

Effective corrections for women offenders

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The past decade has ushered in a new philosophy of women's corrections: 1990 is the year that the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women made its recommendations to the Correctional Service of Canada. At that time, the incarcerated federal women offender population numbered about 240. More than half of these women were accommodated in provincial institutions under Exchange of Services agreements; the rest were at Prison for Women (PFW) in Kingston, Ontario.

PFW was built in 1934 as the first federal institution for women. Almost from its opening, it has been criticized as unsuitable (i.e., lack of programming options) and over-secure. In the late 1980s, Commissioner Ole Ingstrup was determined to address these long outstanding issues and initiated the creation of a task force. This task force was mandated to develop a comprehensive strategy for the management of federally sentenced women. Its report, *Creating Choices*,² is the basis for our current regime for women offenders.

Task force recommendations

The task force recommended the development of a holistic approach to corrections for women using five guiding principles:

- 1 **Empowerment** — the process through which women gain insight into their situation, identify their strengths, and are supported and challenged to take positive action to gain greater control of their lives.
- 2 **Meaningful and responsible choices** — women need options that allow them to make responsible choices that relate to their needs, experiences, culture, values, spirituality, abilities and skills.
- 3 **Respect and dignity** — mutual respect is needed among offenders, among staff and between the two groups.
- 4 **Supportive environment** — the quality of an environment can promote physical and psychological health and personal development.

- 5 **Shared responsibility** — all levels of government, corrections, volunteer organizations, businesses, private sector services and the community have a role to play in the development of support systems and continuity of service for federally sentenced women.

These principles were the driving force for specific recommendations to:

- replace PFW with four regional facilities and an Aboriginal healing lodge;
- construct these regional facilities using a community-living model, where the women offenders would live in houses and be responsible for their daily living (e.g., meals, laundry, cleaning, leisure time);
- develop women-centred programs, including survivors-of-abuse programming and mother-child programming; and
- establish an effective community strategy for women offenders that would include a range of community residential options for women.

In 1990, these task force recommendations represented a

new definition of effective corrections for women offenders, reached through consensus by a broad range of correctional practitioners, government agencies and non-governmental organizations.

The task force based this definition on the results of a consultation process and research findings. The research was largely qualitative and included surveys of staff and women offenders, as well as comprehensive literature reviews. It was the first time in the Service's history that the voices of women offenders were given such weight in the development of strategic policy direction.

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What has happened since 1990?

The opening of the last new facility for women in 1997 exemplifies the Service's commitment to make the task force recommendations a reality. While there is, and will continue to be, debate as to how well the Service has interpreted the recommendations of the task force, the Service has operationalized a fundamentally different concept of effective corrections for women offenders in the federal system.

The Service has five new facilities, one of which is dedicated both in design and operation to Aboriginal healing; a small number of women with special needs remain at PFW. The majority of women offenders are living in house-style accommodation without 24-hour staff presence. They have more choices in daily living and more responsibility, and the regional facilities' model has shown it is effective from a security and public safety perspective for the majority of women offenders. The women have demonstrated that they can manage their daily living and resolve conflicts constructively. Their living environment is healthier and more pleasant than cell-block, self-contained institutions.

The volunteer and mentoring expertise at the regional facilities is extensive and active. Women offenders have benefited from some innovative programs and services during this intensive transition — examples include the canine training program at Nova Institution and the Reintegration Centre at Edmonton Institution for Women. The mother-child program has been implemented. Several women offenders have had their infants reside with them at their respective facilities. Most important, the Service has a women offender program strategy in place, although, accommodation pressures still exist at some institutions. The strategy has provided an opportunity for women offenders to participate in, and benefit from, programs that were developed specifically to meet their needs and styles of learning.

The regionalization of the population has not affected release patterns. Our data show that the Service currently has about 350 women incarcerated and 490 under community supervision. This is a much better balance than what has been achieved to date for male offenders.³ However, we have also been faced with the growing realization that we need to re-assess the needs of a small portion of our female population,⁴ and develop a different range of strategies.

In early 1996, a series of events occurred at Edmonton Institution for Women and the resulting review and investigations highlighted a number of concerns. PFW had to deal with suicides, self-injurious behaviour and special needs. Staff at Nova Institution were challenged to manage women with significant mental health problems, as well as behavioural issues that taxed the new facilities' resources.

In retrospect, it should not have been a surprise that the one model didn't fit all and was not effective for all women offenders. Clearly, women offenders are no more of a homogeneous group than any other population grouping based on a broad definition, whether the defining criterion is offender, ethnicity, gender, age, etc. The challenge of the report recommendations was to find appropriate alternative strategies for this heterogeneous group.

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Maximum-security women offenders

In 1996, the Service decided to create separate maximum-security units for women within designated male facilities. This decision was accompanied by a commitment to develop a long-term strategy for maximum-security women. This commitment has resulted in a flurry of research and program activities to support the development of a comprehensive strategy.

Researchers and practitioners agree on the importance of using multi-dimensional approaches. The Service, in turn, has carried out empirical research on offender needs; has

done individual case analysis and assessment; has done qualitative research; has interviewed and listened to women offenders and staff, and has consulted with community partners and external experts.

The research supporting the development of a long-term strategy for the maximum-security women is intended to ensure that this strategy is as effective for these women as the community-living model has proven to be for the majority of women offenders. Some of the research is being done externally and independently. The Service is not funding this research, but is facilitating it through cooperation and support by providing access to data, offenders and staff.

Evaluation and research

The results of program evaluation projects have contributed to our overall program strategy, and have been invaluable in testing research methodologies appropriate for women offenders. In particular, recent program evaluations⁵ for women offenders have been responsive to the small numbers of program participants and their views, and have addressed structural or environmental issues such as management support for the program.

It must be acknowledged that the Service has just begun the required sustained research into the existing model of women's corrections to support the current women offenders' strategy. The research is necessary to demonstrate to what extent this strategy is effective or lacking. For instance, there are respected and well-

known researchers who believe that the criminogenic needs of women offenders is a concept that requires further investigation; that the parameters of effective programs for women offenders have yet to receive basic validation; that women's pathways to crime have not received sufficient research attention; and that methodologies appropriate for women offender research must be specifically developed and selected to be responsive not only to gender issues, but also to the reality of the small number of women. Thus, if we are to solidly demonstrate what is "effective corrections" for women offenders, the research must be broadened. Finally, it is paramount that we use a multi-disciplinary approach in prospective research endeavours.

Conclusion

Not only are there the usual research issues to contend with regarding women offenders (i.e., appropriate methodology, dispersed population, contextual framework), but there are also broader environmental factors at play. For example, women offender issues are often situated in a highly visible context and are embraced within the general debate on gender, race and class. Several investigators have stated the need to explore these issues further in our research.⁶ It is imperative that individuals in every domain — academics, practitioners, government officials, community partners and advocacy groups — continue to make a contribution to effective and humane corrections for women. ■

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² Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, *Creating Choices: Report on the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women* (Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada, 1990).

³ Data show that as of April 1999, about 12,700 male offenders were incarcerated and 9,200 were on conditional release. Thus, the ratio of those incarcerated to those under supervision is much higher for men (unpublished raw data, Research Branch).

⁴ This refers to women designated as maximum-security, who make up less than 10% of the incarcerated federal female offender population.

⁵ K. Blanchette and G. Eljdupovic-Guzina, *Results of a Pilot Study of the Peer Support Program for Women Offenders*, (Ottawa, ON: Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 1998).

⁶ C. G. Coll, J. B. Miller, J. P. Fields, and B. Matthews, "The experiences of women in prison: Implications for services and prevention," *Women and Therapy: A Feminist Quarterly*, 20, 4 (1998): 11-28.