

Women and fraud: Results of a program at the Prison for Women

Although there is much literature on group programs for women in prison,⁽²⁾ little is known about the effect of such programs on recidivism. Most studies show differences in measures of self-esteem, institutional behaviour, alienation, and trust in others before and after treatment.⁽³⁾ Only a handful of studies have followed their participants to determine effects on recidivism. Of these, one failed to find differences between control and experimental groups,⁴ one had a follow-up period of only 90 days,⁽⁵⁾ and one used an inadequate measure of recidivism (parole officers' estimates of recidivism over seven years).⁽⁶⁾

There are a few published reports of group programs for women convicted of shoplifting and theft. These, however, are fraught with the same problems noted above: they show no treatment effectiveness, use no objective measures, or have inadequate or no follow-up.⁽⁷⁾ Finally, there is no published literature on the treatment of fraud offenders.

The following is a brief report on a group program for female federal fraud offenders offered by the Psychology Department at the Prison for Women. This report is based on findings from the first three groups participating in the program, conducted between August 1991 and October 1992. Why a program specific to fraud of tenders? The impetus for the program came in part from the women themselves, who voiced concern that their needs were not being met by regular psychological services. Because most of these women neither created institutional difficulties nor had much need for crisis intervention, few received individual counselling.

In addition, group programs dealing with anger control, substance abuse, cognitive skills and educational or vocational training, while designed to meet the needs of many women, are not appropriate for most female fraud offenders, who are more likely to be educated, drug-free, socially skilled, stably employed and of average to above-average intelligence.⁽⁸⁾

Nevertheless, these women pose a significant problem - their fraud is typically chronic and results in multiple incarcerations. The costliest of property crimes, fraud is also the fastest growing offence in Canada for both men and women. While receiving only 17% of all charges in Canada, women account for 27% of all fraud charges.⁽⁹⁾

Given the unique needs of fraud offenders, their growing numbers and our limited resources, a short-term group program was chosen as the most cost-effective intervention. The program According to clinical assessments, female federal fraud offenders differ from other federally incarcerated women. Using these clinical data, the Psychology Department at the Prison for Women developed a model of the historic or familial development of chronic fraud, as well as the current functional relationships that maintained the behaviour. The curriculum was based on the principles used in relapse-prevention programs for people with addictions as well as on the tenets and process guidelines of feminist therapy. However, the model of feminist therapy was expanded to incorporate the history of the participants because many had not been abused by men, but virtually all had been abused by their mothers.

A more detailed description of the curriculum, model, homework assignments, group objectives and related materials is available.⁽¹⁰⁾ Program parameters Three groups were conducted at approximately six-month intervals. In all, 19 women attended: 6 in the first group, 8 in the second, and 5 in the third. One woman did not complete the sessions because of an untimely transfer; thus 18 women completed the program.

The program was initially designed as eight sessions but was expanded to nine for the first group. Subsequent groups attended 10 sessions, each lasting two hours.

The women signed consent forms so that we could use pre- and post-test data for research. The women were also informed that they would be contacted discreetly for follow-up information 6, 12 and 18 months after the program was completed, but they could decline to participate in that phase. Program evaluation We hypothesized that, as a result of the fraud group program, the women would improve their assertiveness and self-efficacy. To assess this, we administered two psychometric measures before and after the program. One was the Interpersonal Behavior Survey,¹¹ which samples subclasses of assertive behaviours. This survey is useful in outcome evaluation because it measures change. The second measure was the Subjective Rating of Likelihood to Reoffend Scale, which samples participants' sense of self-efficacy in avoiding reoffending. It is a single seven-point scale that participants use to rate the likelihood of their reoffending.

To obtain family background and demographic information, we administered two measures before the first session. One was the Parental Bonding Instrument,¹² which measures parental care and overprotection in childhood. We used this instrument to test our hypothesis that female fraud offenders would describe their mothers as cold and overly concerned with appearances. The second measure was a Background Information Questionnaire, which records demographic variables such as age, race, number of children, number of offences, educational attainment and marital status.

Finally, after completing the program, women filled out a Program Evaluation Questionnaire, which rates the program's curriculum and relevance, as well as the performance of the group leaders. General findings The results from the three groups participating in the fraud program were mixed. While group one showed reliable treatment gains, the two subsequent groups did not. When data on the measures of assertiveness and likelihood to reoffend were combined across all three groups, however, treatment effects were evident: women showed significant improvements in assertiveness and increased confidence in their ability to avoid reoffending.

On the measure of parental bonding, participants rated their mothers as significantly more rejecting and controlling than community norms for women.

On the Program Evaluation Questionnaire, women rated their satisfaction with, and the usefulness of, the program as very high. Many women commented, however, that the program should be longer.

Longitudinal follow-up information The women were contacted at 6- and 12-month intervals after completing the program. We collected information on reoffending and then compared the scores of women who reoffended with those of women who did not. None of the preprogram, post-program or change measures discriminated between recidivists and nonrecidivists at any point after release.

Although there are several possible explanations for this failure to show treatment-related reductions in recidivism, three seem particularly plausible. First, 10 sessions is likely not intensive enough an intervention for repeat federal offenders without follow-up sessions in the community.

Second, group one, which showed the greatest treatment gains, was the most homogeneous group: all of the women had histories of fraud offences only. Some of the women in groups two and three, however, had committed other offences as well to sustain a drug habit.

Third, the failure to find a treatment effect could have been due to the general nature of the measures used. To explore the latter possibility in future research, we added a test before group three to assess how well the women could apply the course content to their own offence patterns, identify their individual high-risk situations, and think of alternatives to criminal behaviour. This knowledge acquisition test is similar to those currently used in the evaluation of relapse-prevention programs.

Unfortunately, we are presently unable to determine whether the recidivism rates for participants were lower than recidivism rates for other female fraud offenders with similar chronic histories. If and when recidivism data for female offenders become available by offence, the recidivism rates of women who participated in the fraud program could be compared with those of similar women who did not.

The absence of recidivism data for female offenders presents a serious obstacle to an evaluation of any group program for women in prison. It is likely, however, that this problem will be resolved by current Canadian efforts to obtain these data, at both the federal and provincial levels.⁽¹³⁾ Conclusion The Women and Fraud program at the Prison For Women has generated new information about the dynamics of women's fraud offending. The program was useful to the women themselves and an exciting step forward in gathering knowledge about a specific subgroup of incarcerated women.

(1) Jill Atkinson and Heather McLean, Psychology Department, Prison for Women, Correctional Service of Canada, P.O. Box 515, Kingston, Ontario K7L 4W7.

(2) For a review see K. Kendall, *Literature Review of Therapeutic Services for Women in Prison*, Companion Volume 1 to *Program Evaluation of the Therapeutic Services at the Prison for Women* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1993).

(3) R.J. Homant, "Ten Years After: A Follow-up of Therapy Effectiveness," *Journal of Offender Counseling, Services, and Rehabilitation*, 10 (1986): 51-57. See also F.E. Sultan and G.T. Long, "Treatment of the Sexually/Physically Abused Female Inmate: Evaluation of an Intensive Short-term Intervention Program," *Journal of Offender Counseling, Services, and Rehabilitation*, 12 (1988): 131-141.

(4) Homant, Ten Years After: A Follow-Up of Therapy Effectiveness.

(5) D.W. Edwards and G.A. Roundtree, "Assessment of Short-term Treatment Groups with Adjudicated First Offender Shoplifters," *Journal of Offender Counseling, Services, and Rehabilitation*, 6 (1981): 89-102.

(6) J.W. MacDevitt and G.D. Kedzierzawski, "A Structured Group Format for First Offense Shoplifters," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 34 (1990): 155-164.

- (7) Sultan and Long, Treatment of the Sexually/Physically Abused Female Inmate: Evaluation of an Intensive Short-term Intervention Program. See also Edwards and Roundtree, Assessment of Short-term Treatment Groups with Adjudicated First Offender Shoplifters. And MacDevitt and Kedzierzawski, A Structured Group Format for First Offense Shoplifters.
- (8) D. Zietz, *Women Who Embezzle or Defraud: A Study of Convicted Felons* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981). See also J.L. Atkinson and H. McLean, "Women and Fraud: The Prison for Women's Treatment Program for Female Federal Fraud Offenders," unpublished manuscript, Prison for Women, Kingston, Ontario.)
- (9) A. Hatch and K. Faith, "The Female Offender in Canada: A Statistical Profile," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 3 (1989): 432-456.
- (10) Atkinson and McLean, Women and Fraud: The Prison for Women's Treatment Program for Female Federal Fraud Offenders.
- (11) P. Mauger, D. Adkinson, S. Zoss, G. Firestone and D. Hook, *The Interpersonal Behavior Survey* (IBS) (Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services, 1980).
- (12) G. Parker, H. Tupling and L.B. Brown, "A Parental Bonding Instrument," *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 52 (1979): 1-10.
- (13) Jim Bonta of the Policy Branch, Public Security Canada, is completing a database for federally sentenced women. Grant Coulson and Verna Nutbrown of the Vanier Correctional Centre for Women have developed a provincial database for female offenders.