

Women offenders convicted of robbery and assault

There is a common misperception that most federally sentenced women incarcerated for homicide pose a high criminal risk to society. In actual fact, women convicted of robbery are among those with the highest risk for recidivism.²

Over one third of all federally sentenced women are incarcerated for assault or robbery convictions.³ To date, however, there has been very little research examining this group of offenders. This is, in part, because women represent a small percentage, about 2%, of the entire federal inmate population.

Considering these two facts - women who commit robbery are at higher risk for re-offending - types of female offenders and little research exists on female offenders convicted of robbery and assault - there is a need to profile these women. This article reports the results of a study completed by the Federally Sentenced Women's Program of the Correctional Service of Canada examining the profile of all women convicted of assault and robbery who were incarcerated for federal sentences⁴ as of September 1, 1996.

Study sample

On September 1, 1996, 17% of women offenders were incarcerated for assault, and 16% were incarcerated for robbery (an increase from 13% in 1995).⁵ The study sample consisted of 86 female offenders incarcerated for robbery or assault, or 27% of incarcerated women offenders.

The sample distribution included 56 female offenders representing 108 assault convictions and 51 female offenders with 81 robbery convictions. About one quarter had both robbery and assault convictions. The average number of convictions per woman was 1.5 for robbery and 1.9 for assault.

The female offenders in the sample had, on average, 4.4 convictions for offences other than robbery or assault, most commonly for theft.

Methodology

Data were collected using the Offender Management System. Missing information was collected from file reviews completed by case management officers in respective institutions.

Robbery offenders

Female offenders convicted of robbery are most likely to be single; about half of all the female offenders incarcerated for robbery were single. About one quarter were in a common-law relationship and 10% were married.

At the time of their offence, female offenders with robbery convictions ranged from 18 to 43 years of age. The average age was 29.

Two thirds of female offenders from the study sample with robbery convictions were Caucasian. Aboriginal women comprised 24% of the female offenders convicted of robbery. Among the total federal female offender incarcerated population, 19% are Aboriginal women incarcerated for robbery.

Two thirds of the female offenders convicted of robbery were incarcerated in the Ontario and Prairie regions. This is a change from 1995 when the higher proportions were in the Quebec and Prairie regions.⁶

Most female offenders with robbery convictions (56%) had education levels ranging from Grade 8 to Grade 10. Nearly half (48%) were unemployed at the time of their offence. Most female offenders who were working were employed by the sex-trade industry. Of all women incarcerated for robbery, 22% were supported through their work in sex trade, followed by 16% who relied on social assistance. Research in the United States indicates that a prior history of prostitution is an important contributing factor in robberies committed by women.⁷

The types of robbery conviction were as follows: robbery alone (95%), armed robbery (2%), robbery with threats of violence (1%) and robbery with violence (1%). The average aggregate sentence length for women convicted of robbery was five years. Thirty-seven percent of female offenders incarcerated for robbery were serving their first federal sentence, and 15% were serving their second.

Most female offenders convicted of robbery (56%) did not have a history of violence against others. Of the 44% who did, 12% showed an increase in their level of violence. Two thirds of female offenders used a weapon during their robbery offence. The most common weapon was a knife, used 39% of the time, followed by a gun, used 16% of the time.

Most female offenders with robbery convictions (58%) were considered a medium criminal risk, while 28% were considered a high criminal risk and only 8% were considered to be a low criminal risk. Female offenders convicted of robbery were considered to be at higher risk for reoffending and more of a multineed group than any other subgroup of female offenders.⁸ Most female offenders convicted of robbery (56%) were classified as high need, followed by 35% as medium need and 4% as low. The more salient areas of need for women with robbery convictions included their attitudes, companions and substance abuse problems.

More than two thirds of female offenders convicted of robbery (69%) had a peer group or friends who had a negative influence on their behaviour at the time of their offence. Thirty percent had both positive- and negative-influence friends. Peer association has been identified as an important area of intervention with women who have robbery convictions. The likelihood that a woman will reoffend is increased dramatically if she associates with a negative peer-group on release.

Another important target for intervention is substance abuse. The vast majority of female offenders convicted of robbery (93%) had a history of substance abuse problems involving alcohol, drugs or both. Of these women, 44% had a history of abusing both alcohol and drugs, 44% of abusing drugs alone and 5% had a history of abusing alcohol alone. Only 31% of robbery offenders were not intoxicated at the time of their offence. On the other hand, 18% were intoxicated due to both alcohol and drugs at the time of their offence, another 12% due to alcohol alone and a further 37% due to drugs alone. This is consistent with research indicating that incarcerated women abuse drugs more frequently than alcohol.⁹

Assault offenders

The female offenders convicted of assault had similar characteristics to those convicted of robbery. Slightly more were single (59% versus 49%) and slightly fewer were living common-law and married (22% and 8%, respectively, versus 24% and 10%).

Female offenders with assault convictions ranged in age from 18 to 48 years at the time of their offence. This range included slightly older women than the age range for women with robbery convictions. The average age at the time of the current offence was the same, however, at 29 years.

There were some notable differences in the race demographics between female offenders with assault convictions and those with robbery convictions. Among the assault offenders, there was a smaller percentage of Caucasians (55% versus 67%) and a higher percentage of Aboriginal offenders (36% versus 24%). Among the total incarcerated federal female offender population, 32% were Aboriginal women incarcerated for assault.

There were similarities in the geographical distribution of female offenders with assault and robbery convictions. As with the women incarcerated for robbery, most female offenders with assault convictions were incarcerated in the Ontario and Prairie regions.

Female offenders with assault convictions were most likely to have an education level between Grade 9 and Grade 10 (48%). (This compares with a Grade 8 to Grade 10 education for women with robbery convictions.) However, a higher percentage had a Grade 12 education level -21% compared to only 12% of female offenders with robbery convictions. Employment patterns were similar among both female offenders convicted of assault and those convicted of robbery: most were unemployed at the time of their offence and the women who were working were mostly employed by the sex-trade industry. There was a slight difference between the two groups, however, in that 14% of female offenders convicted of assault were on social assistance at the time of their offence, compared to 16% of those convicted of robbery.

As shown in the figure, female offenders' assault convictions most commonly resulted from assaulting a peace officer (25% of the sample). This was followed by aggravated assault (22%) and assault with a weapon (21%). Similar to the robbery offenders, the mean aggregate sentence length was five years for the assault offenders. The most frequently occurring sentence length was four years. Almost two thirds of female offenders convicted of assault (64%) were serving their first federal term, while 27% were

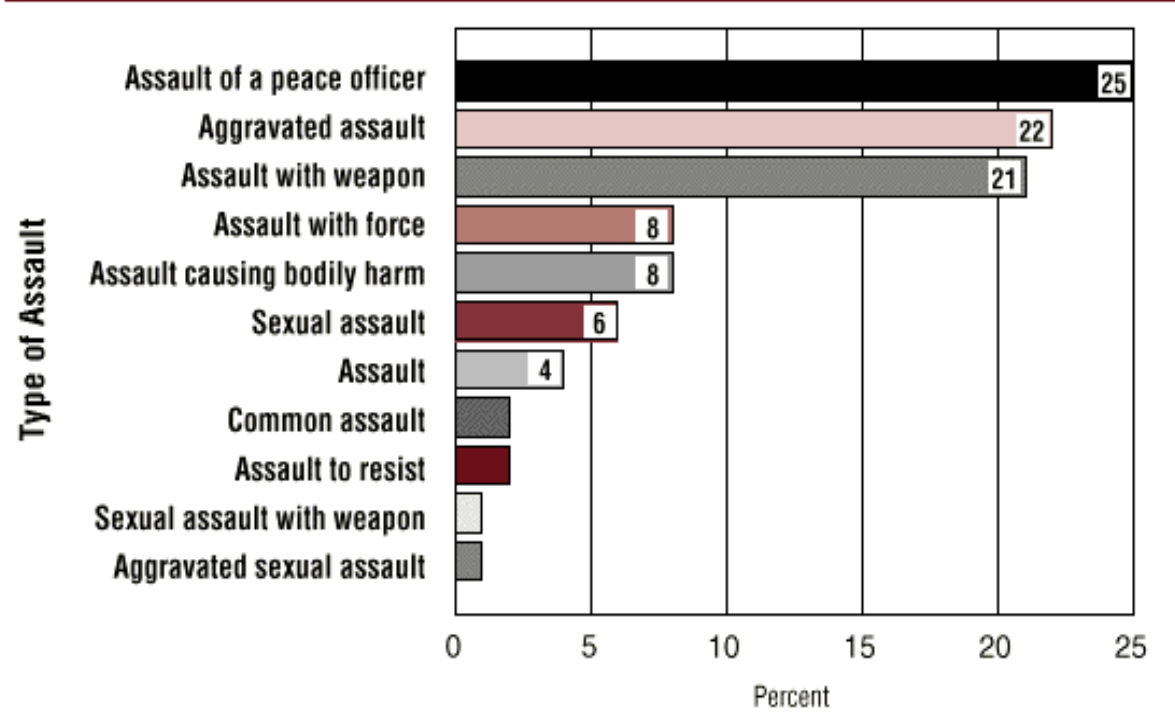
...serving their second. It is important to keep in mind that the number of sentences served by federally sentenced women does not necessarily represent the number of convictions or offences they have committed.

Most female offenders convicted of assault (58%) had a history of violence, with 20% of them escalating in their violence. Almost two thirds (64%) used a weapon during their assault, most frequently a knife which was used 45% of the time. This is similar to female offenders convicted of robbery.

Forty-three percent of female offenders convicted of assault were considered to be a medium criminal risk. Notably, however, 41% were considered a high criminal risk. Only 11% were considered a low criminal risk. Most (55%) were classified as having high needs, while 34% were classified as having medium needs and 5% as low needs.

Figure 1

Assault Type



Almost three quarters of the female offenders convicted of assault (72%) had negative peers or friends, increasing the woman's chance to recidivate. Twenty-eight percent had both positive and negative associations. This clearly indicates that the need area of "associations" should be targetted for intervention when planning to reintegrate these women into the community.

Another need area that should be targetted for intervention is substance abuse. Ninety-one percent of women convicted of assault had a substance abuse problem. Within this 91%, 42% had both alcohol and drug problems, 33% had drug problems and 16% had alcohol problems. At the time of their assault, 35% of the female offenders were intoxicated from alcohol, 22% from drugs and 11% from both alcohol and drugs. In other words, two thirds of female offenders convicted of assault were intoxicated at the time of

their offence and only one third were not. This trend is very similar to the one found among female offenders convicted of robbery.

Discussion

Female offenders convicted of assault and robbery have a similar profile. They are usually Caucasian, single and 29 years old, at the time of their first federal offence. There was a notable difference between the two groups, however, in that there was a higher percentage of Aboriginal female offenders convicted of assault than robbery in the total female incarcerated population (32% versus 19%). Aboriginal women were disproportionately represented in both categories of offenders, however, given that they only represent 2% of the total Canadian population.¹⁰

Over three quarters of the female offenders convicted of robbery compared to half of those convicted of assault were either unemployed, working in the sex-trade industry or on social assistance at the time of their offence. Female offenders in both groups were most likely to have been unemployed at the time of their offence.

Female offenders with assault and robbery convictions had similar education levels, although female offenders convicted of assault had a slightly higher level of education than those convicted of robbery.

The vast majority of both groups had a substance abuse problem, and most had negative peers or friends/associations at the time of their offences.

Female offenders convicted of robbery and assault receive relatively short sentences. The average aggregate sentence length was five years for both robbery and assault.

There were some differences between the two groups on criminal-risk ratings. Female offenders convicted of assault received a high criminal-risk classification more often than those convicted of robbery, at 41% versus 28%. Most female offenders with robbery convictions were considered a medium criminal risk whereas those convicted of assault were evenly distributed between high and medium criminal-risk ratings. More than half, 56%, of the female offenders convicted of robbery did not have a history of violence. This is opposite to female offenders convicted of assault, among whom 58% did have a history of violence. In spite of these differences, female offenders convicted of assault and robbery were both classified as high-needs cases more than half the time.

These findings have implications for the type and timing of interventions used with these female offenders. Intervention should target the areas of need identified as most salient for female offenders: education levels, employment, substance abuse and companions. Intervention should be provided rather quickly after female offenders are admitted to a federal institution because of the shorter sentences these women receive which do not allow much time for intervention. As well, female offenders convicted of robbery and assault are considered to be at high risk for recidivism, with women convicted of assault slightly more at risk than those convicted of robbery.

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