



An Examination of Culturally-Relevant Programs and Culturally-Competent Evaluation Approaches

Background

This literature review sought to address two guiding research questions: how have Indigenous cultural practices, traditions, and activities been included in crime prevention programming and what is their connection with crime prevention; and, how have culturally-relevant crime prevention programs been evaluated and what is their contribution to crime prevention outcomes? This literature review includes a review of risk/protective factors for crime among Indigenous persons; a summary of the literature on crime prevention programs for Indigenous Peoples; analysis of the connection between cultural practices, traditions, and activities and crime prevention objectives; a review of program evaluations; a summary and analysis of evaluation approaches and methodologies; a review of the effectiveness of Indigenous cultural practices, traditions, and activities on crime prevention based on existing evaluation results; and, conclusions and recommendations.

Method

This literature review is limited to literature written in English available through web searches from the early 1980s to present, appearing in electronic databases (academic journal articles; peer reviewed articles) and in select sources of grey literature (e.g., government publications), and does not include consultations or interviews. The search included Canadian and international literature.

A total of 291 articles were collected and analyzed, relating to over-representation of Indigenous Peoples in the Criminal Justice System, risk/protective factors, and crime prevention programs/evaluations. Articles dated

from 1983 to 2021 (majority of articles dating from 2014 to 2021), with countries of publication including Canada, Australia, the United States, New Zealand, the Philippines, and a few other countries (greatest representation from Canada).

Findings

The literature in this field is relatively new and challenging to find, particularly so for literature on the evaluation of programs. Indeed, the majority of articles reviewed were from gray literature sources, indicating that the field has not been extensively researched in academia; thus, causality is difficult to establish.

Indigenous Peoples are over-represented at all stages of the criminal justice system. The reasons for the over-representation are rooted in a history of colonization of Indigenous Peoples, including the impacts of colonialism, residential schools and the sixties scoop, systemic discrimination, the differential impact of criminal justice policies, and socio-economic marginalization.

In general, individual, family, peer, school, and community risk/protective factors for involvement in criminal behaviour are similar for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The higher incidence of these risk factors; multiple levels of marginality; key social issues (e.g., related to the effects of colonialism); and the exposure to fewer protective factors in Indigenous populations explains much of the over-representation in the criminal justice system. Several specific protective factors for Indigenous Peoples also exist, including engagement in traditional/cultural practices, positive

cultural identity, strong extended-family, and community involvement.

Culturally-Relevant Programming

Many existing Indigenous programs are holistic and multi-faceted in nature with the intent of addressing several issues as a crime prevention approach (e.g., well-being, culture, family cohesion). Some of the programs reviewed attempted to address early risk factors that could lead to youth behaviour issues (e.g., family violence, parenting skills) and others provided a mechanism to reduce crime in the community by utilizing an alternative diversion model (e.g., restorative justice).

Linking existing programming to risk factors, many Indigenous programs have the same goals as non-Indigenous crime prevention programming. Programs that focus on Indigenous-specific factors specifically include those that aim to reconnect Indigenous Peoples with their culture.

Certain key components for cultural programming include: a culturally-appropriate program design; community involvement in the design, implementation, and management of programs; incorporation of traditional cultural philosophies, knowledge, and wisdom; and Indigenous-specific activities and experiences. The literature also emphasizes the need to address the unique risk factors that Indigenous Peoples face, including the effects of colonization, residential schools and the sixties scoop, systemic discrimination, and socio-economic marginalization.

Some articles provided results on outcomes, often pointing to success in increasing connections to culture and the community, and individual protective factors. Unfortunately, information on the role that cultural approaches played in addressing risk or protective factors and the extent to which cultural elements made a difference was very limited.

Several opportunities associated with Indigenous crime prevention programming exist, including incorporating Indigenous-specific cultural components into crime prevention programs for Indigenous Peoples; completing community assessments to identify

strengths and areas of concern with a view to tailoring programs and employing a strengths-based approach; developing crime prevention programs specifically for Indigenous Peoples with a holistic approach; grounding the work in community ownership and control; and examining lessons learned and best practices in crime prevention for Indigenous Peoples from other countries.

Conversely, some risks associated with culturally-relevant programming include attempts to adapt programs developed for non-Indigenous populations to Indigenous contexts; importing Indigenous-specific programs developed for one community into another community; focusing on individualized interventions rather than a holistic approach; and unsustainable resources to design, implement and monitor the program.

Next Steps

It is critically important that Indigenous communities are involved in the design and implementation of crime prevention programs; that the programs respect OCAP® principles; and that program designers and facilitators employ cultural humility. Programs should also take a holistic, inter-related and comprehensive approach, incorporating Indigenous worldviews and strength-based approaches. Programs should be well resourced, including secure and long-term funding and well informed and equipped resources in addition to Indigenous staff and leaders. Finally, it is important that culturally-relevant elements in crime prevention programming be both planned and evaluated.

Culturally-Competent Evaluation

Evaluation of culturally-relevant programs is relatively new (dating from 2000) and limited to evaluations of programs in Canada, Australia, the United States, and New Zealand. Culturally-competent evaluations are even harder to find.

In lieu of well-developed and researched evaluation models and results, the literature suggests best practices for (future) program evaluation: developing evaluation designs that responds to the key tenets of an Indigenous evaluation framework by co-constructing evaluation measures with Indigenous communities and leaders,

ensuring the objective of community empowerment; grounding the evaluation design and conduct in the cultural context of the community, respecting differences among communities; ensuring culturally-relevant evaluation components are present; and considering factors such as trust, safe spaces, two-way knowledge sharing, and a discussion of cultural dissonance.

To date, most evaluations have relied primarily on mainstream/Western evaluation methods applied to outcome and process evaluations. There is little rigorous evaluation evidence to show whether crime prevention programs are effective in reducing the over-representation of Indigenous young people and adults in the criminal justice system. Few programs have been comprehensively evaluated, and, of those, even fewer assess the contribution of Indigenous cultural practices, traditions, and activities to crime prevention outcomes, although some evidence suggests that holistic, culturally-relevant approaches and activities contribute positively to healing and reducing some risk factors. More research and evaluation are required to uncover the link between culturally-relevant programming and crime prevention.

Several key opportunities exist: strengthening the link between federal governments and communities as they work together to develop evaluation approaches and methods aligned with Indigenous needs and frameworks; strengthening the role of the evaluator as an advocate for the community; co-development of evaluation approaches rooted in dialogue and equal participation; and drawing on Indigenous knowledge and weaving together both long-term, traditional wisdom and proven evaluation approaches.

The literature also points to several barriers, including relationship barriers, planning challenges, barriers associated with designing and implementing new evaluation method approaches, limitations associated with availability of data, and barriers to access.

Lessons Learned

Finally, the literature reveals several key lessons. Building trust with communities, programs, and participants can take a long time and is an essential

element of success. A collaborative approach can encourage community ownerships and leverage resources, even when they may be limited. The evaluation project should factor in capacity building, to ensure knowledge sharing and co-development of evaluation and research strategies and findings. The use of singular, “one-size-fits-all” program and evaluation designs should be limited. Knowledge should be shared in different formats to suit the diversity of users and participants. Preserving the autonomy, partnership, and interests of Indigenous Peoples is key to responsible evaluation. The role of the evaluator is context- and culture-specific; thus, the evaluator must begin the process with the interests, realities, and context of the communities in mind. Finally, planning for culturally-competent evaluations must include appropriate resourcing, flexibility, communication, and coordination.

Source

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