

Aboriginal federal offender surveys: A synopsis

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This article presents findings from two studies of male Aboriginal offenders serving federal sentences in correctional institutions. The first study (1994)² profiled approximately half of the Northern Aboriginal offenders under federal jurisdiction who were incarcerated in the Prairie region and the Northwest Territories. The second study (1997) was of a selected sample of Aboriginal offenders in federal institutions.³ Both studies used similar data: the Royal Canadian Mounted Police criminal conviction records; case file reviews; and face-to-face interviews. This article highlights some of the differences and similarities between the two samples.⁴

Aboriginal group and first language

The Northern Aboriginal sample (1994) was comprised of Inuit offenders (56.3%), Metis (14.1%), Dene (9.4%), Chippewan (4.7%), Gwich'in (3.1%), and others/mixed (12.5%). Just over 40 percent of the sample reported Inuktituk as their first language, while 39% reported English as their first language. No Northern Aboriginal offender reported French as either his first or second language.

Aboriginal Offenders in the 1997 study were divided into groups by their first language. The first language of the majority (48%) was English. Of those who identified an Aboriginal language as their first language, 28% spoke Cree, followed by Inuktitut/Other Northern/Inuit (16%), Ojibway (14%), and Iroquois/Mohawk (7%). About 9% of the 1997 study reported French as their first language.

Criminal history

The overall conviction pattern for the 1997 Aboriginal sample was characterized by property offences, such as break and enter, theft and possession of stolen property. About three in ten (31%) of the Aboriginal offenders were incarcerated for homicide convictions; 68% had convictions for assault charges, and 36% were incarcerated for sex-related offences.

Violent offences such as assault, both sexual and non-sexual, were identified in the criminal conviction histories of the 1994 Northern Aboriginal sample. More than half have had at least one conviction for a sexual offence, while just over 40% have at least three convictions for assault charges.

Childhood background

From the offenders' case files, information was gathered on individual childhood histories. Both study samples had similar experiences during childhood (see Table 1), such as alcohol and drug abuse, parental absence, poverty, and behavioural problems. Physical and sexual abuse was found in the childhood background of both samples. A significant percentage of both samples were not raised by their families. Almost 11% of the 1994 sample were raised in group/foster homes. In the 1997 sample, 28% were raised as a ward of the community, while 15% were sent to residential school. Suicide and/or self-injury had been attempted by 21% of the 1997 sample.

Education and employment

Almost two-thirds of the 1997 sample had difficulties in the need areas of employment (63%) and more than half (54%) had educational needs, as determined from case file reviews. Almost 60% of the 1994 sample had less than a grade 10 education. Most respondents reported employment activity as semi-skilled (47%) or traditional (10%). Almost 30% reported unstable employment activity. It would appear that the employment needs of this sample are high, as very few of the study participants reported skilled, full-time employment activity prior to incarceration.

Programming and attitudes toward institutional staff

Programming

Appropriate Aboriginal programming was not readily available to the 1994 sample at the time of the study, for one of two reasons. In the first instance, no Aboriginal-specific programming was offered at one particular correctional institution. In the second instance, where Aboriginal-specific programming was offered, it focused more on Native cultures from the south, rather than on Northern Native cultures. Some of the Inuit in the study specifically noted that the cultural differences between themselves and the more southern groups such as the Cree, are quite significant. Regardless of the limitations of relevant programs, the majority of the sample (52%) held a

positive attitude toward institutional programming. At the time of the study, 22% of the sample were involved in vocational programs, 16% were involved in substance abuse programs, and 11% were involved in education programs.

As for the 1997 sample, Native-oriented programming was felt to be more effective, and was participated in with a more positive attitude than non-Aboriginal programming. The programs with the highest participation rates were substance abuse (59%), personal/emotional (43%), educational (36%), employment (28%), and criminal attitudes (22%). It is interesting to note that the substance abuse and the personal/emotional programs were Native-specific programs. This study also queried the sample as to which program they felt was the most effective. Of those who provided an answer to this question, 11% felt that the Native substance abuse programs were the most effective programs, while 8% felt that both Northern Talking Circles and Sweat Lodges were the most effective.

Attitudes toward institutional staff

Nearly all the 1994 sample reported fair and equal treatment from institution staff, but at the same time, felt that the staff were not responsive to their needs, nor knowledgeable about their culture.

From the 1997 interview data, it became clear that there exists a significant apprehension on the part of Aboriginal offenders to deal directly with Correctional staff. While this may be true to an extent of all offenders in custody, Aboriginal offenders seemed quite firm in the belief that the persons whom they are most trusting of are other Natives, and especially spiritual leaders and Elders.

Spirituality and lifestyle

Lifestyle

Many of those sampled in 1994 practiced one or more aspects of a traditional Northern Aboriginal lifestyle prior to incarceration. Almost 38% of the sample rotated their lifestyles with the seasons between living on the land and living in town and only 5% lived exclusively on the land year-round.⁵ Seventy-five percent took part in traditional activities (e.g., craftwork, special Aboriginal ceremonies). For those incarcerated far from their community, especially for those who subsisted largely from wildlife harvested by themselves, the prison environment was experienced as alien. Many things considered commonplace by non-Northerners, such as the weather, processed foods, and the like, exposed many Aboriginal Northerners to additional cultural shock over and above the experience of incarceration.

Spirituality

By their own account, it was established that the 1997 sample constituted a highly spiritual group, placing a high value on their traditions and culture. Almost 50% of the sample considered themselves to be very spiritual, while 21% considered themselves to be spiritual. There was also a high degree of participation in, and the desire for more Native cultural activities. Concern was also voiced regarding the tribal affiliation of the various Elders or spiritual leaders when the Elder is of a culture different than their own.

Conclusion

In these two studies, several themes were apparent. First, it is clear that the overall incarcerated Aboriginal population constitutes a high needs group. Also, this is a group that largely shares a background of physical or sexual abuse, early drug and alcohol use, emotional problems, poor parenting and high educational and employment needs.

Another relevant theme identifies and characterizes the Aboriginal offenders' spirituality, cultural life and lifestyle. The 1994 and 1997 studies indicate that Aboriginal offenders participated in various aspects of what is called a "traditional" way of life, which is fundamental to the Aboriginal society as a whole.

Although the two samples differed in their feelings toward institutional staff, the 1994 sample indicated more positive feelings toward staff than the 1997 sample. The 1994 sample also felt much more isolated from their land and culture as a result of incarceration.

The Aboriginal offender population presents a special set of challenges to corrections, such as language, culture and programming needs that is relevant in providing culturally appropriate interventions. ■

Table 1

Childhood Background Information		
Background Information	1994 sample (percentage)	1997 sample (percentage)
Alcohol abuse	84.4	57.9
Drug abuse	50.0	60.4
Physical abuse	50.0	45.2
Parental absence	35.9	41.4
Poverty	35.9	35.3
Behavioural problems	65.6	57.1
Learning problems	15.6	36.9

¹ Please forward all inquiries concerning this article to the Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0P9.

² Correctional Service of Canada, *Northern Aboriginal Offenders in Federal Custody: A Profile*. Research Report No. 36 (Ottawa, ON: 1994).

³ Correctional Service of Canada, *Aboriginal offender survey: Case file and interview sample*. Research Report No. 61 (Ottawa, ON: 1997).

⁴ Direct comparisons between the two studies should be made with caution, as different questions were asked in each survey. In many instances, many study participants failed or refused to provide an answer to a specific question.

⁵ Living on the land refers to a lifestyle characterized by camp living, acquiring sustenance through hunting/fishing/trapping, and so forth.

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