

Women with violent offence histories: A comparison

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Unlike previous research² which has typically profiled women offenders on several offence and sentence characteristics, the current profile involves a comparison of repeat violent women offenders to their non-violent and one-time violent counterparts. The three groups are compared on various criteria including socio-demographics, offence type, sentence length, risk and need levels. Implications for program development and intervention strategies are briefly discussed.

All available data for federally sentenced women admitted between January 1, 1995 and December 31, 2001 were extracted from the Offender Management System (OMS) of the Correctional Service of Canada. Women offenders were placed in one of three groups based on offence history: non-violent, one-time violent, and repeat violent (Table 1). A "violent" categorization included women convicted of Schedule I³ and homicide offences. This included both current and previous violent offences.

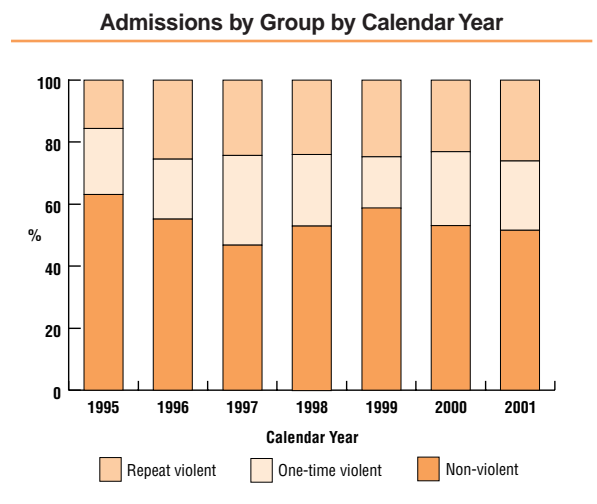
Table 1

	Comparison Groups		
	No previous violent convictions	One previous violent conviction	Two or more previous violent convictions
No current violent convictions	Non-violent	One-time violent	Repeat violent
One current violent conviction	One-time violent	Repeat violent	Repeat violent
Two or more current violent convictions	Repeat violent	Repeat violent	Repeat violent

Admissions to custody

From January 1, 1995 to December 1, 2001, there were 1,995 women offenders admitted to federal custody in Canada. After removing women offenders under provincial jurisdiction ($n = 423$), there were 1,572 women offenders. This includes 54% non-violent ($n = 850$), 22% one-time violent ($n = 349$), and 24% repeat violent ($n = 373$) women offenders. Figure 1 presents the proportion of women offenders admitted to federal custody in each calendar year. The majority of admissions in each year were comprised of the non-violent group. However when

Figure 1



examining each group in isolation, the data suggest that there has been a consistent increase in the proportion of non-violent women offenders admitted to custody from 1995 (12%) to 2001 (21%). In addition, the proportion of women offenders in the one-time violent group has also witnessed an increase in admittance from 10% in 1995 to 23% in 2001. However, the greatest increase over the years has occurred in the repeat violent group whereby 7% of women from this group were admitted in 1995 compared to 25% in 2001.

Analyses of the proportions of women offenders in federal custody in each region revealed that the majority of the non-violent (44%) groups were incarcerated in the Ontario region, whereas the majority of the one-time violent (36%) and repeat violent (32%) groups were incarcerated in the Prairie region.

Demographic information

In general, women offenders can be characterized as Caucasian, single, and between the ages of 26 to 35 years old. However, there were notable significant differences between the three groups with regard to marital status and racial composition. More specifically, significantly higher proportions of one-time violent (32%) and repeat violent (31%) women offenders were Aboriginal⁴ compared to their

non-violent counterparts (12%). In contrast, a significantly higher proportion of non-violent women offenders were comprised of Black and “other”⁵ races compared to the one-time violent and repeat violent groups. In terms of marital status, a higher proportion of one-time violent (6%) women offenders were widowed compared to the non-violent (2%) and repeat violent (2%) groups. Repeat violent (43%) women offenders were more likely to be married or common-law than non-violent (34%) women offenders and one-time violent (35%) women offenders. Alternatively, non-violent women offenders were more likely to be divorced or separated than repeat violent women offenders. There were no statistically significant differences between the three groups for mean age (34 years, 33 years, and 32 years, respectively).

Offence and sentence characteristics

An examination of specific offence categories for the three groups of women offenders identified the current and previous offences for which women have received a federal sentence. A woman may have been previously and/or are currently incarcerated for more than one offence type. Only current offences will be profiled here. The largest proportions of repeat violent women offenders are incarcerated for other non-violent (73%), assault (49%), and robbery (47%). The majority of one-time violent offenders are incarcerated for other non-violent (46%) and homicide (40%). Women offenders in the non-violent group are currently incarcerated for drug offences (72%) and/or other non-violent offences (57%).

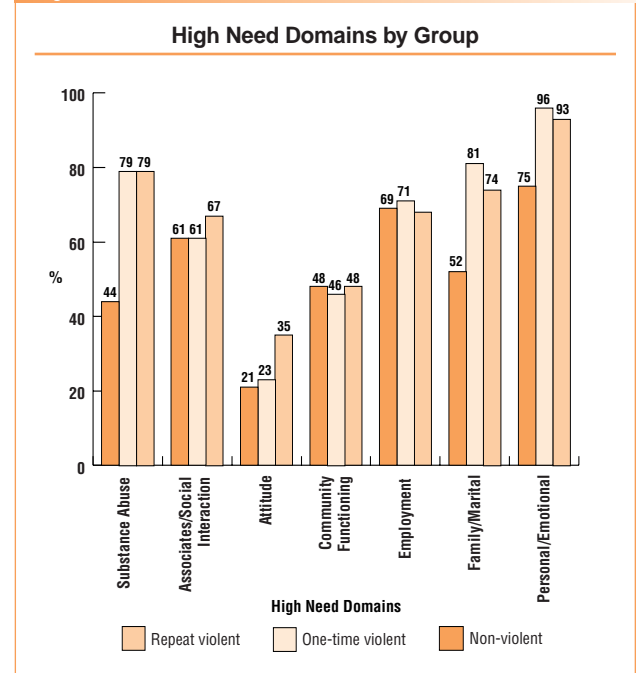
When compared to one-time violent women, significantly higher proportions of repeat violent women offenders were incarcerated for assault (49% vs. 18%), robbery (47% vs. 21%), sexual offences (6% vs. 3%), other violent offences (30% vs. 11%), and other non-violent offences (73% vs. 46%). Alternatively, the one-time violent group was more likely to be incarcerated for homicide than the repeat violent group (40% and 15%, respectively). As a result of grouping women offenders based on number and type of offences, these results are not surprising.

The majority of non-violent, one-time violent, and repeat violent women offenders are serving a sentence of less than three years (65%, 56%, and 60%, respectively). In addition, 13% of women in the one-time violent group and 5% in the repeat violent group are serving life or indeterminate sentences. There were no statistically significant differences in the mean aggregate sentence length between the three groups (2.9 years, 2.9 years, and 2.8 years, respectively)⁶.

Dynamic need and risk factors

For the purpose of identifying offender criminogenic needs, domain need levels at intake to federal custody were extracted. Data were available for 1,329 women offenders. Upon examination of the seven need domains, significant differences were found between the three groups for the following needs: attitude, family/marital, personal/emotional, and substance abuse. More specifically (see Figure 2), significantly larger proportions of one-time and repeat violent women offenders were rated as having “some or considerable need for improvement” in the family/marital, personal/emotional, and substance abuse need domains than non-violent women offenders. Additionally, repeat violent women offenders were also more likely to have “some or considerable need” in the attitude domain than non-violent and one-time violent women offenders.

Figure 2



An examination of overall need and risk demonstrated that the majority of repeat violent women offenders are rated as high need but medium risk. One-time violent women are generally assessed as medium need and medium risk. Non-violent women represent a low risk but are medium need. Significant differences between the groups were further revealed. Compared to non-violent women offenders (13%), significantly higher proportions of one-time violent (44%) and repeat violent (51%) women were assessed as high need for program intervention. Similarly, higher proportions of women in the one-time violent (33%) and repeat violent (31%) groups were assessed as high risk to re-offend than women

in the non-violent (3%) group. No significant differences were found between the one-time violent and repeat violent groups for overall need and risk.

Conclusion

Based on these comparisons, it appears that women offenders comprising of the one-time and repeat violent groups were most similar. For instance, women offenders comprising of the violent groups are more likely to be Aboriginal, to be assessed as higher need, and higher risk than their non-violent counterparts. The Spirit of a Warrior program⁷ a culturally appropriate program for Aboriginal women offenders convicted of violent offences, offers great potential as an intervention for these women offenders. Similar to the high needs domains

reported here, earlier research⁸ has also concluded that women offenders demonstrate high need in the areas of substance abuse problems, family and marital relationships, and personal or emotional issues. Overall, these findings have important implications for the design and delivery of programs that target criminogenic needs among the women offender population. It is also clear that program intervention may need to be based upon offence profiles, including criminal history and offence cycles. As such, a program may vary in intensity and content according to the extent of violence committed by each offender. This profile provides further evidence of the varying levels of need and risk among the women offender population and reinforces the need for a violence prevention program that incorporates these differences. ■

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² Sinclair, R.L., & Boe, R. (2002). *Canadian Federal Women Offender Profiles: Trends from 1981 to 2002*. Research Report R-131, Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada. Also see Treveshan, S. (1999). Women in federal and provincial-territorial correctional facilities. *Forum of Corrections Research*, 11(3), 9-12.

³ Schedule 1 offences include but are not limited to manslaughter, attempted murder, sexual assault, assault, arson, robbery, use of a firearm, criminal harassment, and kidnapping.

⁴ Aboriginal includes First Nations, Metis, and Inuit.

⁵ Other includes Asiatic, Chinese, South Asian, South East Asian, Arab, East Indian, Hispanic, Filipino, Latin American, and "other" races.

⁶ Lifers were excluded.

⁷ In consultation with Native Counseling Services of Alberta, the Spirit of a Warrior program was adapted from the In Search of Your Warrior program for violent Aboriginal male offenders. It has been delivered at Saskatchewan Penitentiary (women's co-located unit), Burnaby Correctional Centre for Women, Edmonton Institution for Women, and Okimaw Ochi Healing Lodge. The goals of the program are to help women understand their acts of violence and the impacts of inter-generational violence. Ultimately, it aims to reduce and eliminate violent behaviour.

⁸ Op. cit. Treveshan, S. (1999). Also see, Dell, C.A., & Boe, R. (2000). *An Examination of Aboriginal and Caucasian Women Offender Risk and Need Factors*. Research Report R-94, Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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