

Maximum security women: “Not letting the time do you”

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It's about not letting the time do you. I really believe if you don't change your attitude a bit and come down and balance with the institution then you're really not going to get anywhere – you're just going to be banging your head up against the wall – letting the time do you – because you're not going to get any answers. But if you're willing to change your attitude a little bit and discuss what the problem is – tell them what the problem is – and try and solve it and find different choices and different ways of solving the problem – then the problem is going to get solved. If you think to yourself that you don't have an attitude and you don't have the problem then you're never going to get anywhere. You have to realize that some of the problem lies within you also.

– Alison²

This article summarizes a few key findings taken from a study sponsored by the Correctional Service of Canada.³ Through this qualitative study, the perspectives and experiences of non-Aboriginal maximum security women⁴ and the staff who work with these women were explored. The purpose of this study was to help identify interventions necessary to suitably address the issues and needs of maximum security women and facilitate the reduction of maximum security classification of female offenders.⁵ The present article is limited to describing the heterogeneity of this population and to presenting some points regarding security classification reduction identified by the women offenders.

Methodology

In February 1998, voluntary interviews were conducted with 14 of the 15 women in the non-Aboriginal maximum security population.⁶

Data for the study were also gathered from discussions held with 20 Service staff in personal interviews and focus groups, and from supplementary meetings with psychologists and program delivery officers.

A qualitative methodology was used because this best suited the small size of the population under study and most appropriately reflected the purpose of the research. Qualitative

methods emphasize the importance of exploring an individual's subjective experiences and her understanding of the events in her life; in short, emphasizing meaning over measurement.

It is, however, important to emphasize that the findings of this study must be interpreted with caution and in relation to the particular context of the study participants. The necessity of giving careful consideration to the findings is due to the small number of study participants, the fact that this is a relative population in time, and a reliance on self-reports, which are susceptible to the possibility of interviewees' biases.

Heterogeneity of population

One of the most important findings of this study is the heterogeneity of this non-Aboriginal maximum security female population.

To consider this population as

homogeneous is misleading and problematic.

The extent to which this population is heterogeneous is illustrated in the responses of the women and staff, which are often clearly differentiated in terms of sub-populations.

Consistent with Warner's⁷ three “constellations of special needs” groups, this population is most readily differentiated on the basis of the following three identifiable, *but not mutually exclusive*, sub-populations:

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- 1) those with antisocial behaviour and criminal attitudes;
- 2) those with special needs resulting from serious emotional and mental health issues; and
- 3) those with special needs resulting from cognitive limitations and basic skill deficits.

It is important to emphasize that these constructions are useful for understanding broad differences in the issues, needs, treatment and management of the maximum security female population, but any such consideration must be done with caution, recognizing these constructions as subjective, fluid and contextual.

With respect to the above sub-populations, data from this study support several conclusions. First, although maximum security women in each of the above sub-populations should be considered as having special (and high) needs of one sort or another, the needs of the women in the latter two sub-populations are extraordinarily high. Second, these sub-populations require separate programming and accommodation. This latter conclusion was supported both in the responses of the staff and of the women offenders, as illustrated in the following excerpts from women offenders. To varying degrees, the offenders in this study differentiated the sub-populations and corresponding institutional requirements in the way of care and intervention, often also expressing their frustration and concern with situations of proximity.

There's so many different personalities — normal population they call it — are ones who can interact well with others and who get along well with others — the SNU [Special Needs Unit] is mostly for girls that have extreme behavioural problems — or a lot of emotional problems where they can't deal with being around a lot of people and stuff like that. I don't think that they should give that up because I really feel like in order to be able to adjust and to be able to rehabilitate yourself you have to be in an environment that's going to be comfortable for you — if you're a SNU inmate and you're in population and you're all paranoid and you don't know who's going to beat you up or who's going to do this — it's going to cause problems whether anybody's beating you up or anything because you're going to be paranoid all the time — people are going to end

up going to seg [segregation] — there's always going to be conflict there. I think that because a lot of times girls in SNU or whatever, they really can't do much for themselves. I think they need a lot more patience, they need constant attention — you know, depending on other inmates to give them constant attention, to clean up after them causes tension, too — where there really is no need of it. (Alison)

Well, I'm not comfortable with [the other inmates]. I wish it were separate, like, so that I don't even have to see them. I just don't trust them, I'd have anxiety attacks. (Melissa)

There's a lot of different types — there's people who are normal population and there's people who are really special, special need. I'm considered as high special needs, and then there are people who are just low special needs. (Tina)

I don't want to be on programs. Cause they are too hard for me to answer the questions — and I'm not like them [other inmates] — I only have grade five education. The girls on the other side get me upset. They're smarter than I am. They like to pick on me to get me upset so I do stupid things. I feel much more better when nobody gets me upset. (Clara)

Classification reduction issues

Among the issues identified by the women regarding security classification reduction were the following four points: periodic ambivalence to reducing their security level; responsibility for security class reduction is shared between the inmate and the Service; exhibiting good institutional behaviour was important; and staff interactions affected their security level both positively and negatively in a very significant manner.

Periodic ambivalence. More than three quarters of the maximum security women stated that there had been periods when they were not interested in reducing their maximum security level or had actively engaged in behaviours to achieve or maintain maximum security. Clearly this finding broadly differentiates the challenges associated with managing women who are complacent regarding their higher security classification from issues associated with assisting women motivated to reduce their security level.

I don't care really — I just would like to get out when it's time to go. (Kim)

I assaulted staff. I wanted to stay here to be with my girlfriend because she was maximum security. (Chris)

I never, ever saw it as an achievable goal until probably three or four months ago. But now that I see it as an achievable goal, it's worth giving it the initiative to try and reach. (Kerry)

Shared responsibility. Most women view the responsibility of reducing their maximum security levels as shared between the individual woman and the Service. Changing behaviour and attitude and following one's correctional plan were seen as the individual woman's responsibility, while offering appropriate programming, presenting a willingness to alter one's perceptions of inmates, and recognizing an inmate's attempts at change were seen as the primary responsibility of staff.

Both. Definitely both. All the psychologists and all the guards and all the case management officers — they can't do it unless you're willing to do it. But once you're willing to do it they have to meet you half way. If you're showing effort, then I think that they should really recognize it. (Kerry)

I think everyone should have an input into it, you know? I think that you have like a meeting — and you discuss things — because a lot of women have factors that case management might not know about — and it could be important, you know. (Tanya)

Institutional behaviour. Exhibiting good institutional behaviour was identified by all women as an important factor in the reduction of security classification. This was explained in terms of staying charge-free, being respectful of staff and inmates, having a positive attitude, not being reactionary, and being consistent. Other important factors identified included women "doing their own time," focusing on their own issues, distancing themselves from a guard-inmate mentality, and not being discouraged by, or upset with, institutional decisions. Moreover, as the title of this article

suggests, becoming positively involved in how one "does her time" is considered central in changing the behaviour and attitudes necessary to reduce security level.

...the big thing is your behaviour — violent outbursts, of course you're going to be maximum — dirty urinalysis, attitude, if you're not being productive, if you're not going to work, if you're not participating in programs, integrating with other inmates very well — I think that keeps you max. My attitude change is what really helped me. I guess the light bulb went on and I said, "Something has to change. I have to really start working on my problems because I've been [fooling] myself." I really wasn't keying into what my problem was — and that was deal with your alcohol issues, deal with anger problem, deal with things. And I remember, I knocked on the door — and CO2 [primary worker] was in the office and I just said, you know, I said to her, "Can you please help me get out of prison?" I said, "I really want to — I'm really ready to change." I guess I just got sick and tired of everything, sick and tired of my behaviour, sick and tired of the reactions I was getting, everything I was trying to do, and then when you start changing your attitude it begins to fit together, and when I began the change inside, everything started to make sense. I never developed [received] a charge. (Alison)

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Well, I think that if I stopped threatening people — hitting people — did the programs, go to the gym with the girls. If they see me participating, doing things, then I think that that would help. (Tanya)

Staff interactions. All women emphasized that staff interactions had a significant effect on their security level, both positively and negatively. Without a doubt, inmate-staff relations form the cornerstone of women's experiences inside the prison. The women have recognized and communicated that if this cornerstone is well-cemented — that is, if inmate-staff relations are open, genuine, consistent, respectful and empowering — there is, in turn, a positive impact on their attitude, behaviour and adjustment. The opposite, in turn, has negative repercussions.

The women perceived negative staff attitudes as being disrespectful, intimidating, diminishing their sense of self, frustrating them and sometimes being deliberately provocative. Ultimately, the consequences of negative inmate–staff interactions can result in conflict and charges.

The negative [staff] attitudes frustrate me — they really frustrate me. Because it makes me feel like worthless, you know, and like that they're better than I am. It's just not — like, a lot of the way that you talk to a person, makes them feel a whole lot differently — the way you approach a person and the way you talk to them. If you're just going to snap at someone, well that's not going to make them feel very good. (Chris)

Positive inmate–staff interactions were identified by both the female offenders and staff as integral to a positive institutional environment as well as to the women's positive institutional adjustment and changes in their behaviours and attitudes. The women identified the following factors as particularly important in developing positive inmate–staff interactions: open communication between inmates and staff; zero tolerance of inappropriate and deliberately provocative behaviours on the part of staff; positive reinforcement and encouragement from staff, including staff changes in behaviour consistent with inmate changes; regular staff on the unit; and a consistent supervisory style that is present, accessible and responsive to individual needs.

It's all in the way that the staff interact with you, without having to push [you] over for this or that. There's a common respect there — they respect us, we respect them, it goes both ways. I have learned that just because someone wears a uniform doesn't mean that they're my enemy. And I never, ever felt that [before] — never, ever, you know. It's all in the interaction — staff–inmate — it works, it works. It really helps. All it takes is, you know, for them to deal with things a little differently. They deal with us a

little differently, we deal with them differently. We get closer and closer to meeting in the middle, yeah. (Kerry)

What was helpful? That as I changed, the staff seemed to change their attitude toward me. Because if they had stayed the same then it would have been frustrating on top of thinking that this doesn't work either, what do I do? I probably would have felt like I was in purgatory there and I wasn't going anywhere. But I noticed that they were changing their attitude toward me — so I said, oh, okay now I get it — give respect and I get respect back — and I do get it — sometimes there's glitches here and there — but that's no big deal, that's the way life is you know, there's always ups and downs — deal with it. I think that if they [staff] see that you're trying to help yourself and they see that you're doing good, they give you credit for it, they'll take you aside or wherever and they'll just say, "We really think that you handled this really well and we're really proud of the way you're doing this or proud of the way you're doing that." That makes a big difference. (Alison)

In correctional settings, structured, predictable and safe confinement is central to positive inmate–staff interactions. When these conditions are met and when supervision is attentive and consistent, female offenders clearly know what is expected of them and are able to concentrate their efforts on themselves. Furthermore, the presence of a predictable and, relatively speaking, safe environment lessens the risk

of psychological decompensation with corresponding clinical and management problems.

In conclusion, this article affords a glimpse at a larger qualitative research initiative that seeks to augment understanding of the personal and institutional realities of non-Aboriginal maximum security women. Findings from this research support an appreciation of the deep complexity of the challenges in understanding

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and managing non-Aboriginal maximum security female offenders. The research also offers insight in how to assist these women in

reducing their security classification level, stressing the necessity for intensive, creative and unique solutions. ■

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² To protect anonymity, pseudonyms were given to each of the inmates interviewed and certain identifying information has been omitted or altered in excerpts taken from participants' accounts and presented in this research. Text placed in square brackets ([]) indicates editorial information added by the researcher.

³ D. McDonagh, *Federally Sentenced Women Maximum Security Interview Project: "Not Letting the Time Do You"* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1999).

⁴ Maximum security inmates are those who receive ratings indicative of a high probability of escape and a high risk to the safety of the public in the event of escape or a requirement for a high degree of supervision and control of the inmate's activities within the institution.

⁵ In September 1996, an interim decision was made to remove all maximum security women from the Service's new regional facilities for women because the community-living design of the regional facilities was not meeting the needs

of this population either in terms of security or programming and the enhanced units at the regional facilities were designed for short-term stays, not long-term accommodation. Since then, maximum security women have been regionally accommodated at the Prison for Women (Ontario) or in separate and distinct units at existing facilities for men: Saskatchewan Penitentiary, Regional Psychiatric Centre — Prairies (Saskatchewan), Regional Reception Centre (Quebec) and Springhill Institution (Nova Scotia). In the Pacific Region, all female inmates are accommodated at the Burnaby Correctional Centre for Women under an Exchange of Services Agreement.

⁶ These women were housed at either the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario, or at Springhill Institution in Nova Scotia. (There were no non-Aboriginal maximum security women in Saskatchewan or Quebec.) A separate study was conducted by SkyBlue Morin (January 1999) for federally sentenced Aboriginal women classified as maximum security.

⁷ A. Warner, *Implementing Choices at Regional Facilities: Program Proposals for Women Offenders with Special Needs* (Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada, 1998).

Coming up in the January 2000 issue of *Forum on Corrections Research*

The January 2000 issue of FORUM will focus on "Aboriginal Offenders".

The May 2000 issue will focus on "Lifers and Long-term Offenders".