

PERCEPTIONS OF RACISM IN YOUTH CORRECTIONS: THE BRITISH COLUMBIA EXPERIENCE¹

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Abstract / Resume

Similar to their adult counterparts, Native youth have been identified as experiencing differential treatment within the youth justice system in Canada. This research discovered that, for the most part, both Native youth and correctional senior management in British Columbia felt racist attitudes and behaviours were not overtly present in youth corrections. The research also examined the intensity of abuse and neglect which incarcerated Native youth had experienced throughout their lives. It was discovered that most Native youth in British Columbia's correctional facilities had lengthy histories of physical, sexual, emotional and substance abuse.

Il est reconnu que les jeunes autochtones, à l'instar des adultes, subissent un traitement distinct au sein du système judiciaire canadien. Cette recherche a découvert qu'en général les jeunes autochtones et les cadres du système correctionnel avaient l'impression que les attitudes et les comportements racistes ne se manifestaient pas ouvertement dans les centres de correction. La recherche s'est aussi penchée sur le degré d'abus et sur le manque de soins que les jeunes autochtones incarcérés ont subi toute leur vie. On a découvert que la plupart d'entre eux, placés dans les institutions correctionnelles en Colombie-Britannique, avaient une longue histoire d'abus physique, sexuel et psychologique et éprouvaient des problèmes de drogue.

Indigenous youth throughout Canada pose a unique challenge for both the formal youth criminal justice system and various social service agencies.² The documented marginalization of Native peoples is often reflected in varied states of economic dependence and cultural disintegration as many communities are plagued by high rates of unemployment, capital deficiency, infant mortality, substance abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, spousal assault, suicide and violent deaths (LaPrairie, 1995, 1988; Griffiths and Verdun-Jones, 1994). Intricately woven into this social and cultural turmoil are the lives of Aboriginal children. Faced with such diversities, some Native youth resort to criminal behaviour as an outlet for their frustration, hopelessness, anger and boredom.

It is routinely argued, and commonly perceived, that the differences between Native and Anglo-Canadian cultures results in discriminatory practices by insensitive justice system personnel when dealing with Native youth. As a result, such ethnocentric behaviour has been identified as one of the major contributors to the disproportionate number of Native children repeatedly found in the youth justice system (Hamilton and Sinclair, 1991; Griffiths and Verdun-Jones, 1994). Furthermore, it is argued that the negative justice system experience fosters additional criminal activity because of unfair labelling as well as learned and/or reinforced criminal values. This then creates a damaging cyclical effect where many Native youth are perpetually caught within the criminal justice system thereby making it extremely difficult for practitioners to provide effective crime prevention assistance.

One official response to the apparent disproportionate number of Native youth in custodial facilities has been the provincial inquiries into the youth justice systems' treatment of Native children. Both Alberta and Manitoba have published reports that confirm and detail many of the above criticisms (Cawsey, 1991; Hamilton and Sinclair, 1991). However, there has been no similar official inquiry in British Columbia. Therefore, this research project was developed to undertake an initial examination of the attitudes of both incarcerated Native youth and correctional senior management on the racism issue in British Columbia's youth correctional facilities. Before presenting the results of the personal interviews, it is necessary to first overview literature concerning the relationship between racism and Native peoples in Canada.

Analysis of Racism in Canadian Society

The Manitoba Justice Inquiry: Treatment of Native Youth

Partly as a result of several fatal confrontations between Native Indians and the police, there has been a widespread perception that the province of Manitoba's justice system has changed little in its apparently longstanding practice of biased treatment towards Native persons. The Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba (1991) addressed this serious issue by providing a detailed description of the treatment Native persons received within that province's youth and adult justice systems.

Concerning young offenders, the Manitoba Inquiry discovered that Native youth account for approximately 70% of all incarcerated residents in "secure" institutions while Native peoples comprise (unofficially) only about 14% of the entire provincial population (Hamilton and Sinclair, 1991:549). This disproportionality raised the following key questions. Do Native youth account for more crime than non-Natives? And, are the disproportionate numbers due to prejudice and racism within the youth justice system itself? In addressing these questions, Hamilton and Sinclair (1991) provided four conclusions. They found that in comparison to non-Native youth, Native youth tended to have: more charges laid against them; were less likely to benefit from legal representation as they often lived in isolated northern communities; were more often detained before trial, detained longer and denied bail; and experienced more delays before their cases were processed though were more likely to receive custodial sentences (Hamilton and Sinclair, 1991:549-550).

The Province of Alberta: Justice on Trial

Following Manitoba, the provincial government of Alberta commissioned a task force to examine the treatment Aboriginal peoples received within their criminal justice system. With a Native birth rate double that of the non-Native population, the Alberta government projected that if current trends persisted for the next eighteen years, substantially more Native youth could experience contact with the justice system unless substantive changes occurred. Though the Alberta inquiry did not focus exclusively on Native youth, large quantities of anecdotal and statistical information relevant to Native children were obtained from the various community meetings and short interviews conducted in youth detention centres.

The most striking statistic found was that similar to Manitoba, Native youth in Alberta were vastly over-represented in custodial facilities. For example, during 1989 approximately 1,450 Aboriginal youth received cus-

todial dispositions and on average Native youth accounted for about 36% of the custodial resident population (Cawsey, 1991:18-57).

The task force further uncovered a disproportionality in the number of Native youth receiving sentenced dispositions compared to non-Natives. Between 1986 and 1989, sentenced admissions for Native young offenders increased by 18.2% while admissions for non-Natives decreased by 8%. The reality of this is that Native youth living in the province of Alberta have a much greater chance of receiving a custodial disposition than their non-Native counterparts. Furthermore, it was discovered that 93% of all youth participating in alternative measures programs were not of Aboriginal descent (Cawsey, 1991:8-57). These findings strongly suggest a reluctance on the part of justice system personnel to divert Native youth from formal processing.

Another disturbing finding was that based on offense characteristics for 1989/90, 53% of Native custodial residents were property offenders while only 4.8% had committed offenses against persons with 11% being against the administration of justice. The remaining youth had committed offenses against various other statutes (Cawsey, 1991:18-57). Contrary to media and public perceptions that young offenders are not punished frequently or harshly enough for their crimes, such data indicate that youth correctional facilities still largely house non-serious property related offenders. This supports Markwart's (1992) critical question of why young offenders, including Native youth, are routinely being incarcerated for non-violent offenses when the *Young Offenders Act* (YOA) supposedly follows the principle of least interference?

The Alberta report also highlighted a myriad of social problems Aboriginal youth suffer. The infant mortality rate, for example, was four times that of non-Natives and life expectancy for Native children was ten years shorter than their non-Native counterparts. Complimenting this was the fact that when Native youth reached adolescence there was a 50% chance they would not complete grade nine and were more likely to receive a custodial sentence at some point in their lives than graduate from secondary school. Aboriginal youth were also three times more likely to be committed to a youth correctional centre than non-Native youth. Finally, the suicide rate for Aboriginal children was estimated to be approximately five times that of comparable non-Native youth and the chance of an Aboriginal child dying from tuberculosis was 27 times that of a non-Aboriginal (Cawsey, 1991:8-56, 8-57).

Presented with the existing dismal profile, the inquiry attempted to provide possible explanations for the disproportionate number of Aboriginal offenders entering the youth justice system as well as options for address-

ing certain social problems that may affect criminal behaviour. First, from a policy perspective, the criminal justice system in Alberta had no apparent and/or identifiable philosophy or mandate to coordinate the myriad of ministries, programs and facilities that were designed to service and process Native youth. Further, there was no integrated approach for addressing Aboriginal social, political, criminal and/or economic problems (Cawsey, 1991). The report also demonstrated that the criminal justice system was too centralized and formalistic and needed to "bring justice back" to the community level including the integration of Native self-justice ideals. Finally, the lack of communication between service providers and Aboriginal peoples was identified as a serious impediment just as was the reliance upon incarceration instead of prevention (Cawsey, 1991).

Racism in British Columbia's Youth Custodial Centres

Though Manitoba and Alberta have larger Native populations than British Columbia, a similar pattern of youth incarceration exists. In all three provinces, custodial facilities house a disproportionate number of Native offenders; 70% for Manitoba, 36% for Alberta and approximately 25%-30% for British Columbia. Accordingly, the prejudicial treatment Native youth supposedly receive in Manitoba and Alberta may also be occurring in British Columbia. However, within British Columbia there is no outright consensus that the youth justice system is plagued with overt prejudicial attitudes (Markwart, 1992, LaPrairie, 1995). Markwart (1992) agrees that in the past Native peoples, and youth, have been discriminated against by a culturally insensitive justice system. However, today's youth justice system is characterized by more educated and culturally aware individuals who are trained to work with the ethnically diverse population found in British Columbia. He asserts that this has occurred mainly through recruitment policies emphasizing educated, dedicated and caring individuals. Realistically though, it is unlikely prejudicial attitudes and behaviours have been completely eliminated in British Columbia, but rather, that their occurrences have been greatly reduced.

Despite this salutary view, arguments can be found which assert that the youth justice system fundamentally discriminates against Native children. An obvious example is the fact that correctional facilities are often far removed both geographically and culturally from the larger Native Indian culture which has an isolating effect upon incarcerated youth. These two opposing views form the basis of the research hypothesis that examines the presence of racist attitudes within youth corrections.

Hypotheses

Since custody is the most severe response in the youth justice system, it needs to be fully explored in terms of possible negative experiences and discriminatory impacts upon Native youth. Given the Alberta and Manitoba reports detailing extensive levels of discrimination experienced by Native youth in the criminal justice system, one of the major hypotheses examined in this study was that Native youth in British Columbia's correctional centres will perceive a high level of racism from non-Native residents and staff members (H1). For the purpose of understanding among interview subjects, no definitive definition of racism was imposed. Rather, each individual had the latitude in determining on a personal level what they believed constituted racism. Accordingly, the subjects were often asked to explain and define their responses.

Independent of the first hypothesis, the second hypothesis (H2) was examined with the intent of providing youth corrections policy analysts with much needed biographical information. The argument was that Native youth found in correctional centres will have biographical backgrounds that indicate persistent levels of abuse and neglect. Abuses such as alcohol, drug, sexual and physical coercion will be apparent as well as neglect arising from poor parental and health care. This position stems from the available literature that asserts many Native adults are having difficulties raising children due to personal traumas suffered such as unemployment, culture conflict and the devastating effects of being torn from their family and culture during the former practice of residential schooling (see LaPrairie, 1988; Christie and Doyle, 1989).

Survey data was gathered to assess these two hypotheses in all of British Columbia's youth containment centres.

Methods

Sample

Data was collected from three primary sources. The first involved all Native residents in the nine "open" and "secure" youth correctional facilities throughout British Columbia. At the time of interviewing, 50 Native youth were identified by correctional staff as serving sentenced dispositions. This is rather startling as Native peoples account unofficially for approximately 4% of the entire provincial population yet at the time of this research, Native youth accounted for approximately 20% of the correctional resident population. With a disproportionate number such as this, support for the argument that biased treatment exists within British Columbia's youth justice system initially seems supported and testing of the hypothesis valid.

The process for identifying the interview candidates involved travelling to the various custodial centres and designating one day (usually day of arrival) where all Native and one-half Native youth residing at the facility became the target group. The list of possible candidates was examined by several senior and lower staff members to ensure that no Native youth were missing. It quickly became evident however, that some Native youth who appeared Caucasian were not recorded as ethnically "Native" in the correctional file data. Another identification reliability issue involved Métis who were also listed as "Caucasian." Nonetheless, every attempt was made to ensure that all Native and half-Native youth were selected to be interviewed. This included Métis and one-half Métis. Once the final list of candidates was confirmed by staff members, the youth were approached confidentially and asked if they would agree to participate in the research project. From the original list of 50 youth, a sample of 45 was obtained which included 44 males and 1 female. Three youth voluntarily withdrew, one went AWOL (absent without leave) and one was taken away on an extended court date.

The second data source consisted of correctional senior management interviews. All 35 persons identified as senior managers agreed to be interviewed though this constituted a sample as only one randomly chosen principle officer (PO) was interviewed per institution due to time and resource restrictions.

By interviewing both youth and senior management it was felt a more complete examination of the research hypotheses would occur. Additionally, the survey data obtained helped provide an initial analysis for determining at what stage, if any, British Columbia's youth justice system needs restructuring in order to combat biased attitudes and/or treatment.

The third data source consisted of examining the youth's correctional file. The files consisted of such information as previous court appearances, social worker reports, probation reports, correctional reports, incident reports, victim impact statements and pre-disposition reports. Examining and data coding this information not only assisted in obtaining accurate biographical data on the youth, but also helped to determine the level of response accuracy during the interviews. Most encouraging was the fact that almost all the interviewed youth related information which matched that found in their correctional files.

Operational Measures

Native Youth Interviews

The perception of racist behaviour in youth containment centres was primarily measured using a 5-point Likert Scale. Native youth were asked

to indicate their perceptions of racist attitudes among the various levels of correctional personnel and non-Native residents. In addition, similar scaling was used asking the youth how they were treated by non-Native residents. The youth were then asked to answer open-ended and simple dichotomous scaled questions dealing with such themes as: participation in physical confrontations; if they had ever experienced what they would consider racism within youth custody; how they would like staff to treat them; if more Native correctional officers were necessary; if ethnically separate institutions were necessary; and whether separate Native police forces were required. Finally, the Native youth were asked questions as to the occurrence, prevalence and intensity of abuse and neglect they may have experienced in their home communities.

Senior Management Interviews

Similar to the youth, staff members were asked to rate on the same 5-point Likert Scale their perceptions concerning the presence of racist attitudes within youth corrections. After this, open-ended questions were utilized so the staff could describe how non-Natives treat Natives in youth containment centres. Staff were then asked their opinions concerning such topics as whether Native youth criminality was a genuine concern in youth corrections or whether it was politically motivated and whether Native peoples should have complete or partial jurisdiction over the administration of Native young offenders. Finally, using a 3-point Likert Scale staff were asked to describe the manner in which Native youth intermixed and adjusted to correctional environments and whether they tended to only associate with other Native youth while in custody. In helping to better understand the biographical profiles created, staff members were asked to loosely comment on the level and intensity of abuse and neglect experienced by Native youth compared to non-Natives based on their professional and personal experiences. These responses were coded on a simple 4-point scale.

Analysis

The biographical profiles of the Native youth interviewed can best be described as dysfunctional. Close to one-half (44.4%) of the youth were characterized by correctional file data as suffering from poor mental health while 11.1% were noted as being in poor physical health.

Of particular concern were the abuse patterns Native youth suffered. According to literature by Cawsey (1991) and LaPrairie (1988), many Native youth are raised in marginalized environments that are sometimes plagued by high rates of sexual, physical, substance and/or emotional abuse. The

Table 1: Mental and Physical Health

	Mental Health	Physical Health
Good	19 (42.2%)	36 (80.0%)
Poor	20 (44.4%)	5 (11.1%)
Unknown	6 (13.3%)	4 (8.9%)

data supplied in Table 2 appears to support these assertions as it was discovered 64.4% of the interviewed youth claimed to have been raised in households where physical violence was routinely occurring. Furthermore, one-fifth (20.0%) admitted to living in households where sexual abuse was occurring with almost all these individuals stating they and/or siblings were the primary victims.

Table 2: Abuse Profile

	Sexual	Physical	Sexual Abusers Themselves
Yes	9 (20.0%)	29 (64.4%)	8 (17.7%)
No	44 (75.5%)	13 (28.8%)	35 (77.7%)
Don't know	2 (4.4%)	3 (6.6%)	2 (4.4%)

In terms of personal substance abuse behaviour, 60.0% of the Native youth admitted to suffering from alcoholism and drug addiction. This finding mirrors literature describing substance and narcotic abuse as one of the most pressing social problems experienced by many of Canada's Native peoples. Though the causes of such behaviour are often linked to living conditions, political/historical conflicts, unemployment, sexual abuse/neglect and isolation, an indepth analyses of these relationships is beyond this research. Nonetheless, this study uncovered a substantive abuse pattern among incarcerated Native youth that needs to be further addressed within correctional and community environments.

Plagued with such a high percentage of substance abuse behaviours, it is not surprising that the vast majority of Native youth attributed the

Table 3: Youth Opinion on Alcohol/Drug Abuse

	Alcoholic	Drug Addict
Yes	27 (60.0%)	27 (60.0%)
No	18 (40.0%)	12 (26.7%)
Don't know	0 (0.0%)	6 (13.3%)

consumption of alcohol and drugs as causal factors to their criminality. However, alternative reasons such as peer pressure and the simple enjoyment of crime due to boredom also weighted heavily in their responses. These indices can be seen in Table 4.

According to the report written by Cooper (1991), suicide is indeed prevalent among British Columbia's Native youth population. In fact, reserved based Native youth commit about twice the number of suicides per 100,000 population compared to non-Native youth. Additionally, approximately 70-75% of all Native deaths are alcohol related while a strong correlation has been identified between adverse lifestyle and Native youth suicide (Cooper, 1991). Given the previously mentioned profile of self-destructive behaviours and adverse social conditions, it is little wonder why so many Native youth are resorting to suicide as an escape from their life style and/or communities. In relation to Cooper's (1991) work, Table 5 details the responses youth provided when the question of self-destructive behaviour was posed. Interestingly, suicide attempts for this sample decreased when the youth were in custody. This can presumably be attributed

Table 4: Identifiable Reasons for Criminality

	Number	Percentage
Fun	15	(33.3%)
Alcohol	30	(66.7%)
Drugs	17	(37.8%)
Fun to be chased by police	6	(13.3%)
Something to do when bored	12	(26.7%)
Peer pressure	26	(57.8%)
Learn from t.v.	14	(31.1%)

Table 5: Previous Self-Harm Practices

	Within Custody	Outside Custody
Yes	6 (13.3%)	12 (26.7%)
No	39 (86.7%)	33 (73.3%)

to the fact that residents are constantly monitored in corrections and that paradoxically custodial facilities provide some Native youth with a level of attention and care they desire.

It can be seen in Table 6 that most Native youth in this research have a lengthy history of contact with the courts. In fact, the vast majority of youth (91.1%) have anywhere from two to ten previous court appearances. Not only were the majority of incarcerated youth in this sample seemingly experienced in contact with the courts, they also exhibited a pattern of early detection by the police. Most distressing was the realization that close to one-quarter (22.2%) had experienced their first contact with the police before age eight.

Table 8 presents a collection of data recorded from correctional files that round out the biographical profiles. Of primary concern was the fact that 44.4% of the youth have lived in foster homes. This initially indicates a trend by Social Services that removal of Native youth from their communities and cultural links is acceptable. The debate surrounding the appropriateness or morality of such behaviour is beyond this paper. However, the data herein may lend support to the argument that home removal adversely affects youth behaviour thereby possibly influencing justice system contact. Obviously when it comes to Native youth, especially those in isolated communities, the decision to place in foster care must be balanced among

Table 6: Previous Court Appearances

Category	Number
No contact	4 (8.9%)
2-5 appearances	25 (55.6%)
6-9 appearances	12 (26.7%)
Over 10	4 (8.9%)

Table 7: Age of First Contact with Police

Age	Number	Percentage
5	2	(4.4%)
6	3	(6.7%)
7	5	(11.1%)
8	0	(0.0%)
9	8	(17.8%)
10	1	(2.2%)
11	6	(13.3%)
12	9	(20.0%)
13	3	(6.7%)
14	2	(4.4%)
15	3	(6.7%)
16	3	(6.7%)

the many competing interests that encompass the youth's "best interests". For example, one youth was discovered who had been placed in over one hundred foster homes by the age of thirteen. In fact, both Social Services and the youth had lost count and could not provide an actual number of placements. Distressing cases such as this bring the entire system of home removal into question.

Also distressing were the number of identified gas sniffers. When youth progress from alcohol and drug abuse to solvent abuse, serious problems exist. Out of the sample, five (11.1%) youth were identified as solvent sniffers and the effects upon their appearance, mannerism and ability to communicate were apparent. Obviously the various social agencies responsible for the health and welfare of youth need to increase efforts in tackling this problem. Finally, a substantial number (31.1%) of youth suffered from anger management problems. This condition was repeatedly highlighted during both youth and senior management interviews in that many of the youth placed themselves in difficult positions, usually involving the police, when they were unable to control their anger. It became apparent that much of the grief experienced by the youth could have been avoided if they had employed techniques designed to control their personal feelings. Accordingly, all correctional centres ran anger management programs where youth learned various ways to control their anger.

Table 8: Personality Profile (as recorded by correctional data)

Category	Number	Percentage
Gas sniffers	5	(11.1%)
Fetal Alcohol Syndrome	3	(6.7%)
Elementary education	7	(15.6%)
Secondary education	38	(84.4%)
Excessive exposure to death	5	(11.1%)
Mental health problems	12	(26.7%)
Receive professional help	7	(15.6%)
Firesetting behaviour	2	(4.4%)
Anger management problems	14	(31.1%)
Sexual management problems	7	(15.6%)
Experienced foster homes	20	(44.4%)
Have not experienced foster homes	23	(51.1%)
No available data	2	(4.4%)

To test the racism hypothesis, simple descriptive statistics indicate that approximately half (51.1%) of the Native youth felt they have been subject to incidents of racist behaviour by non-Native youth within correctional institutions. However, most stated such incidents were minor and consisted mainly of racial epithets that resulted in no major confrontations and were often presented in a "joking" manner. If Native youth felt strongly enough about the subject of racism, then the assumption could be made that they would prefer separate custodial centres administered and attended by only Native persons. Accordingly, the youth were asked if they would prefer separate custodial centres and a surprising three-fifths majority (60.0%) stated they would not. However, 48.9% mentioned they would prefer to see more Native correctional and police officers as they felt only Native persons can understand each other and their unique social/personal problems. The remaining majority (51.1%) were indifferent to such ideas and admitted to rarely thinking about concepts such as Native self-justice or cultural revival.

Despite initial claims of being subject to racist behaviour from non-Native residents, the majority (73.4%) of Native youth believed their relationships with non-Native youth could be classified as either "very good" or "good". Senior management, on the other hand, generally felt (60.0%) racist attitudes existed among non-Native residents. However, such behaviour

Table 9: Youth Opinion on Racism within Custody

	Subject to Racism	Need for "Native Only" Institution
Yes	23 (51.1%)	16 (35.6%)
No	22 (48.9%)	27 (60.0%)
Don't know	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.4%)

was not always present in corrections and was largely dependent upon which group of youth were currently being housed. For example, racist behaviour was often cyclical and could be triggered from the action(s) of one overtly racist resident. Then, usually more tolerant residents would change their behaviour to reflect a more racist persona which would otherwise not be exhibited.

To further facilitate testing the hypothesis, Native youth and correctional management were asked to comment on the perceived level of racist

Table 10a: Youth Opinion on Racism Among Non-Native Residents

"Rate your relationship with non-Native youth?"	Youth Responses
'very good'	8 (17.8%)
'good'	25 (55.6%)
'average'	11 (24.4%)
'poor'	1 (2.2%)
'very poor'	0 (0.0%)

Table 10b: Staff Opinion on Racism Among Non-Native Residents

"Do you agree there is racism among non-Native residents?"	Staff Responses
'strongly agree'	2 (5.7%)
'agree'	19 (54.3%)
'ambivalent'	6 (17.1%)
'disagree'	6 (17.1%)
'strongly disagree'	2 (5.7%)

Table 11: Youth Perception of Treatment by Category of Correctional Staff

	Line-staff	Upper-management	Program Staff
response	number	number	number
'very well'	13 (28.9%)	9 (20.0%)	18 (40.0%)
'well'	23 (51.1%)	23 (51.1%)	19 (42.2%)
'average'	9 (20.0%)	10 (22.2%)	6 (13.3%)
'poor'	0 (0.0%)	2 (4.4%)	1 (2.2%)
'very poor'	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.2%)	1 (2.2%)

Table 12: Senior Staff Perception of Racism Among Category of Correctional Personnel

	Line-staff	Upper-management	Program Staff
response	number	number	number
'strongly agree'	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
'agree'	21 (60.0%)	3 (8.6%)	6 (17.1%)
'ambivalent'	2 (5.7%)	4 (11.4%)	4 (11.4%)
'disagree'	6 (17.1%)	8 (22.8%)	11 (31.4%)
'strongly disagree'	6 (17.1%)	20 (57.1%)	14 (40.0%)

behaviour among certain correctional employees. These results are listed in Tables 11 and 12. Concerning line-staff employees, the two groups strongly juxtaposed each other as the majority (80.0%) of Native youth felt correctional line-staff treated them "well" and did not possess discriminatory attitudes. Two thirds (60.0%) of senior managers felt line-staff employees possessed minor racist attitudes which usually manifested in covert behaviour such as joke telling.

Alternatively, Native youth and senior management did achieve consensus on the presence of racist behaviour among program staff and

upper-management. Both groups agreed that these employees treated Native youth "well" and did not possess overtly discriminatory attitudes.

Perhaps one of the strongest indicators that Native youth were not subject to racist behaviour from correctional employees was that 73.3% of the interviewed youth did not want staff to treat them any different than they presently were. The youth stated they were satisfied with the manner in which all levels of staff treated them and only a small minority offered suggestions pertaining to improved relations. Such suggestions included staff stop: bringing personal problems to work; playing "head games"; being so strict with rules; and treating residents disrespectfully. However, many youth qualified these suggestions by admitting that respect was reciprocal and usually staff treated residents in a manner similar to which youth treated the staff.

Discussion

After conducting the statistical analyses, the presented hypotheses were tested. Concerning the racism hypothesis (H1), it appears not to be confirmed. Rather, there was a level of consensus between incarcerated Native youth and senior correctional management. For the most part, both parties felt there was little overt racist behaviour being exhibited. Senior managers claimed Native youth were not openly subject to discriminatory behaviour from the various levels of staff or other residents though some subtle occurrences of racism existed; albeit at a minimal level. Senior management initially claimed Native youth were subject to subtle forms of racist behaviour from non-Native youth and correctional line-staff personnel but later qualified these statements by asserting such behaviour was minor, covert and usually non-damaging.

Native youth appeared to be satisfied with the treatment they received in correctional centres and related very few stories of racist treatment by non-Native residents. Most stated that all levels of staff treated them fairly and, contrary to senior management, rated line-staff as one of the most favourable groups. Though Native youth initially stated they had experienced racist behaviour from non-Native residents, further questioning revealed most youth felt such racist behaviour was non-serious and usually not directed from a truly racist persona. Senior management supported this view when relating stories of actual racist behaviour among residents that usually surfaced when two youths were about to engage in a physical confrontation and racial slurs were used to provoke or initiate the contact.

Concern could be raised regarding the responses by Native youth in terms of perceiving racist treatment. Because the youth do not qualify certain obvious occurrences as racially based, an argument could be

forwarded that some Native youth have been subject to a lifetime of racist behaviour in the social/communal context which eventually becomes internalized as "normal" treatment. Thus, when experiencing obvious forms of racist behaviour within corrections, these youth will interpret such behaviour as non-racist or even "normal". Unfortunately, determining a condition such as this is beyond the study's framework and further research is necessary.

Of considerable concern were the statements by senior staff members regarding the presence of covert racism among line-staff personnel. Sixty percent of senior management felt racist attitudes existed among the line-staff though most quickly qualified such behaviour as non-damaging "coffee-room talk or jokes" that rarely affected the staff members behaviour toward the youth while working. Whether racism is covert or overt, the fact is that it exists in some form. It is a state of mind that usually affects outward behaviour. Therefore its presence, or perceived presence, raises considerable concern. However, behaviour and action can easily, and inappropriately, be labelled as racist. In this sense, staff assertions that line-level personnel hold subtle and covert levels of racism is open to scrutiny. Unfortunately, the research herein is mainly cursory regarding such subtle differences as the hypothesis does not examine the specific occurrence of racism, rather, it examines the consensus among various groups regarding its presence and serves to identify areas of concern for future research and policy makers.

Concerning the abuse/neglect hypothesis (H2), the data indicates confirmation. The Native youth interviewed in this sample can be classified as multi-problem individuals who have a lengthy history of abuse and neglect. For example, 60.0% of the youth admitted having alcohol and drug addictions while 20.0% were found to be victims of sexual abuse with 64.4% being victims of physical abuse. Just as disturbing was the finding that 17.7% of the youth were themselves sexual abusers.

Teenage suicide is a problem that devastates communities and families. This was apparent in Labrador several years ago when young Aborigines were killing themselves in almost epidemic proportions. It was discovered in this sample that over one-quarter (26.7%) of the youth had attempted suicide in the community setting though this rate dropped by one-half (13.3%) within corrections. This is a paradoxical finding. Intuitively it would stand that Native youth would attempt self-harm while in custody due to the depression of being sentenced, the fear of being housed with and subject to peer pressure from often times "bigger" and "stronger" youth, as well as the loss of freedom. Instead, more of the Native youth were attempting acts of self-harm while in their home communities. When asked to explain why, the most common response was that they received little, if

any, attention from their parents, families and/or community members. Another common response was that the stigmatization and embarrassment of being a sexual abuse victim made the prospect of escape through suicide attractive. While in custody though, such feelings were not usually present because the youth were removed from community pressures and under constant supervision by staff members who took an "interest" in their daily activities.

Findings such as this help to highlight our understanding of adolescent suicide. It seems that often the reasons behind such acts stem from feelings of hopelessness, neglect and the need to be loved—or at least positively noticed. Such feelings are arguably universal and not bound by culture, colour or gender. With this in mind, encouragement can be forwarded to those community workers and social service agents who must face the difficult task of helping "at risk youth".

A final indicator of the extent to which this sample was subject to abuse and neglect can be found in the level of Social Services intervention. It was discovered that close to one-half (44.4%) of the youth had been under the care and control of Social Services; the most usual form of intervention leading to foster care placement. Surprisingly, the majority of these youth harboured ill-feelings toward Social Services for being "taken away" from their parent(s) even in situations of familial abuse/neglect. The youth questioned felt that though their home lives were dysfunctional, no one had the right to take them away from their parent(s) and place them in foreign settings. This admission raises concern in that these Native youth have in effect come to accept the abuse and neglect experienced at the hands of adults and do not understand the necessity of removal in certain circumstances.

Alternatively, Social Services is not uniformly correct in its decision making as witnessed by the example of the youth who had lived in over one hundred foster homes. Reasoning from this, the argument presented by many Native communities that foster care placement ought to be kept within, and even under the control, of Native communities seems appropriate. Further support comes from the finding that many of the interviewed youth had been placed with non-Native families which caused stress and tension due to cultural differences. For example, the use of curfews was foreign to many of the Native children until they were placed in non-Native families. Once this happened, many admitted that the major cause of conflict in the foster home(s) centered upon their loss of freedom. In fact many admitted that part of the reason for their initial involvement in crime was brought about by rebelling against restrictive curfews. Admissions such

as this need to be further explored by both Social Services and researchers in terms of possible crime prevention strategies.

Conclusion

Effectively researching interactions between the criminal justice system and Native youth is imperative in beginning to understand why Native adolescents are over-represented in correctional facilities. As Griffiths and Verdun-Jones (1994) argue, there is a lack of substantive research on the relationship between Native peoples and the justice system. Even more damaging is the fact that of the research currently existing, very little deals exclusively with Native youth.

Based on these assertions, the utility of this work is that it represents an initial examination of the racism issue. Although very superficial in that it concentrates solely on subject perception, the argument is presented that the connection between racial treatment and Native youth needs to be further examined in correctional settings as some of the findings herein are counter to existing ideals concerning the plight of Native children within the youth justice system. Namely, the fact that most of the Native youth interviewed did not see themselves as recipients of overt racist behaviour even though this issue is often discussed in both visual and print media.

According to the available literature systematic discrimination occurs within all levels of the youth justice system. This is supported by the various provincial justice inquiries that outline the presence of racist attitudes among youth justice workers (see Cawsey, 1991; Hamilton and Sinclair, 1991). However, there is a growing body of research that moves beyond this common assertion and attempts to find a more holistic explanation. In her work, Carol LaPrairie (1995) found that in certain Canadian cities Natives do commit disproportionate amounts of crime compared to non-Natives, are disproportionately represented in the types of crimes committed (mainly offenses against persons and liquor related) and are often processed "differently" by justice system personnel. However, she also asserts that much of the theorizing on over-representation focuses primarily on the three concepts of differential treatment by justice system personnel, differential commission of crimes and differential offence patterns. She feels that future research needs to move beyond this and focus more on the social, political and economic forces that influence the everyday lives of Native peoples. The findings presented here can be seen as an initial step toward this in that an examination was conducted on the social problems some Native youth face and how these difficulties may in turn contribute to the commission of their crimes.

One of the more surprising findings in this research is that according to incarcerated Native youth and senior correctional management, overt racist attitudes toward Native youth are not openly expressed by non-Native youth and/or correctional staff members in British Columbia's youth correctional centres. This is counter to most of the literature examined but perhaps indicates that provincial variations may exist and that the majority of discrimination may be directed towards Native youth at different levels of the criminal justice system. Namely, what is referred to as the "front end" or even behind "closed doors" (McMullen and Jayewardene, 1995). This implies, for example, that individuals such as the police, prosecutors and social workers may be exhibiting discriminatory attitudes for it is they who decide which youths will be processed and/or released. Admittedly some respondents told stories of overt racist behaviour by such individuals to the extent that serious research ought to be conducted to determine validity.

Another finding that helps to understand the relationship between Native youth and the justice system is the intensity of previous contact with justice system personnel and social services. It was discovered that the majority of Native youth in corrections have lived in numerous foster homes and have a lengthy history of contact with the police, courts, and probation. Findings such as this support the argument that effective crime prevention strategies must begin with the basic social needs of children. Namely, proper parental supervision, care and love. Furthermore, increased efforts and resources must be channelled to improving the health and social conditions in which many Native youth are raised. Supplying these individuals with life skills, employment training and education within corrections is necessary, but if they later return to the adverse social conditions that may have previously influenced their criminal behaviour, attempts at reducing criminality are going to be ineffective. It was encouraging to discover that the majority of senior management strongly echoed this concern.

The most disturbing findings produced in this research concern biographical profiles. Namely, the large number of incarcerated individuals who have suffered extensively from sexual, physical and emotional abuse and how many are now abusers themselves. This includes self-abusive practices such as alcohol consumption, drug in-take and self-mutilation as well as a propensity to hurt others through physical and even sexual coercion.

Understanding the plight of minority children within the Canadian youth justice system is essential if effective crime prevention strategies are going to be employed. Research that moves beyond the common assertion that discrimination wholly contributes to over-representation must be conducted. Furthermore, social and politically driven hypotheses need to be

integrated into theory-generated studies in order to assist the move from description to prescription. Because young people are the most valued possession in any culture, it is fundamental to ensure that uniformity and impartial treatment exists within the youth justice system so that the harmonious co-existence of Native and non-Native cultures can begin to occur. With Canada being a world-leader in protecting and forwarding equality and basic human rights, it would not stand to have overtly differential treatment occurring in correctional facilities for young offenders.

Notes

1. This research represents a small portion of a two-year study of youth custodial facilities throughout British Columbia conducted in cooperation with the Ministry of the Attorney General, British Columbia.
2. The attitudes and opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not represent the official position or policies of the Ministry of the Attorney General or any of its employees.

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