

Case Study

The Effects of the Youth Criminal Justice Act

Carrington and Schulenberg's (2008) study of the effect of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) of 2002 in Canada on police discretion with apprehended young offenders illustrates a time series design. This design typically includes many pretest and posttest observations that allow the researcher to study the process by which an intervention or a treatment has an impact over time.

One of the major objectives of the YCJA, which came into effect in 2003 in Canada, was to reduce the number of referrals to youth court. The YCJA generally requires police officers who are thinking of charging a minor with a crime to first consider extralegal judicial measures such as giving the youth an informal warning.

To study the effects of the YCJA, Carrington and Schulenberg (2008) examined the number of juveniles who were apprehended and charged from January 1, 1986, through December 31, 2006. The Canadian Uniform Crime Reporting Survey records the number of minors who were charged as well as the number who were chargeable but not charged. The researchers note, "A change in the charge ratio, or proportion of chargeable youth who were charged, is an indication of a change in the use of police discretion with apprehended youth" (p. 355). To control for the actual crime rate of youth, the researchers also examined per capita ratios. Exhibit 6.9 displays the annual rates per 100,000 young persons who were (a) apprehended (i.e., chargeable), (b) charged, and (c) not charged. This clearly shows that the YCJA may have had the intended effect. Of course, the study design leaves open the possibility that something else in 2003 may have happened to effect this change in formal charges against juveniles. However, because there was no known event that could have had such a national impact, the conclusion that this effect is attributable to the YCJA is more plausible. As you can see, this time series design is particularly useful for studying the impact of new laws or social programs that affect everyone and can be readily assessed by ongoing measurement.