

# ABORIGINAL PEOPLES' SAFETY\*

## Strategic Overview

The legacy left by residential schools and colonization has left Canada's Aboriginal population suffering many intergenerational problems now reflected in their high rates of both victimization and offending. This poses a daunting challenge to all municipalities across Canada.

Aboriginal people are both perpetrators and victims of violence for the same multiple reasons that explain non-Aboriginal violence. These reasons include poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, homelessness, high transiency, reliance on food banks and shelters, and a lack of a strong institutional social network.

But the problems are more acute. Aboriginal people are more disadvantaged and disproportionately concentrated in high-crime areas (such as inner cities) than non-Aboriginal people. Often, they do not have attachments in urban areas and feel discriminated against.

So it is not surprising that more police, lawyers and prisoners will make little difference to violence.

### Action for Municipal Stakeholders

1. Invest in activities such as those outlined in other Action Briefs, particularly on *Safe Streets* and *Women's Safety*;
2. Support and work together with Aboriginal leaders in order to address the crime situation specific to each municipality, particularly when developing a strategic plan and public engagement;
3. Sustain funding to culturally relevant social development programs and promising practices that help Canada's Aboriginal youth attain healthy productive futures, including those tackling risk factors, such as Alcohol Abuse Intervention and Aboriginal Perspective Fourth 'R';
4. Encourage more Aboriginal peoples to take up staff positions, particularly in the community safety responsibility centre and in programs servicing Aboriginal people;
5. Encourage programs on reserves to prepare Aboriginal peoples for life in urban areas.

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## Justification

Aboriginal people are more likely than non-Aboriginal people to be victimized by virtually all types of violent crime in Canada. They are three times more likely than non-Aboriginal people to experience some form of violent victimization, and are twice as likely to be repeat victims of crime. These violent victimization rates are also high for young Aboriginal females, with the rate of violence being three and a half times higher when compared to non-Aboriginal females.

Levels of violence are also higher in areas highly populated with urban Aboriginal peoples. For example, Winnipeg, the CMA with the most urban Aboriginal people in Canada, is also home to the highest levels of violence in comparison to the other nine CMAs, which, along with Winnipeg, are considered to be among the top ten largest in Canada.

The Aboriginal population is also becoming increasingly urban. Many Aboriginal peoples are moving off reserves to urban areas. In 2006, 54% of Aboriginal people lived in an urban centre, which is an increase from 50% in 1996.

There is a vast amount of research proposing explanations for the overrepresentation in violence. Details of the sources used will be available on a longer version of this paper on the IPC website. This research highlights factors such as:

- The median age of Aboriginal people is 27, compared to the non-Aboriginal population, whose median age is 40.
- Only 4% of the Aboriginal population have a university degree, compared to 16% of the non-Aboriginal population.
- Aboriginal people are almost four times as likely as non-Aboriginal people to live in a crowded dwelling and are three times as likely to live in a dwelling in need of major repairs.
- The unemployment rate for Aboriginal people is almost double the rate for non-Aboriginal people.

- 22.6% of Aboriginal people report being heavy drinkers compared to 16.1% of non-Aboriginal people.

Research has confirmed the correlation between Aboriginal peoples' victimization and offending and factors such as these. Research also confirms for most countries and populations that those — not just Aboriginal peoples — exposed to factors such as childhood disadvantage, deprivation, child abuse, or parental drinking and/or violence will often find their adult lives disproportionately characterized by many of the same ills, leading to later victimization and involvement in the criminal justice system.

However, many urban Aboriginal people are marginalized to a greater extent than non-Aboriginal people, with the marginalization process beginning in early childhood. These are exacerbated by high levels of poverty, non-integration into the conventional job market, involvement in socially unacceptable activities, alcohol and drug abuse, homelessness, reliance on food banks and shelters, and a lack of strong institutional social networks.

This process has its roots in broader social contexts associated with the consequences of racism, colonization on traditional values and culture, as well as with the breakdown of family life resulting from the experiences suffered by many Aboriginal peoples at residential schools. Residential schools stripped away many Aboriginal peoples' language, culture and identity. Numerous Aboriginal children who went to these schools were also physically assaulted, molested and raped. The intergenerational consequences of both colonization and residential schools now weigh heavily on today's Aboriginal generations.

## Difficulties of Using Criminal Justice

Currently Canada's principal approach to addressing offending and victimization by and against Aboriginal peoples is through the standard

approach to criminal justice, that is, the police, courts and correctional services. Some legislative change and use of sentencing circles mitigates the severity of sanctions.

Nevertheless, Aboriginal Peoples are extremely overrepresented. Despite comprising only 4% of Canada's total population, Aboriginal adults in 2005 accounted for 24% of adult admissions to provincial/territorial custody, 19% of admissions to remand, and 18% of admissions to federal custody.

Continuing to rely on police, criminal justice and corrections is not enough to solve the intergenerational problems that lead to crime committed by and against Aboriginal peoples. Not only is it ineffective to continue to arrest, charge and incarcerate Canada's Aboriginal peoples, but it is incredibly expensive as well. This is not to say that such measures should be eliminated, but a more balanced approach which gives equal importance to prevention and treatment must be implemented alongside these standard measures.

## Current Involvement of Municipalities

Municipalities are already involved in some prevention services that directly or indirectly tackle some Aboriginal peoples' risk factors (although, many programs do not have sustained funding and/or lack central leadership). Some of these initiatives include:

- Culturally sensitive after-school sports and recreation programs
- Early childhood and parental support programs
- Neighbourhood Revitalization strategies
- Enhanced after-school academic programs
- Safety programs for women

Some municipalities have also created partnerships and/or committees of people that collaborate to address issues that may have some impact on the problem of overrepresentation. Edmonton, for example, has an *Aboriginal Urban Affairs Committee* whose purpose is to promote the awareness and development of Aboriginal people in their city; they

work with individuals, groups, agencies, and levels of government who are also addressing concerns regarding Aboriginal people living in urban areas. In addition, the committee advocates on behalf of urban Aboriginal people, and collaborates with the Mayor and City Councillors through meetings, reports, and other projects. They are also involved with other agencies like the *Safe Edmonton Advisory Committee*, which seeks to prevent violence, support vulnerable groups, and design and support safe neighbourhoods.

### Box 1 Aboriginal Perspective Fourth 'R' Program

The *Fourth 'R' (Relationship)* program represents a promising example of risk-focused prevention originating in London, Ontario.

This program was originally developed for delivery in a universal setting; however, it has now expanded to include an Aboriginal Perspective Fourth 'R' version. This version keeps the skills-based curriculum of the original program, but situates the program in a cultural identity framework. This framework takes into consideration that Aboriginal people's specific vulnerabilities and risk behaviours are very much a result of their historical circumstances.

Elders and other members from the Aboriginal community are also involved in the program, and are brought into the classroom to assist with the lessons and execution of the program.

Nova Scotia has a successful Tripartite Forum, which enlists the collaborative efforts of federal, provincial and Aboriginal representatives. It has met regularly for the past seventeen years and has altered the landscape for Aboriginal justice throughout the province.

The *International Centre for the Prevention of Crime*, based out of Montreal, has an Aboriginal virtual network and bulletin. Including such countries as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States, this agency brings together many individuals who work in the area of Aboriginal crime and its prevention from across the world, its purpose being to share knowledge, facilitate research, and to advance partnerships with Aboriginal communities across the globe.

## Key Components of Solutions

Promising initiatives do exist which seek to reduce high levels of urban Aboriginal peoples' victimization and offending. However not enough is being done. There is a great deal of research that reveals the importance of municipalities joining with Aboriginal leaders and organizations to tackle crime problems together. Culturally relevant programs and initiatives that tackle the multiple risk factors associated to urban Aboriginal people must be implemented and sustained with continued funding.

### **Box 2 Alcohol Abuse Intervention for Aboriginal Peoples in Nova Scotia**

A relatively recent prevention program has shown some promise in reducing drinking behaviours (a risk factor highly correlated to victimization and offending) amongst Aboriginal youth in Nova Scotia. Researchers Mushquash, Comeau and Stewart developed and pilot-tested an early intervention initiative for alcohol misuse among Aboriginal youth from two Mi'kmaq communities (4 different schools) in Nova Scotia. Through a culturally-adapted intervention entitled "Nemi'simk, Seeing Oneself," the research revealed that youths who participated in the intervention had fewer alcohol-related problems and were more likely to abstain from alcohol abuse in the future.

Different programs/initiatives include:

- Providing public health nurses to at-risk mothers, or single parent families
- Enriched pre-schooling for at-risk children
- Providing culturally relevant violence reduction education programs in schools
- Providing youth with job training
- Implementing programs on reserves to prepare Aboriginal peoples for life in urban areas

The Action Briefs in Series 1 *Invest Smartly in Safety for the City* provide the collaboration and planning base for success but Aboriginal people must be integrated into these solutions.