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Emerging Research Results

Social Histories of Aboriginal Women Offenders

KEY WORDS: *Aboriginal ancestry, women offenders, Aboriginal social history*

What it means

Consistent with previous research, many Aboriginal women were found to have experienced challenging events prior to their admission to federal custody. Legal precedent and Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) policy indicate that Aboriginal social history factors should be identified and considered in correctional decision-making for Aboriginal offenders. While there was considerable variability in the amount and nature of Aboriginal social history information recorded on women’s files, this issue is expected to improve given that CSC recently trained all federal parole officers on requirements related to this information. The training’s goal is to increase consistency of information considered for interventions and decision-making.

What we have found so far

There was considerable variability in the amount and nature of Aboriginal social history information recorded on women’s files. Nonetheless, over half of the women reported having attended or having had a family member attend residential school (see Table). About half also reported having lived on a reserve for at least part of their childhood; a similar proportion reported being removed from their family home (e.g., adopted, foster care). Almost all of the women’s files indicated the existence of previous traumatic experiences and substance abuse problems.

When women of First Nations and Métis ancestry were compared¹, more First Nations women reported having been affected by residential school residence. Substance abuse patterns also differed by ancestry with First Nations women more often reporting issues with alcohol use and Métis women more often reporting drug abuse.

Why we are doing this study

Aboriginal offenders’ disproportionate representation within the criminal justice system has received considerable attention. However, most research to-date has been on men offenders, with relatively few

studies focused on Aboriginal women. A better understanding of this group is key to informing policy and to delivering effective interventions for Aboriginal women.

Percentage of Women’s Case Files Indicating the Presence of an Aboriginal Social History Factor

Factor	%
Residential school experience	
Woman attended	10
At least one family member attended	52
Childhood events	
Parents had substance use issue	66
Ever lived on reserve in childhood	48
Removed from family home	48
Experiences of trauma	
Physical abuse	81
Sexual abuse	56
Other ^a	69
Substance abuse	
Drug abuse	82
Alcohol abuse	74
Drug and alcohol abuse	64
Cultural involvement when in the community	37

^a Other trauma includes events such as emotional abuse, witnessing a family or close friend die, prostitution at an early age.

What we are doing

A project is underway to examine the correctional experiences of Aboriginal women, from admission to warrant expiry. A cohort of 174 Aboriginal women admitted in fiscal years 2008-09 and 2009-10 were followed until the end of their sentence or the end of 2013. Within the context of this project, we examined the Aboriginal social history factors documented on women’s correctional files at admission, including comparisons by ethnicity.

For more information

Please e-mail the [Research Branch](#) or contact us by phone at (613) 995-3975.

You can also visit the website for a full list of research publications.

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¹ Inuit women were excluded due to low numbers.