

Childhood experiences affect Aboriginal offenders

Shelley Trevethan and John-Patrick Moore¹
Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada
Sarah Auger²
Native Counselling Services of Alberta
Michael MacDonald³
Formerly with Department of Justice Canada
Jennifer Sinclair⁴
Assembly of First Nations

The reasons for the over-representation of the Aboriginal people within the criminal justice system are complex and multi-faceted. Often, a neglected area for examination is the effect that childhood experiences have on criminal behaviour. More specifically, to what extent does lack of attachment or stability during childhood affect criminal behaviour and future relationships?

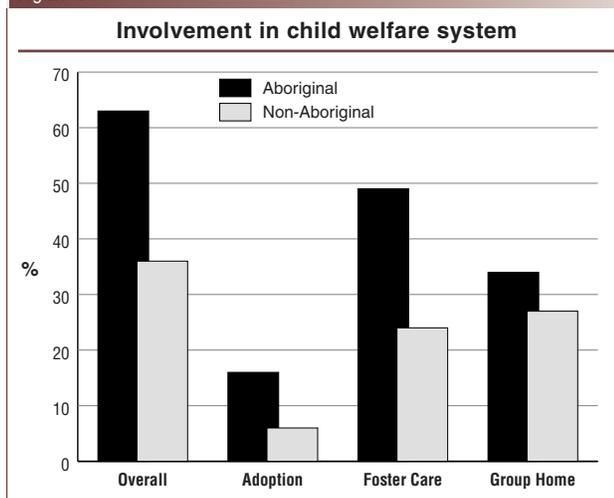
The research concerning family attachment generally shows that lack of attachment often results in maladaptive and antisocial behaviour among children and adolescents.⁵ Further, research has demonstrated that family disruption due to placement in a foster or group home can have negative effects on children and adolescents.⁶ Adoption studies have identified some of the same negative effects, although not to the same extent.⁷ Negative effects can take various forms, such as behavioural problems, decreases in intellectual and academic functioning, and internalizing behaviours.

There is a lack of information on attachment and family relationships as they relate to Aboriginal people. The present study was conducted to examine the living situations of Aboriginal offenders while growing up - including adoption, foster care, and group homes. Two data sources were utilized: structured personal interviews and information from offender files. Interviews were conducted with a total of 175 Aboriginal and 148 non-Aboriginal offenders from seven federal prairie institutions: Stony Mountain (Manitoba); Saskatchewan Penitentiary - medium, Saskatchewan Penitentiary - maximum, and Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge for Women (Saskatchewan); Drumheller Institution, Edmonton Institution, and Edmonton Institution for Women (Alberta).

Involvement in child welfare system

As illustrated in Figure 1, significantly larger proportions of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal offenders were involved in the child welfare system when they were children. Overall, 63% of Aboriginal offenders said they had been adopted or placed in foster or group homes at some point in their childhood, compared to 36% of non-Aboriginal offenders.

Figure 1



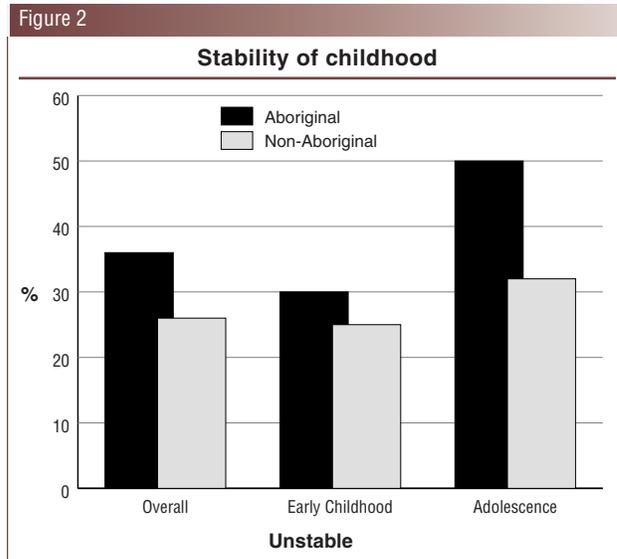
Larger proportions of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal offenders had been placed in foster care (49% versus 24%) or placed for adoption (16% versus 6%). Although larger proportions of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal offenders were placed into group homes (34% and 27%, respectively), the differences were not statistically significant.

The findings from this study are similar to other studies - finding large proportions of offenders with past involvement in the child welfare system.⁸ Furthermore, the proportions of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders who had been involved in the child welfare system is substantially higher than among those outside the criminal justice system.⁹ However, this is clearly an important issue to be addressed among Aboriginal offenders, since about two-thirds have been involved in the child welfare system.

Stability of childhood

Another important question is whether Aboriginal offenders had a more unstable childhood than non-Aboriginal offenders. As indicated in Figure 2, a significantly larger proportion of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal offenders said they had an unstable childhood (36% versus 26%). This difference was most obvious during the teenage years - one-half

(50%) of Aboriginal offenders reported an unstable adolescence, compared to one-third (32%) of non-Aboriginal offenders. There were no significant differences in perceived stability during early childhood - 30% of Aboriginal and 25% of non-Aboriginal offenders said it was unstable.



Other indicators of stability were also examined. Significantly larger proportions of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal offenders had family violence and drug/alcohol problems in the home environment, a poorer economic situation, and family members involved in criminal activity.

These findings indicate that Aboriginal offenders had more extensive history in the criminal justice system and less stability while growing up than non-Aboriginal offenders. However, this is less often the case when they were young children than when they were adolescents.

In examining only those involved in the child welfare system, the differences in childhood stability between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders disappeared. Among both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders, significantly larger proportions of those involved in the child welfare system reported an unstable childhood compared to those not involved in the child welfare system (Aboriginal - 43% versus 25%; non-Aboriginal - 40% versus 18%).

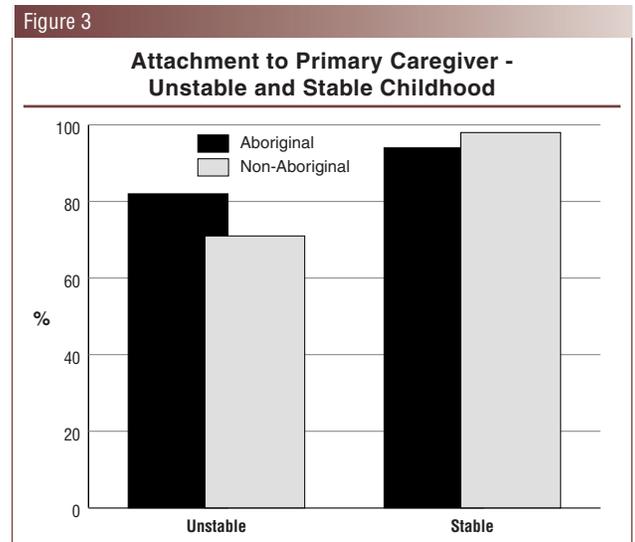
These analyses appear to demonstrate that involvement in the child welfare system is related to instability during childhood and adolescence. This is the case for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders. Since larger proportions of Aboriginal offenders were involved in the child welfare system, this seems to contribute to the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders in stability of childhood. However, it is important to note that it is not clear whether placement in the child welfare system caused instability or whether placement in

the child welfare system was a result of other factors in the home or involvement in the criminal justice system.

Attachment during childhood

Most offenders said that the primary person who cared for them was a parent. However, this was much more often the case among non-Aboriginal (80%) than Aboriginal (50%) offenders. A significantly larger proportion of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal offenders were cared for by other relatives (29% versus 9%), such as a grandmother.

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders reported a great deal of attachment to their primary caregiver during childhood (90% and 91%, respectively). However, as indicated in Figure 3, those who reported an unstable childhood were less attached to their primary caregiver than those who reported a stable childhood. This was the case among Aboriginal (82% versus 94%) and non-Aboriginal offenders (71% versus 98%).



No significant differences existed in attachment to primary caregiver between those involved and not involved in the child welfare system.

Current relationship with family

Early childhood experiences did not seem to impact on the relationship offenders currently have with their spouse or children, but did impact on their relationship with their family of origin. No significant differences were found in current contact with, or attachment to, a spouse/partner between those who reported a stable adolescence compared to those who reported an unstable adolescence. This was the case for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders. Stability of adolescence also did not seem to affect the current relationship with children. However, differences were found among Aboriginal offenders when examining contact with their

children. Aboriginal offenders with an unstable adolescence reported significantly less regular contact with their children than those who had a stable adolescence (52% versus 71%).

Offenders with an unstable adolescence tended to have a more negative relationship with parents and siblings. This was the case for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders. Among Aboriginal offenders, those who had an unstable adolescence reported significantly less regular contact with their birth father than those with a stable adolescence (28% versus 50%). Interestingly, those with an unstable adolescence actually reported more regular contact with their grandmother than those with a stable adolescence (63% versus 36%). This may be because as a child they lived with their grandmother and maintained this relationship over the years. In terms of attachment, those who had an unstable adolescence said they had less attachment to their birth mother (67% versus 92%) and birth father (46% versus 66%).

Attachment to Aboriginal culture

A large number of Aboriginal offenders are currently attached to Aboriginal culture and participate in Aboriginal activities. Almost three-quarters (74%) of the Aboriginal offenders said that they were currently attached to Aboriginal culture, that is, they considered it part of their everyday life and felt a sense of belonging. Furthermore, 80% said that they were currently involved in Aboriginal activities, such as circles, ceremonies, sweat lodges and smudges.

Attachment to Aboriginal culture was examined for Aboriginal offenders to determine whether those with little attachment and/or an unstable childhood were more detached from Aboriginal culture than those with a great deal of attachment or a stable childhood. Interestingly, attachment to a primary caregiver during childhood did not seem to influence current attachment to Aboriginal culture. It may not be the attachment per se that influences the cultural attachment, but more so with whom the person was living. If the person was living in a home without access to traditional activities, there may be less attachment to Aboriginal culture. Since large proportions of Aboriginal offenders who were put in care were placed with non-Aboriginal families, they may not have had access to Aboriginal culture.

No significant differences were found in understanding or speaking an Aboriginal language, current attachment to Aboriginal culture, or current involvement in Aboriginal activities between those who had stable and unstable childhood experiences. However, significantly fewer of those who had an unstable childhood said that they were involved in traditional Aboriginal activities while they were growing up (38% versus 59%). It seems that involvement in Aboriginal activities and attachment

to culture may have been re-developed once the offenders entered the correctional facility.

Conclusion

The findings from this research demonstrate that Aboriginal offenders have unstable childhood experiences, including a great deal of involvement in the child welfare system. Furthermore, involvement in the child welfare system is associated with instability. However, it is unclear whether involvement in the child welfare system is the cause of the instability, or the result of it.

The study also indicates that those with an unstable childhood were less attached to their primary caregiver while growing up, and are less attached to parents and siblings currently. This was similar for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders.

It is clear that attachment to Aboriginal culture is fairly strong among the Aboriginal offenders. However, it seems that the attachment to Aboriginal culture is gained during the institutional experience.

This research helps to demonstrate the importance of focusing on early childhood experiences in correctional programming, as well as the importance of Aboriginal culture in programs and through the use of Elders. ■

- 1 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9. This project was a partnership between Correctional Service Canada, Department of Justice Canada, Assembly of First Nations, and Native Counselling Services of Alberta.
- 2 12527 - 129th Street, Edmonton, Alberta T5L 1H7.
- 3 284 Wellington Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0H8.
- 4 1 Nicholas Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7B7.
- 5 Cernkovich, S. A., and Giordano, P. C. (1987). Family relationships and delinquency. *Criminology* 25(2), 295-321; see also Sim, H. O., and Vuchinich, S. (1996). The declining effects of family stressors on antisocial behavior from childhood to adolescence and early adulthood. *Journal of Family Issues* 17(3), 408-427.
- 6 Blome, W. W. (1997). What happens to foster kids: Educational experiences of a random sample of foster care youth and a matched group of non-foster care youth. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 14(1), 41-53; see also Brand, A. E., and Brinich, P. M. (1999). Behavior problems and mental health contacts in adopted, foster, and non adopted children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 40(8), 1221-1229; and Roy, P., Rutter, M., and Pickles, A. (2000). Institutional Care: Risk from Family Background or Pattern of Rearing? *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 41(2), 139-148.
- 7 Op. cit. Brand & Brinich (1999).
- 8 Johnston, J. C. (1997). *Aboriginal offender survey: Case files and interview sample*. Research Report R-61, Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service Canada; see also MacDonald, M. (1997). Perceptions of Racism in Youth Corrections: The British Columbia Experience. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 17(2), 329-350.
- 9 According to studies conducted in the 1980's (e.g., Hepworth, 1980; Loucks & Timothy, 1981; Special Committee on Indian Self-Government, 1983), approximately 1% of children overall and about 4% of Aboriginal children are involved in child welfare services.