be used. In hindsight, additional communities relating to

true crime podcasts and recruitment methods should have been considered in the HREB application.

Participants were separated into groups based on their prior involvement with the criminal justice system for cross tabulations. While one significant difference was found between groups, perhaps even more insight would have been gained if participants were separated into groups based on type of involvement in the criminal justice system. This is because it is expected that a justice professional would have a different impression of the criminal justice system than a family member of an accused person, for example. The way the groups were created did not account for additional these in-group differences, which should be explored further.

The order in which questions about the death penalty were presented may have influenced the way participants responded to them by priming them on this topic. When first asked about their support for the death penalty, most participants indicated that they did not support it. However, when presented with several circumstances in which the death penalty may be used, support was higher for each circumstance than for the general question on reinstatement. This may indicate that general support for the death penalty is actually higher than shown when originally surveyed, because the subsequent questions reminded participants of the egregious circumstances in which the death penalty could be used. Alternatively, it is possible that the additional questions about the death penalty influenced participant answers by inadvertently implying that there are legitimate reasons for its use, which may cause participants to increase their levels of support for the practice.

## Conclusion

This study on true crime podcast listeners in Canada found that the audience for this genre is overwhelming female, white, young, and educated. While the overall sample had lower support for reinstating the death penalty in Canada than the general population, it was found that those who consume true crime podcasts for more than six hours per week demonstrated higher support for this policy than those who listened for average of six hours or less. This finding may be lending support to the criticism that, in excess, true crime consumption can contribute to an unsubstantiated fear of crime as demonstrated by higher support for tough on crime policies such as capital punishment. However, low support for the death penalty in the case of the murder of a peace officer does not seem to support the criticism that true crime podcasts are a type of propaganda for law enforcement, but further research is required to confirm this.

To rule out spuriousness, further research is required to explore the relationships found in this study, and could begin by replicating this study with a larger, more representative sample, and a control group of participants who do not consume true crime podcasts. In addition, this study should be replicated in other abolitionist jurisdictions where true crime podcasts are popular, such as Australia and the United Kingdom, to unearth any similar relationships between true crime podcast consumption and support for the reinstatement of the death penalty.

To complement these findings, future qualitative research could include conducting a content analysis of various true crime podcasts to examine any patterns and themes related to the topics explored in this study. Lastly, the remainder of the data from this study on podcast consumption habits, opinions on mandatory minimums, and police views should also be analyzed.

This study also found that over one third of the sample had previously participated in crime and justice activism after being invited to do so by a true crime podcast. This type of engagement, coupled with the fact that many listeners turn to true crime podcasts for information on the justice system, should not be ignored. Policy-makers should take note of the types of narratives about crime and justice that are being proliferated through this medium, as this contribution to popular criminology may have a more significant impact on Canadian society than one would realize.



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## Appendix

### Copy of Questionnaire

#### DEMOGRAPHIC SECTION

1. Please select your gender.

- a. Male
- b. Female
- c. Non-binary
- d. Genderqueer or gender non-conforming
- e. Prefer not to answer
- f. Prefer to self-describe

2. What is your age (in years)?

3. Which of the following best describes your race or ethnicity?

- a. White
- b. Black
- c. Indigenous (First Nation, Metis, Inuit)
- d. East Asian (Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Filipino)
- e. Southeast Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Afghani, Sri Lankan)
- f. Arab
- g. Hispanic
- h. Two or more of these
- i. Prefer not to answer
- j. Prefer to self-describe:

4. In which province or territory do you reside?

- a. Alberta
- b. British Columbia

- c. New Brunswick
- d. Newfoundland and Labrador
- e. Nova Scotia
- f. Northwest Territories
- g. Manitoba
- h. Nunavut
- i. Ontario
- j. PEI
- k. Quebec
- l. Saskatchewan
- m. Yukon

5. In the space below, please input how many years of education you have (where 12 years = high school diploma).

6. Regardless of how you voted in the last federal election, which federal party do your political views best align with?

- a. Bloc Québécois
- b. Conservative Party of Canada
- c. Green Party
- d. Liberal Party of Canada
- e. New Democratic Party (NDP)
- f. People's Party of Canada
- g. Other (specify):
- h. Not sure

7. Have you ever been involved in the criminal justice system? Choose all that apply.

- a. Testifying as a witness in criminal court
- b. Jury member chosen to participate in a criminal trial
- c. As the victim/survivor of a non-violent crime



- d. As the victim/survivor of a violent crime
- e. After being charged/convicted of a crime
- f. As a family member of a victim/survivor
- g. As a family member of an accused/convicted person
- h. Know someone as victim/accused
- i. By working in the criminal justice system/Working in a related field
- j. Volunteering in the criminal justice or related area
- k. Other (please specify) :
- l. I have not been involved in the CJS before
- m. Prefer not to answer

#### TRUE CRIME PODCAST CONSUMPTION

8. Using your best estimate, please input below how much time (in hours) you spend listening to true crime podcasts during an average week.

9. Which of the following podcasts do you listen to on a regular basis?

- a. Canadian True Crime
- b. Casefile
- c. Crime Beat
- d. Crime Junkie
- e. Dateline NBC
- f. Mens Rea
- g. My Favorite Murder
- h. Morbid
- i. Uncover (CBC podcast)
- j. Sword and Scale
- k. Wine & Crime
- l. Others (please list them here):

10. Some studies have found the following common motivations for listening to true crime podcasts. Please select which motivations from the list below apply to you (select all that apply).

I listen to true crime podcasts...

- a. because I like mysteries.
- b. because I enjoy learning about the criminal justice system.
- c. because it is a convenient way to explore my interest in true crime.
- d. as a way to escape my daily life.
- e. to learn more about the criminal mind.
- f. to learn ways to reduce my own risk of victimization.
- g. because they are popular and I want to participate in the conversation.
- h. because of the community they provide.
- i. because I find them relaxing.
- j. to alleviate my own anxieties surrounding crime.
- k. Because I enjoy the host(s)'s storytelling style.
- l. Other: (please specify)

11. At times, true crime podcasters invite their listeners to participate in activism campaigns related to the crime(s) or social issue(s) discussed in a series or episode. For example, this could include signing petitions or donating to a cause.

Have you ever participated in such an activism campaign after hearing about it on a true crime podcast?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Not sure

12(a). [If answered yes to the previous question] What kind of activity did you participate in?

- a. Signed a petition
- b. Donated money to a charity/a fundraiser through a direct donation or purchase of merchandise
- c. Wrote to a politician or other leader

- d. Followed a social media account
- e. Attended a protest, march, or demonstration
- f. Read a book, article, or other resource recommended by the podcast
- g. Spread the word about an issue to friends, family, peers and/or colleagues
- h. Other (please specify):

12(b) How many times would you say you participated in such campaigns? Please use your best estimate.

12(c). Please provide details on the campaign(s) in which you participated. E.g.,: *I signed a petition requesting that an offender be denied parole. I donated to a charity that supports LGBTQ2S+ youth.*

## POLICIES ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

As you may know, Canada eliminated the death penalty for murder in July 1976. Today, the automatic sentence for someone convicted of first degree murder is life imprisonment with no possibility of parole for 25 years.

13. Would you support or oppose reinstating the death penalty for murder in Canada?

- a. Strongly support
- b. Moderately support
- c. Moderately oppose
- d. Strongly oppose
- e. Not sure

At times, people may not support the death penalty in general but feel that it is appropriate under certain circumstances.

For example:

14. Would you support or oppose the death penalty in Canada for someone convicted of murdering a child?

- a. Strongly support
- b. Moderately support

- c. Moderately oppose
- d. Strongly oppose
- e. Not sure

15. Would you support or oppose the death penalty in Canada for someone convicted of murdering a military or peace officer (police officer, corrections officer, etc)?

- a. Strongly support
- b. Moderately support
- c. Moderately oppose
- d. Strongly oppose
- e. Not sure

16. Would you support or oppose the death penalty in Canada for someone convicted of murdering someone as part of a hate crime?

- a. Strongly support
- b. Moderately support
- c. Moderately oppose
- d. Strongly oppose
- e. Not sure

17. Would you support or oppose the death penalty in Canada for someone convicted of killing multiple people, either in a mass murder or during a series of murders?

- a. Strongly support
- b. Moderately support
- c. Moderately oppose
- d. Strongly oppose
- e. Not sure

18. Would you support or oppose the death penalty in Canada for someone convicted of terrorist activity?

- a. Strongly support

- b. Moderately support
- c. Moderately oppose
- d. Strongly oppose
- e. Not sure

## MANDATORY MINIMUM SENTENCES AND JUDGE DISCRETION

When someone is convicted of a crime, they appear for sentencing. A judge will impose a sentence that reflects the seriousness of the crime and the offender's level of responsibility for that crime.

20. How important is it for a judge to consider each of the following when deciding on a sentence that is fair and appropriate:

[rows]

The seriousness of the specific offence (e.g., circumstances surrounding the crime, was there a victim)

How responsible or blameworthy the offender is (e.g., how responsible the offender is for their behaviour due to personal circumstances)

The wishes of the victim(s), if there is one (e.g., seeking financial restitution, desire for leniency)

[columns]

Not at all important

Somewhat unimportant

Neither important nor unimportant

Somewhat important

Very important

21. A number of offences in the *Criminal Code of Canada* include a range of behaviours from less serious to more serious. For example, an assault charge can be given for a shove during a disagreement as well as other acts of violence that can cause more harm to a person. This variation explains why courts have a range of options available to them at sentencing.

Given that a wide range of behaviours is included in a single offence (a shove or a punch are both called assault), do you believe that it would be fair and appropriate to give all offenders convicted of the same offence (e.g., assault) the same sentence? That is, should the offender who shoved someone and the offender who punched someone always be treated the same or should their sentences be different?

- a. Yes, they should have the same sentences
- b. No, they should have different sentences
- c. Hard to tell without more information on each
- d. Don't know
- e. No opinion

22. The following three options represent different degrees of discretion that judges could have when sentencing offenders. Which of these do you think is the best approach for determining fair and appropriate sentences for offenders?

- a. Judges are free to decide sentences after looking at how the offence happened, why the offender did it and what sentences were given in other similar cases.
- b. Judges decide sentences by using guidelines. Judges are free to choose the right sentence within those guidelines and can go outside the guidelines in those few cases where they feel a different sentence is needed. Judges would give the reasons for their decision in writing.
- c. Judges give everyone who commits the same offence the same sentence no matter the individual circumstances of the offence and the offender.
- d. Don't know
- e. No opinion

Some offences under the Criminal Code of Canada are tied to mandatory minimum penalties. A mandatory minimum sentence is a jail sentence where the minimum length of time for a conviction of a specific crime has been set by Parliament, although judges are able to give more than the minimum sentence when they feel it is appropriate. Judges have no flexibility to sentence someone below the mandatory minimum. Some of the offences that carry a mandatory minimum sentence include human trafficking, the use of a firearm while committing an offence, some drug offences, and some sexual offences.

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about mandatory minimum sentences.

23. In general, applying the same minimum sentence to all offenders who are convicted of the same offence is fair and appropriate.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Moderately agree
- c. Moderately disagree
- d. Strongly disagree
- e. Not sure

24. Mandatory minimum sentences make sentencing more equal and fair across different groups (e.g., rich and poor) because there is a set minimum applied to everyone.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Moderately agree
- c. Moderately disagree
- d. Strongly disagree
- e. Not sure

25. A guaranteed minimum period of incarceration is too harsh and does not lead to fair and appropriate sentences in those cases where the circumstances of the offender or the crime would suggest a lesser sentence.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Moderately agree
- c. Moderately disagree
- d. Strongly disagree
- e. Not sure

26. Mandatory minimums are a strong deterrent for people to commit crime because they would know that there would be a guaranteed minimum term in jail/prison.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Moderately agree
- c. Moderately disagree
- d. Strongly disagree

e. Not sure

27. Mandatory minimums decrease the pressure on the courts and reduce the amount of time it takes to complete cases before the court because everyone is given at least the same minimum sentence.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Moderately agree
- c. Moderately disagree
- d. Strongly disagree
- e. Not sure

## POLICING

In the summer of 2020, conversations around the police and their relationships with minorities were in the spotlight following the murder of a black man, George Floyd, by a Minnesota police officer. These conversations pushed many organizations, including law enforcement, to address issues of systemic racism and bias.

28. Thinking about the police in your own community where you live, do you generally view them favourably or unfavourably?

- a. Very favourably
- b. Favourably
- c. Unfavourably
- d. Very unfavourably
- e. Not sure

29. When you personally see a police officer, does it usually make you feel more or less secure?

- a. More secure
- b. Less secure
- c. No real feeling either way

30. Would you say, when it comes to the Canadian justice system, priority should be given to

- a. Crime prevention and the rehabilitation of those convicted of crimes

OR



b. Longer sentences to punish criminals

31. Which of the following best reflects your feelings about the way police interact with Black, Indigenous, and other non-white people ...

[rows]

In your own community

In your province

In Canada as a whole

[columns]

There is a serious problem

Sometimes police interact inappropriately with non-white people, but it's not a major problem

There is no problem

Not sure

32. Would you say you agree or disagree with the following statements?

[rows]

The police are too quick to use force to solve a problem

The police in my community make me proud

There is a serious problem with systemic racism in the RCMP

Police officers are not held accountable when they abuse their power

Complaints about police misconduct are taken seriously in my community

Police unions cover up for bad cops

[columns]

Strongly Agree

Moderately Agree

Moderately Disagree

Strongly Disagree

33. When you think about the amount of money that is spent on the police in your community, would you say it is:

- a. Too much, funding should be reduced
- b. About right
- c. Too little, funding should be increased
- d. Don't know/Not sure

34. And when you think about police resources, regardless of whether you would like to see them reduced or increased, would you say money should be allocated more towards:

- a. More police presence in high crime areas

OR

- b. Social welfare solutions like mental health resources and housing programs