Federally sentenced women in the community: Dynamic risk predictors

Moira A. Law[1]
Centre for Criminal Justice Studies, University of New Brunswick, Saint John

Prediction research with female offenders has increased substantially over the past 25 years. Presently, the "cutting edge" of prediction research has been the analysis of the dynamic risk predictor[2]. The dynamic risk predictor, e.g., substance abuse problem, differs from the traditional static risk predictor, e.g., age at first arrest, as it exclusively explores malleable "needs" that if attended to will decrease the chance of future criminal conduct[3]. Researchers examine the change in repeated measures of predictor variables as they relate to outcomes such as community adjustment. These dynamic risk predictors serve not only as indicators for future community adjustment but simultaneously provide tangible targets/goals for effective treatment services.

Currently there are several criminogenic needs that have demonstrated consistent predictive validity with male offenders: criminal attitudes, criminal associates, educational issues, employment, substance abuse, family/marital relations, associates/social support, living arrangements and personal/emotional orientations.[4] Currently, there is considerable support that many of these dynamic risk predictors may be pertinent for the female population.[5] However there is debate regarding which needs are paramount[6] and whether they are as important for females as they are for males.[7]

The Study

The present study focused on the change in criminogenic needs for 497 federally sentenced women in the community and their relationship to future adjustment. The seven criminogenic need domains from the Community Intervention Scale — associates, attitudes, community functioning, employment, marital/family, personal/emotional, and substance abuse — served as the dynamic risk predictors for this investigation. Measures of community adjustment were coded from Canadian Police Information Center (CPIC) files providing *official* recidivism data. Non-violent reconvictions were defined as a conviction for any new general offence, e.g., theft, or fraud. Violent reconvictions were defined as any new conviction for an offence involving crimes against persons, e.g., assault and robbery.

The Women

The average age of the sample at the time of the study was 36.8 years (n = 497, SD = 8.7) with a range of 20.6 to 68.9 years. Well over half the sample (61%) were single/separated/divorced while 33% were living common-law or were married (n = 497). The sample (n = 497) was predominantly Caucasian (57%), with 19% Aboriginal, and the remaining 8% belonging to other minority groups. The majority of women had been convicted for property offences such as theft (60.6%) and fraud (39.8%), followed by drug convictions (46.7 %). The most common violent convictions were for weapons 30.6%, arson 20.7% and kidnapping 13.9%; with only the proverbial handful of women in this sample having ever been convicted for assaults (4.8%) or murder (3%).

The Results

The average time of follow-up of the women in the community was 29 months (SD = 16.6) and ranged from 5 days to 6 years. Not surprisingly, the majority of reconvicted offenders were non-violent offenders (85.1%). This sample generally engaged in relatively little violent post-release behaviour (<5%). Crimes such as theft (45.3%) failing to appear (29.5%) and fraud (20%) dominated the convictions. Assault was the most common offence (43%) of all violent crimes committed, followed by weapons (21%) and robbery (21%). Only one woman in this sample was convicted of manslaughter while on conditional release.

Timing of Failures

The women were assessed at each of the following 4 time periods: At 0 to 6 months (time 1), at 6 to 12 months (time 2), at 12 to 18 months (time 3, and at 18 months to 2 years (time 4). Although there were women who recidivated during all four time periods, the majority of offenders returned to incarceration during their first 6 months in the community. In a somewhat predictable manner, 67 of the 103 failures (65%) occurred before their second assessment (time 2).

Dynamic Measures

The mean and standard deviations for the seven dynamic measures from the Community Intervention Scale showed all seven variables

decreasing in the severity of their need levels across time. Authentic dynamic change in the variables was supported in the analysis, as all need domains exhibited significant amounts of change at time 1 through to time 4, except the substance abuse variable. There were significant changes in each dynamic variable at each assessment wave. With the dynamic nature of the variables established, the analysis turned to predicting two outcome measures, i.e., general failure and violent re-offences.

Correlations

The first set of correlational analyses demonstrated that the initial assessment of four variables (at time 1) were valuable predictors of the female offenders' adjustment in the community; the associates variable, antisocial attitudes, family factors and substance abuse.

Re-assessments

The next set of analyses assessed how well the *re-assessment* of the dynamic measures could enhance predictive accuracy, using the assessment immediately prior to an offender's failure. There was a marked increase in the predictive accuracy attained by all seven dynamic measures relating to the specified outcomes. Variables, which had little predictive accuracy at the time of their first assessment, now exhibited significant relationships with several of the outcome measures. Employment, substance abuse, community functioning and personal/emotional needs, which had yielded no previous association, now displayed significant predictive prowess. And those variables that were moderate predictors at the time of the first assessment showed even stronger predictive accuracy, e.g., family and associates. Interestingly, attitudes showed the opposite trend; with stronger predictive validity at the time of their first assessment compared to those measurements at the time of the last assessment before failure. Not surprisingly, the prediction of violent offences remained limited. What was unanticipated was that substance abuse (which previously presented a weak relationship to failure in prior correlational analysis) was one of only two variables that predicted violent re-offending. The other predictive criminogenic need for violent behaviour was the offender's associates.

Survival Time

The relationship between the need variables and the amount of time they survived out in the community before re-offending was then examined. Five of the seven variables (n=497) significantly predicted time to failure (revocation or recidivism) ($p<.05$), to the exclusion of the personal/emotional and community functioning variables.

Best Prediction Model at Time 1

The next phase of the analyses assessed which combination of dynamic risk predictors assessed at time1 made the strongest predictor model? Only associates and attitudes entered the equation, as employment, family and substance abuse factors did not add significantly to the predictive power of the set. For violent reconvictions the associates variable remained a moderate predictor ($p<.01$) of time to failure, followed by significant but weaker relationships of family, substance abuse and attitude variables ($p<.01$).

Dynamic Measures

The final set of analyses attempted to unearth the best *dynamic* risk predictors, those that improve in their predictive ability over time. Strong positive relationships were unearthed between all seven variables and the amount of time the offender spent in the community.

The last analysis in this study attempted to select the best combination of time dependent dynamic variables using Cox Stepwise Regression Survival Analysis. All seven variables were entered as they all demonstrated a significant univariate relationship with survival time in the previous analysis. Only associates and employment entered the model, as the other five variables did not add significantly to the predictive power of the set. When violent reconvictions were examined as the outcome measure the associates variable remained a strong ($p<.001$) predictor of survival time, with substance abuse and personal emotional factors also displaying significant relationships with the outcome.

Conclusions

Overall, the results were positive as six of the seven domains, excluding substance abuse, demonstrated genuine change throughout the study period, and all seven variables were significantly related to outcome measures. The employment and associates variables were empirically deemed the strongest predictors of failure, while the remaining variables displayed moderate to weak predictive relationships with recidivism. Despite the suggestion that risk assessment instruments developed primarily for male offenders may not be applicable for female offenders[8] the results of this study demonstrate the CIS to be a relevant and valuable tool for the assessment of female offenders in the community. All seven variables were predictive of future behaviour. Four of these variables were capable of significantly anticipating violent behaviour. Ultimately, this study directly addressed the "debatable" issue whether and which dynamic risk

predictors are relevant for the female offender and addressed the contentious issue that the "genesis of" and "interventions for" female criminality is *completely* different from their male counterparts. Obviously, this study does not exclude the empirically validated contribution that other variables may eventually contribute to the understanding of female criminality. However, it does provide pragmatic power to the notion that there are dynamic risk predictors for community adjustment that are relevant for both men and women. Echoing Brown's[9] sentiments, "priority should be given to securing employment and maintaining steady employment as well as building (healthy) support networks" for offenders as they re-enter the community. ■

[1] P.O. Box 5050 Centre for Criminal Justice Studies, Hazen Hall 16. University of New Brunswick, Saint John, NB E2L 4A5

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