

## Factors associated with successful re-integration of Aboriginal offenders into the community

*Aboriginal leaders and justice officials are aware of the over-representation of Aboriginal persons in the criminal justice system. Aboriginal offenders frequently seem to be in conflict with the law earlier in their lives for longer periods of time for more serious crimes than non-Aboriginal offenders. However, many Aboriginal offenders do turn their lives around and become law-abiding citizens.*

*This article summarizes a recent exploratory study that examined the lifestyles of some Aboriginal offenders who successfully re-entered the community. These offenders all shared several common characteristics, which are important indicators that can be used actively to help Aboriginal offenders become law-abiding citizens.*

### Methodology

Many researchers, writers and criminal justice officials have documented the extensive over-representation of Aboriginal persons in all areas of the criminal justice system -- from involvement with the police to court appearances to correctional populations.<sup>(2)</sup> Aboriginal persons also tend to be disadvantaged in areas such as employment, education and health.

The Nechi Institute on Alcohol and Drug Education therefore believed that Aboriginal offenders who have successfully re-entered society have an important story to tell, and decided to research the lifestyles of Aboriginal offenders who became law-abiding citizens. This research was to systematically document the personal qualities, community resources, family relationships and correctional interventions that positively affected these offenders.

A sample of 20 Aboriginal offenders (3 women and 17 men) was selected. Each of these individuals had either a serious and extensive criminal record or had served a sentence of five years or longer. All were now back in the community and had not been in further serious conflict with the law for at least two years.

The offenders ranged from in age 32 to 53. Their criminal records included minor offences such as illegal possession of alcohol, and serious offences such as theft, assault and robbery. Many had convictions for drug offences. The most serious offences were manslaughter and murder.

Relatively unstructured personal interviews allowed the offenders to tell their stories about growing up, getting into trouble, getting out of trouble and staying out of trouble. The interviews were taped and transcribed, and the contents were analysed to identify factors that positively affected their efforts to develop a law-abiding lifestyle.

### The early years

The offenders' early experiences varied widely. Most reported some good times, including a close family,

strong cultural ties and supportive communities. The good times did not, however, last long. These offenders experienced the devastation of residential schools, alcoholism in their families and communities, violent deaths, family breakdown, poverty, suicide and neglect.

As a result, these offenders tended to lose their self-confidence and self-esteem at a young age, and felt that their Aboriginal identity was threatened. The formative years were turbulent for most of the people in the study.

### Getting into trouble

Although their explanations for getting into trouble were equally diverse, all the offenders mentioned alcohol or drug abuse. Some drank or used drugs to mask the pain of violent and abusive relationships. Substance abuse also seemed to help many cope with the pain associated with family breakdown, racism, death and neglect.

Most of the sample lived in a violent subculture. They learned about violence at home, at school and in the community. Some exploded in anger, rage and bitterness, and fought their families, friends, employers, teachers, police and correctional workers.

Many of the offenders also felt attacked because they were Aboriginal, which hurt their self-esteem and confidence. They, therefore, tended to rebel at the discrimination and racism they encountered. With few positive role models, many followed negative stereotypes.

At this point in their lives, the offenders generally did not feel good about themselves. They saw few alternatives to their situations, and did not hope to live any other way. They lost their individual and Aboriginal identity and became someone else -- a drinker, a drug-user, a fighter, a tough con.

### Getting out of trouble

How did these people change from being a danger to themselves and the community to being positive role models? In each case, a variety of positive influences impacted on their lives. Most of the offenders began to see the destruction caused by their substance abuse and decided to stop drinking and taking drugs. Alcoholics Anonymous meetings helped many who were in custody, and others attended Aboriginal treatment centres.

Sobriety helped the offenders to begin to feel good about themselves and spot new life paths. These paths were not easy to follow. A third of the offenders suffered relapses and some committed new offences. However, all of them gradually brought their drinking under control and, as they achieved sobriety, they stopped committing crimes.

Aboriginal Elders were important to many of the offenders. For some, an Elder rekindled their cultural awareness, and taught rules of conduct, values and beliefs that either had been lost or had never been

learned. Other Elders acted as counsellors, helping the offenders deal with problems such as the emotions and pain from their childhood.

The impact of the Elders was coupled with the positive effects of Aboriginal culture and spirituality, which apparently gave many of the offenders a sense of direction and a path to follow. The offenders took part in ceremonies in prison and in the community. They spoke about prayer and about faith -- things that had not been in their lives for many years.

These offenders were also simply getting sick and tired of going in and out of prison. Many had begun to feel that they were wasting their time. This gnawed at them, pushing them to question their past actions. Old patterns were replaced by hopes for a better life.

The Native Brotherhood organizations in prisons also helped. These groups helped the offenders to feel comfortable with each other and avoid (for a while) the racial tensions of prison life.

Finally, some offenders were helped by correctional staff who were patient and tolerant; focused on potential instead of past actions; encouraged involvement in Aboriginal cultural activities; did things with them on their own time; served as positive role models; looked beyond the negative to the positive; challenged them to change their lives; and who talked with them, not at them.

Aboriginal staff were particularly influential in getting through to these offenders. However, these Aboriginal offenders had high expectations of Aboriginal staff. When the expectations were not met, any potential for positive impact was quickly lost.

In most cases, the rejuvenation process was gradual but noticeable. Over time, the offenders found a new way to live that allowed them to overcome personal, family and community problems. This empowered them with a personal sense of direction and equipped them with ways to relate positively with others. This, along with support, encouragement and reinforcement from family, friends and staff, paved a way for the offenders to successfully re-enter society.

### Staying out of trouble

The most important influence on the offenders' ability to stay out of trouble was developing their spiritual and cultural identity. This involved taking part in activities such as sweat lodges, pipe ceremonies, drum groups, fasting, vision quests, prayer and healing circles.

The offenders all worked diligently at staying sober by attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and taking part in treatment programs. Some eventually relapsed for a time, but those who had been addicted knew they had to deliberately avoid drugs and alcohol.

The offenders also spoke about their strengthening personal identity and the importance of managing their lives. They talked about feeling happy, being humble and finding a place in life. They realized that

it was their responsibility to stay crime-free -- nobody else could do it for them. They had to learn to make the right choices.

Being able to help others was another influence that helped these offenders stay out of trouble. Many of the offenders took on a helping role such as counsellor, or volunteered in schools or community agencies.

It was also important to remain employed. A job provided not only income, but also satisfaction. The offenders were proud to be able to look after their families, and pay rent and bills. Education also helped. Personal development courses such as life skills and counsellor training were particularly helpful.

Many offenders expressed the need for therapy and other ways to deal with issues that interfered with their healing. The offenders turned to peers, Elders, psychologists, psychiatrists and other therapists for help with these issues. Families were very important to the offenders, particularly the support they received from them.

Finally, the offenders all spoke about personal responsibility. When they were getting into trouble, they tended to see themselves as at the mercy of forces outside their control such as racism, substance abuse and poor role modelling. Now, however, they are confident and committed to making it on their own.

## Discussion

Although this study is limited by its small sample, its relatively unstructured interview format and its method of analysis, its findings should help those working with Aboriginal offenders in the criminal justice system.

It is clearly important for such offenders to stop drinking and using drugs. The study also documented the positive impact of Aboriginal spirituality and culture on Aboriginal offenders. These two influences did much to transform hard-core offenders into law-abiding citizens.

This raises important implications for the training of non-Aboriginal staff. Do staff know about Aboriginal spirituality and culture? Do they recognize changes in the attitudes and behaviour of Aboriginal offenders that may be associated with becoming law-abiding persons? Do they understand the dysfunctional dynamics in Aboriginal families and communities?

Interestingly, none of the offenders ever used the word "rehabilitation." The closest they came was to describe their process of change as "healing." More research is needed into this concept as it applies to Aboriginal offenders.

Many people have wondered what can be done to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal persons in the justice system. Some of the answers may rest in the concepts of healing, spirit and recovery.

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(2) C. T. Griffiths and S. N. Verdun-Jones, *Canadian Criminal Justice* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1994). See also R. A. Silverman and M. O. Nielsen, *Aboriginal Peoples and Canadian Criminal Justice* (Toronto: Butterworths, 1992). And see Task Force on the Criminal Justice System and its Impact on the Indian and Métis People of Alberta, *Justice on Trial* (Edmonton: Queen's Printer, 1991).