

# The role of large cities in the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the federal correctional system

Mark Nafekh and Nicole Crutcher

Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada

The over representation of Aboriginal peoples in the Canadian criminal justice system has been a growing concern of correctional policy makers and practitioners. The importance of addressing this issue is reflected in the Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC) corporate objectives: "The Service will work with Aboriginal peoples, partners and the community to advance Government initiatives aimed at reducing the incarceration rates of Aboriginal peoples". Recent research has suggested that over-representation be examined via linkages between relative disadvantage and location of crime.<sup>2</sup> This article examines the role of large cities (in the Prairie region) in the over-representation of Aboriginal peoples in the federal correctional system, and suggests a methodology for empirically defining and assessing location-specific advantage/disadvantage.

This study examined differences in dynamic risk factors (criminogenic need) of Aboriginal offenders who committed their most serious offence in large cities, small cities or rural communities. Place of offence was categorized into three location groupings:<sup>3</sup>

- Large city - population over 100,000;
- Small city - population that is less than 100,000 but more than 10,000;
- Rural community - all other towns and villages, but excluding reserve communities.

The study comprised two sets of analyses. The first set of analyses examined the relationship between dynamic factors and location of offence for Aboriginal offenders. The second set of analyses examined whether the dynamic factors associated with offence locations are more pronounced for the Aboriginal offender population, thus indicating a relative disadvantage. For both sets of analyses, the dynamic risk (criminogenic need) domains of the Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) were utilized. The OIA process is a systematic review and evaluation of an offender's criminal risk and need areas upon admission to a federal correctional facility.<sup>4</sup> The application of the OIA assists in the identification of dynamic factors, thus providing a measure of advantage/disadvantage. Dynamic factors are grouped into seven target domains: employment, marital/family relations, associates/ social interaction, substance abuse, community functioning, personal emotional orientation, and attitudes. Each domain contains an overall dynamic need rating plus a range of individual indicators. An examination of demographic factors, such as age at admission, was also included in the analyses.

## **Procedure**

All available data for this study were extracted from CSC's automated Offender Management System (OMS). The sample included all male federal offenders admitted on a warrant of committal to a federal correctional facility in the Prairie region between January 1, 1995 and April 30, 2002. Offenders with complete OIA and an offence that occurred in the Prairie region were selected to comprise the study.

Based on where the most serious admitting offence occurred,<sup>5</sup> place of offence was categorized into the three location groupings described above. The data extraction criteria were used to create two samples; an Aboriginal offender sample (N = 2,750) and a non-Aboriginal sample (N = 2,522) matched on offence location. About one-half of the sample were arrested in a large city for their most serious offence (53% Aboriginal; 58% non-Aboriginal), one-third in a rural community (34% Aboriginal; 28% non-Aboriginal), and less than one-fifth in a small city (13% Aboriginal; 14% non-Aboriginal). Results of the study are presented in the sections that follow.

### **Differences within the Aboriginal offender population by offence location**

The results demonstrated that differences existed between Aboriginal offenders who had committed their most serious offence in a large city, as compared to those who had committed the offence location in a small city or rural community. Although there were no significant differences in the employment, substance abuse, personal/ emotional or attitude domains, when individual indicators within each dynamic factor domain were examined, the results provided an interesting picture that better illustrated some of the differences by location. Table 1 summarizes some of the key indicators that were viewed as being related to offending location. These indicators are discussed in the sections that follow.

Aboriginal offenders who committed their most serious offence in a large city were more likely to have programming needs in the areas of employment. Offenders from the large-city grouping were assessed as more likely to have had difficulties acquiring and maintaining employment when compared to those in the small city or rural community groupings. In particular, those who committed their most serious offence in a large city were more likely to be lacking a skill/ trade/profession, to be unemployed at arrest, have no employment history, and to have been laid off. This problem may be compounded by the fact that Aboriginal offenders who committed their most serious offence in large cities were more likely to have criminogenic lifestyles. In addition, offenders who committed their most serious offence in a large city were more likely to have gang affiliations, associate with substance abusers and have drug abuse problems than those in the small cities or rural communities.

Aboriginal offenders who committed their most serious offence in a large city had significantly more difficulty with respect to community functioning compared to those who committed their offences in a small city or rural community. Specifically, those in the large-city grouping were more likely to have experienced difficulties in the areas of maintaining housing and paying bills. The results are not surprising, given the employment and associates related programming needs identified earlier for those in the large-city grouping.

When examining attitudes, it was found that a significantly larger proportion of offenders who committed their most serious offence in a large city had a generally negative attitude towards the criminal justice and correctional systems when compared to the offenders in the other two location groupings. Specifically, those committing their most serious offence in a large city were more likely to be assessed as having poorer attitudes towards laws, police, correctional institutions, and community supervision.

Analyses of the personal/emotional indicators revealed that Aboriginal offenders who had committed their most serious offence in a large city were assessed as risk taking, thrill seeking, unaware of consequences and had low frustration levels to a significantly greater extent than those from small cities or rural areas. Again, these findings are linked to the general criminogenic lifestyle but are probably exacerbated when living in a large city due to both the increased exposure to criminal opportunity and police presence.

Lastly, when examining the demographic characteristics of Aboriginal offenders, it was found that those who committed their most serious offence in a large city were significantly younger at admission than those in the small city and rural community groupings (average age at admission was 29, 30 and 31 respectively).

The first set of analyses revealed areas in which Aboriginal offenders are assessed as having 'higher' programming needs in large cities versus small cities and rural communities. The second set of analyses examined whether Aboriginal peoples are at relatively more disadvantage in an urban environment compared to non-Aboriginal peoples.

**Table 1**

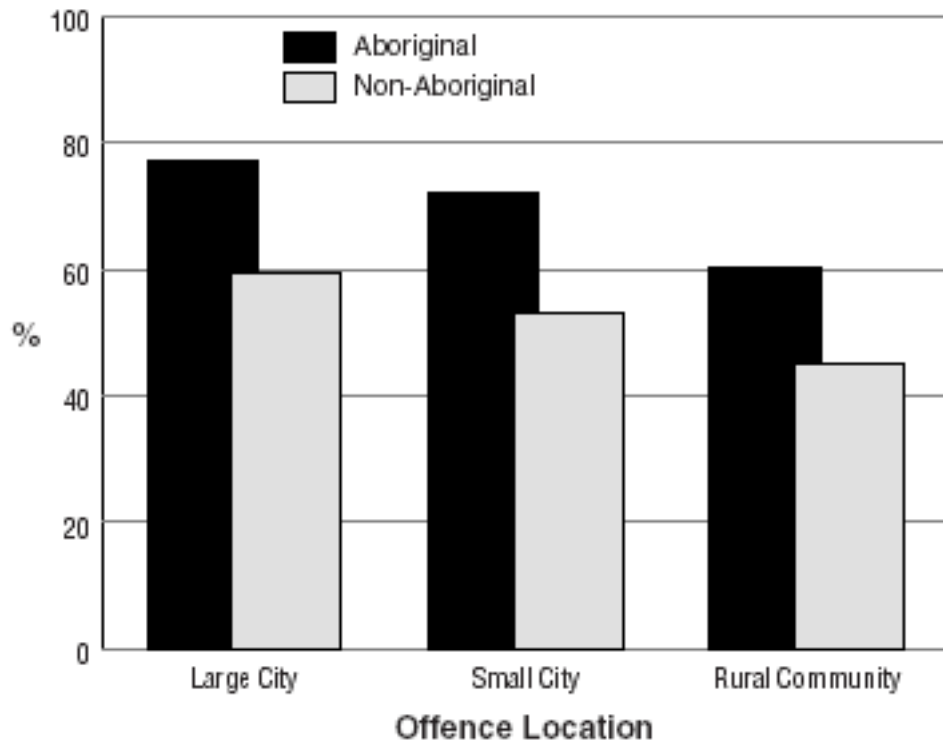
<b>Selected need domain indicators for Aboriginal offenders</b>				
<b>Significant need domain indicators</b>	<b>Aboriginal offenders(%)</b>			<b>Total</b>
	<b>Large city</b>	<b>Small city</b>	<b>Rural area</b>	
<b>Employment</b>				
Under grade 8 education***	22%	26%	34%	27%
Lacks a skill area/trade/profession***	74%	71%	65%	71%
Unemployed at time of arrest***	77%	72%	60%	71%
No employment history***	21%	16%	11%	17%
<b>Marital/family relations</b>				
Has been arrested for child abuse**	3%	4%	5%	4%
Has been arrested for incest*	2%	3%	4%	3%
<b>Associates/social interaction</b>				
Has many criminal acquaintances***	80%	72%	59%	72%
Has mostly criminal friends***	57%	44%	33%	47%
Has been affiliated with a gang***	28%	11%	8%	19%
Resides in a criminogenic area***	60%	34%	40%	50%
<b>Substance abuse</b>				
Began using drugs at an early age***	70%	65%	55%	64%
Uses drugs on a regular basis***	62%	56%	49%	56%
Has gone on drug-taking sprees***	58%	48%	36%	49%

Abuses drugs***	85%	80%	73%	80%
<b>Community functioning</b>				
Has unstable accommodation***	51%	48%	32%	44%
Difficulty meeting bills**	46%	44%	39%	43%
<b>Personal/emotional functioning</b>				
Gang member***	20%	7%	4%	13%
Low frustration tolerance*	52%	51%	46%	50%
Takes risks inappropriately***	71%	69%	58%	66%
Thrill-seeker***	37%	35%	29%	34%
<b>Attitude</b>				
Negative towards law**	49%	49%	42%	47%
Negative towards police**	40%	35%	33%	37%
Negative towards corrections***	23%	20%	16%	20%
Negative towards community supervision**	35%	35%	29%	33%
Employment has no value*	22%	20%	17%	20%
***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05				

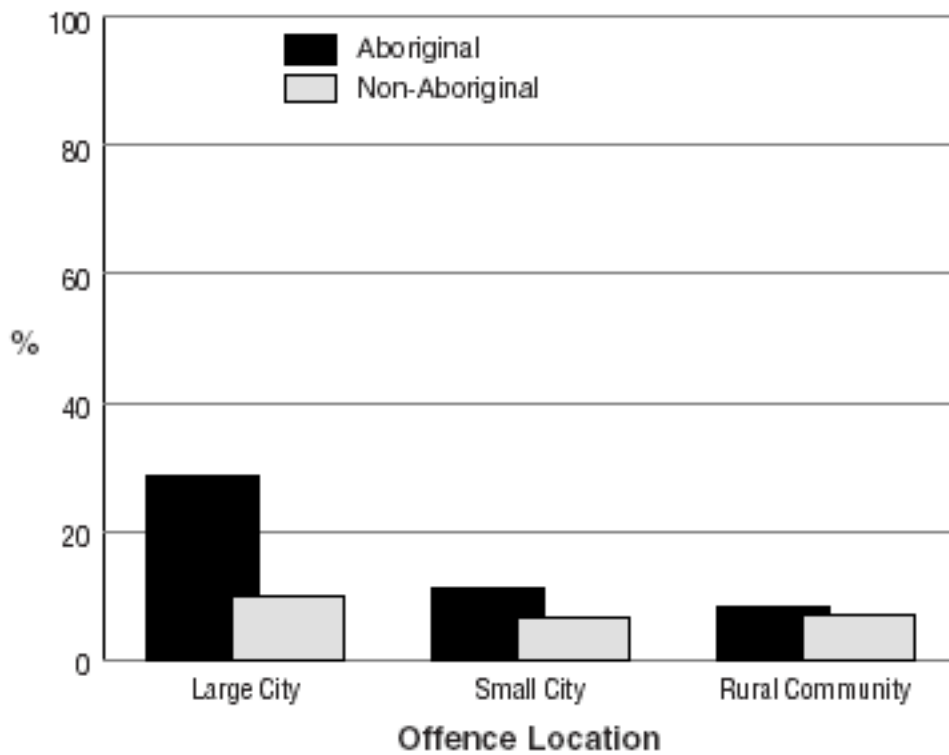
### Differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders

Similar to the Aboriginal population, within the matched non-Aboriginal sample there were significant differences in dynamic factor domains by offence location. However, these differences were significantly more predominant for Aboriginal offenders within certain dynamic factor domains. In particular, Aboriginal offenders were more likely to be unemployed at time of arrest in a large city than their non-Aboriginal counterparts, even though they were not predominantly more likely to lack a skill area, trade or profession. In the large-city grouping, Aboriginal offenders were also more likely to be gang affiliated, be assessed as having criminogenic lifestyles and have mostly criminal friends (see Figures 1 and 2).

**Figure 1**  
**Unemployed at time of arrest**

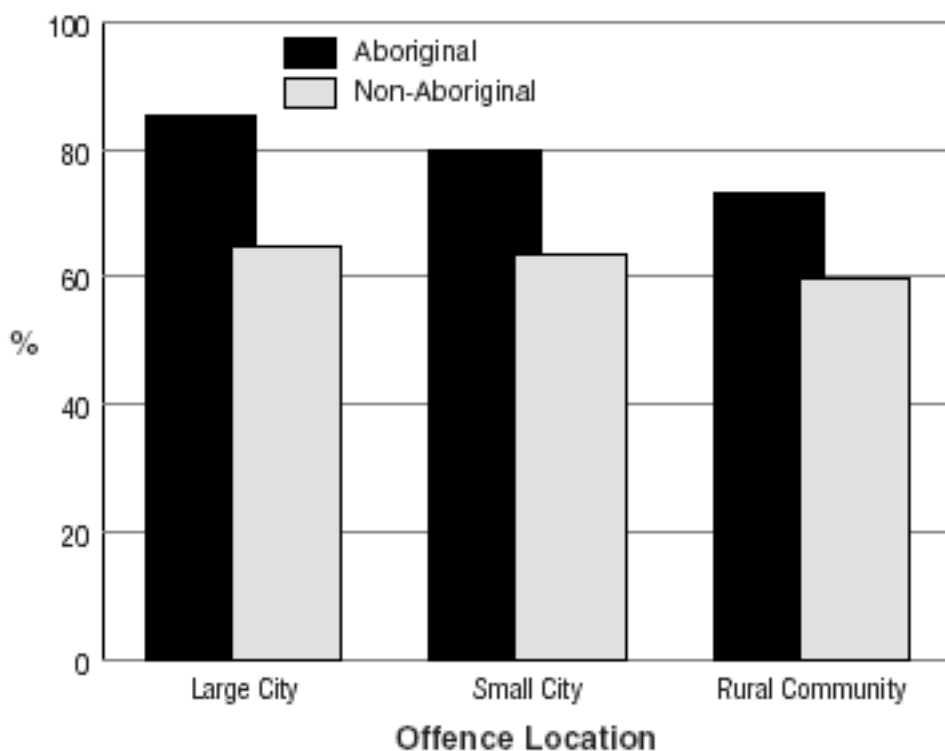


**Figure 2**  
**Gang affiliation**

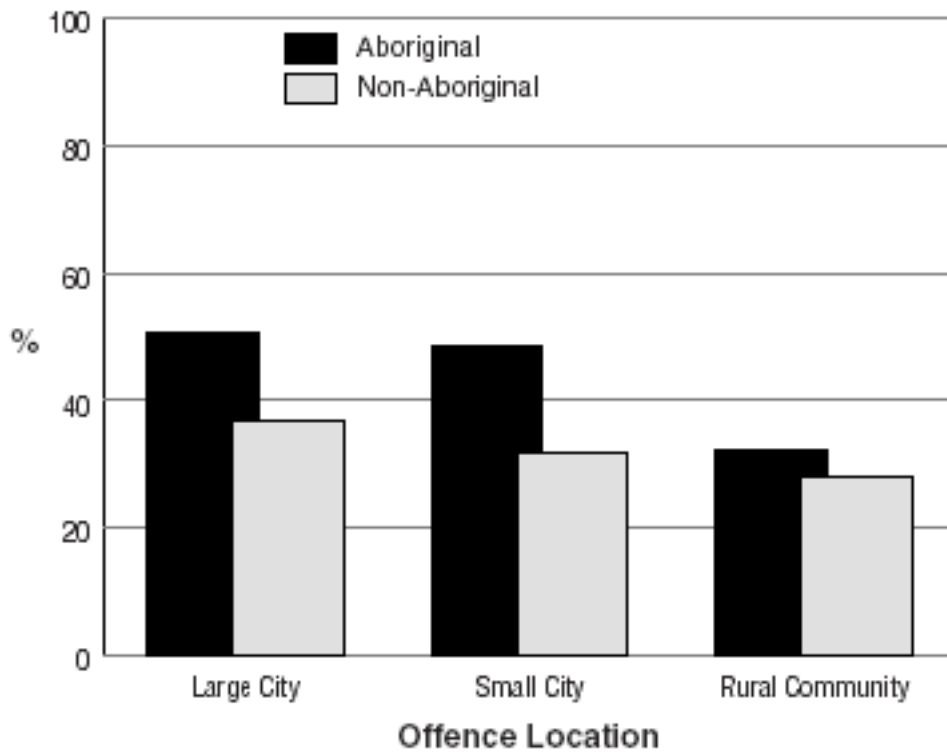


A “large-city association” was also linked to substance abuse and community functioning for the Aboriginal offender population. Specifically, Aboriginal offenders who committed their most serious offence in a large city were more likely to abuse drugs and have unstable accommodations than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (see Figures 3 and 4). Furthermore, Aboriginal offenders in the large-city grouping were more likely to have placed little or no value on employment than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. This was not surprising given the strong “large-city” association with unemployment for the Aboriginal population.

**Figure 3**  
**Abuses drugs**



**Figure 4**  
**Unstable accommodations**



Finally, an examination of demographic factors revealed that there was an association between age at admission and offence location for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders. Both were significantly younger in the large city grouping than in the small city or rural community groupings. However, there were no between-group differences across offence locations, meaning that the gap between large city, small city and rural community was similar for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

<b>Average age at admission</b>		
<b>Most serious offence location</b>	<b>Aboriginal</b>	<b>Non-Aboriginal</b>
Large city	28.9	32.0
Small city	29.9	33.4
Rural area	31.5	34.5

## **Conclusions**

Results demonstrated that Aboriginal offenders who committed their offences in large cities tended to be younger, more involved in criminal lifestyles, and lacking in employment experience than those who commit their most serious offence in small cities or rural communities. The large-city environment may be a key factor that influences the extent to which certain dynamic criminogenic factors are present for offenders. The study also examined the degree to which large cities in the Prairies contribute to the over-representation of Aboriginal offenders in the criminal justice system. It was found that significant differences in dynamic factors existed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders by offence

location. Specifically, in large cities, Aboriginal offenders were assessed as having more predominant employment and substance abuse programming needs than the non-Aboriginal sample. Aboriginal offenders were also more likely to have large-city associated dynamic factors present, such as having unstable accommodations, criminogenic lifestyles, many criminal friends and gang affiliations. Overall, results demonstrated an association between dynamic factors and large cities in the Prairie region. This effect is more predominant for Aboriginal offenders in the specified dynamic factor domains.

The research findings suggest a number of implications for CSC and other criminal justice partners. Specifically, results suggest that successful reintegration strategies address the dynamic factors associated with the area to which Aboriginal offenders are conditionally released. For example, ensuring that programming needs in the area of employment are met for offenders reintegrating in a large city. Ultimately, appropriate intervention strategies may be aided by current and prospective research initiatives that build on the scope of these analyses.

- 
1. 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0P9.
  2. LaPrairie, C. (2002). Aboriginal over-representation in the criminal justice system: A tale of nine cities, *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, April, 181-208.
  3. These categories are based on information from Statistics Canada.
  4. For a more detailed description of the OIA, see Motiuk, L. L. (1997). Classification for correctional programming: The Offender Intake Assessment process, *Forum on Corrections Research*, 9(1), 18-22.
  5. "Most serious offence" is a classification system used by CSC based on the definition provided by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. The offences are generally categorized by the longest maximum sentence an offence carries with violent offences always taking precedent over non-violent. The offences, classified in order of seriousness are as follows: homicide, attempted murder, sexual offences, robbery, assault, other violent offences, impaired driving, break and enter, other property offences, drug offences.