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# Childhood Experiences of Aboriginal Offenders

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## Introduction

The disproportionate involvement of Aboriginal persons in the criminal justice system has been recognized for some time. Various inquiries and reports have noted that Aboriginal people are overrepresented in virtually all aspects of the criminal justice system (Correctional Service of Canada 2000; Henderson 1999; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996; Saskatchewan Indian Justice Review Committee 1992; Solicitor General of Canada 1988; Solicitor General of Canada and Attorney General of Alberta 1991; Task Force on the Criminal Justice System and Its Impact on the Indian and Métis People of Alberta 1991; Trevethan, Tremblay and Carter 2000). As reported by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), "Reports and inquiries . . . have not only confirmed the fact of over-representation [of Aboriginal offenders in the criminal justice system] but, most alarmingly, have demonstrated that the problem is getting worse, not better."

The reasons for the overrepresentation of the Aboriginal people within the criminal justice system are complex and multi-faceted. Often, a neglected area for examination is the effect that childhood experiences have on criminal behaviour. More specifically, to what extent does lack of attachment or stability during childhood affect criminal behaviour and future relationships? The research concerning family attachment, particularly to a primary caregiver, shows that lack of attachment often results in maladaptive and antisocial behaviour among children and adolescents (Cernkovich and Giordano 1987; Loeber 1991; Paolucci, Violato and Schofield 1998; Sim and Vuchinich 1996; Towberman 1994; Widom 1991).

Research has demonstrated that family disruption due to placement in a foster or group home can have negative effects on children and adolescents (Blome 1997; Brand and Brinich 1999; Chinitz 1995; Kendrick 1990; Kim et al. 1992; McMillen and Tucker 1999; Roy, Rutter and Pickles 2000; Westad 1994). Negative effects can take various forms, such as externalizing

problems, intellectual and academic functioning, and internalizing behaviours.

Adoption studies have identified some of the same negative effects as foster/group homes, although not to the same extent. According to Brand and Brinich (1999), while children in foster care have significantly more behavioural problems, the vast majority of adopted children show patterns of behaviour problems similar to those of non-adopted children.

There is a lack of information on attachment and family relationships as it relates to Aboriginal people. This present study was conducted to examine the living situations of Aboriginal offenders while growing up—including adoption, foster care and group homes. Information was also included on family disruption, attachment to caregivers, stability of home life and current relationships. The study also examined whether Aboriginal offenders were raised in Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal cultures.

Information was gathered from data sources. First, structured interviews were conducted with a random sample of 175 Aboriginal and 148 non-Aboriginal offenders from seven federal prairie institutions in Canada (two maximum security, three medium security and two women's multi-level security). The largest proportion of Aboriginal offenders were First Nations (n=106). Smaller numbers were Métis (n=39) and Inuit (n=3). Interviews focussed on a number of key areas, including background, involvement in the child welfare system, attachment, childhood stability and current family relationships. Second, data were collected from offender files stored in Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC) Offender Management System. In particular, information pertaining to the offender's criminal history, offence characteristics, risk and needs were examined.

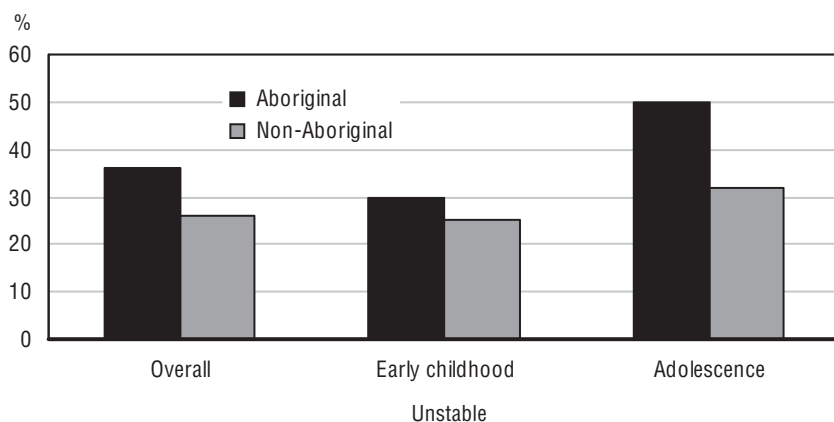## Involvement in the Child Welfare System

As illustrated in Figure 1, significantly larger proportions of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal offenders were involved in the child welfare system when they were children. Overall, 63% of Aboriginal offenders said they had been adopted or placed in foster or group homes at some point in their childhood, compared to 36% of non-Aboriginal offenders. Larger proportions of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal offenders had been placed in foster care (49% versus 24%) or placed for adoption (16% versus 6%). Although larger proportions of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal offenders were placed into group homes (34% and 27%, respectively), the differences were not statistically significant.

**Figure 1:    Involvement in the child welfare system**
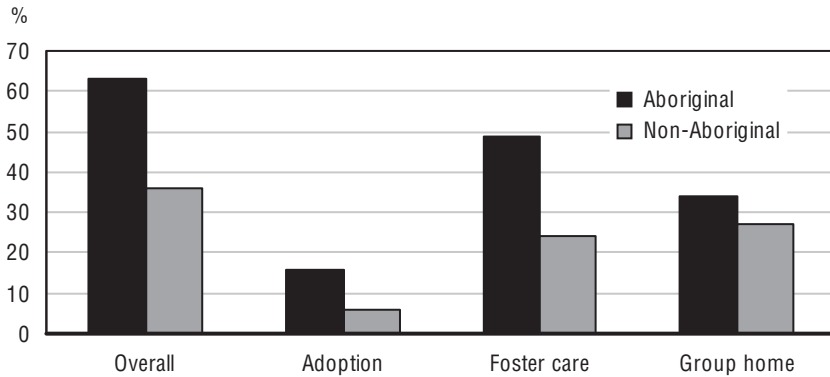


The findings from this study are similar to other studies—finding large proportions of offenders with past involvement in the child welfare system (Johnston 1997; MacDonald 1997). Furthermore, the proportions of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders who had been involved in the child welfare system is substantially higher than among those outside the criminal justice system. For instance, according to studies conducted in the 1980s (Hepworth 1980; Loucks and Timothy 1981; Special Committee on Indian Self-Government 1983), approximately 1% of children overall and about 4% of Aboriginal children are involved in child welfare services. However, this is clearly an important issue to be addressed among Aboriginal offenders, since about two-thirds have been involved in the child welfare system.

## Stability of Childhood

Another important question is whether Aboriginal offenders had a more unstable childhood than non-Aboriginal offenders. As indicated in Figure 2, a significantly larger proportion of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal offenders said they had an unstable childhood (36% versus 26%). This difference was most obvious during the teenage years—one-half (50%) of Aboriginal offenders reported an unstable adolescence, compared to one-third (32%) of non-Aboriginal offenders. There were no significant differences in perceived stability during early childhood—30% of Aboriginal and 25% of non-Aboriginal offenders said it was unstable.

**Figure 2:    Stability of childhood**



Other indicators of stability were also examined. Significantly larger proportions of Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal offenders had family violence and drug and/or alcohol problems in the home environment, a poor economic situation, and family members involved in criminal activity. These results highlight the lack of security and reliability in the homes of many Aboriginal offenders. In particular, Aboriginal offenders appear to have experienced a considerable amount of difficulty during their teenage years.

In examining only those involved in the child welfare system, the differences in childhood stability between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders disappeared. Among both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders, significantly larger proportions of those involved in the child welfare system reported an unstable childhood compared to those not involved in the child welfare system (Aboriginal, 43% versus 25%; non-Aboriginal, 40% versus 18%). These analyses appear to demonstrate that involvement in the child welfare system is related to instability during childhood and adolescence. This is the case for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders. Since larger proportions of Aboriginal offenders were involved in the child welfare system, this seems to contribute to the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders in stability of childhood. However, it is important to note that it is not clear whether placement in the child welfare system caused instability, or whether placement in the child welfare system was a result of other factors in the home or involvement in the criminal justice system.

# Attachment during Childhood

Most offenders said that the primary person who cared for them was a parent. However, this was much more often the case among non-Aboriginal (80%) than Aboriginal (50%) offenders. A significantly larger proportion of Aboriginal, as opposed to non-Aboriginal, offenders were cared for by other relatives (29% versus 9%), such as a grandmother.

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders reported a great deal of attachment to their primary caregiver during childhood (90% and 91%, respectively). However, as indicated in Figure 3, those who reported an unstable childhood were less attached to their primary caregiver than those who reported a stable childhood. This was the case among Aboriginal (82% versus 94%) and non-Aboriginal offenders (71% versus 98%).

**Figure 3:  Attachment to primary caregiver—unstable and stable childhood**
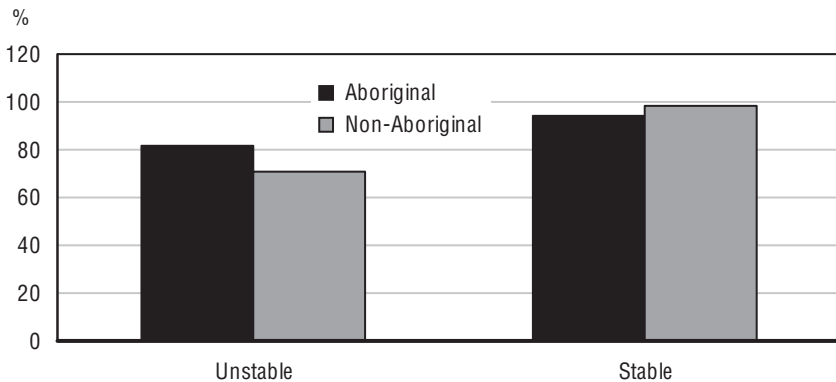


No significant differences existed in attachment to their primary caregiver between those involved and not involved in the child welfare system. Overall, the findings suggest a link between the extent to which offenders felt loved and cared for as a child and perceived instability in youth.

# Current Relationship with Family

Early childhood experiences did not seem to impact on the relationship offenders currently have with their spouse or children, but did impact on their relationship with their family of origin. No significant differences were found in current contact with, or attachment to, a spouse/partner between those who reported a stable adolescence compared to those who reported an unstable adolescence. This was the case for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders. Stability of adolescence also did not seem to affect the current

relationship with children. However, differences were found among Aboriginal offenders when examining contact with their children. Aboriginal offenders with an unstable adolescence reported significantly less regular contact with their children than those who had a stable adolescence (52% versus 71%).

Offenders with an unstable adolescence tended to have a more negative relationship with parents and siblings. This was the case for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders. Among Aboriginal offenders, those who had an unstable adolescence reported significantly less regular contact with their birth father than those with a stable adolescence (28% versus 50%). Interestingly, those with an unstable adolescence actually reported more regular contact with their grandmother than those with a stable adolescence (63% versus 36%). This may be because as a child they lived with their grandmother and maintained this relationship over the years. In terms of attachment, those who had an unstable adolescence said they had less attachment to their birth mother (67% versus 92%) and birth father (46% versus 66%).

Overall, it appears that those with a great deal of instability during the teenage years felt less connected to their families and had distant relationships with parents and siblings. However, Aboriginal offenders who experienced difficulty in adolescence also developed enduring relationships with their grandmothers.

## Attachment to Aboriginal Culture

A large number of Aboriginal offenders are currently attached to Aboriginal culture and participate in Aboriginal activities. Almost three-quarters (74%) of the Aboriginal offenders said that they were currently attached to Aboriginal culture; that is, they considered it part of their everyday life and felt a sense of belonging. Furthermore, 80% said that they were currently involved in Aboriginal activities, such as circles, ceremonies, sweat lodges and smudges.

Attachment to Aboriginal culture was examined for Aboriginal offenders to determine whether those with little attachment and/or an unstable childhood were more detached from Aboriginal culture than those with a great deal of attachment or a stable childhood. Interestingly, attachment to a primary caregiver during childhood did not seem to influence current attachment to Aboriginal culture. It may not be the attachment per se that influences the cultural attachment, but more so with whom the person was living. If the person was living in a home without access to traditional activities, there may be less attachment to Aboriginal culture. Since large proportions of Aboriginal offenders who were put in care were placed with non-Aboriginal families, they may not have had access to Aboriginal culture.

No significant differences were found in understanding or speaking an Aboriginal language, current attachment to Aboriginal culture, or current involvement in Aboriginal activities between those who had stable and unstable childhood experiences. However, significantly fewer of those who had an unstable childhood said that they were involved in traditional Aboriginal activities while they were growing up (38% versus 59%). It seems that involvement in Aboriginal activities and attachment to culture may have been redeveloped once the offenders entered the correctional facility. These results emphasize the extent to which Aboriginal offenders feel connected to their culture. In addition, culture plays a strong role in the daily lives of Aboriginal offenders.

# Conclusion

The findings from this research demonstrate that Aboriginal offenders have unstable childhood experiences, including a great deal of involvement in the child welfare system. Furthermore, involvement in the child welfare system is associated with instability. However, it is unclear whether involvement in the child welfare system is the cause of the instability, or the result of it.

The study also indicates that those with an unstable childhood were less attached to their primary caregiver while growing up, and are less attached to parents and siblings currently. This was similar for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders.

It is clear that attachment to Aboriginal culture is fairly strong among the Aboriginal offenders. However, it seems that the attachment to Aboriginal culture is gained during the institutional experience.

This research helps to demonstrate the importance of offering Aboriginal-specific programs in a correctional setting tailored to the unique developmental experiences of Aboriginal offenders. Programs may need to focus more on the effects of childhood trauma and address issues associated with involvement in the child welfare system. Moreover, findings underscore the importance of culture in correctional programming. Delivering institutional services and programs in a culturally sensitive manner and providing access to cultural practices may serve to heighten responsiveness to treatment among Aboriginal offenders.

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