

Release potential of federally-sentenced Aboriginal inmates to communities

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Introduction

In brief, this article describes a pilot study of five select Aboriginal communities in the Prairie region. The goals of this research initiative were to ascertain the Aboriginal communities' release potential as well as those opportunities that will support community based restorative justice programs, develop alternative programs and services for newly released offenders, and to clarify the feasibility of restorative programs and the factors that would influence the use of community-based reintegration programs.

Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this study were:

- To determine the place and stage of community-based justice and corrections initiatives.
- To determine the perceptions, attitudes, and values of First Nation community people toward offenders and their release.
- To determine the possibility of utilizing community-based initiatives and feasibility to monitor, facilitate and sustain release.
- To ascertain healing initiatives within institutions and Aboriginal community-based restorative justice initiatives.
- To examine and analyze Aboriginal communities' feasibility and needs to facilitate the return of federal offenders in the long term.

Method

Five First Nations communities in Saskatchewan and Alberta were invited to participate in the study and/or support the identified community based researcher. Each of the researchers was trained in all aspects of the research project. A total of one hundred and forty-six people participated in this study. The participation breakdown is as follows: a total of sixty-two individual households, thirty-four key informants, fifteen Elders, four community circles involving twenty participants, six interviews with released offenders and one circle of six offenders currently in prison and one Elder working in prison.

Community Profile

The five community profiles show the following characteristics that have impacted the capacity of Aboriginal communities in developing alternative programs and services for newly released federal offenders.

1. Social/economic problems and issues such as population growth rates, significant alcohol/drug/solvent abuse, disproportionate family dysfunction (violence, suicides, child abuse/neglect), single parent families.
2. Unemployment rates of 60%–70%, increasing criminal activity and development of youth gangs are prevalent.
3. Basic services such as housing are grossly inadequate for most people in the community.

Summary of Individual Household Questionnaire

A total of sixty-two people from the five First Nations communities were interviewed through the individual household questionnaire. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the respondents interviewed were middle aged (30–50 years), seventy-seven percent (77%) were female respondents and most of the respondents are bilingual: First Nation language and English. Ninety-four percent (94%) of the respondents knew people who have been in prison and returned to the community.

The needs identified for people who have been released from prisons are Elder Counselling, traditional cultural guidance and healing circles, structural transition programs for the individuals and community. Most respondents mentioned emotional support such as the need for belonging/acceptance from family and community. Basic needs such as housing, clothing and financial assistance were also identified by many of the respondents. Programs and services that are coordinated, integrative and holistic were identified by many of the respondents including:

1. Support programs for federal offenders and families, i.e. Elders program, conflict resolution, and anger management.

2. Employment/education/training programs.
3. Halfway house.
4. Recreational house.
5. Professional therapy and counselling.

Overall most of the sixty-two people interviewed support the return of federal offenders to their community and giving them opportunities to change.

Summary of Key Informants Interviews

A total of thirty-four key informants interviews were conducted. Most of the key informants were managers/directors mainly in social, health, education, justice/corrections programs and services at the community level. A few were in leadership roles in the community. Most of the informants were over thirty years of age, representing an equal percentage of both genders.

Respondents indicated that the nature of the relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations communities is improving especially among young people.

Most of the key informants indicated that people who have been released from prison face more barriers and competition for employment, education, and training in their communities. These barriers may result from issues related to criminal record checks, criminal labeling/stigma, lack of trust, and safety issues. Some of the recommendations aimed at reducing barriers for ex-inmates varied from programs specifically designed to offer traditional and cultural services provided by Elders, access to professional treatment and support systems, community acceptance and awareness and the individual offender's motivation for change reflected in his/her behaviour.

There are no specific educational, training and employment opportunities in most of the communities for people who have been released from prison. Most of the employment/funding opportunities identified included First Nation public band programs and services, seasonal labour employment and social assistance as a safety net. Only one of the five communities identified specific programs and services for those who have been released from prisons. Most respondents either felt that they did not have enough information about the specific programs and services offered by the communities, i.e. statistics and results, to comment on the matter, or they felt the programs to be either effective to very effective in meeting the needs of ex-inmates.

Most of the key informants felt that barriers to re-integration to the communities were largely

dependent on the seriousness of the crime, a person's social/economic status, family political standing and the motivation level of the ex-inmate and degree of effort in his/her reintegration into the community.

Overall, the key informants interviewed support people who have been in prison and their return to the community. However, they made specific comments about programs and services to be made available for the released offenders, families and community supports, emphasizing Elders' involvement in the re-integration/healing process through traditional and cultural methods.

Summary of Elders Interviews

A total of fifteen Elders were interviewed from four of the communities. Some of the Elders felt that federal prisons do not serve as a deterrent for most offenders. "It is a place to eat three meals a day, with shelter and no responsibilities. Many go to jail because they have nowhere else to go."

Elders saw their role as providing services for Aboriginal people who are released from prison and wanting to reintegrate into the community in the contemporary context of reintegrative justice systems, courts, probation and correctional centers and through other more culturally appropriate approaches such as sentencing circles.

All of the Elders support playing a role for those released from prison. They mentioned the role of prayer, ceremonies, and counselling/advice. They cautioned for healing to occur there must be the willingness of the offenders to change. Additional other community programs and services must be available.

Summary of Community Circles/ Focus Groups

There were four community circle/focus groups initiated in four of the communities involving a total of twenty-one participants. The circle consisted of mostly adults, a balance of men and women and usually a few Elders.

The community circle participants generally felt that people who have been released from prison should return to the community. Community acceptance, tolerance, understanding and transitional readjustment were common responses reflecting community perception towards ex-inmates. In some of the participating communities, this tolerance has some limits in that the seriousness and type of crime (i.e. violent, dangerous and child sexual offenses) determined communities' receptiveness and

acceptance to provide supports and services for the offenders. Community receptiveness to provide reintegration services is directly related to the individual offender's efforts to make amends, show self responsibility, show remorse for his behaviours and actions that led to the prison term and be willing to change and contribute as a community member. In some communities, the community members are more concerned about how to protect their children from sex offenders. The majority of the community people either do not want serious offenders returned to their community or they want assurances of community safety and that the offender will make an integrated, holistic and coordinated effort to address their issues.

For other offenses and conditional to the offender's responsibility, the community members who participated in the circles would support initiatives to reintegrate the people who have been in prisons. Suggested reintegrative initiatives were programs and services aimed at addressing the issue of anger and hate for the victims and victims' families, and other programs included traditional, cultural and addiction services.

Overall, the participants of community circles/ focus groups supported reintegration efforts and initiatives to restore balance in community, with the exceptions being violent and dangerous sex offenders of children. The community is willing to work to give them a chance at rehabilitation and reintegration. Comments were expressed to secure the necessary resources and funds to offer a variety of programs and services for offenders, families and victims.

Analysis of Interviews with People Released from Prison

Approximately 50% of the people who have been in prisons had returned to the community. The transitional phase of release to the community was considered the most difficult phase. Preparation (post-release) was considered a necessity to assist in the successful re-adjustment phase. An on-reserve community re-integration program to promote community acceptance, awareness and needs of released offenders, support programs and services to meet the basic needs is considered essential.

Summary of Interviews with People Currently in Prison

Alcohol/drug/substance abuse is considered to be one of the biggest primary contributing problems for First Nation offenders. Gang violence, residential schools, introduction of provincial citizenship rights in the 1960s such as social welfare, being able to buy

liquor and the resulting "child welfare scoops" and many children being raised in non-Aboriginal foster homes were also identified as contributing factors. Many of the federal offenders were former foster children. Having lived in urban centers all or most of their lives, they have little identification with reserve community people and they don't have a sense of community belonging. The only alternatives are off-reserve and urban centre communities.

Most of the people interviewed that were currently in prison recommended various helping support systems to keep Aboriginal people out of prison. These included prevention and awareness programs about issues related to gang violence, and drug and alcohol addictions, especially for Aboriginal children.

Most of the offenders currently in prison felt they are responsible for their own actions, but require additional supports for issues related to addictions, housing and other areas. A reintegration transitional phase involving Elders and a reintegration program were seen as essential to develop basic life-skills, and programming promoting healing and wellness through the traditional and cultural ways.

Perceptions, Attitudes and Values Toward Offenders and their Release

Generally, there is support for addressing the needs, issues and supports necessary for offenders and their release back to the community. The trend is to give federal offenders an opportunity for change, to be treated like human beings.

Traditional values such as respect, honesty, acceptance, and culturally appropriate principles and philosophies were emphasized and it was felt that these should also be extended to offenders. The cross-sectional community receptiveness to offenders did not fully extend to serious criminal offenders without assurances of safety, programs and services.

Healing/Restorative Justice Initiatives

Community based initiatives such as Elders' counselling, traditional and cultural activities, and healing circles were identified and should be formally recognized and supported.

Healing and wellness community initiatives have started over the last ten years in most First Nations communities. Many of the respondents identified and empathize with many of the contributing factors symptomized by substance abuse. Most of the respondents would support community based restorative justice initiatives that could help enhance

and develop culturally relevant and appropriate programs and services for federal offenders returning to the community. The beginning of community based restorative justice initiatives are initially having a positive impact and creating community awareness with regard to offenders. Further developments and initiatives would be welcomed provided that they have community participation, ownership and additional resources to supplement existing scarce resources.

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Conclusion

The initial findings of the research initiative offers the potential of viable alternatives for reintegration initiatives, a vision of an reintegration process, community will and capacity to undertake initiatives and the long term potential to strengthen relationships between Correctional Service Canada staff and the First Nations communities. ■

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*The May 2000 issue of FORUM will focus on Effective Corrections.
The September issue will focus on Managing Long-term Offenders.*