

Aboriginal offender survey: Case files & interview sample (R-61, 1997)

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This research study ($n = 556$) was drawn from a nation-wide sample (approximately 50%) of Aboriginal offenders in federal custody for file review and face-to-face interviews. Criminal history data was also obtained from the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC). The samples represented all levels of security.

Aboriginal offenders' criminal histories were characterized by a prevalence of violent offences, most common of which was assault. Property crime such as break and enter and theft were the most numerous, and failure during community supervision was very evident.

From Aboriginal offenders' case files, information was collected regarding their childhood backgrounds. It was found that early drug (60.4%) and alcohol abuse (57.9%) were commonplace, as were behavioural problems (57.1%). Other frequently noted occurrences were physical abuse (45.2%) and sexual abuse (21.2%), as well as severe poverty (35.3%), and parental absence or neglect (41.1%). Suicide was attempted by 20.5 percent of these offenders.

In terms of a Risk/Needs analysis, this Aboriginal group studied tended to be a higher risk/higher needs population. Over 40 percent of those surveyed fell into the high risk/high needs cell, according to their case files. The balance of the others tended to group around the high risk/medium needs or the medium risk/high needs cells.

In all, several themes presented themselves. First, it becomes clear that the incarcerated Aboriginal population constitutes a high needs group. A group that largely shares a common background of physical or sexual abuse, early drug and alcohol use, emotional problems, and poor parenting. This is also a relatively high-risk group, often with histories of failure during community supervision.

Another theme relates to Aboriginal offenders' cultural and spiritual life. Here, it was found that many enjoyed participating in native cultural activities, although most desired more to be available. The Aboriginal offender population also represented themselves as fairly spiritual and frequent participants in spiritual or ceremonial activities.

While difficult relations between inmates and institution staff may be common for any culture, the present study does not warrant the conclusion that relations are worse for Aboriginal offenders. (That would require a comparative study.) The offenders *did* frequently recommend more Aboriginal staff and program deliverers as a means to smooth relations and improve programs. ■