

Profiling federally incarcerated First Nations, Métis and Inuit offenders

John-Patrick Moore and Shelley Trevethan¹

Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada

Research suggests that the profile of Aboriginal offenders is quite different from non-Aboriginal offenders.² Overall, Aboriginal offenders appear to be younger, have lower levels of education, higher rates of unemployment, greater need for intervention and more extensive criminal backgrounds in comparison to non-Aboriginal offenders. Although there is some evidence to suggest that differences also exist between some Aboriginal groups,³ few studies have explored this issue in depth. This article compares First Nations, Métis and Inuit offenders and identifies areas that could be used to inform programs and policy.

Data were drawn from a one-day snapshot (August 2000) of all First Nations (N = 1,490), Métis (N = 586), Inuit (N = 100), and non-Aboriginal (N = 10,363) offenders incarcerated in federal correctional facilities. Information was extracted from case files in Correctional Service of Canada's Offender Management System. Offenders were compared along their socio-demographic, case needs and criminal offence/history characteristics.

Socio-demographics characteristics

A few differences exist between First Nations, Métis and Inuit offenders in socio-demographic characteristics (see Table 1). Over one-half (57%) of Inuit offenders have less than a grade 8 education at the time of admission to the federal correctional facility. In comparison, about one-third (31%) of First Nations offenders and about one-fifth (21%) of Métis offenders have less than a grade 8 education. Métis offenders appear to be similar to non-Aboriginal offenders in educational level.

The average age at the time of admission to a federal correctional facility is significantly older for Inuit offenders (33 years) than First Nations and Métis offenders (about 30 1/2 years). Inuit offenders are also less likely to be married at admission than First Nations and Métis offenders (28% versus 40% and 43%, respectively). While smaller proportions of Inuit offenders are unemployed at arrest in comparison to First Nations and Métis offenders, these differences are not significant.

Table 1

Socio-demographic characteristics					
	First Nations % (n)	Métis % (n)	Inuit % (n)		Non-Aboriginal % (n)
Less than grade 8 education	31 (309)	21 (80)	57 (44)	***	20 (1215)
Unemployed at arrest	77 (761)	75 (275)	68 (51)	ns	68 (4130)
Married	40 (586)	43 (252)	28 (28)	*	40 (4102)

Male	96 (1424)	97 (570)	97 (97)	ns	98 (10113)
	M (n)	M (n)	M (n)		M (n)
Age of admission	30.5 (1490)	30.6 (586)	33.1(100)	*	33.9 (10368)
ns = non-significant; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001					

Case need characteristics

Some differences exist between First Nations, Métis and Inuit offenders on their identified needs for programming when entering the federal correctional facility. Significantly larger proportions of Inuit offenders (89%) are rated as high need overall for comprehensive intervention, as compared to First Nations and Métis offenders (78% and 73%, respectively). Significant differences also exist between First Nations and Métis offenders.

When examining specific need areas, First Nations, Métis and Inuit offenders do not differ substantially in the areas of community functioning, personal/emotional orientation, or attitudes (see Table 2). However, significantly larger proportions of First Nations and Métis offenders (70% and 71%, respectively) are rated as having “some or considerable” need in the area of employment as compared to Inuit offenders (57%).

Differences also exist between Aboriginal offender groups on their level of need for interventions targeting pro-criminal associates and social interactions. Métis offenders are more likely to be rated as having “some or considerable” need in the area of pro-criminal associates than First Nations and Inuit offenders (70% versus 65% and 55%, respectively). Significant differences also exist between First Nations and Inuit offenders.

Aboriginal groups tend to have varied levels of need for substance abuse interventions. First Nations offenders are significantly more likely to exhibit “some or considerable” need for substance abuse interventions in comparison to Métis offenders (94% versus 91%).

Findings indicate that Aboriginal offenders differ significantly on their marital/family need rating. Inuit offenders (73%) are significantly more likely to have “some or considerable” need for marital and family interventions than First Nations (60%) and Métis (53%) offenders. Significant differences also exist between First Nations and Métis offenders.

Table 2

Socio-demographic characteristics					
Some or considerable need	First Nations % (n)	Métis % (n)	Inuit % (n)		Non-Aboriginal % (n)
Employment	70 (872)	71 (343)	57 (48)	*	58 (4,882)
Marital/Family	60 (754)	53 (259)	73 (61)	***	51 (4,324)

Associates/Social Interaction	65 (817)	70 (341)	55 (46)	**	63 (5,282)
Substance Abuse	94(1,178)	91 (439)	92 (77)	*	70 (5,889)
Community Functioning	45 (563)	47 (228)	44 (37)	ns	49 (4,100)
Personal/Emotional	96(1,201)	95 (460)	99 (83)	ns	91 (7,699)
Attitudes	53 (656)	56 (272)	52 (44)	ns	62 (5,239)
ns = non-significant; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001					

Current offence characteristics

Regarding the offences for which offenders are currently incarcerated, significantly larger proportions of First Nations offenders are incarcerated for homicide than Inuit offenders (28% versus 16%). The difference between Métis and Inuit offenders fail to reach significance (see Table 3).

Significantly larger proportions of Inuit offenders (62%) are incarcerated for sexual offences than First Nations or Métis offenders (22% and 16%, respectively). Significantly greater proportions of First Nations offenders are incarcerated for sexual

Significantly greater proportions of Métis offenders are incarcerated for robbery than any other Aboriginal offender group. However, First Nations offenders are also more likely to be convicted of robbery than Inuit offenders. Furthermore, larger proportions of Métis offenders are incarcerated for break and enter, as compared to First Nations offenders.

Furthermore, larger proportions of Métis offenders are convicted of drug- related offences, as compared to First Nations and Inuit offenders. While a larger proportion of First Nations offenders are incarcerated for a drug- related offence than Inuit offenders, the difference fails to reach significance.

Similar proportions of First Nations, Métis and Inuit offenders are designated as maximum security at the time of admission to the federal correctional facility. However, at the time of intake to the federal facility, Inuit offenders are more likely to be rated as “ high risk” to re- offend than First Nations and Métis offenders (85% versus 73% and 68%, respectively). Significant differences also exist between First Nations and Métis offenders.

Criminal history

Some differences exist between First Nations, Métis and Inuit offenders in terms of their criminal history. Significantly greater proportions of Métis and First Nations offenders have been involved in closed youth custody (46% and 40%, respectively) in comparison to Inuit offenders (18%). Further, although similar in their previous involvement in provincial institutions, significantly greater proportions of Métis offenders (39%) have served a prior federal term in comparison to First Nations

offenders (32%). Differences between Métis and Inuit (33%) offenders are not significant.

Profiles

First Nations offenders

First Nations offenders are admitted to federal institutions in their early 30' s. Typically, they are younger at admission than other Aboriginal groups and large proportions have been involved in the youth justice system, highlighting their early criminal involvement. Moreover, large proportions are admitted to federal facilities with low levels of education, underscoring their socio- economic disadvantage.

The criminal characteristics of First Nations point to their violent offending behaviour. Large proportions are incarcerated for murder and serious assaults. These offence characteristics are likely reflective of the myriad of needs First Nations offenders present at admission. First Nations offenders have a high level of need for interventions that target substance abuse, personal/ emotional issues, and employment. The multitude of needs suggest that First Nations offenders require comprehensive correctional programming.

Table 3

Socio-demographic characteristics					
Some or considerable need	First Nations % (n)	Métis % (n)	Inuit % (n)		Non-Aboriginal % (n)
Current offence (1)					
Homicide	28 (414)	24 (139)	16 (16)	**	24 (2,447)
Serious assault	39 (578)	33 (191)	40 (40)	*	26 (2,709)
Sex offence	22 (333)	16 (93)	62 (62)	***	17 (1,736)
Robbery	29 (426)	40 (237)	8 (8)	***	35 (3,610)
Drug offence	11 (165)	17 (98)	6 (6)	***	21 (2,193)
Break and enter	32 (477)	38 (222)	35 (35)	*	31 (3,157)
Other Criminal Code offence	61 (914)	64 (373)	53 (53)	ns	62 (6,473)
Designated maximum security at admission	21 (275)	17 (85)	17 (15)	ns	16 (1,311)
High risk to re-offend	73(1,077)	68 (392)	85 (85)	***	57 (5,727)
	M	M	M		M
Aggregate sentence length	1,959.1	2,168.3	1,819.6	*	2,427.2

(1) Offenders may be incarcerated for more than one offence, therefore the total does not equal 100%.
ns = non-significant; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Métis offenders

Similar to First Nations offenders, Métis offenders are admitted to federal facilities in their early 30's and have had a lengthy criminal past. However, in contrast to other groups, the offences for which Métis offenders are incarcerated appear to be more varied in nature. Large proportions are incarcerated for robbery, break and enter and drug-related offences. The diverse offending behaviour of Métis offenders is likely associated with the large proportion of Métis living in urban areas.⁴

Métis offenders appear to have similar needs to First Nations offenders. Large proportions require interventions that focus on personal difficulties, substance abuse and employment-related issues. However, unlike other groups, Métis have higher need for programs that address criminal social interactions. The need of Métis offenders for such programs highlights their ties to criminal peers and their disproportionate involvement in pro-criminal social milieus.

Inuit offenders

Unlike other Aboriginal groups, past involvement in the criminal justice system does not appear to be a prominent feature in the Inuit offender profile. However, there are some important differences in the offending patterns of Inuit offenders. Considerably larger proportions of Inuit offenders are incarcerated for sexual offences than any other offender group. Moreover, most likely due to the type of offences for which they are incarcerated, large proportions of Inuit offenders are rated as high risk to re-offend.

Inuit offenders present a multitude of social and psychological issues upon entry to federal facilities. Large proportions are under educated, experience considerable difficulty personal/emotional issues, substance abuse, and marital/family relations. They are also more often considered in need of comprehensive interventions than other Aboriginal groups. These results emphasize the necessity of offering Inuit offenders a diverse range of programming.

Discussion

The profiles of Aboriginal offenders are diverse. The areas of difference emphasize the need to adapt programs to fit the needs and issues of specific Aboriginal groups. These programs should consider the varied socio-demographic, offence, need and background profiles of each group.

1. 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0P9.

2. For example, see Trevethan, S., Tremblay, S., and Carter, J. (2000). The over-representation of Aboriginal people in the justice system. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada. Also

see LaPrairie, C. (1996). Examining Aboriginal corrections in Canada. Ottawa, ON: Solicitor General of Canada.

3. Motiuk, L., and Nafekh, M. (2000). Aboriginal offenders in federal corrections: A profile. Forum on Corrections Research, 12(1), 10-15.

4. Leclair, M. (1996). Profile of Aboriginal sex offenders. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.