

Aboriginal Recidivists

A Canadian study published recently compared aboriginal offenders who reoffended with those who did not. Aboriginal recidivists were significantly more likely to have been incarcerated earlier in their lives and to have been serving a sentence for break and enter at the time of their release. As well, these recidivists had been convicted of their first offence at a significantly younger age than the aboriginal offenders who did not reoffend.

Socio-demographic and criminal history information for more than 3,000 federal inmates released in 1983-1984 was drawn from a federal government data base. Information on recidivism (defined as a further conviction for an indictable offence for which the offender received a custodial sentence) was available for a period of three years following the offender's release.

Information on 282 male aboriginal offenders was available. Their average age at the time of federal incarceration was 26.7 years. Only 8% were first-time offenders, and just 16% were first-time inmates. Most of the offenders were status and non-status aboriginal people, 28.4% were Metis and 4.6% were Inuit.

Before their release on mandatory supervision or full parole, most of these offenders had been serving sentences for property-related offences, almost one third (31.6%) for break and enter, and about one quarter (26.2%) for other property-related offences.

Results

Two thirds (66%) of the sample committed a further offence.

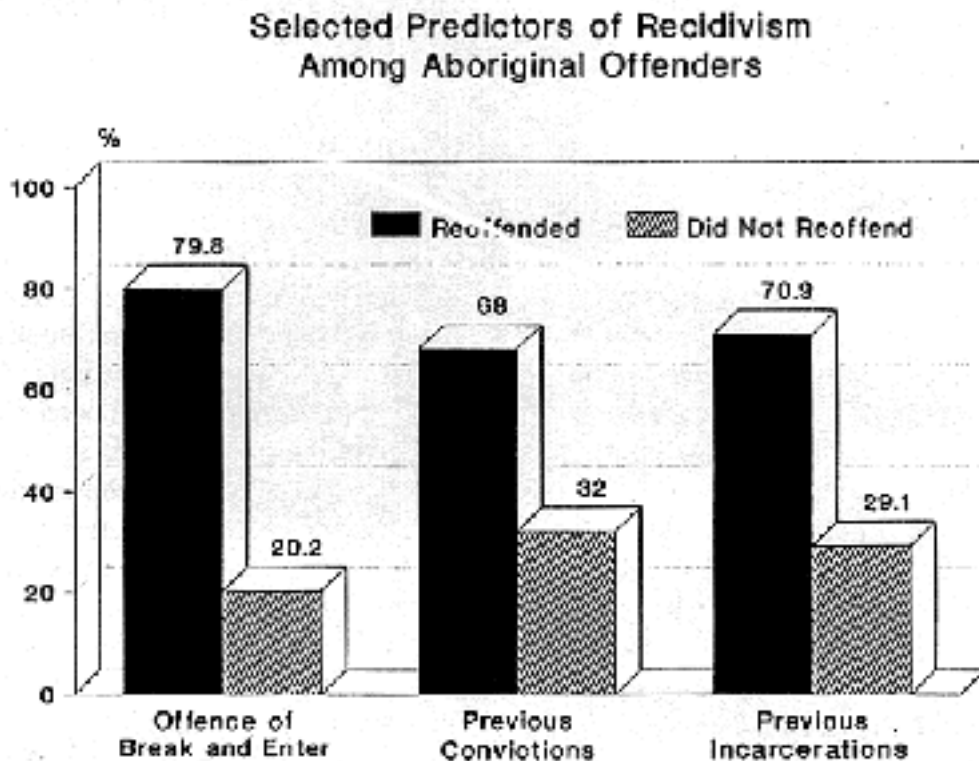
Although the study examined about 30 variables and their relationship to recidivism, only five showed significant value as predictors: offence type (specifically break and enter), previous convictions, previous incarcerations, age at first conviction and length of sentence.

When studied more closely, sentence length appears to be much less important than the analysis originally showed. First, length of sentence was closely related to offence type (in this case, break and enter). Second, although the average sentence length for the overall sample was 41.8 months, each offender's individual sentence length varied considerably (with a standard deviation of 39.7 months). Third, the study sample may have included some individuals who had been released but then reincarcerated for technical violations of their release conditions. When these individuals were reincarcerated, a new sentence length would not have been recorded, skewing the calculation of an average sentence length for the overall sample.

For the recidivists, the average age at first conviction was 17.8 years; for non-recidivists it was 19.5. This difference was statistically significant.

The figure shows the percentage of aboriginal recidivists who had been serving time for an offence of break and enter, and who had previous convictions or incarcerations.

Figure 1



Further analysis narrowed the strongest predictors of recidivism down to three variables. They were, in order of strength of predictive ability: previous incarcerations, an offence of break and enter, and age at first conviction. However, these variables are not predictive enough to be used in making release decisions.

These findings are generally consistent with previous studies on recidivism among non-aboriginal inmates, as were the findings related to recidivism and different types of release. Three quarters (74.9%) of the aboriginal offenders released on mandatory supervision reoffended, compared with one third (32.8%) of those released on full parole.

The similarities between the results of this study and studies that looked at non-aboriginal offenders do not reduce the importance of factors specific to aboriginal inmates; they merely indicate we should not ignore research findings from non-aboriginal offender populations.

Almost all the variables found in the data base used in this study are historical, or static. Studies that focus on criminal history provide information which has limited practical use. If the three or four variables found predictive in this study were used in making release decisions, the error rate would be too high. To improve accuracy, dynamic risk factors such as information on employment or personal addictions must be identified. As well, since most offenders are released under some form of supervision, if supervisors knew which dynamic characteristics predicted risk, interventions could be introduced that would greatly decrease the likelihood of recidivism.

J. Bonta, S. Lipinski and M. Martin, "The Characteristics of Aboriginal Recidivists," *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, July-October (1992): 517-521.