

Characteristics of sexual assaults on female prison staff

The sexual assault of a female prison staff member is a rare phenomenon committed by a small minority of inmates. However, even one such assault can have devastating impacts. Action must, therefore, be taken to respond to this rare but serious problem.

The best strategy for dealing with sexually motivated hostage-takings or other prison sexual assaults is prevention. One important preventive measure is identifying inmates likely to sexually assault a female staff member.

To that end, this article sets out the results of a recent review of several incidents involving either the sexual assault of a female staff member or a hostage-taking in which sexual assault was alleged. We hope that this examination will reveal characteristics that will help identify such dangerous inmates so that appropriate precautions can be taken. Methodology This review was carried out in several Correctional Service of Canada institutions. The first step was to review file information on inmates who committed or were charged with the sexual assault of a female staff member or with a hostage-taking that involved an allegation of sexual assault.

Additional information was then obtained from staff members with personal knowledge of the inmate or incident. Some of the staff members consulted were the victims of these assaults.

A total of 13 inmates were identified through this process. However, the number of inmates studied was eventually reduced to 11 because of lack of information about two of the inmates. In all, these inmates committed (or attempted to commit) considerably more than 11 sex offences against female staff members. Some offenders repeatedly committed sex offences against female prison staff.

In most cases, the assaults caused no physical injuries to the victims. However, one incident did result in serious physical and psychological harm, while an inmate apparently attempted to kill a female staff member in another of the incidents. Inmate characteristics All the inmates identified in the study were known sex offenders who had previously sexually assaulted adult women. Most were serving long sentences at the time of the incident studied - almost half were serving either a life sentence or an indeterminate sentence after being classified as a dangerous offender or dangerous sexual offender.

These inmates had committed crimes that had resulted in more physical harm to the victims than most sex offenders. Several of the inmates had killed or attempted to kill a past victim(s).

Many (although not all) of them also had psychiatric histories involving psychoses, severe personality disorders, or extreme behavioural or mental instability. The proportion of psychopaths in the study was greater than in the general sex offender population,⁽²⁾ and most of the study inmates were sexually sadistic (only about 10% to 20% of the general sex offender population can be so described).⁽³⁾

As mentioned, most of these inmates had sexually assaulted female prison staff members before. Some had a long history of such assaultive behaviour against female staff, although most of these offences had been limited to sexual touching.

Most of the inmates had also been identified as highly likely to sexually assault female prison staff. In some cases, psychological and case management staff had issued specific warnings about this risk, and some of the inmates had warned their eventual victim(s) of the risk before assaulting them.

However, not all inmates had been identified as a high risk to female staff - even though they had sexually assaulted female staff members before.

Most of the assaults on female staff occurred after the inmate had experienced a period of distress during which he characterized himself as being in a hopeless situation.

For example, several inmates committed the sexual assault after receiving discouraging news about an appeal or National Parole Board decision, or after involvement in an institutional problem. Some tentative conclusions The sex offenders at highest risk of assaulting female prison staff seem to possess the following characteristics:

- a history of sexually assaulting adult women;
- a history of sexually assaulting female staff members in psychiatric or correctional institutions;
- have been identified as a psychopath by high scores on the Hare Psychopathy Checklist (Revised)⁽⁴⁾
- are sexually sadistic;
- view their situation as hopeless or extremely distressing;
- are serving a lengthy sentence; and
- have a history of causing or attempting to cause grave injury to victims.

The harm these inmates may do to female staff depends on factors specific to each inmate, but past sexual assaults are the best predictors of sexually assaultive behaviour. Previous assaults on female staff and the inmate's most serious past sexual assault are probably most relevant in making such predictions. What can be done? The Statistical Prediction of Violent Recidivism Among Sex Offenders Instrument appears to be useful in identifying which inmates might attempt to assault female staff.

This instrument uses the Hare Psychopathy Checklist, various static risk factors, and phallometric test results to estimate the absolute risk level for sexual or violent offending.⁽⁵⁾ The instrument identified seven of the nine study inmates for whom we had sufficient data to score as highly likely to assault female staff.

Sex offenders at high risk of sexually assaulting female staff should be identified at each institution. A registry or flagging system is needed to alert staff about such inmates, and information should be available on the type of sexual offence they might commit.

The movements of these inmates should also be restricted, or very closely monitored, to limit their access to potential victims. To ensure accuracy of information about past sexual assaults, criminal charges should be laid against all inmates who commit sex offences against prison staff.

Unfortunately, there are no simple, effective rules that can be followed in the event of such an attack. The motives of sex offenders vary, as do their responses to victim reactions.

Some victims are harmed less if they do not resist, while other victims can only protect themselves from great harm by resisting. There is simply no way to predict the safest strategy.⁽⁶⁾ What might discourage one type of assailant might only aggravate another.

Hopefully, this study will provide a basis for preventing sexual assaults on female staff members in the first place by identifying high-risk offenders and developing risk management strategies for them.

(1)555 King Street West, P.O. Box 22, Kingston, Ontario K7L 4V7.

(2)R. C. Serin, P. B. Malcolm, A. Khanna and H. E. Barbaree, *Psychopathy and Deviant Sexual Arousal in Incarcerated Sexual Offenders*, Unpublished Manuscript, 1992.

(3)D. L. Preston, *Patterns of Sexual Arousal Among Rapist Subtypes*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Queen's University, 1995. See also H. E. Barbaree, M. C. Seto, R. C. Serin, N. L. Amos and D. L. Preston, "Comparisons between sexual and nonsexual rapist subtypes: Sexual arousal to rape, offense precursors, and offense characteristics," *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 21 (1994): 95-114.

(4)R. Hare, *Psychopathy Checklist - Revised* (Toronto: Multi-Health Systems Inc., 1990). This means that the offender persistently disregards social norms; is impulsive, unreliable and irresponsible; lacks the capacity for empathy, remorse and emotional depth; fails to maintain enduring attachments to people, principles or goals; and has a chronically unstable criminal lifestyle.

(5)This instrument was developed using the general principles from the Burgess method. See E. M. Burgess, *The Working of the Indeterminate Sentence Law and the Parole System in Illinois* (Springfield: Illinois Parole Board, 1928).

(6)R. R. Hazelwood and J. A. Harpold, "Rape: The dangers of providing confrontational advice," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* (June 1986).