

Inventory of Aboriginal Services, Issues and Initiatives in Vancouver

Justice

Relevant Details

- In 2003/04 Aboriginal people made up 19.8% of the B.C. prison population (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Juristat, Vol. 26, no. 3, p. 28).
- In BC in 2004/05, 38% of youth in custody were Aboriginal and 14% were female. (BC Ministry of Children & Family Development 2004/05 Annual Service Plan Report).
- Although overall there were fewer youth being sentenced to custody in BC, Aboriginal youth are increasingly over-represented. In 1996/97 Aboriginal youth were 3 times more likely to be incarcerated; that rose to 5 times more likely in 2004/05; and 7 times more likely in 2005/06. (Child and Youth Officer of BC, Issue Paper 5, 2006).
- "In order to decrease the over-representation of Aboriginal youth in BC, it is important to develop and maintain a profile of incarcerated Aboriginal youth, determine and fund best practices, educate police officers, judges, probations officers, ...develop and enhance First Nations programs that use strengths based or asset-building approaches, and identify existing barrier to the provision of referrals by the youth justice system to community-based programs". (Child and Youth Officer of BC, Issue Paper 5, 2006).
- A common concern is that, all factors being equal, many Aboriginal people are more likely to go to jail for a crime compared to a non- Aboriginal defendant (type of crime, criminal record, bail amount). Reasons include not understanding their options, racism, or having to remain in jail until trial if they are unable to make bail. Those who cannot afford bail often end up spending more time in jail than the sentence they receive when the trial is finalized. In other cases some might plead guilty, even if they are innocent, as the time for the alleged crime is less than waiting for trial.
- Some provinces have some form of alternative sentencing program such as sentencing circles. Many are operated by Aboriginal communities or not-for-profit organizations.
- Correctional Service Canada recognises the importance of specialised programming to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal offenders, 50% of whom presented with family violence issues (The Incidence of Family Violence Perpetrated by Federal Offenders: A File Review Study, No. FV-03, Correctional Service of Canada, March 1995).

Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Juristat, Vol. 26, no. 3

- 60% of violent crime [against Aboriginal people] went unreported to police ...violence was most likely to be committed in or around the victim's home, 34% (p. 6).

- “Some of these factors [that contribute to violence against Aboriginal people] include being young, low levels of formal education, being unemployed, having low income, being a member of a lone-parent family, living in crowded conditions, and having high residential mobility” (p. 3).

Who’s Involved?

Vancouver Aboriginal Transformative Justice Services (1607 East Hastings Street)

- Not-for-profit organization with a community-based Board of Directors.
- Has signed agreements with the federal government and courts to ‘divert’ willing Aboriginal first-time offenders with specific non-violent charges.
- Receives direct referrals from the Crown, Vancouver Police Department, schools, social service organizations, and the province (but receives very limited funding).
- The accused person must meet with the Justice Coordinator and fully commit to participating in the sentencing circle process and creating/implementing a wellness plan. If the accused does not fit the criteria, they are sent back to the mainstream justice system.
- Sentencing circles are carried out by the Justice Coordinator, trained community volunteers, and an Elder. The process includes having the ‘victim’ present to let the accused know how the crime affected them.

Native Courtworkers & Counselling Association of BC (50 Powell Street)

- Provincial not-for-profit organization with a community-based Board of Directors.
- Courtworkers are liaisons between the court and the accused.
- Drug and alcohol workers available.
- Facilitates and enhances access to justice by assisting Aboriginal people involved in the criminal justice system to obtain fair, just, equitable and culturally sensitive treatment.

First Nations Legal Clinic, UBC (1822 East Mall, UBC)

- Trains law students in issues that can arise in providing legal services to disadvantaged members of the First Nations communities.
- Includes class time plus part-time work at the First Nations Legal Clinic at 50 Powell Street.

Indian Residential School Survivors Society (100 Park Royal South, West Vancouver)

- Support includes crisis counselling, court support, info and referrals, workshops, media, conferences, supports & conducts research, advocates for justice and healing.

Vancouver Métis Community Association - Walk Bravely Forward (744 West Hastings Street)

- Program offered since 2002 helps to reintegrate incarcerated federal offenders back into their families and communities.

Circle of Eagles Lodge Society (1470 East Broadway)

- Assists ex-offenders in becoming more productive, contributing members of society

- COELS helps to reduce the number of Aboriginal repeat offenders through its residential halfway house & rehabilitation services.
- Offers counselling, training, visitation, advocacy, youth canoe journey, women's healing lodge, and liaison.

Urban Native Youth Association (1640 East Hastings Street)

- Alcohol & Drug Counsellors work with youth who are in remand and Youth Detention Centre.

Aboriginal Community Policing Centre (1726 East Hastings Street)

- This centre opened in October 2006.
- Mandate is to be a liaison between Aboriginal communities and the Vancouver Police Department, develop initiatives to respond to Aboriginal crime and safety concerns, recruit volunteers, and the police officer assigned to the office will take onsite reports when possible.

Broadway Youth Resource Centre - Aboriginal Victim Support Worker (691 East Broadway)

- Works with Aboriginal youth victims of crime.

Assembly of First Nations (Ottawa)

- Works on national Aboriginal justice issues including the Aboriginal Justice Strategy, works with Correctional Services Canada to develop a national strategy and action plan to reduce the rate of incarceration and recidivism among First Nation peoples, and discussions with the RCMP to review, evaluate and renew the AFN-CSC Public Safety Cooperation Protocol.

Vancouver Police Department Board

- In recent years, there has usually been an Aboriginal representative appointed to this Board, but most have resigned for various reasons. There are currently two Aboriginal people on the VPD Board.

Justice For Girls

- A non-profit organization that promotes freedom from violence, social justice and equality for teenage girls who live in poverty.
- Trains and employs young women to do court monitoring, advocacy, and presentations
- Has a focus on Aboriginal issues, including research.

Partnerships

- The Native Courtworkers & Counselling Association of BC are currently the host agency (administrative only) for the Vancouver Aboriginal Transformative Justice Program, but also partner with them to divert accused Aboriginal people to their program.
- The Native Courtworkers & Counselling Association of BC and the First Nations Legal Clinic at UBC work closely together to support Aboriginal people in conflict with the law.

Committees

- Vancouver Aboriginal Transformative Justice Program is governed by a diverse group of community organization representatives.
- Vancouver Police Department Aboriginal Advisory Committee and Youth Working Group meet regularly to discuss and address Aboriginal-specific policing issues.

Trends

- Violence is rising.
- Local Aboriginal communities initiated a large effort that has led to increased positive relations with the Vancouver Police Department and led to the development of a joint VPD and Aboriginal Community Advisory Committee. This, in turn, led to the creation of the Aboriginal Community Policing Centre and the Aboriginal art on VPD police cars.
- The local restorative justice program is receiving reduced funds from the Ministry of Justice and the agreement is up for renewal in 2007.

Gaps

- There continue to be problems with incarcerated Aboriginal people having free access to their cultural / religious freedoms that others enjoy. This is a human rights issue which may end up in the court system.
- There are no exiting programs for Aboriginal women to help them reintegrate back into mainstream society upon their release from prison.
- There is very little attention paid to the needs of incarcerated Aboriginal people including visitations, support groups, exiting programs, or family reunification programs.

Contact Information

Addresses, phone, fax, email, and website information for any of the organizations above can be found in the Contact Information section of this manual.