

Women in federal and provincial-territorial correctional facilities

by *Shelley Trevethan*¹

Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics

Women have historically made up a relatively small proportion of persons involved in crime. For instance, women currently make up less than one fifth of adults charged with an offence. However, the proportion of women involved in the criminal justice system has been increasing, putting new demands on the police, courts, correctional facilities and community programs. Over the past 20 years, the proportion of women charged with a criminal offence has increased from 14% to 18%. Similarly, the number of women admitted to provincial-territorial custody has increased from 5% to 9%, and to federal custody from 3% to 5%.²

Since females are a relatively small proportion of the inmate population, accommodation and program planning may be more of a challenge than it is for males. A better understanding of the characteristics of female inmates can help program planners and policy makers decide how to best utilize limited budgets to address the needs of this population. As well, it may help identify areas for prevention, which could reduce the incidence of crimes committed by females.

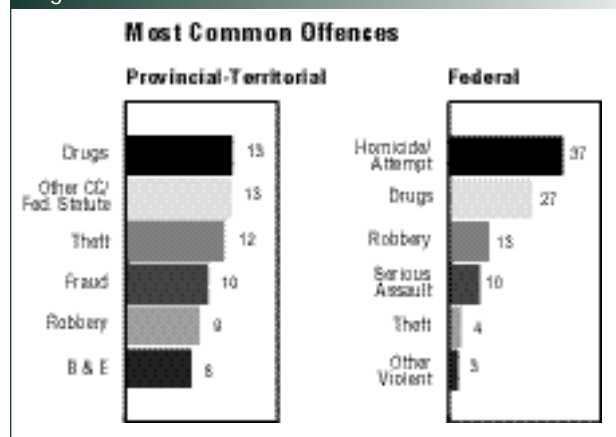
This article examines the characteristics of women in provincial-territorial and federal correctional facilities. The data are based on a one-day snapshot of inmates who were on-register in adult correctional facilities at midnight on Saturday, 5 October 1996.³ Since the data are based on inmates who were in a facility on one particular day, generalizations should be made with caution.⁴

Women a small proportion

On snapshot day, females accounted for 5% of the inmates on-register in Canadian correctional facilities (1,807 women out of 37,541 inmates). Women made up a larger proportion of the provincial-territorial inmate population (7%) than the federal female inmate population (2%).

Women in provincial-territorial facilities were incarcerated for different types of offences than those in federal facilities. Although women in

Figure 1



provincial-territorial facilities were primarily incarcerated for non-violent offences (72%), women in federal facilities were typically incarcerated for violent offences (64%).⁵

This would be expected since persons in federal facilities are serving longer sentences than those in provincial-territorial facilities, typically for more serious offences.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the most common offences among women in provincial-territorial facilities were drug-related offences (13%), "other" Criminal Code or federal statute offences (13%) or theft (12%). The most common offences for women in federal facilities were homicide/ attempted murder (37%) and drug-related offences (27%).

Although females in federal facilities were more likely to be incarcerated for violent offences than those in provincial-territorial facilities, overall, females were less

likely than males to be incarcerated for violent offences. A smaller proportion of female than male inmates were convicted of violent offences in provincial-territorial (28% versus 34%) and in federal (64% versus 74%) facilities.

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Female inmates were also serving shorter sentences than males.⁶ The median aggregate sentence length for females in provincial-territorial facilities was approximately five months, compared with approximately six months for males. The median aggregate sentence length for females in federal facilities was approximately four and one-half years, compared with five years for males.

Demographics

As illustrated in Figure 2, the characteristics of females in provincial-territorial and in federal facilities were similar. In both provincial-territorial and federal facilities, the majority of females were younger than 35 years of age (61% and 57%, respectively). Females in the Canadian population tend to be older — only one third of adult females are younger than 35. On snapshot day, almost one quarter (23%) of provincial-territorial female inmates, and 20% of federal female inmates, were Aboriginal. Comparatively, female Aboriginal persons make up about 2% of the female adult population in Canada.

Past research has shown that female inmates are more likely to be unattached (single, divorced, separated or widowed) than males.

unattached at the time of admission (69% versus 58%). However, the same proportion of females and males in provincial-territorial facilities were unattached (76% each). These data refer to marital status at time of admission to the facility, so it is possible that marital status will change during the sentence.

Female inmates had fairly low educational levels compared with the population of Canada.⁸ Approximately one third (35%) of female inmates in provincial-territorial facilities had a grade nine education or less. This was the case for an even larger proportion of those in federal facilities — about

one half of female inmates (48%). In Canada, 19% of female adults had a grade nine education or less. Female and male inmates had similar educational levels.

Based on available data,⁹ 64% of female inmates in provincial-territorial facilities and 80% of females in federal facilities were unemployed at time of admission to the correctional facility. In comparison, 10% of females in Canada in 1996 were unemployed. Substantially fewer male

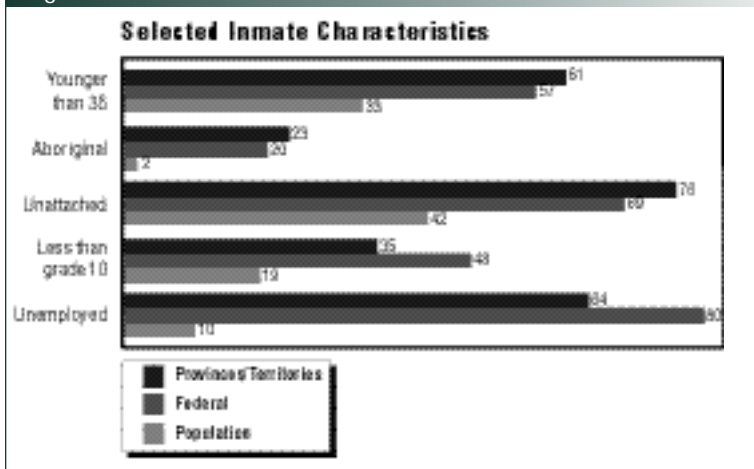
inmates were unemployed at time of admission (43% of provincial-territorial male inmates and 54% of federal male inmates).

Lower risk of reoffending

Female inmates were classified as lower risk to reoffend than males. Less than one half (44%) of provincial-territorial female inmates compared with 49% of male inmates were classified as high risk. The difference was more pronounced for inmates in federal facilities. Just over one quarter (28%) of female inmates, compared with 59% of male inmates, were

classified as high risk. A different measurement was used to examine risk/needs of federal inmates; direct comparisons between provincial-territorial and federal inmates is therefore not possible.

Figure 2



Past research has shown that female inmates are more likely to be unattached (single, divorced, separated or widowed) than males.⁷ The data from the snapshot partially support these findings. In federal facilities, larger proportions of females than males were

Figure 3

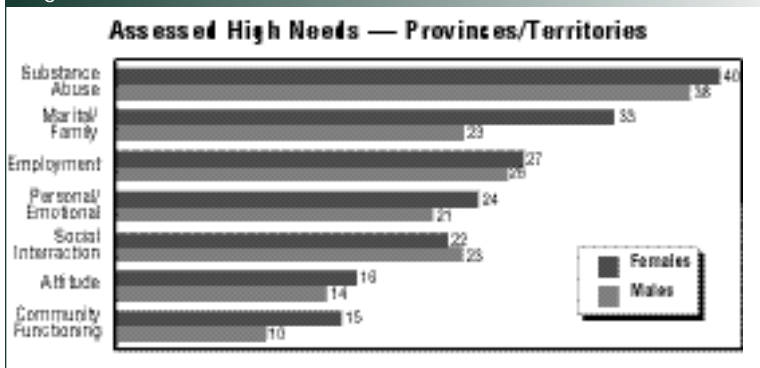
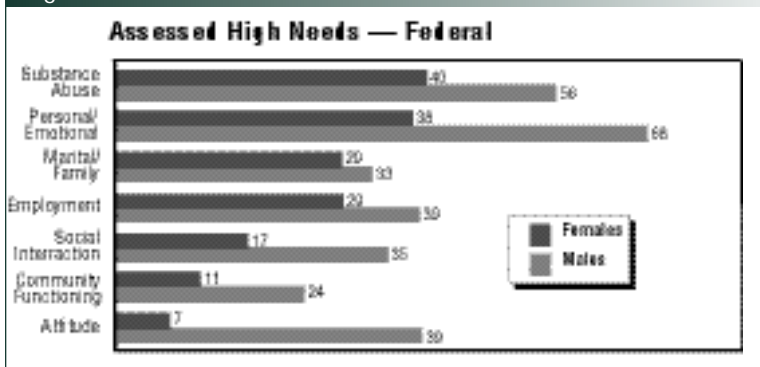


Figure 4



Need dimensions

A set of criminal history and need indicators were collected for the inmate populations in eight jurisdictions.¹⁰

Female inmates in provincial-territorial facilities who reported needs data were rated as having slightly higher needs than males on all need dimensions, except social interaction (Figure 3). Females demonstrated the highest needs in the areas of substance abuse (40%) and marital/family issues (33%).

In contrast, among federal inmates, females were rated as having lower needs than males on all need dimensions (Figure 4). Females were recorded as having the highest needs in the areas of substance abuse (40%) and personal/emotional needs (38%). The greatest difference between female and male inmates

was in the area of attitude. Only 7% of female inmates were rated as high need in this area compared with 39% of males.

Summary

Women in provincial-territorial facilities were incarcerated for different types of offences than women in federal facilities. Women in federal facilities were most often incarcerated for violent offences such as homicide or attempted murder, while those in provincial-territorial facilities were most often incarcerated for non-violent offences such as drug-related crimes or theft. Female inmates in the two levels of jurisdiction, however, share many characteristics. They tended to be in their early thirties and unattached, and a disproportionately high percentage were Aboriginal. They also tended to have low levels of education and to be unemployed.

Female inmates differed in some respects from males. Females were less likely than males to be incarcerated for violent offences. Also, females were classified as lower risk to reoffend than males. In provincial-territorial facilities, females were assessed as having higher needs than males, while in federal facilities, they were assessed as having lower needs. Finally, male and female inmates were similar in age and education; substantially fewer males, however, were unemployed at time of admission to the correctional facility.

Differences in the characteristics of female and male inmates, as well as between women serving federal and provincial-territorial sentences, suggest that it is necessary to examine programs and policy for female inmates to ensure they fit their specific needs. ■

¹ R.H. Coates Building, RC 19A, Holland Avenue and Scott Street, Tunney's Pasture, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0T6.

² Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, *Canadian Crime Statistics*, cat. no. 85-205-XPE (Ottawa, ON: Industry Canada, 1996); CCJS, *Adult Correctional Services in Canada*, cat. no. 85-211-XPE. (Ottawa, ON: Industry Canada, 1997).

³ S. Trevethan, G. Carrière, B. MacKillop, A. Finn, D. Robinson, F. Porporino, and W. Millson. *A One-Day Snapshot of Inmates in Canada's Adult Correctional Facilities*, cat. no. 85-601-XPE. (Ottawa, ON: Industry Canada, 1999).

⁴ The "on-register" population refers to the number of inmates who have been placed in a facility to serve their sentence. Inmates may not be physically located at the facility for a

number of reasons (e.g., on temporary absence, serving an intermittent sentence in the community, away for medical reasons or court appearances).

- ⁵ Using the most serious offence for which the inmate is incarcerated. The most serious offence is based on the Seriousness Index of the Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey violation coding structure that defines seriousness in terms of length of maximum sentence and the degree of injury or threat of injury to the victim. Offences are grouped into the following major offence categories: violent offences, property offences, and other Criminal Code and federal statute offences.
- ⁶ An offender can be convicted of multiple charges and be ordered to serve the various prison sentences at the same time as, or following, one another. The "aggregate sentence" is the total time for all sentences that the offender must serve in the institution.
- ⁷ H. Boritch. *Fallen Women: Female Crime and Criminal Justice in Canada* (Toronto, ON: Nelson, 1977); H. Johnson. *Women and Crime in Canada*, TRS No. 9 (Ottawa, ON: Programs Branch, Ministry Secretariat, Solicitor General Canada, 1986.)
- ⁸ Education data were not available for British Columbia and Yukon inmates, and for 64% of Correctional Service of Canada "federal" inmates.
- ⁹ Employment data were not available for Quebec and Ontario, and for 81% of Correctional Service of Canada "federal" inmates. Percent unemployed refers to those not employed and seeking work. It does not include those who report that they would like to work, but who have stopped searching because they believe no work is available.
- ¹⁰ Risk/needs data were analyzed for Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Manitoba, Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Correctional Service Canada. Data for Correctional Service of Canada inmates were based on a different instrument and may not be directly comparable to other jurisdictions. It should be noted that risk assessments are not completed on all inmates (i.e., remand inmates are excluded, as are some sentenced inmates — typically those serving short sentences).

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