

# A profile of federally sentenced women in the community: Addressing needs for successful integration

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Research has documented a clear and consistent relationship between the type and number of needs that offenders present and the likelihood of successful community reintegration.<sup>2</sup> This relationship highlights the importance of assessing and reassessing offender needs, with continuity of care from sentencing, through incarceration, to community supervision. Indeed, this tenet is a cornerstone of the mission statement of the Correctional Service of Canada: “actively encouraging and assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens, while exercising reasonable, safe, secure and humane control.”<sup>3</sup>

Individual, comprehensive risk/needs assessments are essential to the provision of appropriate programming, both within the institution and, after release in the community. Therefore identifying and evaluating criminogenic needs<sup>4</sup> are essential to correctional intervention. This article is an overview of demographic data, criminal history and needs of federally sentenced women currently on conditional release.

National implementation of the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale (CRNMS) in Canadian corrections has provided a method for comprehensive and systematic evaluation of each offender released from federal incarceration, and every six months throughout her period of supervision.<sup>5</sup> Briefly, the CRNMS involves collecting case-specific information to determine the offender’s personal criminal risk and need areas.

A combination of overall risk and need levels serves in part to determine how often the offender should contact parole officers. However, it is the need areas alone that are amenable to correctional intervention, and therefore should be the focus of program planning for successful reintegration. The CRNMS process considers 12 need domains: academic and vocational, employment pattern, financial management, marital and family relations, companions, accommodation, behavioural and emotional stability, alcohol use, drug use, mental ability, health, and attitude. The instrument is designed to rank each need on either a three- or four-point continuum, ranging from “asset to community

adjustment” (not applicable to all needs) through “no current difficulties” and “some need for improvement” to “significant need for improvement.”

Approximately 350 federally sentenced women are currently on conditional release<sup>6</sup> in Canada, but CRNMS data were available for only 297 on September 30, 1997. These data were the basis for analyses in the present investigation.

## Sample

Since its implementation, all data derived from CRNMS have been entered into the CSC Offender Management System (OMS), which is an automated database. For the present research, the most recent CRNMS data for currently supervised federal female offenders were extracted from OMS. This process produced a sample of 297 or about 85% of all federally sentenced women currently on conditional release. The study sample is clearly representative of the overall population of federally sentenced women in the community.

## Demographic information

According to these data, about 13% of federally sentenced women on conditional release are Aboriginal, and the majority of non-Aboriginals are Caucasian. The average age is 37.9, with a range from 20 to 90 years old. Almost half (43.9%) are single, 32.1% are married or living common-law, 16.6% are divorced or separated, and the remaining 7.4% are either widowed or of unknown marital status.

A high proportion (45%) of women on conditional release from federal sentences are supervised in the Ontario region. Almost one third (29%) reside in the Prairies, 11% in Quebec, 9% in the Atlantic region, and 6% are supervised in the Pacific region.

## Criminal history

Most women currently on conditional release from federal custody (87.5%) have served only one term of federal<sup>7</sup> incarceration. Another 10% are on release from their second federal term. Five women (1.7%) have served federal sentences three times, and two women (0.7%) are on release from their fourth term of federal incarceration.

More than one quarter (25.6%) of women currently under community supervision have been convicted of homicide. Accordingly, almost one fifth (17.2%) are serving life sentences. Although this percentage seems high, it must be borne in mind that life-sentenced offenders remain under community supervision indefinitely, while offenders with shorter sentences are supervised only until their warrant expires.

About 17% of federally sentenced women in the community have been convicted of a drug-related offence. Only two women in the sample (less than 1%) have been convicted of a sexual offence. A similarly small proportion (2.4%) have a history of break and enter, although 11.4% have been convicted of robbery, and 15.8% of theft.

Based on a thorough review of each offender's criminal history, including its severity and diversity, plus the parole officer's discretion, an overall risk score is assigned. Of those women currently under community supervision, the majority (70.4%) are rated as low risk. An additional 13.5% are considered medium risk, while the remaining 16.2% are rated as high risk.

## Release type and phase of release

Most women in the sample had been granted discretionary release: either day parole (12.1%) or full parole (77.8%). Only a small minority (10.1%) served two thirds of their sentence and received only statutory release. This bodes well for the federally sentenced women in the sample, as offenders granted discretionary release are generally considered good candidates for successful community reintegration. Moreover, solid empirical evidence<sup>8</sup> affirms this notion: in comparison with those detained until

statutory release or sentence completion, women granted discretionary release are less likely to return to federal custody.

Forty-five percent of the sample of federally sentenced women under federal supervision had been in the community for more than one year. Another 19% were in their second phase of release and have been in the community between six months and one year. Finally, about one third (36%) are at the initial stage, meaning that they were released from prison within the previous six months. Again, it is encouraging to find that almost half the sample had successfully completed more than one year of community supervision. Research has consistently demonstrated that those who reoffend tend to do so within the first year of release.

## Case need levels

As mentioned, appropriate correctional programming begins with a comprehensive needs assessment. In other words, to provide offenders in the community with the best services possible, we must first decide which needs to address. We must also consider the severity of the problem in the need domain, to match the intensity of treatment to the magnitude of need.

As previously described, the CRNMS classifies and rates offenders across 12 need domains. A percentage distribution of needs by severity is shown in Table 1.

Perhaps what is most noteworthy about the data in Table 1 is the large percentage of women showing "considerable difficulty" in the employment domain. Moreover, about three quarters of federally sentenced women in the community show either "some" or "considerable" need for improvement in this area. It was therefore not surprising to find that almost 70% also experience at least some difficulty with academic and vocational skills. Finally, about three quarters of the sample are rated as having either "some" or "considerable" difficulty in the behavioural and emotional domain. Some might argue that these problems result from the double-bind of being women in a patriarchy, as well as offenders in a vengeful society.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1

**Percentage Distribution of Case Need Levels:  
Female Offenders Under Supervision (n = 297)**

Need domain	Asset %	No difficulty %	Some difficulty %	Considerable difficulty %
Academic and vocational	n/a	35.0	47.6	17.5
Employment	3.5	24.8	44.8	26.9
Financial management	2.1	30.8	51.0	16.1
Marital and family relations	10.1	30.8	41.6	17.5
Companions	11.9	36.8	35.1	16.1
Accommodation	7.3	67.1	17.8	7.7
Behavioural and emotional	n/a	25.9	59.4	15.7
Alcohol abuse	n/a	83.6	11.9	4.5
Drug use	n/a	77.3	12.9	9.8
Mental ability	n/a	95.1	3.8	1.0
Health	n/a	68.5	25.5	5.9
Attitude	22.5	68.1	4.6	4.9

**Comparing needs by gender**

For a cursory look into whether the needs of federally sentenced women in the community differ from the needs of similar male offenders, CRNMS data were retrieved for a random sample of 300 men currently under supervision. Ratings on all need domains were dichotomized to collapse “some difficulty” and “considerable difficulty” into an indication of presence of need, and “no difficulty” and “asset” (where applicable) into an indication of absence of need. Chi-square analyses were performed to test for between-gender differences in all 12 domains (see Figure 1).

Significant between-gender differences emerged in four need domains: alcohol use, behavioural and emotional stability, marital and family relations, and academic and vocational skills. Compared with the male offenders, women under community supervision have more needs in three domains: emotional stability, marital and family relations, and academic and vocational skills. However, the men have

more problems with abuse of intoxicants, especially alcohol.

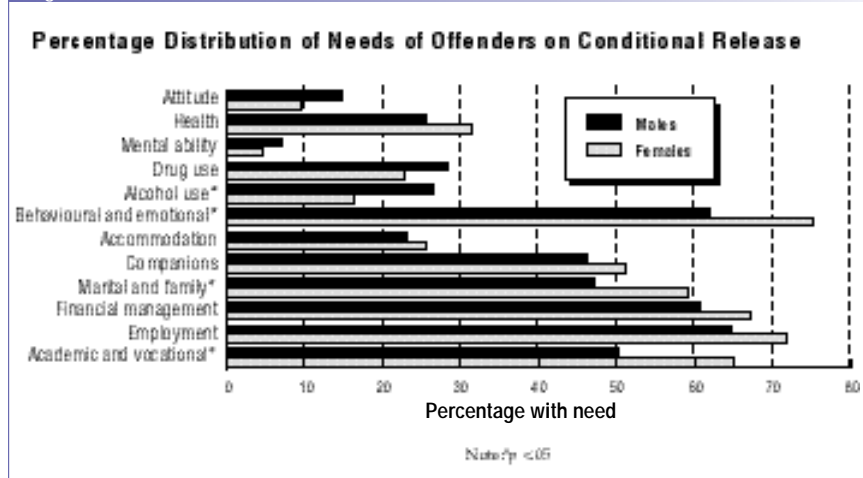
When the number of needs was totalled, the women had, on average, more needs than the men, although the number of needs rated “some difficulty” or “considerable difficulty” ranged from 0 to 11 for both the men and the women. Specifically, the mean number of needs for men was 4.5, and the mean number of needs for women was 5.0. Statistical analysis (*t*-test) showed this difference to be significant at *p*<.05.

**Conclusions**

The fact that women offenders in the community have, on average, more needs than similar male offenders needs to be addressed. Moreover, a higher proportion of women have problems in the academic, behavioural, and marital and family domains. This should be reflected in community correctional intervention strategies.

There is good news. In recognition of the diverse, special needs of women offenders, the Service will tailor assessment, management and treatment strategies accordingly. For example, six new facilities for federally sentenced women have opened so that women can serve their sentences close to their families and social supports.

Figure 1



Moreover, the new facilities are based on an “independent living” model to facilitate the transition from incarceration to the community.

The Correctional Service of Canada has tailored some core programs (e.g., cognitive skills) to the needs of female offenders, and is implementing and evaluating programs specific to this group, such as mother-and-child and peer-support programs. These changes have important implications, especially for post-release adjustment.

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The assessment and reassessment of criminogenic needs is an important first step in service delivery for all offenders. Moreover, these data can be used to tailor treatment strategies targeting specific groups. The Service seems to be moving in the right direction to enhance community reintegration for women on conditional release. Current and prospective research initiatives will produce more definitive answers to the question: What can we do to help women on conditional release live more successfully in the community? ■

<sup>1</sup> 340 Laurier Avenue West, Section 2B, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.

<sup>2</sup> P. Gendreau, T. Little and C. Goggin, “A Meta-Analysis of the Predictors of Adult Offender Recidivism: Assessment Guidelines for Classification and Treatment” (Report submitted to the Corrections Branch, Ontario Ministry Secretariat, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> *Mission of the Correctional Service of Canada*, Cat. no. JS 82-46/1997 (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1997): 4.

<sup>4</sup> Criminogenic needs reflect attributes of the offender that are changeable and, when changed, affect the likelihood of recidivism.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed description of CRNMS, see L. Motiuk “The Community Risk/Needs Management Scale: An effective supervision tool,” *Forum on Corrections Research*, 9, 1 (1997): 8–12.

<sup>6</sup> Conditional release in Canada includes day parole, full parole and mandatory supervision. Offenders are eligible for day parole six months before they are eligible for full parole, and they are eligible for full parole after having served one third of their sentence. Mandatory supervision begins when the offender has served two thirds of the sentence.

<sup>7</sup> In Canada, offenders sentenced to two years or more of incarceration are under federal jurisdiction, while those sentenced to less than two years of incarceration are under provincial jurisdiction.

<sup>8</sup> R. Belcourt, T. Nouwens and L. Lefebvre, “Examining the unexamined: Recidivism among female offenders,” *Forum on Corrections Research*, 5, 3 (1993): 10–14.

<sup>9</sup> M. Eaton, *Women after Prison* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1993).

## A new resource

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