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Prisons poisoning natives

Jails turn out to be 'gladiator schools' for the many aboriginals who end up there

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HOBBEMA RESERVES, Alberta–On the walls of Jonathan Napoose's family home are portraits of Jesus Christ and embroideries of the Last Supper, vestiges of the Catholic upbringing he received from his mother.

On his torso are signs of an altogether different allegiance; tattoos, or "patches," identifying him as a top-ranking member of the notorious Aboriginal gang, the Redd Alert.

He counts the knife scars on his head, right cheek, arms and stomach and stops at a dozen. He says he usually gave more than he got, and tells of bashing bones, ducking bullets and narrowly skirting death after a brutal introduction to a baseball bat.

"I made a name for myself because I was really vicious," says Napoose, an articulate, 27-year-old resident of the Samson Cree reserve, south of Edmonton. "I would basically volunteer to beat people up."

What makes Napoose's story unusual is that a year ago he quit Redd Alert, a street gang affiliated with the Hells Angels, after his second stint in a federal penitentiary. What makes it all too common is that prison turned Napoose into a more dangerous gang member than when he walked in.

He entered as a foot soldier, or "striker," and became — during two tours and 5 ½ years in Edmonton's maximum security prison — one of Redd Alert's four governing council members. He rose through the ranks on the inside by selling drugs and dispensing pain, distinguishing himself in riots and a gang war.

"The term gladiator school — basically, that's what prison is," says Napoose. "When I walked into the Edmonton max I was 20 years old and 160 pounds. By the time I walked out...I was six foot, 220 pounds, tattered up, mean, and basically I could deal with a lot of people and a lot of people didn't want to deal with me. I was just a scary person."

Graphics

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Federal offender population by race
These are self-reported as of April 8, 2007.

VIDEO Watch the video from Hobbema, Alta. in High-Definition: **Watch now**

Napoose's prison experience raises questions about a new crime law expected to fill troubled penitentiaries with even more Aboriginal people.

The overrepresentation of Native Canadians in the country's prisons is seen as a national disgrace by many observers. They make up 19 per cent of inmates in federal penitentiaries but only three per cent of the Canadian population.

The figures for young Aboriginal Canadians are starker: They represented 33 per cent of young people in custody in 2003, but just 5 per cent of Canada's population, according to the federal justice department. In Ontario, young Aboriginals were at least twice as likely to receive a custodial sentence than non-Aboriginals in 2006, according to provincial data analysed by Jonathan Rudin, of the Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto.

A well-known plethora of social and economic ills has been blamed: High rates of poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, and family break down, low levels of education, a biased criminal justice system, and a collapse of traditions caused partly by former federal policies, such as forcing children into abusive residential schools.

Criminal justice experts say the federal government seems poised to make matters worse with a new "tough on crime" law and a proposed anti-drug bill. The first imposes longer mandatory sentences for gun-related crimes, the second new mandatory sentences for drug possession or trafficking. The government also wants to toughen penalties for young offenders.

"Whenever you crack down on crime you tend to get disproportionately what police call the low hanging fruit, those people who are easiest to arrest and prosecute," says Craig Jones, director of the John Howard Society, which helps reintegrate offenders in communities.

Even RCMP officials, noting the influence of Aboriginal gangs in Western Canadian prisons, are raising the alarm. Chief Superintendent Doug Reti, director of the RCMP's National Aboriginal Policing Services, witnessed the negative effect of prisons during years of service in violence plagued Hobbema, a once oil-rich cluster of four Cree reserves.

"Many of the youth we were dealing with, if they were not gang members going into jail, they certainly were coming out," Reti told a Senate committee studying the new crime law earlier this year.

Says sociologist Jana Grekul, a University of Alberta gang expert: "Prisons are a breeding ground for the propagation of gangs."

Reti told the Senate tougher mandatory sentences would do little to deter young Natives from crime. He urged alternatives to jail — so-called restorative justice programs, which use traditional Aboriginal methods to resolve conflicts, are available in Hobbema — and early intervention.

"When a kid turns 12 years old and you end up charging him, sometimes it is too late by that point," he says.

Police first noted the Hobbema gang problem in 2001. Today, 13 street gangs, including Indian Posse, Redd Alert and Alberta Warriors, deal drugs and wage turf wars. Most observers, including Hobbema's RCMP officers, largely blame the prison system for seeding the reserve's gang troubles.

In the early 1990s, Correctional Service of Canada concentrated Aboriginal gang

members at Manitoba's Stoney Mountain prison. Gang recruiting became so intense that inmates refusing to join banded together to form Redd Alert.

Prison officials tried to break the power of the gangs by dispersing members to prisons across the country. The policy backfired, as recruiting suddenly spread to many more penitentiaries. Once released locally, gang members continued recruiting in communities previously untouched by the phenomenon.

Violet Soosay was the warden at Hobbema's Pe Sakastew minimum security prison in the late 1990s when gang members reached the facility. She watched them recruit inmates and bully others from participating in "healing" programs that try to reconnect offenders to their Aboriginal roots. Once out, they targeted Hobbema.

"I don't have faith in the prison system at all," says Soosay, who opposed the transfer policy and quit as warden in 1999. She now runs restorative justice programs for the Samson Cree Nation, the largest of Hobbema's four Aboriginal communities.

Drive by shootings quickly became a nightly threat to Hobbema's 12,000 residents. In 2001, RCMP officers arrested 3,500 people, a thousand more than last year. Hobbema has Canada's highest ratio of gang members per 1,000 residents: 18.75 compared to Toronto's 1.15, says Toronto-based gang expert, Michael Chettleburgh.

The challenge became all the more acute when the drive-by shooting of 2-year-old Asia Saddleback reverberated across the country in April. The toddler had just finished a bowl of soup at the kitchen table when a bullet pierced the wall of her home, and her stomach. Surgeons saved her life but couldn't remove the bullet.

Two youths aged 15 and 18 have been arrested, both described by police as gang members. They allegedly were shooting at two young members of the Saddleback family sitting on the front porch. Police won't say what the dispute was about.

On May 13, the day she turned two, a cranky Asia seemed fully recovered, restlessly demanding the attention of her mother, who was busy organizing her birthday party. Candice Saddleback initially announced she would leave Hobbema, but now is determined to stay.

"Why should I let those kids chase me and Asia from the only home that we know?" says Saddleback, 25, a single mother of two children.

Saddleback describes Asia's shooting as a tipping point. Residents have mobilized to take back control of the streets from what police say are as many as 250 gang members.

The Samson Cree council struck a community task force that imposed a 10 p.m. curfew on youths (gangs use drug "runners" as young as 9 years old).

Residents have been whitewashing gang graffiti on walls and fences, and are tearing down 29 burnt out houses, often used by gangs as crack dens or to stash weapons. Once fearful of being targeted as "rats," residents are increasing calling an RCMP hotline with tips.

The RCMP, which has 41 officers working the reserves, has stepped up patrols. Officers run a cadets program that teaches leadership skills and are handing out coupons for free burgers to youths doing something positive, like participating in the clean up program. And, they're planning a gun amnesty.

The shooting also sparked collective soul searching. Many now point to Hobbema's oil wealth as the source of their downfall. It began in the early 1950s with the discovery of

Alberta's biggest oil deposit at Pigeon Lake.

By the late 1970s, Samson reserve residents were receiving oil royalties of $500 a month — a windfall that sparked a baby boom. A few invested their money. But most, like light-headed lottery winners, went on extended binges of drinking, traveling and gambling.

"People didn't know how to manage money. They got lost in those days of affluence," Soosay says.

Once strong family ties broke down as partying parents left children to fend for themselves. Today, almost half of Samson families are headed by single parents.

"Kids were raising kids," Soosay says. "So what we have now is a generation of those children having children with little or no parenting skills, and little or no (knowledge of) traditional teachings."

By the time the oil and monthly payments dried up in the early 1990s, addictions were high and poverty had returned. Samson council owns Peace Hills Trust, a bank with $500 million in assets, and has a $387 million heritage fund. Yet the reserve has a housing shortage, poor roads and broken street lamps that allow gang members to better hide their activities.

When youths turn 18, they continue to receive a one-time payment, often more than $100,000. Most follow the example of their parents and, like Candice Saddleback, admit to "spending it foolishly." At the top of everyone's list is a new SUV, and dealerships sprouted in nearby Wataskiwin to feed the habit. Street gangs feed a different habit.

"Drug dealers would come into the community and start giving free drugs to 16 year-olds," Soosay says. "And when they reached the age of majority they came to collect."

In 1999, at the age of 19, Napoose had finished partying away the $127,000 he had received. He joined the Redd Alert, attracted, he says, by the lure of money and the "ghetto glamour" seen in rap music videos.

His childhood was plagued by domestic violence and alcoholism. He spent several years in and out of a young offenders' detention centre in Edmonton, where he says inmates taught him valuable street skills, such as stealing cars.

"I went in a dumb criminal and I came out a smart one," he says.

Two years later, after disarming an attacker with a knife and stabbing him 17 times, Napoose became a resident of Edmonton's maximum security prison. He earned his "full patch" ranking — a large tattoo on his back of a stylized cross with the words, "ghetto soldier" — by wielding "shanks and pipes" in a 2001 prison turf war against the rival Alberta Warriors.

At his home in the flat Hobbema countryside, Napoose spreads out on the kitchen table a stack of photos of himself and muscle-bound, tattoo-coated Redd Alert leaders posing in prison hallways or courtyards. He rhymes off a list of those since killed or maimed.

"This individual was stripped of his colours. He had his patch carved off his back with razor blades," he says, adding the former member had botched a dope deal.

Napoose says inmates join gangs for protection and access to drugs. In one nine month period in prison, he made $25,000 selling narcotics, mostly speed.

Money never changed hands on the inside. A trusted family member would set up a bank account and inmates were given the number. When a coded phone call confirmed the deposit, Napoose handed out the drugs.

Visiting family members, sometimes using body cavities, often did the smuggling. At one point, Redd Alert members were paying an Edmonton prison guard $2,000 for every batch of drugs he brought in, Napoose says.

When a stash arrived, it was party time.

"For maybe a week, two weeks, everybody's high, everybody's having a good time," Napoose says.

"Can you imagine the effects of speed on people within a maximum institution? It's very f------ crazy. People don't sleep, people don't eat, they see shadow people, they get paranoid, they hear people, they might schiz out, check-in, stab someone up or lash out at the guards," he adds.

Napoose began thinking of going straight when his sister committed suicide and he wasn't allowed out of prison to attend her funeral. He was released in 2006 and turned his back on the gang. He says a contract for his assassination was issued, but a Redd Alert leader intervened to have it rescinded.

"I'm with a new gang now; it's my wife and it's my kids," says Napoose, who has four children, three with his current spouse. "They saved me."

He scrapes together a living selling firewood and doing odd jobs. He hopes to one day use his street credibility to convince Hobbema youths to stay clear of gangs, and prisons.

"Our kids are our future," he says. "If we can't help the youth then I think the prospects for Hobbema are very grim."