

Métis offenders in British Columbia: An examination of needs in the institution and upon release

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As is the case for First Nations and Inuit, Métis people are over-represented in the federal correctional system. While Métis account for 0.7% of the total Canadian adult population, Métis offenders comprise 4% of the federal offender population.⁴ Furthermore, research suggests that the profile of Métis offenders is distinct from First Nations and non-Aboriginal offenders.⁵ This points to the need to examine the issues facing Métis offenders and their diverse needs for correctional programming.

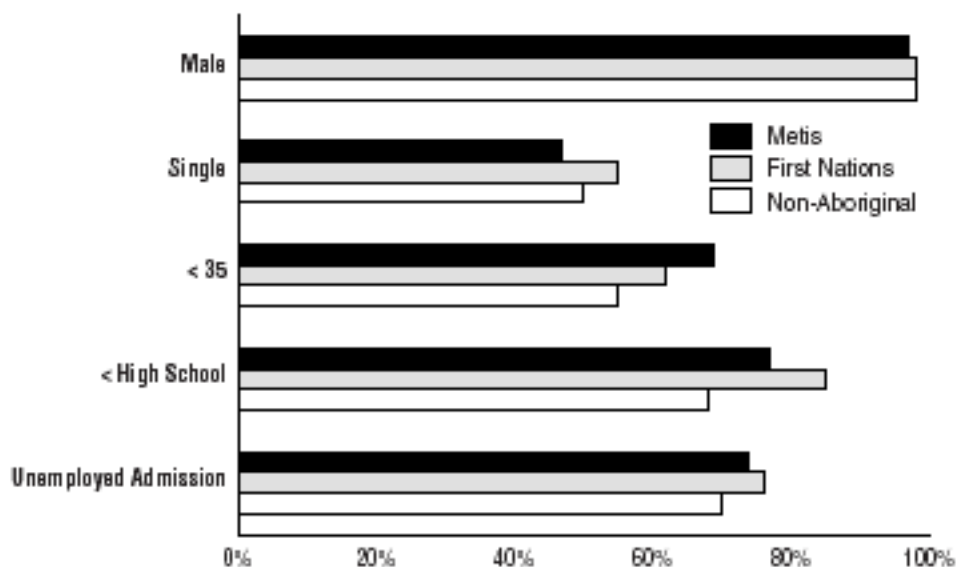
The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), Métis Provincial Council of British Columbia (MPCBC), and Métis National Council (MNC) established a partnership to examine the needs of Métis offenders. The information could be used to enhance correctional programs and reintegration services to better meet the needs of Métis offenders, their families, and communities. Furthermore, the findings could be used to be better informed about how Section 81 and 84 of the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA) can be used to assist Métis offenders in making successful transitions back into the community.

Structured interviews were conducted with 64 Métis federal offenders in British Columbia, and 17 family members. In addition to background information, the interviews focused on current program participation and the needs of offenders and their family. Additional data were extracted from offender files, as was information on comparison groups of First Nations and non-Aboriginal populations in British Columbia.

Characteristics of Métis offenders

As illustrated in Figure 1, Métis offenders in British Columbia are fairly similar to First Nations and non-Aboriginal offenders on demographic characteristics. As with First Nations and non-Aboriginal offenders, large proportions of Métis offenders were less than 35 years of age (69%), single (47%), had not completed high school (77%), and were unemployed at the time of admission (74%). However, Métis offenders were significantly younger than non-Aboriginal offenders. Approximately two-thirds (69%) of Métis offenders were less than 35 years of age at the time of admission to the federal institution compared to one-half (55%) of non-Aboriginal offenders.

Figure 1
Socio- demographic characteristics of Métis offenders



A considerable number of Métis offenders (83%) were currently incarcerated for violent offences. The largest proportions were currently incarcerated for homicide (35%) and robbery (24%). Excluding those serving life sentences, the average aggregate sentence length for Métis offenders was approximately 61/2 years. The current criminal offence characteristics of First Nations and non-Aboriginal offenders were similar.

Métis offenders differed somewhat from non-Aboriginal offenders in terms of criminal histories, but not substantially from First Nations offenders. Larger proportions of Métis than non-Aboriginal offenders had youth court convictions (73% versus 55%), previous community supervision (91% versus 74%) and provincial terms (84% versus 70%).

Métis offenders were rated as having some or considerable need in a variety of areas, such as personal/emotional issues (98%), substance abuse (95%), criminal associates/social interaction (84%), attitudes (84%), employment (77%), marital/family issues (74%), and community functioning (70%). Some of these needs were different from other groups. In particular, Métis offenders were more likely to have some or considerable substance abuse (95% versus 76%) and employment (77% versus 62%) needs than non-Aboriginal offenders. A large number of Métis offenders were also classified as “high risk” to re-offend (79%). However, differences between Métis offenders and other groups on risk were not significant.

Métis offenders differed from First Nations offenders on some areas. While Métis offenders tended to live in urban areas (86%), smaller proportions of First Nations offenders lived in urban areas (75%).⁶ Furthermore, there are differences in culture, as shown in Aboriginal language, involvement in Aboriginal activities, and identity.

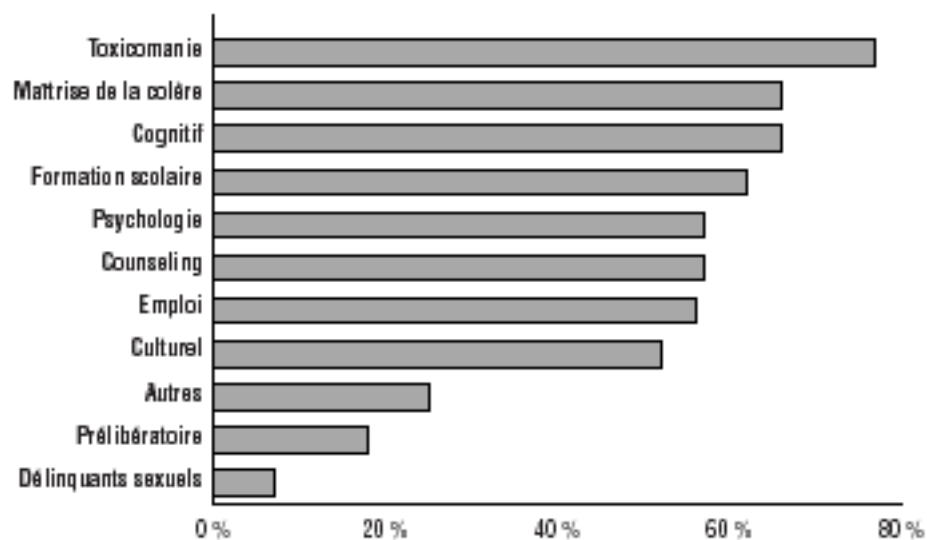
In sum, Métis federal offenders were in their early 30’s, single, had low education and high unemployment, which was similar to First Nations offenders and the Canadian Aboriginal population generally. Furthermore, Métis offenders had more extensive criminal histories and different needs than non-Aboriginal offenders. However, there were fewer differences between Métis and non-Aboriginal

offenders than between First Nations and non-Aboriginal offenders. The areas where differences emerged between Métis and First Nations offenders related to where they grew up, and culture. Differences in the characteristics of Métis offenders may point to a need for different interventions for Métis offenders than are currently in use for First Nations offenders.

Program participation

As illustrated in Figure 2, Métis offenders participated in a wide variety of programs. Almost all of those interviewed (98%) said that they had participated in some form of programming in the institutions. The largest proportion (77%) reported participating in substance abuse programs. Furthermore, approximately two-thirds participated in anger management (66%), cognitive/living skills (66%), and educational programming (62%). Over one-half of the Métis offenders also received psychological services (57%), counselling (57%), and were involved in employment (56%) programs. Smaller proportions participated in pre-release (18%) and sex offender programs (7%). The majority of offenders reported completing a program (90%).

Figure 2
Institutional program participation



Almost two-thirds (61%) of respondents reported involvement in Aboriginal-specific programming. They reported Aboriginal programs including substance abuse, anger management and specific cultural initiatives. However, only two respondents reported having been involved in Métis-specific programs, such as substance abuse counselling.

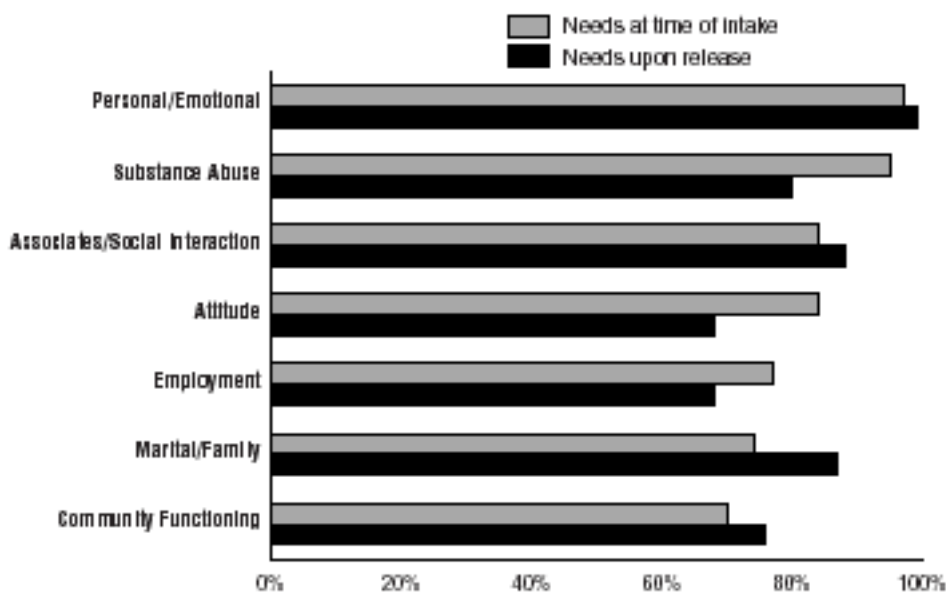
Findings demonstrated that respondents with high need at intake were involved in a multitude of programs in the institution. Furthermore, those with high need in specific areas participated in need-appropriate programming. For instance, large proportions of respondents with high need for substance abuse intervention participated in substance abuse (80%) and cognitive/living skills (66%) programs. In addition, considerable proportions of those rated as having high need for employment-related

interventions participated in employment (58%) and educational (62%) programs. Although the results suggest that Métis offenders are involved in programs that attempt to address their needs, it is unclear whether the spiritual and cultural needs of Métis offenders were adequately met by correctional programming.

Needs of Métis offenders

Métis offenders were admitted to federal facilities with a variety of needs for intervention and those who had needs in one area tended to have needs in other areas. As illustrated in Figure 3, as is the case upon admission, Métis offenders also tended to have some or considerable need upon release to the community. However, some need ratings were significantly lower at the time of release than at admission. Respondents appeared to have lower substance abuse (average 3.6 versus 3.2), personal/emotional (average 3.8 versus 3.5) and attitude (average 3.4 versus 3.0) needs at the time of release into the community, suggesting that some of the issues facing Métis offenders were met inside the institutions.

Figure 3
Métis offender needs at intake and upon release



Offenders were also asked about their needs in the institution. As indicated in Table 1, over one-half (54%) of those interviewed felt the need for more knowledge or awareness of their Métis culture. More than one-quarter (28%) also reported the need for more Métis-specific programs and a further 28% reported the need for Métis program facilitators. Put together, these findings suggest that a substantial portion of Métis offenders place importance on culturally-sensitive programming in the institutions. Moreover, respondents appear to require programs tailored to the experience and issues of Métis peoples.

Table 1

Needs of Métis offenders while incarcerated		
	N	%
Métis cultural knowledge/awareness	27	54%
Métis-specific programs	14	28%
Métis facilitators/staff	14	28%
Métis community involvement	3	6%
Other	13	26%

When asked what their needs would be at the time of release, the largest proportion of respondents reported that they would need the support of the Métis community (40%) (Table 2). Respondents also noted the need for financial support (22%), employment (16%), cultural support (15%) and adequate housing (15%). Findings suggest that Métis offenders not only place a great deal of importance on community mechanisms of support, but also acknowledge their need for economic stability upon release.

Table 2

Needs of Métis offenders upon release		
	N	%
Métis community support	22	40%
Support in general	15	27%
Financial support	12	22%
Employment	9	16%
Cultural support	8	15%
Housing support	8	15%
Education	5	9%
Family support	5	9%
Other	14	25%

In general, Métis federal offenders as a group tended to view their needs as unique from the needs of others. Over one-half (57%) reported that their needs were different from those of non-Aboriginal offenders and approximately one-quarter (27%) felt that their needs were unique from the needs of other Aboriginal offenders.

Needs of family members

Apart from examining the needs of Métis offenders, the needs of the families were also investigated. Almost one-half (48%) of offenders thought their family members needed more contact with them while

incarcerated. In addition, one-fifth of offenders felt that their families needed a better understanding of the offender (21%) and support from others (21%). Smaller proportions noted the need for financial support (14%), adequate housing (5%) and medical benefits (5%). At the time of release, the largest proportion of Métis offenders reported that their families needed a commitment from them to change or avoid trouble while in the community (35%). In addition, over one-quarter (29%) of offender respondents reported that their families needed contact with them, and one-fifth felt their families required support (21%) and counselling (19%) upon release.

Of the 17 family respondents, 14 responded to questions concerning their needs while the offender is incarcerated. Forty-three percent of these family members noted the need for support from other family members and the community at large during the offender's incarceration. Smaller proportions reported the need for contact with the offender (21%), understanding (7%) and counselling (7%). Family members reported similar needs upon release of the offender. Among those who answered questions about their needs at release (n = 12), over one-half (58%) felt they would need supports in place to assist them with the transition of their family member, and one-quarter (25%) would require access to counselling. These findings highlight the importance of professional support services and community involvement to families of Métis offenders. Both offender and family members emphasize the need for access to a comprehensive support network that can provide on-going assistance from the time of incarceration to the point of successful reintegration.

Conclusion

Profile information indicates that Métis federal offenders in British Columbia are in their early 30's, unemployed at admission, display a wide variety of needs at admission, possess extensive criminal backgrounds and are incarcerated for violent offences. Results also indicated that some profile characteristics of Métis offenders differed from other offender groups, suggesting that Métis offenders may have needs for intervention that are unique from those of First Nations and non-Aboriginal offenders. For instance, Métis and First Nations offenders differed in culture and whether they grew up in urban or rural areas.

Overall, Métis offenders in British Columbia participated in a variety of core programs inside federal facilities. Furthermore, needs presented at intake were addressed by correctional programming. Findings indicate that Métis offenders also had specific self-identified needs in the institution and upon release. Large proportions reported the need for Métis-oriented programs and enhanced knowledge of their Métis culture while incarcerated. Upon release, large numbers expressed the need for support from the Métis community and economic assistance. However, the degree to which current programs addressed these areas is not available.

Results demonstrated that families were in need of a comprehensive system of supports during the period of incarceration and upon release. Large proportions of offender and family respondents emphasized the importance of formal and informal methods of intervention. Families appeared to require a combination of psychological services and support from community members in order to deal

with the difficulties they experience.

Findings have implications for Métis offenders, their families, Métis communities and CSC. Information from this study can be used to improve the implementation of Sections 81 and 84 of the CCRA. Successful reintegration may be enhanced by offering programs that address the specific cultural needs of Métis offenders in the institutions and community. It may also be imperative to allocate professional support resources to family members who plan to assist in the reintegration process. The emphasis placed on the community by offenders and families highlights the importance of providing Métis communities with a better understanding of Métis offender needs and issues. Ultimately, the successful reintegration of Métis offenders into their communities strengthens the chance of improving the quality of life for all Canadians.

This project was the first phase of a three phase process that examined the specific needs of Métis offenders within the correctional system and as they prepare to be released. The second phase will involve a needs assessment in those communities that Métis offenders have identified as the likely place they will go upon release. This process will examine existing services available and the level of support and assistance these communities are prepared to offer to the offenders and their families in the future. Building on the information from the first two phases, the final phase of the project will work to establish Section 81 and 84 programs and services in the identified communities. This could lead to the establishment of Métis transition houses, training facilities, healing programs, or other services.

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 4. Correctional Service of Canada (March 2002). One-day snapshot of federal offenders. Unpublished data from Offender Management System.
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