



Research Summary



THE DEVELOPMENT OF ABORIGINAL CHRONIC OFFENDING

Question: Do Aboriginal offenders follow a similar path to chronic offending as Non-Aboriginal offenders?

Background: There is a body of research that shows that criminal behaviour may follow a number of different routes. One path may be transient and begins with adolescents engaging in relatively minor antisocial acts that all but disappear in adulthood. Another path is characterized as beginning in childhood, escalating significantly in adolescence and continuing through much of adulthood. The offences committed during the course of this pathway are also more serious. This second pathway has been labeled in different ways by researchers but the labels all commonly refer to a chronic and high frequency pattern of offending.

Although chronic offenders represent the minority of offenders (see Research Summary Vol. 13, No. 3), their high frequency and seriousness of offending is a special concern because of the disproportionate amount of resources directed to them by the criminal justice system. In general, almost all of the research on chronic offenders has been conducted on Caucasian offenders. In Canada, however, Aboriginal offenders are not only over-represented in prison populations nationally but in some of the Prairie Provinces, Aboriginal offenders

constitute the majority of the incarcerated population.

Thus far, there have been no studies investigating the offending trajectories of Aboriginal offenders. Can Aboriginal offending be described by two general pathways as it has been done with Non-Aboriginal offending? Are the factors associated with chronic offending similar? These questions have remained unanswered.

Method: A random sample of 439 young offenders between the ages of 12 and 19 years was drawn from a Prairie province. The young offenders were under community supervision between 1986 and 1991 with 53% of the sample being Aboriginal. For these young offenders a range of information was gathered including personal-demographic, criminal history and risk factors. This sample was then followed into adulthood (ages 26 – 30 years) and their involvement in criminal activity, or lack of, was charted.

Various statistical procedures were applied to test whether or not the development of chronic offending for the Aboriginal offenders was similar to the Non-Aboriginal offenders.

Answer: The majority of the offenders, approximately 85%, showed low rates of offending with less serious crimes over the

course of the follow-up. For this group, there was a slight decline in criminal activity after the age of 26 years.

A minority of the sample, approximately 15%, demonstrated a chronic high level of offending. The proportion of chronic offenders was similar for both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal offenders.

An analysis of risk factors associated with the chronic offending pathway for both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal offenders found few differences. However, substance abuse, family problems and associating with criminals was more salient for the chronic Aboriginal group. Frequent address changes was a risk factor for the Non-Aboriginal chronic group.

Policy Implications:

1. As found with Non-Aboriginal offenders, there is also a small group of chronic Aboriginal offenders who commit serious crimes and over a long course of time. Resources and interventions should focus on this

chronic group in order to have the largest returns in community safety.

2. The development of chronic offending starts at a young age. In this study, it was evident at as early as age 12 years but likely begins even earlier. Identifying these children early and appropriately intervening could yield significant long term benefits.
3. A number of risk factors for chronic offending were identified. Association with other delinquents, substance abuse and family problems may serve as warning signs for future behaviour. Services in Aboriginal communities should be directed to address these risk factors and stem the possibility of following a chronic offending trajectory.

Source: Yessine, A. K. & Bonta, J. (2009). The offending trajectories of youthful Aboriginal offenders. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 51, 435-472 .

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