

# Turning Points: Factors related to the successful reintegration of Aboriginal offenders

Doug Heckbert and Douglas Turkington<sup>1</sup>

Nechi Training Research and Health Promotions Institute

This article examines the success of Aboriginal offenders who, at one time, had been very serious offenders and who had turned their lives around to become law-abiding citizens. The goal was to identify the factors associated with the successful integration of Aboriginal offenders. Interviews were conducted with Aboriginal ex-offenders from Edmonton, Alberta. All had served one or more sentences in a federal penitentiary and had been out of conflict with the law for at least two years. Twelve women and 56 men were interviewed according to a structured questionnaire that guided them through their early years, getting into trouble, getting out of trouble, and staying out of trouble.

## **Respondent profile**

A profile of the ex-offenders who participated in the study was developed in an attempt to understand the experiences reported by the participants and the socio-demographic context in which these experiences occurred.

The largest proportion of respondents (60%) were First Nations. A further 38% were Métis and 2% (1 respondent) were Inuit. The average age of the respondents was 43, with a range of between 21 and 64 years. Eighty percent of the respondents had completed grade 12 or less. More than one-half (58%) reported that they were presently employed, either part-time or full-time. Most of the respondents resided in a city at the time of the study (74%). Finally, two-thirds (66%) reported that their physical health was good or excellent. In addition, about three-quarters (74%) reported good or excellent mental health.

In order to demonstrate the dramatic changes made by the respondents, it is important to understand the extent of their criminal histories. A large proportion of the respondents (84%) reported convictions for violent crimes. For instance, 16 respondents (24%) had criminal records for murder, attempted murder, or manslaughter. It is clear that these ex-offenders were able to successfully reintegrate into the community despite their relatively serious and dangerous crimes.

## **The early years**

The respondents' living atmospheres in their childhood and adolescence were explored to identify the factors that may have influenced their criminal behaviour. The majority (59%) reported that they were raised by both parents at some point in their lives.<sup>2</sup> Some respondents had been placed in alternative living arrangements. For example, 40% said they had lived in an orphanage or foster care, while over one-quarter (28%) reported placement in a residential school. Many of the respondents experienced unstable, dysfunctional, and abusive home environments in their early years. Forty percent reported incidents of psychological, physical, sexual abuse, and/or neglect in their childhood. In addition, almost

one-half (47%) reported they became violent during their child and adolescent years.

## **Getting into trouble**

As a result of their early living conditions, many respondents committed a great number of offences and spent large amounts of time in the correctional system. This study found that 62% of the respondents were first charged between the ages of 13 and 17. The majority of first charges were property offences (56%). Over one-half (54%) of the respondents were involved in the youth justice system, while the majority (57%) of those involved in the system spent between one and three years.

As adults, 51% reported between one and 10 convictions. In terms of dispositions, 86% had been sentenced to a federal institution,<sup>3</sup> 85% had been sentenced to a provincial institution, 79% received a fine, and 69% had been sentenced to probation. For those sentenced to an institution, the majority (47%) received a sentence of between one and three years. The sentence to a federal institution was reported as having the greatest impact on the respondents.

Participants were asked to provide explanations for their conflict with the law. Four general categories were developed from their responses: wrong place at the wrong time, an addiction and criminal lifestyle, anger and rebellion, and confusion. When asked about what would have prevented them from getting into trouble, the respondents identified communication and family support as two main factors. The importance of supportive and attentive families with solid communication and problem solving skills is clearly identified as a measure of effective crime prevention and family intervention. One of the challenges facing Aboriginal communities, governments, and family service agencies in the future, is to ensure that Aboriginal families become stronger and healthier.

## **Getting out of trouble**

Participants in the study were provided a list of factors identified as influences that have helped people out of trouble. In general, the list of influences provided by the respondents can be grouped into three general categories: culture,<sup>4</sup> programs,<sup>5</sup> and personal.<sup>6</sup> This information has the potential to direct “what works” in research and practice for successful community reintegration. The insights may also act as a basis upon which to design and implement treatment and intervention programs that can initiate and/or reinforce the process of behavioural change.

The largest proportion of the participants (85%) stated that controlling or stopping their alcohol and/or drug abuse was a strong influence for helping them get out of trouble. The second largest proportion (82%) said that family members were an important factor in prompting change. In addition, 72% of respondents noted that the influence of friends helped them get out of trouble. Many of the participants (81%) also explained that they had become sick and tired of being in trouble with the law. Similarly, 76% said they realized there was a better way of life. A sense of personal identity was also cited as important factor for many of the respondents (76%).

Aboriginal culture and spirituality represented a strong theme in the participants' responses. The respondents emphasized the importance of Elders and Aboriginal-centred ceremonies and programs in institutions as factors of change. For example, 72% of respondents said that Elders had a positive effect on turning their lives around, while 71% had been involved in Aboriginal spirituality and ceremonies within the institutions. Programs administered by outside agencies was also cited as a factor for productive change (71%).

It is likely that a combination of factors, or certain life events, affected these central influences. These influences have important implications for the development and provision of corrections and community intervention strategies. More so, the effective delivery of programs offered upon release, as well as the establishment of community links are critical to successful reintegration for Aboriginal offenders.

### **Staying out of trouble**

Participants were asked to describe the influences that they believed helped them stay out of trouble. Almost all respondents (94%) stated that personal values and identity were a strong influence in staying out of trouble. Once again, the family was identified as an important influence by 94% of the participants. In addition, 87% of respondents noted the importance of friends. A large proportion (91%) stated that staying clean and sober helped them stay out of trouble.

Another theme elicited from the participants' responses focused on helping themselves. The influences of self-improvement activities (90%)<sup>7</sup> and self-help groups (43%)<sup>8</sup> illustrate this point. In addition to helping themselves, respondents also noted that helping others was a factor in staying out of trouble (79%). A large majority of the respondents volunteered their time for various organizations, which clearly demonstrates their willingness to become productive members of society.

Employment (74%), education and training (71%) were also cited by the participants as positive influences. According to some respondents, employment gave focus to their lives and provided them with support from their coworkers. Support for education is further related to the importance associated with learning about Aboriginal history and establishing an identity. Participation in Aboriginal spirituality and ceremonies (71%) and cultural activities (68%)<sup>9</sup> had a significant impact on keeping the respondents crime-free.

It was further revealed that the respondents had no or little concept of Aboriginal culture. For many, their knowledge and experience with Aboriginal culture had been negative. A recurring theme in most of the stories was that a positive Aboriginal culture did exist. In most cases, contact with Elders helped to clarify their misconceptions about Aboriginal culture. This finding reinforces the need to have Elders available to offenders inside and outside the institutions, as well as providing offenders with accurate knowledge about their culture.

The continued and positive support from outside individuals and agencies is clearly important, in

addition to, the programs and services available in the community. From these responses, it is evident what areas of community intervention needs to be further developed and expanded.

## **Conclusion**

The insights provided by the respondents are a valuable contribution to the field of crime prevention in Aboriginal and mainstream communities. A better understanding of successful integration factors will assist criminal justice and correctional officials to design and implement programs to facilitate the process of healthy change, as well as to improve culture and spiritual awareness among Aboriginal offenders. Finally, it is hoped that the expanded support and respect for Aboriginal activities and cultural identity inside and outside institutions will reduce the number of Aboriginal persons involved in the criminal justice system.

- 
1. Box 34007 Kingsway Mall PO, Edmonton, Alberta T5G 3G4. This article is an abstract of a report that was prepared on contract for the Research Branch of Correctional Service Canada, and was jointly sponsored by Nechi Training Research and Health Promotions Institute and Native Counselling Services of Alberta.
  2. Respondents may have lived in more than one home with different caregivers each time.
  3. Some respondents who received a federal sentence served their time in provincial institutions.
  4. Culture refers to the positive impact elicited by learning more about Aboriginal history, culture, and spiritual practices.
  5. Programs refer to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal programs offered inside and outside the institutions.
  6. Personal refers to personal changes experienced by the participants.
  7. Self-improvement activities involve taking part in leisure activities that help the rehabilitation process. These may include sports, reading, or spending time with family members.
  8. Self-help groups are activities a person undertakes with a group of people such as healing or friendship circles.
  9. Cultural activities include sweats, sweetgrass, pipe ceremonies, and sacred circles.