



Aboriginal Street-Involved Youth Experience

Elevated Risk of Incarceration

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Aboriginal, Indigenous, youth, intergenerational trauma, historical trauma, interventions, incarceration, street-involved youth, substance use, policing, discrimination

POPULATION GROUP

Aboriginal youth; Youth involved with the law

STEPPING UP THEMES

Health & Wellness

RESEARCH ORIGIN

Canada

SOURCE

Academic article (peer-reviewed)

“Even after adjusting for drug use patterns and other risk factors associated with incarceration, this study found that Aboriginal street-involved youth were still significantly more likely to be incarcerated than their non-Aboriginal peers. Given the established harms associated with incarceration these findings underscore the pressing need for systemic reform including culturally appropriate interventions to prevent Aboriginal youth from becoming involved with the criminal justice system.”

1. What is the research about?

Incarceration is associated with many negative social and health outcomes, which are amplified and have a greater negative effect on young offenders. Rather than serve as a deterrent to criminal activity, previous research shows that incarceration increases the risk of young people to reoffend. Moreover, all demographics are not equally represented in the criminal justice system. This research is about the factors that contribute to the ongoing and rising overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system.

This study extends previous research that identified risk factors linked with incarceration for Aboriginal adults. This is the first longitudinal study, controlling for risk factors, that seeks to assess whether Aboriginal youth are at a greater risk of being incarcerated than other youth.

2. Where did the research take place?

This study took place in Vancouver, British Columbia.

3. Who is this research about?

The research is about street involved Aboriginal youth who report being incarcerated, which is defined as staying at least one “night in detention, prison, or jail”.

4. How was the research done?

This study is longitudinal. Data was collected from 1,050 street-involved, drug-using youth in Vancouver, British Columbia, through the At-Risk Youth Study. Data collection began in 2003 and concluded in 2013. The youth completed the survey on average three times, during three visits.

Youth were eligible to participate in the study if they met the following criteria:

- between the ages of 14-26
- homeless or have unstable housing
- utilizing street-based services
- used illicit drugs in the last month

Over the ten years, 1,050 street-involved youth completed an interviewer-administered survey that asked questions regarding socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, educational attainment, and living situation. The survey also inquires about a number of behaviours, including drug use as well as familial upbringing.

5. What are the key findings?

Aboriginal youth are incarcerated at rates higher than non-Aboriginal youth. Even when adjusting for known risk factors for incarceration, Aboriginal ancestry remains significantly associated with incarceration. This suggests that the high numbers of incarcerated Aboriginal youth is a result of factors beyond increased likelihood of engaging in risky behaviour. The researchers suggest two reasons for this:

1. Aboriginal youth commit proportionally more crimes than non-Indigenous youth; or
2. Aboriginal youth are targets of a racist criminal justice system.

Research finds that Aboriginal people do engage in criminal behaviours at a proportion higher than non-Aboriginal Canadians. However, historical and structural factors contribute to this phenomenon.

Social, structural and environmental factors are well known to lead to social and health inequalities of Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal overrepresentation in the criminal justice system is linked with on-going colonialism, through the dispossession of land, and attempts to eradicate Aboriginal culture. These attempts include residential schools, the 60s scoop, banning of religious and cultural ceremonies, and destruction of language. The trauma brought on by colonization has yet to be adequately addressed, resulting in the transmitting of trauma across generations.

These historical events have resulted in economic marginalization, increased rates of drug use, and elevated rates of poverty, which are all demonstrated risk factors for incarceration.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

This research matters for youth, especially Aboriginal youth, as it underscores the need for culturally relevant and meaningful interventions to mitigate the risk factors associated with incarceration.

The study finds that Aboriginal ancestry and incarceration are independently associated, which implies “that policing or other aspects of the criminal justice system” may play a role in disproportionate incarceration rates.

Promising alternatives to incarceration include alternative sentencing and community-based, community-driven diversion programs. However, these treat the symptoms and not the causes of incarceration. In order change the structural factors that drive criminality, issues of representation, land claims, socioeconomic and other inequalities, and historical and intergenerational traumas will need to be addressed. The impacts of colonialism need to be acknowledged and responded to with a post-colonial framework, one that acknowledges the inherent rights of self-governance and self-determination of Canada’s Indigenous peoples.



Barker, B, Alfred, G.T., Fleming, K, Nguyen, P, Wood, E, Kerr, T, DeBeck, K, (2015). Aboriginal street-involved youth experience elevated risk of incarceration. *Public Health*, 12, 1662-1668.

FIND IT ONLINE

http://www.cfenet.ubc.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/news/releases/barker_elevating_risk_of_incarceartion_among_aboriginal_youth_ph_2015.pdf