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Aboriginal Resource Access in Response to Criminal Victimization in an Urban Context

Raymond R. Corrado, Irwin M. Cohen and Jesse L. Cale

A disproportionate number of Aboriginal people, on- and off-reserve, experience a wide range of criminal victimizations from minor property offences to serious personal violence. While victimization generally can have severe consequences, Aboriginal victims are particularly susceptible to both social exclusion and more problematic access to resources, services and programs to assist their recovery and reintegration. Unlike the United States, where considerable research has been conducted on minority groups, crime and victimization (Greenfeld and Smith 1999), little similar research has been conducted in Canada, with the exception of the General Social Survey (GSS). However, the GSS did not specifically explore Aboriginal victimization. Consequently, little is known about how these victims respond generally to their victimization experiences and specifically in terms of their accessing available resources.

The rate of Aboriginal crime and victimization varies widely across communities (Roberts and Doob 1994). A consistent observation is that violence in Aboriginal communities is usually directed at family members, particularly women. In La Prairie's (1994) study of Aboriginal people in the inner cities, the majority of Aboriginal women interviewed reported a violent victimization. Additionally, crime is predominately intraracial since most perpetrators and victims are Aboriginal (Silverman and Kennedy 1993; Trevethan 1991; Roberts and Doob 1994; Griffiths et al. 1995).

As mentioned above, Aboriginal violence typically involves family members (Frank 1992). The Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba found that approximately one-third (33%) of Aboriginal women had been abused—at some point in their relationships—by their intimate partner. A report by the Ontario Native Women's Association revealed that 80% of the Aboriginal women surveyed had personally experienced family violence. In British Columbia, the Beyond Violence Report by the Helping Spirit Lodge concluded that 86% of respondents experienced or witnessed family violence. In addition, approximately 40% of respondents identified all family

members as suffering from some form of abuse. The report from the British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence (1992) found that Aboriginal women not only face a much greater risk of family violence than non-Aboriginal women, but also are typically afraid to access non-Aboriginal victim-based services, resources and/or programs because of Aboriginal people's historical experiences with non-Aboriginal governmental and non-governmental departments, agencies and services.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) also examined family violence in Aboriginal communities. They defined family violence as "a serious abuse of power within the family, trust or dependency relationships" (RCAP 1996, 54–55). Violence includes spousal assault, violence against children and sexual abuse, as well as more general forms of psychological and emotional abuse. While family violence exists in mainstream society, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (1996) suggests that there are three distinct features in the Aboriginal context: (1) family violence effects the entire community; (2) in part, family violence is an outcome of government interventions that disrupted and/or displaced Aboriginal families; and (3) violence is sustained by a racist social environment (RCAP 1996). For example, in the case of sexual abuse, if the perpetrator is from an older generation, the Aboriginal victim may be hesitant to acknowledge the abuse, confront the offender and seek help. Moreover, the entire family may experience shame as a result of the victimization and directly or indirectly pressure the victim to remain silent (RCAP 1996).

Despite a growing acceptance within Aboriginal communities that violence is a serious problem requiring prevention and intervention policies, too many victims remain fearful and are prevented from seeking resources, services and programs. Accordingly, these victims do not report to the police or seek medical, social, or mental health assistance. Particularly troublesome are victims of physical or sexual abuse whose sense of shame and fear prevent them from seeking assistance. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People concluded that "fear is behind the violence. Fear allows it to continue. Fear prevents people from doing something to stop the cycle of violence" (RCAP 1993, 35).

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People found considerable consistency in the Aboriginal research literature concerning the reasons why many Aboriginal women do not report family violence. The most common reasons are: (1) family violence is viewed as normative behavior; (2) a general lack of self-esteem, shame and acceptance of the victim; (3) a fear that children will be removed from the victim's home; (4) women do not want to see their partners charged; (5) a fear of the potential loss of income if their partner is convicted and incarcerated; (6) a general lack of faith in the system to effectively intervene on the victim's behalf; and (7) a fear of retaliation from the perpetrator (RCAP 1996). Finally, McEvoy and Daniluk (1995)

argue that, in general, much of the clinical and research literature on the outcomes and intervention strategies associated with sexual abuse assumes a relative homogeneity in the abuse experience.

Given the general lack of systematic Canadian research into Aboriginal victimization, and particularly the ways in which Aboriginal victims of crime access and use services, programs and resources in response to these experiences, the National Community Research Project (NCRP) surveyed Aboriginal people's access to services, primarily in an urban context, in response to their most serious lifetime criminal victimization. The NCRP involves an innovative approach to policy and research. It is based on intricate working partnerships among individuals from government departments, academics, community workers and First Nation's communities to initially identify specific policy issues, and then to construct research instruments to collect, analyze and disseminate policy information relevant to all of the research partners.

Between April 2001 and April 2002, using a snowball sampling technique, 1,047 Aboriginal people from the Greater Vancouver Regional District in British Columbia participated in a two-hour, semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interview on a wide range of issues, including: (2) mobility and housing issues; (2) social cohesion and collective efficacy; (3) lifetime and recent criminal victimization experiences and outcomes; (4) access, use and satisfaction with programs, services and resources in response to their victimization experiences; (5) cultural identity and family history; (6) health and mental health issues; and (7) alcohol and drug use.¹ While this sample appears to be representative of the Aboriginal people who live in the downtown core of Vancouver on several key demographic indicators, this sample should not be considered representative of Aboriginal people in Canada.

Of the entire sample of 1,047 Aboriginal people, 76.5% stated that they had been the victim of a crime they defined as having a serious impact on them. Only these respondents (n=801) are included in the following analyses. This sample is nearly equally divided by gender with 53.4% of respondents being female and 46.6% of respondents being male. The respondents in this sample are overwhelmingly self-identified as Status Indians (82%). The mean age of the sample was 39 years with a range of 18 to 75 years. More specifically, 37.1% of the sample was between 18 and 35 years old, 47.2% was between 36 and 50 years old, and 15.6% of the sample was more than 50 years old.

In terms of education attainment, only a small percentage (7.2%) had only an elementary education. The majority of the sample had either completed some secondary school or graduated from secondary school (58%). Nearly one-fifth of the sample (19.6%) had either some post-secondary schooling or graduated from post-secondary school. Moreover,

15.1% had some other form of schooling, such as having attended or graduated from a vocational or trade school.

Based on the level of education evident in this sample, it is not unexpected that 60.5% of the sample had an annual household income of less than \$20,000 in the previous twelve months. Slightly more than one-quarter of respondents (28.8%) reported household earnings between \$20,000 and \$40,000, while 10.7% reported earnings in excess of \$40,000. Approximately one-fifth of the sample reported that they worked for themselves, on average from two to three months of the year, and this provided 20%–30% of their annual income. Others exclusively engaged in seasonal work (16.4%).

While the majority of the sample experienced more than one criminal victimization, respondents were asked to identify the one victimization that had the greatest negative impact on their lives (see Table 1). Approximately one-fifth (19.5%) of the sample mentioned a violent offence as the most serious victimization. A gender difference is evident since 23.4% of the males versus 16.4% of the females reported a non-violent criminal victimization as having the greatest negative impact on their lives.

Table 1: Most serious lifetime criminal victimization

	Total (n = 801) %	Males (n = 373) %	Females (n = 428) %
Personal theft	3.2	4.6 *	1.9 *
Breaking and entering	7.6	9.7	6.1
Threats or stalking	8.7	9.1	8.4
Assault without a weapon	19.9	16.1 ***	22.9 ***
Assault with a weapon	18.5	25.3 ***	12.4 ***
Robbery	7.9	14.2 ***	2.6 ***
Attempted sexual assault	12	8.1 ***	15.7 ***
Sexual assault	18.7	8.6 ***	27.6 ***

* p = .05; ** p = .01; *** p = .001

Assaults had the greatest negative impact on the lives of the males in this sample. Approximately one quarter (25.3%) reported an assault with a weapon and 16.1% reported an assault without a weapon. While 22.9% of the females were assaulted without a weapon, 27.6% indicated that a sexual assault had the greatest negative impact on their lives. The prevalence of attempted sexual assaults (15.7%) and assaults with a weapon (12.4%) is also high for the females in this sample. Aboriginal people in this sample have experienced serious forms of criminal victimization.

For all types of serious personal criminal victimization, the majority of respondents accessed at least one service, program, or resource (see Table 2). More than one-third (35.3%) of the respondents who identified a property offence as having had the greatest negative impact on their lives accessed a resource, service, or program in response. Of these respondents, slightly

more females (37.8%) than males (34.8%) accessed a resource. The highest access occurred for those who identified a personal theft (57.7%) as the victimization that had the greatest negative impact.

Table 2: Resource access based on most serious lifetime victimization

	Total (n = 801) %
Personal theft	57.7
Breaking and entering	33.9
Threats or stalking	49.0
Assault without a weapon	75.2
Assault with a weapon	78.0
Robbery	67.2
Attempted sexual assault	68.0
Sexual assault	78.9

Most respondents (74.8%) who identified a violent victimization as having had the greatest negative impact on their lives accessed at least one service, resource, or program. As with those who reported a property offence, again, slightly more females (79.4%) than males (69.1%) indicated that they accessed resources. Most of those who reported being the victim of a sexual assault (78.9%) or experienced an attempted sexual assault (68%) accessed resources. Equally expected, high access rates are evident for the remaining violent victimization categories.

In terms of the specific types of programs, services, or resources that respondents accessed in response to their most serious victimization, all of the responses were collapsed into six distinct types: (1) health, (2) mental health, (3) police-based, (4) community-based, (5) government, and (6) Aboriginal (see Table 3). In interpreting Table 3, it is important to keep in mind that people can access more than one type of resource in response to a single victimization.

Table 3: Type of resource accessed by gender and most serious lifetime victimization

	Property Victimization		Violent Victimization	
	Males %	Females %	Males %	Females %
Health resources	0.0	4.4 ***	47.5 ***	49.9 ***
Mental health resources	10.1	13.3	28.3 ***	49.3 ***
Police-based resources	4.3	6.7	10.4 ***	33.1 ***
Community-based resources	7.2	15.6	16.0 **	25.6 **
Government resources	13.0	13.3	16.4 ***	19.0 ***
Aboriginal resources	8.7	11.1	8.20	9.2

* p = .05; ** p = .01; *** p = .001

While the percentage of respondents who accessed any type of resource in response to a property offence is quite low for all of the different types of resources, they are more likely to access an Aboriginal resource to deal with a property offence than a violent offence. Moreover, when a resource is accessed in response to a property offence, the most common resources are community and government-based programs, services and resources. As reported above, the females in this sample were more likely to access a resource than males. While the rates of accessing a health resource to deal with a violent victimization were similar for males and females, many more females accessed a mental health resource (49.3%) than males (28.3%). An even larger gender ratio is evident regarding accessing police-based resources since three times as many women resorted to this type of resource than males in response to their most serious violent victimization.

A substantial percentage of victims (38.2%) did not access any resources, programs, or services in response to the criminal victimization that had the greatest negative impact on the respondent. The most common reason given is that the respondent did not want any help (57.6%). Other reasons given for not accessing services included: victimization was not considered serious enough (41%); lack of awareness of resources that could assist victims (27.1%); sense of being ashamed or embarrassed (26.4%); and concerns that they would not be believed (13.3%). However, when one considers only those respondents who identified a violent victimization and did not access any resources, the reasons provided for not accessing any assistance provides a number of important policy implications (see Table 4).

Table 4: Reasons for not accessing any resources in response to a violent victimization

	Assaults (n = 72) %	Robbery (n = 20) %	Sexual Offences (n = 32) %
Respondent did not know of any resources	29.6	25	18.2
Resources were not available	8.6	0	27.3
Respondent felt that the incident was too minor	43.2	45	18.2
Respondent was ashamed or embarrassed	24.7	25	81.8
Respondent felt they would not be believed	11.1	5	36.4
Respondent was prevented by the offender	6.2	0	0
Respondent did not want or need any help	64.2	55	90.9
Location of service was inconvenient	9.9	5	9.1

In terms of those respondents who identified an assault with or without a weapon, 23.1% did not access any resources in response. Specifically, nearly two-thirds (64.2%) reported that they either did not feel that they required any help or did not want any help. As expected, nearly half of those who identified an assault (43.2%) felt that the incident was too minor to

access any services. Very few respondents (8.6%) attempted to access victim services and found none. In contrast, nearly one-third did not know of any victim programs.

Nearly one-third of all respondents (31.3%) who identified a robbery as their most serious victimization did not access any resources. Nearly half of those respondents (45%) felt that the incident was too minor. In addition, a slight majority (55%) did not want, or felt they did not need, any assistance. However, a quarter of respondents reported that they did not know of any resources that could assist them. It is possible that these respondents did not consider the police a possible resource.

Slightly more than one-fifth (21.1%) of those individuals who identified a sexual assault where intercourse occurred did not access any resources. A major policy concern for service providers and community leaders is the finding that 90.9% of those respondents either did not want help or felt that they did not need help. As discussed in the research, 81.8% report that they did not access any resources because they felt ashamed or embarrassed. More than one-third (36.4%) felt they would not be believed by service providers. Equally problematic for service providers is the finding that 18.2% of victims did not know of any resources that could have assisted them and 27.3% could not access any resources because none were available. It is also troublesome that nearly one-fifth of those respondents (18.2%) who were sexually assaulted—where intercourse occurred—felt that the assault was too minor to access any resources.

There are many negative impacts associated with the criminal victimization experienced by respondents. In order to assess any negative impact, a five-point scale was created based on respondents' self-reported feelings that their most serious victimization made them feel: angry, fearful, emotional harm, shocked, or caused physical injury. Using this measure, those respondents with a higher score experienced a greater negative impact as a result of their victimization. The mean negative impact score was higher for those who accessed a resource, service, or program compared to those who did not access any kind of resource. Specifically, the mean negative impact score for those who accessed a resource was 4.1, while those who did not access a resource had a mean negative impact score of 3.5. This difference was statistically significant ($p=.001$). Moreover, the odds of accessing a service versus not accessing a service was 2.95 times greater for those respondents who reported "more of or a stronger" negative impact from the victimization experience than those who reported "less of or a weaker" negative impact from the victimization experience.

In addition to the finding that those who felt a greater negative impact from the victimization were more likely to access at least one type of service, respondents also reported a significant benefit from accessing resources.

Respondents who accessed at least one of the service types indicated in Table 3 were 1.5 times more likely to have expressed a positive outcome from the victimization experience in terms of greater self-reliance or strength than those who did not access any services, resources, or programs (see Table 5).

Table 5: Odds ratio – Positive outcome based on type of resource accessed

	Odds Ratio
Health resources	1.1
Mental health resources	1.5 **
Police-based resources	1.8 **
Community-based resources	1.7 **
Government resources	1.4
Aboriginal resources	0.9

* p = .05; ** p = .01; *** p = .001

Accessing a police-based resource, a community-based resource, or a mental health resource is associated with statistically significant differences in positive outcomes compared to those who did not access any services. Those who accessed a police-based service were 1.8 times more likely to state that they felt more self-reliant or stronger following their victimization experience. Similarly, those who accessed a community-based resource were 1.7 times more likely than those who did not access a resource to report feeling more self-reliant or strong, while those who accessed a mental health resource were 1.5 times more likely to report a positive outcome. While not statistically significant, those who accessed at least one government resource were 1.4 times more likely to have expressed a positive outcome compared to those who did not access resources. Those who accessed an Aboriginal resource were more likely to have expressed a positive outcome in terms of greater self-reliance or strength compared to those who did not access any services. However, this relationship is the weakest among the various resource types.

This initial analysis of the NCRP victimization data confirms that both property and personal victimization is not uncommon. Most troubling are the high frequencies of violent victim experiences and the large number of these victims who either did not report them to the police or did not seek any assistance. Moreover, there are many individuals who sought help from service providers and were unsuccessful. What is encouraging is that many victims who accessed resources viewed them positively and, equally important, reported significantly more positive outcomes than those who did not access any resources, services, or programs.

There are, however, the policy challenges of convincing many victims who did not seek services that their victim experiences are important enough, and serious enough, to be provided assistance. It may also be necessary to

better publicize the availability of resources to increase awareness among victims. In addition, it appears that male victims are substantially more reluctant than female victims to access most types of resources. In particular, male victims were more than three times less likely to turn to police-based resources in response to their most serious lifetime victimization experience. Given this, more must be done to encourage male victims of crime to access resources, services and programs that can be beneficial to them in dealing with their often serious victimization experiences.

Endnotes

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1. For a full description of the research project and the methodology please see: R.R. Corrado, I. M. Cohen, and M. Boudreau, *The National Community Research Project: Vancouver Urban Sample: Report 1—Overview of the Research*, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 2002.

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