

Family violence in the lives of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders

In 1992, the Correctional Service of Canada initiated an interview-based study to learn more about offenders' experiences as family members. Separate studies were conducted for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders to be sensitive to any cultural differences between the groups.

This article analyzes some of the results, focusing on offender experiences as both a child and an adult within a family, and on any connections between the two experiences. Methodology Aboriginal interviewers met with 31 randomly selected Aboriginal male offenders from the Correctional Service of Canada's Prairies region. The interviewers used an interview guide designed in consultation with Aboriginal contractors.

A comparable interview guide was used by non-Aboriginal interviewers with 150 non-Aboriginal male offenders. These offenders were randomly selected, but all regions of the country had roughly equal representation within the sample. The non-Aboriginal sample was divided into three groups:

- the "program" group was made up of 25 offenders who had participated in the Service's Parenting Skills Training or Living Without Violence programs;⁽²⁾
- the "matched" group was made up of 18 offenders who had not participated in family-related programming. These offenders were matched with offenders in the program group based on variables such as age and aggregate sentence; and
- the "random" group was made up of the remaining 107 offenders. Like the matched group, these offenders had not participated in family-related programming.

Childhood experiences When asked to describe their families of origin, many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders spoke of difficult and painful childhood experiences - detailing abuse and neglect that they had witnessed and experienced.

More specifically, 79%⁽³⁾ of Aboriginal offenders reported that they were hit by parents/caregivers (of which 41% said they were bruised), 58% stated that they were neglected by their parents/caregivers and 27% said they were sexually abused during childhood.

Further, 57% of the Aboriginal sample reported witnessing their father hit their mother (with 72% of these offenders reporting that their mother was bruised).

Many non-Aboriginal offenders also witnessed and/or experienced abuse and neglect during childhood. Approximately 85% of this sample reported being hit by parents/ caregivers (of which 56% said they were bruised), 38% said they were neglected and 24% indicated that they had been sexually abused during childhood.

As for witnessing abuse, 44% of the non-Aboriginal offenders said they had seen their father being "really mean or cruel" to their mother (this phrase was used to identify psychological abuse) and 38% reported witnessing their father hit their mother (75% of these offenders indicated that the assault resulted in bruising).

There were several differences, however, between the groups of non-Aboriginal offenders. Program offenders (38%) were more likely than the matched (22%) and random (21%) offenders to indicate they had been sexually abused during childhood.

Offenders from the program group were also more likely (96%) than the matched (83%) and random offenders (83%) to report being hit by their parents and significantly more likely (83% of those reporting an assault) to say that the assault caused bruising (compared with 47% and 52%, respectively, $p < .05$). Similarly, offenders from the program group (67%) were significantly more likely than offenders from the matched (27%) and random (34%) groups to say they had been neglected by their parents ($p < .01$).

Program offenders were also most likely to report witnessing abuse as a child -63% of the program group said they saw their father hit their mother, compared with 27% of the matched and 39% of the random groups. These differences were statistically significant ($p < .05$). Similarly, program offenders (72%) were significantly more likely than the matched (40%) and random (40%) offenders to report seeing their father being cruel to their mother ($p < .01$).

These differences between groups may be the result of the program offenders' participation in family violence programming. These offenders were exposed to information about the dynamics of abuse and may, therefore, have been better equipped to **identify** abuse within their own family. Further, their experience may have made them more comfortable with discussing these sensitive issues with an interviewer.

Alternatively, the group differentiation could indicate actual differences between the childhood experiences of program offenders and other offenders. Program offenders may have been selected for family violence programming because they had witnessed and/or experienced abuse as children. Such experience is a potential "risk marker"⁽⁴⁾ for future family violence, so Service staff would be likely to encourage and facilitate program participation for offenders with that type of background. Adult families of offenders The adult family lives of these offenders were also characterized by violence.

Approximately 55% of the Aboriginal offenders were married or had a partner (see Table 1). Of these offenders, 90% said they "got along" with their partner. Despite this, 42% said they had hit their partner (of which 56% said they caused a bruise). Also, 52% claimed their partner had hit them (20% of these offenders said they were bruised).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Male Offenders	
	Aboriginal offenders (31) Non-Aboriginal offenders (150)

Age		
24 or younger	20.0%	11.5%
25-34	50.0%	43.9%
35-44	23.3%	28.4%
45-54	6.7%	10.8%
55-64	0	4.1%
Older than 64	0	1.4%
Language spoken		
Cree	48.4%	0
Ojibway	16.1%	0
English	35.5%	64.6%
French	0	25.1%
Family Situation		
Has a wife/partner	54.8%	41.2%
Has children/stepchildren	67.7%	50.8%
All percentages are based on the number of responses received.		

As for non-Aboriginal offenders, 41% said they had a wife or partner and 87% of these offenders said they "got along" with their partner. However, 30% of the "attached" non-Aboriginal offenders reported hitting their partner (56% of these offenders reported causing bruising), while 50% claimed their partner hit them (of these offenders, 36% said they were bruised).

Further, 45% of the non-Aboriginal offenders said they were cruel to their partner, while 20% said their partner was cruel to them.

The fact that both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders claim to have been hit by their partner more frequently than they admit to having been abusive raises concerns. The dynamics of family violence clearly indicate that women are far more frequently victims and men are far more frequently abusers. Further, when women do strike their partner, it is often in self-defence.⁽⁵⁾ Therefore, we must carefully interpret these findings, recognizing that women were not contacted in this study and were, therefore, unable to contextualize the claims of their partners.

Approximately 68% of the Aboriginal sample said they had children and/or stepchildren and 76% of the offenders who responded to the question reported having some contact with the children. However, 41% of those who responded to the question reported that they and/or their partner had hit their children.

By comparison, 61% of non-Aboriginal offenders said they had children/stepchildren and 62% of these offenders said they had some contact with the children. Approximately 40% of the non-Aboriginal offenders with children indicated that they and/or their partner had hit their children.

Non-Aboriginal offenders in some regions were, however, more likely to report having hit their children. For example, 67% of non-Aboriginal offenders from the Prairies region with children said they (or their partner) had hit their children, compared with 50% in the Atlantic region, 36% in the Pacific region, 25%

in the Quebec region and 13% in the Ontario region. The differences between regions were statistically significant ($p < .05$).

This pattern replicates a pattern established in the Service's family violence file review study (see the Robinson article in this issue). In that study, files of offenders in the Prairies region contained the largest proportion of references to child abuse. This proportion gradually decreased across the Atlantic, Pacific, Quebec, and Ontario regions.⁽⁶⁾ What does it all mean? There are no national data on child abuse in Canada, so we cannot draw comparisons with this study's data on that subject. However, national data are available on the prevalence of violence against women in Canada. The Violence Against Women survey was recently conducted with a sample of more than 12,000 randomly selected women.⁽⁷⁾

This study revealed that 29% of women who had been married (at some time) reported having been abused by a partner. Therefore, our non-Aboriginal offender data mirrors the national results. However, the family violence file review study revealed that 30% of offender **files** contained a reference to abuse of a partner, the majority of which resulted in a criminal conviction. Normally, the incidence of family violence is much greater than that of criminal convictions. Therefore, it is perhaps more realistic to estimate that more than 30% of non-Aboriginal offenders were abusive to their partners.

Further, when we compare both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal data to national data, we must recognize that the lives of federally sentenced offenders are often characterized by violence.⁽⁸⁾ As such, these individuals are probably more likely to abuse their partner than are men from the general population.

A final set of findings merit elaboration. The long-term effects of witnessing and/or experiencing abuse in childhood have received considerable attention recently, and some research suggests that those who have witnessed and/or experienced abuse are more likely to become abusers themselves.⁽⁹⁾ In fact, evidence of intergenerational transmission of abuse has been identified within the Canadian correctional population.⁽¹⁰⁾

Several relationships were examined within this study to assess if there was any association between witnessing and/or experiencing abuse and perpetrating abuse. For example, the relationship between non-Aboriginal offenders being hit as a child and hitting their own children was found to be not statistically significant.

However, two dimensions of witnessing abuse were related to the perpetration of abuse as an adult. Non-Aboriginal offenders who stated that their father psychologically abused their mother were more likely to report having been psychologically abusive to their partner (65%) than were offenders who said their father was not abusive (26%, $p < .001$). Similarly, non-Aboriginal offenders who reported that their father physically abused their mother were significantly more likely to admit they physically abused a partner (44%) than were offenders whose father had not been physically abusive (15%, $p < .01$).

These results illustrate the cyclical nature of abuse and violence in families. This, and the other findings discussed in this article, should alert us to the need for intervention with offenders (through family violence programming) to "break the cycle of family violence."

- (1) This article is based on J. Taylor and C. Alksnis, *Models of Family Among Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Offenders* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1995). For further information, please contact Correctional Research and Development, Correctional Service of Canada, 2nd Floor, 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of Justice Canada.
- (2) These "living skills" programs are intended to provide offenders with basic awareness of family violence and parenting issues.
- (3) Please note that all percentages are based on the number of responses received.
- (4) D. G. Dutton and S.D. Hart, "Risk Markers for Family Violence in a Federally Incarcerated Population," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 15 (1992): 101-112.
- (5) R.P. Dobash, R. E. Dobash, M. Wilson and M. Daly, "The Myth of Sexual Symmetry in Marital Violence," *Social Problems*, 39 (1992): 71-91.
- (6) D. Robinson and J. Taylor, *The Incidence of Family Violence Perpetrated by Federal Offenders: A File Review Study* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1995).
- (7) "The Violence Against Women Survey," *The Daily* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, November 18, 1993), Catalogue No. 11-001E.
- (8) Dutton and Hart, "Risk Markers for Family Violence in a Federally Incarcerated Population."
- (9) C. S. Widom, "Does Violence Beget Violence? A Critical Examination of the Literature," *Psychological Bulletin*, 106 (1989): 3-28.
- (10) Dutton and Hart, "Risk Markers for Family Violence in a Federally Incarcerated Population." See also D. Robinson and I. Taylor, *The Incidence of Family Violence Perpetrated by Federal Offenders: A File Review Study*.