

# **Robert S. Wright, MSW, RSW**

800-1701 Hollis Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3J 3M8

wrightrs@ns.sympatico.ca • www.robertswright.ca

---

July 29, 2014

## **Impact of Race and Culture Assessment**

**Re: “X”, d.o.b. 1996xxxx**

### **Excerpts for Teaching Purposes**

Dear Ms. T.,

#### **Reason for the referral**

[Snip]

#### **The Nature of an Impact of Race and Culture Assessment**

Though much has been written about the intersection of race and the criminal justice system, and in particular the experience of North Americans of African descent, there are to date, no standard forms for the presentation of such a report. In Canada there is a growing understanding and practice of presenting such material before the courts as it relates to Aboriginal Canadians. Though I fully respect that the experience of aboriginal Canadians is quite unique, and I have no wish to expropriate or exploit their struggle and leadership, I nevertheless need to acknowledge that my development of this report has been influenced by my familiarity with Gladue.

“X” is an African Nova Scotian (ANS) with roots in the historical community of . . . This should be considered as a significant factor in considering his sentence. We have learned much about systemic racism in the justice and education systems in Nova Scotia through the Marshall Inquiry and the BLAC report. Nova Scotia’s recent review of the Mental Health and Addictions system has also indicated that there are significant gaps in serving the needs of ANS there as well. Knowing this, it is critical to understand how an individual’s ANS heritage has affected their involvement in criminal behaviour, will be a factor in their treatment while incarcerated and will be a factor in their rehabilitation and reintegration in the community. I will present the following information in this report:

1. What is known about ANS experience, and how might that have influenced “X”’s involvement with criminal behavior;
2. How should this history and “X”’s unique history and status as an ANS be considered when delivering sentence;
3. What services or resources should be made available to “X” to support his rehabilitation and reintegration given his unique history and status as an ANS, and;
4. What light does “X”’s status as an ANS shed on the conclusions and recommendations that were offered in the reports that are already before the court?

Given that the reports already submitted have provided significant background information I will reference them here but will not prepare a detailed psycho-social review here.

#### **A Note about the Assessor:**

I am a clinical, child and family, forensic specialist who has been working extensively with children and families for over twenty years. I possess both Undergraduate and Graduate degrees in Social Work and have completed some Post Graduate work in both social work and sociology. I worked and completed my clinical training at the Special Housing Unit of the Washington State Penitentiary as part of my graduate education. A more complete C.V. will accompany the submission of this report but there are two aspects of my history and practice that should be included here:

1. It is important to note that I have worked extensively with young people during my career. I have been employed within the field of child welfare for about 12 of the past 24 years. I have served as a front line child welfare worker, a casework supervisor, a forensic assessor, and a child welfare executive director. I also served as the Executive Director of Nova Scotia’s Child and Youth Strategy. I did my clinical training and served as a correctional mental health worker at the Special Housing Unit of the Washington State Penitentiary. I have extensive knowledge about troubled young people and how their complex needs are met by various systems including the criminal justice system.
2. It is also important to note that I am an ANS who has spent a significant amount of time studying and working on issues affecting ANSs. I served as the Race Relations Coordinator of the Dartmouth District School Board in the Early 1990s. I served on the Mayor’s Task Force on Drugs and co-authored an Africentric substance abuse prevention program. I have served as a sessional lecturer in the

Africentric cohort of Mount St. Vincent University's Masters' Degree in Education in Lifelong Learning. I was a significant contributor to the development of the ANS Mental Health and Addiction Initiative and have assisted in the development and implementation of the Ceasefire Halifax, an initiative designed to address gun violence.

It is my hope that the readers of this report understand that my background, experience, and education do not serve to create a bias that would disqualify me from writing such a report but rather asserts and affirms my qualifications to do so.

### **Preparation of this Report**

In preparing this report I have participated in the following activities:

[Snip]

### **African Nova Scotians and Crime**

I have reviewed the literature and written elsewhere about the unique manifestation of substance use, trafficking and other crime within the history and experience of North Americans of African descent (Wright & Leader, 1997; Wright R. S., 2012). Suffice to say here that all peoples on the planet have lengthy histories of the use of intoxicants. In ancient times the use of those substances was almost always strictly controlled. In most cultures the use of stimulants of intoxicants was limited to ceremonial and medicinal purposes. The widespread recreational use of substances and the corresponding social problems of addiction and related criminal behavior is a relatively new phenomenon.

The vast majority of African peoples who arrived early in North America had a rather desperate social circumstance. Removed from their native lands, they were disconnected from all stabilizing elements of their culture, stripped of their language, disconnected from all family structure, and were regularly supplied with biologically foreign forms of alcohol to mollify them and lower their resistance to slavery and oppression.

One of the great paradoxes of the experience of African people in North America is that when it comes to substance use, trafficking, and crime, things got dramatically better for some but worse for others after emancipation. From the mid-1800s until the early 1900s in both Canada and the United States many people of African descent remained in their segregated and largely rural communities. Many of these developed subsistence economies and established strong and functional communities centered on the black church and the multigenerational family unit. Many others migrated to urban areas. It is here that large numbers engaged in education or founded businesses and integrated into the larger economy experiencing a measure of wealth. Unfortunately, even larger numbers of urban blacks established the large urban ghettos and experienced an urban poverty that was unmitigated by rural subsistence agriculture. It is in this urban ghetto that the strong link between African North Americans and crime was established.

It is interesting to note that this period in North American history coincided with a modern religious reformation. The Temperance movement was born in this time and led to prohibition. As we know now, prohibition was unsuccessful in eliminating the recreational use of alcohol. It also failed to stem the growing introduction and popularity of other drugs such as opium, marijuana, and cocaine. What prohibition did succeed in doing was driving the use of these substances into speakeasies and private clubs that were housed in the dark corners of society, often the black urban ghettos that had been establishing since emancipation. This, coupled with the active recruitment of people of African descent into the drug trafficking trade by white-ethnic criminal organizations is the foundation upon which the current and unique phenomenon of black crime and violence has been established in North America. Though this brief history might seem distant and unrelated it goes a long way to informing us about the factors that are likely at play in “X”’s life.

. . . , “X”’s home community, is one of Canada’s largest and oldest ANS communities. It has a long and rich history as a cohesive, though isolated community. Until recent decades its members had high rates of home ownership and participation in employment and community life. It has a large youth population. Sadly, in recent years, it has gained notoriety as a location of increased gun violence and as the home of individuals who participate in criminal activity.

### **Patterns of Crime in Criminally Affected African Nova Scotian Communities**

I have written elsewhere about the unique patterns of criminal activity that have been seen in recent years in ANS communities: The rise in drug trafficking, the explosion of juvenile prostitution, the spread of a loosely formed ANS criminal organization across the country (and internationally), and the proliferation of gun violence. Though the criminal justice system holds people individually accountable for the crimes they commit, there is a recognition that social forces are at the root causes of crime. Understanding these social forces, however, are critical to properly understanding and adjudicating persons of ANS descent. I offer discussion of three such factors as examples to form a basis for considering issues in “X”’s case:

**Community Displacement:** Though it is true that all communities in Nova Scotia have been affected by shifts in population caused by economic and urbanizing forces, this is particularly true of ANS communities. There are places around the province where ANS lived in very large numbers in cohesive communities, yet today those communities barely exist. Beechville and Amherst are two examples of this, though Africville would be the most dramatic example in Metro. The gentrification of the North End of Halifax and the creation of public housing in Bayers Westwood and Greystone are other examples. With the expansion of the city, the largely ANS communities of Lake Loon, Cherry Brook, East and North Preston are also being encroached on by suburbanization which threatens their traditional fabric.

**Economic Collapse & Increased Demand for Education:** Many ANS were historically employed in labor and domestic work. Throughout Halifax ANS’s worked as stevedores

at the dock yards, laborers on road crews, stone masons and sought after craftsman. There was also a significant amount of subsistence husbandry that supported rural Blacks in Halifax. Most families kept a cow and a couple of pigs, dozens of chickens or turkeys; others were crafts people who sold their wares in downtown markets. These economic opportunities are now relics of a not too distant past.

In terms of education, over the last generation the demand for education in order to enter the economy has grown dramatically. In the mid 80's the need was recognized and gave rise to a national effort to encourage students to stay in school (the federal stay-in-school initiative). Prior to this, Nova Scotians of all ethnic groups from the working classes had low educational attainment rates. The pressures and needs to remain in school gave rise to the recognition that schools were less welcoming places for ANS than others (Black Learners Advisory Committee, 1994). ANS were faced with the same increased demand for education as White students but were less well integrated and supported in the education system. This increasing demand for education but differential success in integrating ANS students into the education system may go a long way to explaining some of the racial differences in criminal and violent patterns we see.

**Strategic Recruitment of ANS into the Criminal Subculture:** I have written elsewhere about the phenomenon of ANS substance use and trafficking patterns (Wright & Leader, 1997). Suffice it to say here that the history of organized crime responsible for the large scale import of drugs in NS is the history of largely white ethnic criminal organizations such as biker gangs/groups. In other jurisdictions, the systematic recruitment of African American "drug crews" to market and distribute drugs in inner city settings has been suggested (James & Johnson, 1996). This has certainly been observed here. Additionally, since the early 1980's there has been a dramatic increase in the ANS participation in more organized pimping. The juvenile pimping and prostitution taskforce that was developed as a policing response to this phenomenon targeted and charged largely ANS. Those prostitutes who were rescued from "the life" were overwhelmingly white. This, despite the fact that historically the pimping trade was also controlled by white ethnic criminal organizations and ANS prostitutes were disproportionately represented in the trade. The reason for this change in the complexion of the pimping trade has not fully been explored yet to my knowledge. However, it has left a significant legacy of a national presence of ANS in this trade with strong links back to their home communities in Nova Scotia.

**Particular Patterns of ANS Violence:** I have written earlier about the cohesive and extensive relational bond that exists between ANS communities. It is a commonly held belief that ANS hold these kinship bonds as a more substantial part of their culture than do their NS neighbors of European heritage (Nichols, n.d.) This may be due to the culture being more high-context and relational (Kuykendal, 1992; Nichols, n.d.), or it may be that the racialization process causes ANS to form a deeper racial alliance than those of other racial groups. Regardless, this recognition of the large extended family bond means that each tragic loss of an ANS life to violence is felt as a deep personal loss throughout a wide network of extended families and throughout the entire affected

community. When the violence is "Black on Black" it inevitably involves overlapping social and/or family ties between victim and perpetrator. This results in many consequences but two of them are quite dramatic: First, the ANS community senses each loss as tragic and deep and the losses mobilize a sentiment of outrage and community disruption that could arguably be suggested to be out of step with the actual number of such losses; and secondly, among those ANS who are engaged in criminal activities the loss is not simply about business but it is personal and family. Such losses are more likely to result in violent reprisal than simply be seen as the cost of doing business. Some writers have described this phenomenon of close overlapping social and familial networks among African Americans as a reason for the high sensitivity to personal affront in dealings within these networks. Some have suggested that this is the reason why disrespecting (or "dissing") someone is a violation often requiring violent response (Jones, 2002; Morris, 2012).

Regardless of the origins and causes we are left today with a growing problem in Halifax. Guns are more prevalent among persons who participate in criminal activity related to drugs and prostitution. The gun violence that is perpetrated by those persons connected with criminal enterprise may be related to criminal activity or to personal disputes that occur between armed individuals. It seems to be intensifying, even if not in a numerical sense, certainly in terms of the nature of these shootings (occurring in mid-town, during the day time, involving bystanders and visitors). This certainly was the case in the matter in which "X" participated. [Snip]

### **"X": Youth from a Criminally Impacted African Nova Scotian Community**

[Snip]

Family Constellation and History: [Snip]

Behavioural History: [Snip]

Trauma: [Snip]

School History: [Snip]

Criminal History: [Snip]

Community and Other Interventions: [Snip]

### **A Note about Testing Results**

As a standard part of his psychological and psycho-educational assessments, a battery of psychometric tests have been administered to "X". [Snip] I, and other local practitioners have spoken publicly about the low language and literacy scores in schools in certain ANS communities. The heavy local dialects that have developed in some communities

may mean that students in those areas may be at a linguistic disadvantage when they enter the public school.

[Snip]

Assessment scores are not to be taken as defining, however. They are used to inform clinical opinion and formulation.

### **General Conclusions from Assessments**

[Snip]

### **Additional Observations from Interviews**

[Snip]

### **Revisiting the Issues**

At the beginning of this report I outlined the 4 issues that this report would consider. I re-present them here with comments for consideration:

1. What is known about ANS experience, and how might that have influenced “X”’s involvement with criminal behavior?
  - a. I have presented a fairly detailed socio-cultural perspective on the intersections of African North American experience and crime. [Snip]
  - b. “X” hails from the well-known, historical ANS community of . . . . This community, like all other ANS communities has been under significant stress. In . . . this has resulted in a dramatic disproportionate participation in criminal behaviour and violence by members of this community at home and abroad. This seems to play out in a stereotypical “gangsta, hip hop” pattern of criminal behaviour that has become well established and well known and for many youth seems to have become a cultural identity with which they begin to identify at an early age.
  - c. [Snip]
  - d. [Snip].
  - e. [Snip]
2. How should this history and “X”’s unique history and status as an ANS be considered when delivering sentence?
  - a. The racial analysis that I provided at the beginning of this paper demonstrates the clear connection between social forces, including racism and historical discrimination, and crime. That such forces were and are in play in “X”’s life should be reasonably assumed. [Snip] Racial issues should be a significant

factor for consideration as the Court and its agents work to craft an appropriate sentence. That none of the assessments before the court mention race in a substantial way prevents these issues from being addressed by the court and, in my view, calls into question the strength of the conclusions made in those reports.

3. What services or resources should be made available to “X” to support his rehabilitation and reintegration given his unique history and status as an ANS?
  - a. [Snip].
  - b. Though the links between race, culture and crime have been well established, the development of powerful, culturally specific interventions are just now being developed and implemented in Nova Scotia. Though attempts are being made to implement such programmes in youth and adult correctional settings, the power of their effect is yet to be fully documented. Though I am aware that an ANS Mental Health and Addictions Initiative is currently under development, it is in its early stages.
  
4. What light does “X”'s status as an ANS shed on the conclusions and recommendations that were offered in the reports that are already before the court?
  - a. [Snip]

It is my hope that this report will be useful in assisting the court to arrive at an appropriate sentence in this matter.

Respectfully Submitted

Robert S. Wright, MSW, RSW  
Consultant/ Therapist

## Bibliography

- Black Learners Advisory Committee. (1994). *BLAC Report on Education - Redressing Inequity Empowering Black Learners*. Halifax: Nova Scotia Department of Education.
- DeGruy Leary, J. (2005). *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*. Baltimore: Uptone Press.
- James, W. H., & Johnson, S. L. (1996). *Doin' Drugs: Patterns of African American Addiction*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Jones, G. (2002). Gang mediation: non-violent resolution within a culture of violence. *Advocates' Forum*, 3-13.
- Kuykendal, C. (1992). *From Rage to Hope: From Rage to Hope*. Bloomington, Indiana: National Education Service.
- Morris, E. J. (2012). Respect, protection, faith, and love: major care constructs identified within the subculture of selected urban African American adolescent gang members. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 262-269.
- Nichols, E. (n.d.). The Philosophical Aspects of Cultural Difference. Washington, D.C.: Unpublished model available from the author.
- Wright, R. S. (1997, Spring). The measure of victimization experience and trauma symptomatology among protective custody inmates at Washington State Penitentiary: implications for returning persons to general population. *Unpublished paper available from the author*.
- Wright, R. S. (2003). *Reflections of African Canadian/American Identity Development from Birth to Later Adolescence: Towards a Framework for Guiding Interventions*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Unpublished paper available from the author.
- Wright, R. S. (2012). *Towards the Development and Implementation of a Violence Interruption Programme in Halifax Regional Municipality*. Halifax: Prepared for the Knowledge Exchange Conference. Available from the author.
- Wright, R. S., & Leader, T. (1997). *Prevention and treatment of addictions among North American persons of African descent: another look at the disease model*. Retrieved November 15, 2013, from Robert S. Wright: <http://www.robertswright.ca/Prevention%20and%20Treatment%20of%20Addictions.pdf>