

# Aboriginal inmates: Demographic trends and projections

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## Background

*“Aboriginal people have been a concern of the Ministry of the Solicitor General of Canada since the early 1970s. Although they comprise 2.5 percent of Canada’s population, approximately 9 percent of federally incarcerated inmates are Aboriginal people.” (Aboriginal Task Force, 1989).<sup>2</sup>*

These words were written in 1989 but are essentially as true today. Nearly a decade later, a Statistics Canada inmate snapshot found Aboriginal people to be even more over-represented in correctional institutions. In October 1996, a snapshot survey of all adult correctional facilities in Canada found that Aboriginal inmates represent about 14% of inmates incarcerated in Federal institutions and about 17% of the inmates incarcerated in Provincial/Territorial adult correctional institutions.<sup>3</sup> By January 1999, the proportion had reached 17.5% of all federal inmates (see Table 1).

At the time of the 1996 Census of Canada, Aboriginal peoples were found to represent fewer than 3% of the general population. Therefore, the Aboriginal over-representation in the adult inmate population has been growing faster than the Aboriginal proportion of the general population. By 1996, Aboriginal peoples were about 5 to 6 times more likely to be incarcerated than their distribution in the population would lead us to predict, and this ratio was up from about 3.6 times in 1989.

Current demographic trends suggest that continued over-representation is likely unless there are major changes in the amount or way that Aboriginal people interact with the criminal justice system. This paper briefly reviews some of these demographic and criminal justice trends.

## The Aboriginal population in the 1996 Census

Aboriginal peoples are classified in the 1996 Census by self-identification with any of the three North American Indian, Metis or Inuit population groups. Aboriginal respondents numbered about 799,015 persons in 1996. As reported in the Census, about two-thirds of the Aboriginal population or 554,000 people were North American Indian, one-quarter or 210,000 were Métis, and one in twenty, or 41,000 were Inuit.<sup>4</sup>

Nationally, Aboriginal respondents represented about 3% of the entire Canadian population. However, as indicated in Table 1, this population was not evenly distributed, with generally quite low Aboriginal population representation in the eastern part of the country (e.g., just 0.7% in PEI) and much higher levels in the West (e.g., rising to 62% representation for the Northwest Territories).

## The Aboriginal population is much younger than the general population

The average age of the Aboriginal population in 1996 was 25.5 years, 10 years younger than the average age in the general population. Children under 15 accounted for 35% of all Aboriginal peoples, compared with only 20% in the total population. The proportion of young people aged 15-24 (18%) was also greater among the Aboriginal population than in the total population (13%).

Moreover, there were 491 Aboriginal children under age five for every 1,000 Aboriginal women of childbearing age in 1996, which is about 70% higher than the ratio for the general population.

## Aboriginal population will grow rapidly

Given the number of young children, and the much higher birthrate, large increases are predicted to occur in the next decade in the Aboriginal population ages 15-24. In 1996, there were about 144,000 in this age group and this is projected by Statistics Canada to increase to 181,000 by 2006 (an increase of 26%).

The associated increase in the number of Aboriginal women of childbearing age will result in continued large numbers of Aboriginal children being born.

Similarly, over the intervening decade other segments of the Aboriginal population are projected to increase significantly. Those aged 35-54 are expected to grow from 173,000 to 244,000, a 41% increase by 2006.

## Urban location is a factor

Not only is the Aboriginal population younger, and growing faster, but there appears to be a growing concentration of this population in the core of the larger cities (especially throughout the West). This

urban movement may greatly increase the risk of contact with the criminal justice system.

In 1992, Carol LaPrairie examined the demographic characteristics of Aboriginal inmates in correctional institutions.<sup>5</sup> Her research identified Aboriginal groups residing in the inner cores of the large cities as the most vulnerable to the commission of crime and criminal justice processing.

Registered Indians from the inner core of the large western cities were found to be particularly at risk, as were Aboriginal offenders who commit offences off-reserve. An additional risk factor was that these Aboriginal offenders were generally very low on all socio-economic indicators, placing them disproportionately in the “have-not” social category.

**Aboriginal Family characteristics**

It is not clear whether urban migration causes or reflects a continuation of widespread childhood deprivation. In 1996, Johnston interviewed a 10% sample of federal male Aboriginal offenders, and inquired into their childhood background. He found that early drug (60%) and alcohol abuse (58%) were commonplace characteristics among these inmates, as were childhood behavioral problems (57%).

Other frequently noted occurrences were childhood physical (45%) and sexual (21%) abuse, as well as severe poverty (35%) and parental absence (41%). Suicide was attempted by 21% of these offenders. The male Aboriginal inmates in this study could be characterized as a very high-needs population, that all share a similar deprived background.<sup>6</sup>

**Aboriginal over-representation is pervasive**

The over-representation of Aboriginal peoples in Canada’s adult prisons and penitentiary system is pervasiveness as demonstrated by the recently published data from the “one-day snapshot” of Canada’s prison population.<sup>7</sup>

Among the provinces, the proportion of Aboriginal inmates was found to be much higher as you move from east to west (see Table 1). The proportion of Aboriginal people in the population also increased as we move from east to west, but nowhere near as rapidly.

Within the federal system, Aboriginal inmate representation ranged from about 4% in Quebec Region to just over 44% in the Prairies Region (see Table 1). Aboriginals are over-represented in every federal region.

Table 1

Representation of Aboriginal People in Canada (Census 1996) and of Federal Inmates within CSC’s Incarcerated Population						
Region or Province	Total Population 1996 Census	Total Aboriginal Population	Aboriginal as % of Total	Incarcerated Offenders — Total	Aboriginal Inmates — Est. *	Aboriginal as % of Incarcerated
NFLD	547,160	14,205	2.6%	—	—	—
PEI	132,855	950	0.7%	—	—	—
NS	899,970	12,380	1.4%	—	—	—
NB	729,630	10,250	1.4%	—	—	—
<b>ATLANTIC</b>	<b>2,309,615</b>	<b>37,785</b>	<b>1.6%</b>	<b>1,278</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>7.1%</b>
QUEBEC	7,045,080	71,415	1.0%	3,378	138	4.1%
ONTARIO	10,642,790	141,525	1.3%	3,462	267	7.7%
MAN	1,100,295	128,685	11.7%	—	—	—
SASK	976,615	111,245	11.4%	—	—	—
ALTA	2,669,195	122,840	4.6%	—	—	—
NWT	64,120	39,690	61.9%	—	—	—
<b>PRAIRIE</b>	<b>4,810,225</b>	<b>402,460</b>	<b>8.4%</b>	<b>3,322</b>	<b>1470</b>	<b>44.3%</b>
BC	3,689,755	139,655	3.8%	—	—	—
YUK	30,655	6,175	20.1%	—	—	—
PACIFIC	3,720,410	145,830	3.9%	1,775	348	19.6%
<b>NATIONAL</b>	<b>28,528,120</b>	<b>799,015</b>	<b>2.8%</b>	<b>13,215</b>	<b>2,314</b>	<b>17.5%</b>

Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Canada; “Total population by Aboriginal group, 1996 Census”. Note that the Census did not include the population for the yet-to-be-formed territory of Nunavut.

Source: OMS/EIS (1999-01-10). \* Classification is by self-reports and other intake documentation.

Table 2

Adult Corrections Snapshot, October 5, 1996		
Jurisdiction	Aboriginals as % of prison inmates	Aboriginals as % of adult population
NFLD	12	2
PEI	2	1
NS	5	1
NB	5	1
QUE	3	1
ONT	9	1
MAN	61	9
SASK	76	8
ALTA	34	4
BC	17	3
NWT	93	54
YUK	56	18
FEDERAL (CSC)	14	3
NATIONAL TOTAL	17	3

*Source: CCJS Juristat: "A One-Day Snapshot of Inmates in Canada's Adult Correctional Facilities". Vol. 18, No. 8. June 1998.*

### Aboriginal inmate admissions have grown significantly

As Table 3 shows, the largest increase in Aboriginal admissions was in the Western provinces and in the Territories. Overall, while Aboriginal admissions were not becoming a larger proportion of the total Provincial/Territorial annual admissions between 1980/81 and 1997/98, the federal proportion did increase, from 10 to 17% during this period. All three of the Prairie provinces, among the Provincial/Territorial jurisdictions, witnessed gains of more than 10 percentage points over this period.

### Summary

Based on past trends, the problem of Aboriginal over-representation in correctional institutions and the criminal justice system seems unlikely to

Table 3

Aboriginals as Proportion of Sentenced Admissions to Federal and Provincial/Territorial Custody				
Jurisdiction	% of Admissions 1980/81	% of Admissions 1990/91	% of Admissions 1997/98	Change 1980/81 to 1997/98
NFLD	3	3	7	+4 points
PEI	5	4	3	-2
NS	4	3	4	—
NB	3	5	4	+1
QUE	1	2	1	—
ONT	9	8	9	—
MAN	50	49	61	+11
SASK	62	68	72	+10
ALTA	26	34	39	+13
BC	18	18	16	-2
NWT	84	91	90	+6
YUK	56	63	77	+21
National	15	19	15	—
Federal (CSC)	10	12	17	+7

disappear of its own accord. Aboriginal peoples are significantly over-represented among the prison and penitentiary populations of Canada, and this has generally been increasing. It is especially problematic in western Canada and the Territories.

Some of the reasons for this include the increasing growth rate of the Aboriginal youth population relative to the overall Aboriginal population. As well, the Aboriginal population is also growing in the larger urban cores and off reserve. These two issues appear to increase Aboriginal vulnerability to coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Therefore, there will continue to be greater risks for the incarceration of Aboriginal people unless ways and means are developed to lessen their contact with the criminal justice system. ■

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<sup>2</sup> *Task Force on Aboriginal Peoples in Federal Corrections: Final Report*, Solicitor General Canada, 1989. Page 5.

<sup>3</sup> CCJS Juristat: *Female Inmates, Aboriginal Inmates, and Inmates Serving Life Sentences: A One-Day Snapshot*. Statistics Canada, Vol. 19, No. 5. April, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> These sub-totals also exceed the total Aboriginal population since a small number, about 6,400 reported that they considered themselves as members of more than one Aboriginal group. See Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, Tuesday, January 13, 1998. 1996 Census: Aboriginal Data.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Carole LaPrairie: "Dimensions of Aboriginal Over-Representation in Correctional Institutions and Implications for Crime Prevention." Solicitor General of Canada, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph C. Johnston, *Aboriginal Offender Survey: Case Files and Interview Sample*. Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, September 1997, Report No. R-61. Note that Johnston had earlier found very similar characteristics for northern Aboriginal inmates: *Northern Aboriginal Offenders in Federal Custody: A Profile*, Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, September 1994, Report No. R-36.

<sup>7</sup> CCJS Juristat: *A One-Day Snapshot of Inmates in Canada's Adult Correctional Facilities*. Statistics Canada, 1998. Vol. 18, No. 8.