Canada's National Repository Holds Five Million Criminal Records. How Many Canadians Actually Have One?

An international examination of criminal records, public safety, government accountability and the reliability of national statistics.

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How many Canadians have a criminal record?

It sounds like a relatively straightforward question for a developed country with national police databases and substantial investment in criminal justice and public safety. The answer is considerably more complicated than it should be.

Senator Kim Pate cited 3.8 million Canadians with criminal records in Senate debate on May 21, 2024, and again on October 2, 2025. [1] [2] Public Safety Canada used the same figure in its 2019 transition material without citing a source or reference year. [3] Its 2015 statistical overview had attributed that estimate to 2009 RCMP Criminal Records Division data—meaning the figure lost its attribution within four years. [4]

In 2009, Canada's population was approximately 33.7 million. The estimate was equivalent to roughly 11.3% of that population, assuming it represented unique living residents. By July 1, 2026, the preliminary population estimate had reached 41.8 million. [5] [6]

Where is the updated national prevalence assessment?

Five million criminal records

In a written response associated with the April 21, 2026 Senate finance committee meeting, the RCMP reported five million records in its National Repository of Criminal Record and Fingerprint Information. In 2023, RCMP testimony confirmed that the repository includes convictions, outstanding charges and non-conviction information. [7] [8]

The fingerprint-based repository covers indictable and hybrid offences. Records for offences punishable only by summary conviction are held by provincial, territorial and municipal jurisdictions, unless submitted as part of an occurrence that also involves an indictable or hybrid offence. The national count therefore includes non-conviction information while omitting some conviction information. [8]

Five million records cannot be interpreted as five million convicted Canadians. An allegation is not a conviction. A historical conviction is not necessarily evidence of a current threat.

How Canada compares internationally

Other developed countries collect, retain, classify and disclose criminal information in different ways. These figures describe different statistical measures, not a ranking of criminality.

Jurisdiction	Reported measure	Metric type	Count	Year
Canada	Historical estimate of people with criminal records [4]	Stock estimate	**3.8 million**	2009
Canada	National repository records [7] [8]	Repository stock	**5 million**	2026
United States	Estimated adults with felony convictions [9]	Stock estimate	**19 million**	2010
United States	Subjects in reporting criminal-history repositories [10]	Repository stock	**116.4 million**	2022
United Kingdom	Working-age PNC nominal records [11] [12]	Repository stock	**9.4 million**	2024
Germany	Individuals in central register [13]	Register stock	**Approx. 4.1 million**	2021*
France	Police suspect entries [14]	Repository stock	**17 million**	2022
Australia	Adjudicated defendants with a guilty outcome [15]	Annual flow	**451,045**	2024–25
New Zealand	Adults convicted during calendar year [16]	Annual flow	**Approx. 50,000**	2025

*German figure: BfJ 2021 review, not a current prevalence estimate. Stock measures describe accumulated totals or estimates; annual flows describe outcomes during a specified year. Australia's annual flow counts separately finalised court cases across Higher, Magistrates' and Children's Courts (including defendants aged 10–17), whereas New Zealand's counts unique adults (18+) once per calendar year under their most serious offence. Neither stock nor flow figures are automatically a count of unique living residents with convictions.

American research estimated that approximately 8% of adults had a felony conviction in 2010, excluding misdemeanours. The 2022 SEARCH survey, funded by BJS, counted subjects across 49 states, the District of Columbia and Guam; New Mexico did not supply a count. The total may include arrests, multi-state duplicates and deceased individuals. [9] [10]

The UK Ministry of Justice estimated that 9.4 million working-age people (16–64), approximately 22%, had a PNC nominal record in 2024. These records include cautions, pending prosecutions and no-further-action cases. The UK Statistics Authority clarified that a criminal record is not equivalent to a criminal conviction, and claims about convictions were unsupported by that release. [11] [12]

Germany's 2021 review reported approximately 15.3 million decisions relating to about 4.1 million individuals. Germany applies statutory record-deletion periods. France's CNIL reported 17 million suspect files in 2022, not convictions. [13] [17] [14]

Different laws produce different numbers

New Zealand automatically conceals eligible convictions following seven conviction-free years, subject to statutory conditions and exceptions. In England and Wales, a conviction may become spent and ordinarily cease to be disclosable, subject to exceptions, even while a police record is retained. [18] [19]

Different legislation. Different retention periods. Different reporting standards. Different results.

A country retaining police information for longer could appear considerably more criminalized than a country deleting historical records, even if their populations demonstrated identical offending patterns.

The Canadian intelligence gap

Canada collects substantial information on reported crime, criminal charges, convictions, incarceration and correctional supervision. What appears to be missing from publicly available national statistics is a current, consolidated assessment establishing how many unique living Canadian residents have criminal convictions.

The distinction is not new. In April 2010, the RCMP reported that the national repository contained approximately 4.2 million records—already greater than the 3.8 million people estimated for 2009. In March 2023, RCMP testimony described the repository as containing almost five million records, rising to five million in its April 2026 response. These are different measures from a population prevalence estimate, not evidence of a sudden increase in offending. [4] [7] [8] [20]

The RCMP's 2026 response states that many aspects of the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) have reached end of life. Modernization requires multi-year investment; at the time of that response, costs were still being developed and funding had not been identified. [7]

Canada should be publishing annual aggregate statistics identifying:

- Individuals with criminal convictions.
- Individuals with outstanding criminal charges.
- Individuals with non-conviction records.
- Individuals with pardons or record suspensions.
- Conviction categories and severity.
- Age of convictions and subsequent offending patterns.
- The proportion of records legally disclosable for employment and licensing purposes.

Aggregate statistics can be produced without publicly identifying individuals, provided privacy safeguards, data-sharing authority and adequate data quality are established. This information has practical applications across policing, corrections, rehabilitation, employment, licensing and national security.

Collecting information and producing usable intelligence are two entirely different functions.

The implications for the security industry

The security industry routinely relies on criminal background checks to determine suitability for employment and access to sensitive environments. Unfortunately, a background check is frequently treated as a complete assessment of an individual's trustworthiness. It is not.

A person with a twenty-year-old impaired-driving conviction, an individual recently convicted of financial fraud and someone facing an unresolved criminal allegation present entirely different assessment considerations.

Equally, an individual without a criminal record is not necessarily trustworthy, competent or incapable of committing an offence. A clear check establishes only that no applicable record was identified through that particular screening process.

Effective personnel security requires an assessment of behaviour, integrity, reliability, historical conduct, legal restrictions and the responsibilities associated with the position.

The federal security screening application and consent form states that a criminal conviction does not necessarily result in denial of a security status. At the provincial level, Ontario's Police Record Checks Reform Act, 2015 distinguishes criminal record checks, criminal record and judicial matters checks, and vulnerable sector checks. Federal human rights law protects against discrimination on the ground of a conviction for an offence for which a pardon has been granted or a record suspension has been ordered within federal jurisdiction. **[21] [22] [23]**

The objective is to identify and manage credible threats, not simply classify people according to the existence of historical information.

Conclusion

The evidence does not establish whether Canada has a higher or lower prevalence of criminal convictions than other developed nations. It establishes that a widely cited estimate traces back to 2009, while the current repository count measures something fundamentally different.

Improving national reporting requires a funded modernization plan, cooperation across jurisdictions, transparent definitions and accountability for the quality of the resulting statistics.

> **Five million records tell us the approximate size of a national repository. They do not tell us how many Canadians have criminal convictions, how many have been rehabilitated or how many represent a current threat.**

Understanding the difference is fundamental to competent intelligence analysis, responsible policymaking and professional security management.

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Methodological note

Figures use different reference years, units, age groups and legal definitions. The historical Canadian ratio uses the contemporaneous 2009 population. No current conviction-prevalence rate or international rank can be established from these sources. The New Zealand figure is rounded.