

Identifying and Building on Positive Change

The *Commission on First Nations and Métis Peoples and Justice Reform* began its work with the knowledge that despite the best efforts of Commissions that have preceded it, little has changed in terms of restoring the confidence of Aboriginal people in relation to the justice system in this country. And for good reason. Aboriginal people continue to be disproportionately represented in Canadian prisons and in provincially operated correctional centres for men and women and children. Perhaps most disturbing for the citizens of Saskatchewan is the knowledge that this province has the highest rate of youth incarcerated among the provinces. Although they comprise only 15 per cent of the population in Saskatchewan, Aboriginal youth represent 69 per cent of young offenders in custody (1999-2000 statistics).

The social impact on First Nations and Métis people who have come into contact with the justice system is significant. Whether it is a symptom of greater social ills or a contributing factor that undermines family values and overall wellness, the justice system plays a defining role in Aboriginal communities.

In his 1994 report submitted to *The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, Robert Mitchell, then Saskatchewan Minister of Justice and Attorney General for Saskatchewan wrote:

One of the complexities of dealing with justice reform for Aboriginal people is that high levels of Aboriginal conflict with the law are in many respects a reflection of wider structural inequities - social, economic and political. The latter beg for solutions which lie beyond the boundaries and mandate of the criminal justice system. To foist responsibility for the resolution of such problems upon the criminal justice system is to assure their continuance. Poverty, unemployment, poor health, family dysfunction, low levels of formal education, substance abuse - these are matters which warrant the attentions of government and civil society at all levels.

