

ASSESSING THE RISK OF RE-OFFENDING AMONG ABORIGINAL OFFENDERS

QUESTION: Do risk factors for recidivism differ between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders?

BACKGROUND: Aboriginal people are over represented among offender populations. While Aboriginal people represent 3% of the Canadian population they comprised 12% of the provincial/territorial admissions to probation in 1996/97. One of the important tasks for corrections is the management of offender risk. In order to accomplish this task, assessments of offenders' risk of committing new crimes are routinely conducted. However, the majority of offender risk assessment instruments have been standardized on male non-Aboriginal offender populations and therefore, there is a need to evaluate the validity of these risk scales for use with Aboriginal offenders.

METHOD: Subjects were drawn from a database maintained by the Manitoba Community and Youth Corrections Division. The database consisted of approximately 11,600 adult probationers, male and female, who completed their

terms of probation between 1986 and 1991. The database included information on an offender risk instrument used in Manitoba. The final random sample consisted of 903 offenders, 513 (56.8%) non-Aboriginal and 390 (43.2%) Aboriginal offenders. The Aboriginal sample consisted of 124 Métis, 153 "treaty-on" and 113 "treaty-off" Aboriginal offenders. "Treaty-on" and "treaty-off" refer to offenders with registered Indian status as defined under legislation and who were living either on or off reserves at the time of their admission to probation.

ANSWER: As a group, Aboriginal offenders, compared to non-Aboriginal offenders, were younger, less educated, more likely to be unemployed and had longer criminal histories. In addition, 65.9% of Aboriginal offenders and 47.8% of non-Aboriginal offenders re-offended within 3 years of completing community supervision. The total risk score predicted recidivism for Aboriginal offenders as it did for non-Aboriginal offenders ($r = .32$ and $r = .36$ respectively). Almost all of the items from the risk assessment instrument

predicted re-offending for both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal offenders. These items were peers, alcohol and drug abuse, attitude, employment, prior criminal history, sex (male), age (younger), address change and financial situation. Family/marital relationships, mental ability and academic/vocational skills predicted re-offending among non-Aboriginal offenders only. Finally, emotional stability did not predict recidivism for either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal offenders. A further breakdown of the Aboriginal sample revealed that Métis offenders were most similar to non-Aboriginal offenders in terms of their risk factors. Every risk item that was associated with recidivism for non-Aboriginal offenders was a risk factor for Métis offenders. However, there was variability for the status Aboriginal offenders. Only 7 of the 15 items predicted re-offending for "treaty-on" Aboriginal offenders and still fewer items (4 of 15) for "treaty-off" Aboriginal offenders. The total risk-needs scores nevertheless, predicted recidivism for all four groups.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

1. The finding that a risk and needs scale developed on non-Aboriginal offender samples predicted re-offending for Aboriginal offenders supports the evaluation and use of similar scales among Aboriginal offenders. Many of the risk factors identified for non-Aboriginal offenders (e.g. substance abuse, criminal peers and criminal history) apply equally well to Aboriginal offenders.
2. The variability in risk factors among Aboriginal sub-groupings suggests a need to recognize the differences among Aboriginal offenders and conduct further research to elucidate these differences.

SOURCE: Bonta, J., LaPrairie, C., & Wallace-Capretta, S. (1997). 'Risk Prediction and Re-Offending: Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Offenders'. *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 39 (2), pp. 127-144.

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