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**Northern Aboriginal Offenders in  
Federal Custody: A Profile**



# Northern Aboriginal Offenders In Federal Custody: A Profile

by

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## Executive Summary

Northern Aboriginals constitute a rarely studied group from the perspective of the Canadian criminal justice system. This study, which sampled approximately half of the northern Aboriginal offenders under federal jurisdiction, discovered a number of noteworthy things regarding the backgrounds, incarceration history, institutional performance, and criminal histories of this population. It should be noted that because the current study took the form of an in-depth survey, with the goal of profiling the population in question, comparative statements are beyond the scope of this work.

The majority (56.3 %) of the northern Aboriginals studied were Inuit, with the rest being from other northern groups such as the Dene, Metis, Chippewan, and others. Just over 40 percent of the sample reported speaking Inuktituk as their first language, while a similar number (39.1 %) reported English as their first language.

The case files revealed information about their childhoods that was rather astonishing. Over 84 percent of our sample were reported to abuse alcohol during their youth, and half abused drugs during this period. The incidence of physical and sexual abuse, and outright neglect was also quite high. The overwhelming picture one gets from reviewing the case files of these Aboriginals is that the environment of their developing years was impoverished at best, and downright brutal in the worst cases.

The prison environments that these offenders now find themselves, especially those in CSC institutions far from their home communities, was often described as being somewhat alien. Aside from the experience of the social environment of the prison itself, the climate is different, the food is often strange to them, visits from friends or family are rare (if at all) due to distance, and for some, the English language poses difficulties in communication. Even the Aboriginal programming (e.g., visits from Elders), if it exists, is often conducted by members of a completely different culture.

Nearly all the Aboriginals surveyed reported fair and equal treatment from institution staff, but at the same time, felt that the staff were not responsive to their needs, or knowledgeable about their culture. As well, nearly all (all but 2 out of 64) said they would prefer incarceration in, or nearer, their home community. For those incarcerated far from their home community, especially those who subsisted largely from wildlife harvested by themselves, the prison environment was experienced as truly alien. Many things considered commonplace by non-northerners, the weather, processed foods, and the like, provide many Aboriginal northerners with an additional cultural shock over and above the experience of incarceration.

It was also found (from their case files) that approximately half of those surveyed did not pose problems for staff in the institutions, and an additional nearly 30 percent had positive performance reports. This would indicate that the majority of these offenders' behaviour while incarcerated is relatively good.

A somewhat unexpected finding was what the criminal histories of this group revealed. The preponderance of violent offences, and the fact that well over half had at least one conviction for a sexual offence, gives cause for concern. Looking back to their background information, where it was evident that sexual and physical abuse was not uncommon, it perhaps is not surprising that they continued a violent legacy. Coupled with a prevalence of substance abuse, one can envision the bleak social circumstances that often characterized their home environments. The offence patterns that landed them in federal custody, in fact, could be seen as a kind of mirror image of the backgrounds from which they emerged.

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## I. Introduction

The Northern Aboriginal Offender Study began in the Summer of 1993 as a joint effort between the Research and Statistics Branch, Correctional Programs and Operations, Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) Regional Headquarters: Prairies, and the Yellowknife Correctional Centre. Partly as a result of several recent task force and policy recommendations (e.g., Task Force on Aboriginal People in Federal Corrections [1987], Aboriginal Justice Inquiry [1991], Saskatchewan Indian and Metis Justice Committee Reports [1992], CSC/NWT Master Development Plan [1992]), it was considered desirable to gather information on the CSC population of northern Aboriginal offenders.

Although there have been several recent reports which have focused on justice issues in the north (Correctional Service of Canada, 1993a; Faulkner, 1992; Pauktuutit, 1993; University of Regina, 1994), until now there has yet to be one which has systematically and comprehensively profiled the northern Aboriginals currently in federal custody. With events such as the recent establishment of Nunavut, self-government issues, and possible plans for repatriation of northern Aboriginals incarcerated in southern institutions, the need for such a study is underscored.

Applied operational and programming issues also come to the fore. For example, it is currently not known what the language abilities or needs are for this little-studied population. In the same vein, this group has never been studied regarding their programming needs, their strengths or needs as a unique group. Nor is it known what the impact is of being incarcerated huge distances from one's home community and culture, as is the case for most northern Aboriginals in southern institutions (i.e., CSC Prairie region institutions).

As can be seen, there is much the Correctional Service does not know of this group of offenders. By enhancing our knowledge of this population, it is hoped that more culturally sensitive treatment, applied by more culturally aware line staff, would be a positive step towards optimizing correctional practices for northern Aboriginals.

## **II. Method**

### **Subjects**

This study selected 64 male subjects, all volunteers and all northern Aboriginals, who were in federal custody during the months of September and October of 1993. This number represents approximately half of all northern Aboriginal offenders who are incarcerated in CSC institutions. In order to facilitate the collection of data, it was decided to sample offenders in institutions where there were fairly large concentrations of northern Aboriginals. The Prairie region institutions and those federal offenders in the Yellowknife Correctional Centre (transferred under the Exchange of Services Agreement) met these requirements, and thus served as the sampling sites.

### **Data Gathering Process**

The data collected for this study came from a number of sources. Initially, all 64 offenders were given structured face-to-face interviews. These interviews were intended to cover areas of the subjects' personal background and extent of cultural identity. Questions were also put to the subjects regarding their opinions on a number of issues of interest, such as desire for repatriation to the north, adequacy of correctional programming, sensitivity of staff, and so forth.

The two individuals who conducted the interviews had experience working with Aboriginal offenders, and both were given additional training by Research and Statistics Branch staff.

Structured case file reviews were also completed for each of the interviewed offenders. These file reviews gathered information such as each offenders' institutional performance and behaviour, security incidents, need areas, family background, and program participation.

Finally, complete criminal histories were gathered using the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) system. This data includes a record of all criminal convictions, the date of each conviction, as well as the sentence imposed for each conviction.



### III. Findings

The general demographic characteristics of our sample are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**General Characteristics of Sample (N=64).**

VARIABLE	Percent	Mean (SD)*	Range**
Age	N/A	31.0 (7.3)	21 - 53
Married/C.L.	45.3 %	N/A	N/A
Children	67.2 %	1.3 (1.3)	0 - 5
Sentence Length***	N/A	3.6 Years	2 yrs - Life
Time Served So Far	N/A	4.0 Years	4 Months - 18 years

\* Mean = Average, SD = Standard Deviation

\*\* Range = Minimum - Maximum

\*\*\* Mean value does not include 7 offenders serving life sentences

On the whole, the data in Table 1 indicate that the northern Aboriginals in this study do not differ markedly from the general federal population in terms of either age or sentence length (c.f., Correctional Service of Canada, 1993b). Information on the ethnic identification of the sample is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Aboriginal Group of Study Participants.**

ABORIGINAL GROUP	NUMBER	PERCENT
Inuit	36	56.3 %
Dene	6	9.4 %
Metis	9	14.1 %
Chippewan	3	4.7 %
Gwich'in	2	3.1 %
Other or Mixed	8	12.5 %

The majority of the sample identified themselves as Inuit (56.3 %), while the rest were split between Dene (9.4 %), Metis (14.1 %), Chippewyan (4.7 %), Gwich'in (3.1 %), or those of another or mixed heritage (12.5 %).

The linguistic profile of the sample is presented in Table 3, where it can be seen that English, if spoken at all (two offenders required a translator in order to be interviewed), is a second language for most of these offenders.

**Table 3**  
**Language Profile of Northern Aboriginal Offender Sample.**

FIRST LANGUAGE	NUMBER	PERCENT
Inuktituk	26	40.6 %
Chippewyan	4	6.3 %
Gwich'in	3	4.7 %
Slavey	5	7.8 %
Other Native	1	1.6 %
English	25	39.1 %
SECOND LANGUAGE	NUMBER	PERCENT
None	10	15.6 %
Inuktituk	8	12.5 %
Cree	1	1.6 %
Chippewyan	2	3.1 %
Gwich'in	1	1.6 %
Slavey	2	3.1 %
English	40	62.5 %

It is interesting to note that not one offender reported French as either his first or second language. This may well be due to the fact that our sample was mostly gathered from Aboriginals from the western Arctic. It is possible that a sample of eastern Arctic Aboriginals would yield a somewhat different linguistic profile.

The home communities of each of the offenders in our survey was recorded and presented in Table 4. Although the sample was quite far flung, nearly a third (32.8 %) reported hailing from the Fort Smith region, which includes Yellowknife, one of the more populous communities in the north.

**Table 4**  
**Home Communities of the Northern Aboriginal Sample.\***

HOME COMMUNITY	NUMBER	PERCENT
Inuvik Region	14	21.9 %
Ft. Smith Region	21	32.8 %
Central Arctic Region	7	10.9 %
Baffin Region	13	20.3 %
Keewatin Region	8	12.5 %
Lower Territory	1	1.6 %

\* Because the samples' home communities were often widely dispersed, they have been grouped by general administrative regions.

Table 5 contains youth-related information taken from the offenders' case files. It should be specially noted that the percentages reported represent only those cases where *specific mention* is made in an offender's file of a given problem during his youth. Because offenders' early histories are frequently not present, or are often incomplete in their case files, the numbers in Table 5 should be considered, if anything, an under-representation of the true circumstances. This under-reporting notwithstanding, it is nonetheless important to note the astonishing prevalence of early-age alcohol abuse (84.4 %) and the fact that half reported drug abuse at an early age. As well, the incidence of neglectful (39.1 %) or absent parents (35.9 %) during childhood was frequently identified. Behavioural problems were also quite common among this group (65.6 %). Finally, fully 50 percent were identified as having been physically abused during their youth, and just over one out of five (21.9 %) reported early sexual abuse.

**Table 5**  
**Factors Identified in Case Files as being Problematic during Youth. (N = 64)**

PROBLEM AREA IDENTIFIED IN CASE FILE (AS A YOUTH)	PERCENTAGE
Neglect	39.1 %
Absent parent(s)	35.9 %
Group/Foster homes	10.9 %
Runaway	9.4 %
Poverty	35.9 %
Alcohol abuse	84.4 %
Drug abuse	50.0 %
Learning problems	15.6 %
Behavioral problems	65.6 %
Emotional problems	21.9 %
Physically abused	50.0 %
Sexually abused	21.9 %

In order to better understand the lifestyle of the population, the subjects were asked a number of questions regarding their level of education, employment patterns, and the extent and nature of their involvement in community activities. Data on their reported level of education is presented in Table 6. Noteworthy here is the finding that almost 60 percent have less than a grade 10 education.

**Table 6**  
**Education Levels of Sample Population.**

HIGHEST GRADE ACHIEVED	NUMBER	PERCENT
Grade 6 or Less	8	12.5 %
Grades 7, 8, or 9	30	46.9 %
Grades 10, 11, or 12	24	37.5 %
Post-Graduate	2	3.1 %

It was found that prior to their incarceration, our sample reported spending an average of 100.9 days (SD = 89.9), or roughly a third of the year, 'on the land'. The term used here -- 'on the land' -- is meant to refer to a lifestyle characterized by camp living, acquiring sustenance through hunting/fishing/trapping, and so forth. It was also found that 75.0 % took part in traditional activities (e.g., craftwork, special ceremonies). Table 7 presents information on the types of lifestyles the offenders reported before entering their institution. It should be noted, as above, that in Table 7, 'land' refers to the camp lifestyle and 'town' refers to a more conventional or permanent non-traditional lifestyle.

**Table 7**  
**Lifestyles/patterns of the Sample Prior to Incarceration.**

ACTIVITY	NUMBER	PERCENT
Full-Time Job - Town	17	26.6 %
Unemployed - Town	5	7.8 %
Odd Jobs - Town	14	21.9 %
Lived on the Land - Year Round	3	4.7 %
Seasonal Rotation between Land/Town	24	37.6 %
School - Town	1	1.6 %

The offender sample was asked about their employment activities before their arrest, and this information is contained in Table 8. Here it can be seen that the majority of this sample reports either semi-skilled (46.9 %) or unstable (29.7 %) working situations.

**Table 8**  
**Reported Employment Activity of Sample Prior to Incarceration.**

EMPLOYMENT TYPE	NUMBER	PERCENT
None	2	3.1 %
Skilled Full Time	7	10.9 %
Semi-Skilled	30	46.9 %
Odd Jobs - Unstable	19	29.7 %
Traditional*	6	9.5 %

\* e.g., fur trade, fishing, carving

Offenders were also queried about their level of vocational, or job-related skills. These data are presented in Table 9, where it can be seen that a large proportion are either unskilled or semi-skilled.

**Table 9**  
**Vocational Attainment Reported by Offender Sample.**

VOCATIONAL SKILLS	NUMBER	PERCENT
No Response	5	7.8 %
Unskilled	29	45.3 %
Semi-Skilled	15	23.4 %
Skilled: Non-Trad.	12	18.8 %
Craftwork/Artwork	3	4.7 %

Of the 64 offenders who participated in this study, 41 (64.1 %) were serving time in a federal facility while 23 (35.9 %) were serving their sentence in a territorially-operated facility (Yellowknife Correctional Centre) under the Exchange of Services Agreement. Whether the offenders were placed in a federal or territorial institution, for each, the reason for their particular placement was noted in their case files, and can be found in Table 10.

**Table 10**  
**Reason for Placement in Federal or Territorial Institution.**

FEDERAL INSTITUTION	NUMBER	PERCENT
Security Concerns	12	18.8 %
Offence Severity	13	20.3 %
Offender's Request	4	6.3 %
Program Availability	10	15.6 %
Other Natives	2	3.1 %
TERRITORIAL INSTIT'N	NUMBER	PERCENT
Low Security Risk	16	25.0 %
Low Offence Severity	1	1.6 %
Close to Community	4	6.3 %
Offender's Request	2	3.1 %

From Table 10, it appears that operational concerns such as the security risk offenders pose, the seriousness their offence, and programming needs are the chief guiding factors regarding offenders' institutional placement.

Once this group of offenders were sentenced to a federal institution, many were frightened of the prospect of spending time in a penitentiary often far from home. In fact, 56.3 % of the offenders surveyed reported considerable worries, usually fear and anxiety, over having to go to a federal institution. Table 11 reports on a number of the difficulties our sample of offenders experienced just prior to admission and shortly thereafter.

**Table 11**  
**Difficulties Experienced by Offender Sample.**

PROBLEM AREA	NUMBER	PERCENT
Language	10	15.7 %
No chance to talk to family	23	35.9 %
No knowledge of federal institutions	33	51.6 %
Adjustment problems	39	60.9 %

Table 12 reports the frequency of community contact our sample of offenders reported. It would appear from this table that phone calls from family and friends are the most widely used mode of contact, which is not surprising considering the relative ease they are to manage operationally. Also noteworthy is the finding that a broad majority (86.0 %) reported either few visits or no visits. One likely interpretation of this figure is the fact that for those northern offenders serving sentences in federal institutions in the "south" (e.g., Bowden, Stony Mountain), their home communities are often a thousand or more miles away. The simple geographic distance between these offenders and their communities would thus make any regular visitation from family and the like quite time-consuming and expensive.

**Table 12**  
**Frequency of Contact with Family or Friends While Incarcerated.\***

TYPE	WEEKLY	MONTHLY	FEW OR NONE
Letters	32.9 %	18.7 %	48.4 %
Phone Calls	67.2 %	15.6 %	17.2 %
Visits	6.3 %	7.8 %	86.0 %

\* 'Weekly' is defined here as at least three times a month, 'Monthly' is defined as at least every few months, and 'Few or None' is defined as less than three per year or none.

Regarding our samples' institutional performance, there were a number of different measures we gathered, one of which was the occurrence of institutional incidents. Table 13 reports the volume of incidents which were officially recorded for the sample. It would appear from this data that the majority (62.5 %) have not been involved in recorded security incidents.



**Table 13**  
**Recorded Security Incidents for Northern Sample.**

INCIDENTS	NUMBER	PERCENT
Not in File	3	4.7 %
None	40	62.5 %
One	6	9.4 %
Two	5	7.8 %
Three or More	10	15.6 %

When the type of incident was recorded, only 7.8 % were of a violent nature, while 10.9 % were behavioural (e.g., refusing an order, disrespecting an officer), and 14.1 % were contraband-related.

The type of institutional employment was also noted (from the offenders case files) for each of the study's participants. This information is presented in Table 14.

**Table 14**  
**Institutional Employment of Northern Aboriginal Offenders.**

EMPLOYMENT	NUMBER	PERCENT
Not in File	6	9.4 %
None	12	18.8 %
Food Service	14	21.9 %
Grounds	9	14.1 %
Programming	9	14.1 %
Unit Cleaners	7	10.9 %
Clerical	1	1.6 %
Industries	5	7.8 %
Combination	1	1.6 %

Information regarding the overall institutional performance of our sample of offenders was culled from their case files (e.g., progress summaries, incident reports). These data are presented in Table 15, where it would appear that the largest number are either described as having no problems with their institutional performance (48.4 %) or as having records of very good performance (29.7 %).

**Table 15**  
**Summary of Offenders' Institutional Performance.**

PERFORMANCE	NUMBER	PERCENT
Not Stated	2	3.1 %
No Problems	31	48.4 %
Very Good Reports	19	29.7 %
Management Problems	6	9.4 %
Unmotivated	3	4.7 %
Violent Behavior	3	4.7 %

On the subject of programming, it was found that 70.3 % of offenders surveyed reported that they were taking part in some sort of institutional programming. Moreover, 51.6 % had attitudes which were entirely positive towards programming, while only 9.4 % held entirely negative attitudes (with the remainder holding mixed attitudes or expressed no opinion).

Table 16 displays a breakdown of the types of programming the sample was currently most involved with, as well as secondary or additional programs they were taking concurrently.

**Table 16**  
**Current Program Participation: Study Sample.**

MAIN PROGRAM	NUMBER	PERCENT
None	19	29.7 %
Education	7	10.9 %
Vocational	14	21.9 %
Living Skills	2	3.1 %
Cognitive Skills	2	3.1 %
Anger Management	3	4.7 %
Spiritual	3	4.7 %
Social	4	6.3 %
Substance Abuse	10	15.6 %
ADDITIONAL PROGRAM	NUMBER	PERCENT
None	34	53.1 %
Vocational	4	6.3 %
Living Skills	1	1.6 %
Cognitive Skills	2	3.1 %
Spiritual	5	7.8 %
Social	9	14.1 %
Substance Abuse	9	14.1 %

The offenders' attitudes towards programming was queried, and it was found that, in general, their attitudes were generally mixed, with the majority tending towards holding positive attitudes. These results are presented in Table 17.

**Table 17**  
**Attitudes Toward Institutional Programming.**

ATTITUDE	NUMBER	PERCENT
No Comment	5	7.8 %
Negative	6	9.4 %
Mixed Feelings	20	31.3 %
Positive	33	51.6 %

The finding that fully 45.3 percent reported never having participated in any Aboriginal programming was not expected. A closer examination of the data explains why this is. First, even though the majority of offenders at the Yellowknife Correctional Centre are Aboriginal, no Aboriginal-specific programming is offered. Further, some complexity enters the picture when one considers the case of northern Aboriginals, such as the many Inuit who are serving sentences in federal facilities in the "south" (e.g., Stony Mountain Institution, Bowden Institution) where Aboriginal programming *is* available. In these cases, it is not the lack of Aboriginal programming, but rather, that

the programming (e.g., visits by Elders) is focused on Native cultures more from the south (e.g., Plains Indians). Some of the Inuit in our study specifically noted that the cultural differences between themselves and the more southern groups such as the Cree, are quite significant. It is perhaps not surprising that all but two of the sample wanted to serve their sentences in the north.

Considering the release plans of the sample, it was also found that all but two of the 64 said they definitely planned to return to the north. The type of release this group expected is presented below in Table 18.

**Table 18**  
**Expected Release Type for Northern Aboriginal Sample.**

RELEASE TYPE	NUMBER	PERCENT
Unknown	10	15.6 %
Full Parole	12	18.8 %
Day Parole	13	20.3 %
Statutory Release	22	34.4 %
Warrant Expiry	7	10.9 %

A Statistical Information on Recidivism (SIR: Nuffield, 1982) scale score was calculated for each of the offenders sampled. This scale was developed in order to rate offenders' risk levels (very poor, poor, fair, good, very good) for recidivism. The offenders' ratings are presented in Table 19. It should perhaps be noted that the scale was originally validated on a non-Aboriginal population, so caution in assessing the instrument's validity is often advised. Regarding this, several points merit attention. First, it appears clear that the study sample comprised a relatively high risk population, with a large majority of offenders (67.4 %) falling into either the 'poor' or 'very poor' risk categories. While some may rightly question the validity of this finding, it could be reasonably argued that if anything, the scores calculated *under-represent* the risk of this group. To explain, the SIR scale heavily weights property offenses such as Break and Enter, yet weighs much more lightly violent offences such as sexual or physical assault. "Bonus points" (i.e., lowering the risk rating) are even given for homicide offences. Upon consideration of the largely violent criminal histories these offenders often present, as described above, many (e.g., those with multiple sex offence convictions or long histories of physical assaults) are likely rated as being better risks for release into the community than their SIR scores would predict.

**Table 19**  
**SIR Scale Scores: Study Sample.**

SIR SCALE RATING	NUMBER	PERCENT
Very Good	4	6.4 %
Good	7	11.1 %
Fair	10	15.7 %
Poor	15	23.6 %
Very Poor	28	43.8 %

The average SIR scale score was -6.44 (s.d.=6.67) with a range of 10 as the highest to -21, the lowest.

File reviewers also looked for reports or ratings of the offenders' risk and need levels. These can be found in Table 20. From this table, it is apparent that this sample of offenders is largely a high risk, high needs group.

**Table 20**  
**Risk/Need Rating from Case File Reviews.**

FILE RATINGS	Low Needs	Medium Needs	High Needs
Low Risk	0	1	0
Medium Risk	1	7	3
High Risk	1	15	36

Finally, as derived from the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) database, several breakdowns of the samples' criminal conviction histories are presented. The first, in Table 21, displays data concerning the offenders' involvement in violent offences. As can be seen, violent offences such as assault, both sexual and non-sexual, are a common element to this samples' criminal history. In fact, more than half have had at least one conviction for a sexual offence, while just over 40 percent have at least three convictions on assault charges.

**Table 21**  
**Violent Offenses: Criminal Conviction Record.**

NUMBER OF CONVICTIONS	Homicide	Sexual Offence	Assault	Robbery
None	87.5 %	42.2 %	14.1 %	81.2 %
One	9.4 %	29.7 %	26.6 %	17.2 %
Two	3.1 %	20.3 %	18.8 %	1.6 %
Three or more	0.0 %	7.8 %	40.6 %	0.0 %

Table 22 deals with a finer breakdown of offence types, and displays the minimum and maximum number of convictions for each offence as well as the mean (or average) number of convictions per offender.

**Table 22**  
**Criminal Conviction Record of Study Sample.**

TYPE OF CONVICTION	RANGE	MEAN (SD)*
Murder	0 - 2	0.09 (0.39)
Manslaughter	0 - 1	0.06 (0.24)
Assault	0 - 13	2.89 (2.79)
Sexual Offence	0 - 5	1.00 (1.14)
Robbery	0 - 2	0.20 (0.44)
Escape	0 - 4	0.26 (0.67)
Unlawfully at Large	0 - 1	0.11 (0.31)
Fail Supervision	0 - 16	2.70 (2.94)
Break and Enter	0 - 17	3.19 (3.72)
Theft	0 - 10	1.47 (2.17)
Possession of Stolen Property	0 - 3	0.41 (0.79)
Impaired Driving	0 - 4	0.56 (1.04)
Auto/Traffic	0 - 4	0.20 (0.65)
Weapons	0 - 2	0.37 (0.63)
Drugs	0 - 5	0.34 (0.98)
Fraud/False Pretence	0 - 1	0.08 (0.27)
Fail to Appear	0 - 5	0.50 (1.01)
Mischief	0 - 6	0.95 (1.20)
TOTAL	1 - 44	15.88 (9.98)

\* Note: Mean = Average, SD = Standard Deviation

## IV. Discussion

Northern Aboriginals constitute a rarely studied group from the perspective of the Canadian criminal justice system. This study, which sampled approximately half of the northern Aboriginal offenders under federal jurisdiction, discovered a number of noteworthy points regarding the backgrounds, incarceration history, institutional performance, and criminal histories of this population. It should be noted that because the current study took the form of an in-depth survey, with the goal of profiling the population in question, comparative statements are beyond the scope of this work.

The majority (56.3 %) of the northern Aboriginals studied were Inuit, with the rest being from other northern groups such as the Dene, Metis, Chippewan, and others. Just over 40 percent of the sample reported speaking Inuktituk as their first language, while a similar number (39.1 %) reported English as their first language.

The case files revealed information about their childhoods that was rather astonishing. Over 84 percent of our sample were reported to abuse alcohol during their youth, and half abused drugs during this period. The incidence of physical and sexual abuse, and outright neglect was also quite high. The overwhelming picture one gets from reviewing the case files of these Aboriginals is that the environment of their developing years was impoverished at best, and downright brutal in the worst cases.

The prison environments that these offenders now find themselves, especially those in CSC institutions far from their home communities, was often described as being somewhat alien. Aside from the experience of the social environment of the prison itself, the climate is different, the food is often strange to them, visits from friends or family are rare (if at all) due to distance, and for some, the English language poses difficulties in communication. Even the Aboriginal programming (e.g., visits from Elders), if it exists, is often conducted by members of a completely different culture.

Nearly all the Aboriginals surveyed reported fair and equal treatment from institution staff, but at the same time, felt that the staff were not responsive to their needs, or knowledgeable about their culture. And nearly all (all but 2 out of 64) said they would prefer incarceration in, or nearer, their home community. For those incarcerated far from their home community, especially those who subsisted largely from wildlife harvested by themselves, the prison environment was experienced as truly alien. Many things considered commonplace by non-northerners, the weather, processed foods, and the like, provide many Aboriginal northerners with an additional cultural shock over and above the experience of incarceration.

It was also found (from their case files) that approximately half of those surveyed did not pose problems for staff in the institutions, and an additional nearly 30 percent had positive performance reports. This would indicate that the majority of these offenders' behaviour while incarcerated is relatively good.

A somewhat unexpected finding was what the criminal histories of this group revealed. The preponderance of violent offences, and the fact that well over half had at least one conviction for a sexual offence, gives cause for concern. Looking back to their background information, where it was evident that sexual and physical abuse were not uncommon, it perhaps is not surprising that they continued a violent legacy. Coupled with a prevalence of substance abuse, one can envision the bleak social circumstances that often characterized their home environments. The offence patterns that landed them in federal custody, in fact, could be seen as a kind of mirror image of the backgrounds from which they emerged.

In the future, it may be of interest to replicate this study, perhaps using a somewhat different format. For example, it would be interesting to use a comparative methodology whereby a sample of northern Aboriginals might be compared to a matched sample of white offenders, or a randomly selected sample. Because it was found that northern Natives were largely uninterested in Aboriginal programming offered in the more southern institutions, it may even be of interest to examine comparisons with a matched non-northern Native sample.



## V. References

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