Assessing the needs of Aboriginal women offenders on conditional release

by Craig Dowden and Ralph Serin[1]
Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada

The appropriate management of offenders on conditional release is one of the keys to their successful community reintegration. Consequently, one of the primary tasks of probation and parole officers is to continuously evaluate and respond to offender needs. The Community Intervention Scale (CIS) and its predecessor, the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale (CRNMS) is the risk/needs assessment instrument used by the Correctional Service of Canada to allocate supervision resources for offenders who are under community supervision.

Previous research[2] has demonstrated that the vast majority of the need domains measured by the CIS are strong predictors of post-release outcome for general offender populations. However, there is concern that risk/needs assessment instruments that have been developed for predominantly male and Caucasian offender populations may have less relevance when applied to women or Aboriginal offenders. The purpose of the present investigation was to explore the utility of the CIS for case management of Aboriginal women offenders on conditional release.

The CIS is an empirically validated and theoretically-based assessment instrument that predominantly focuses on the substantive criminogenic need areas of offenders.[3] This interview-based rating is administered to an offender approximately once every six months throughout his/her conditional release period. There are seven need domains included within the CIS that include, employment, marital/family relationship, associates/social interaction, substance abuse, community functioning, personal/emotional orientation, and attitude.

Past research[4] has demonstrated that the majority of the need domains surveyed by the CIS are significantly correlated with post-release outcome. More specifically, past studies have reported that offenders who experience increased problems in these areas were significantly more likely to be suspended on conditional release than those who did not. A recent study investigated the predictive utility of the CIS to federal women offenders, finding that the vast majority of the need domains (with the exception of marital/family) were significantly associated with post-release outcome.[5]

Although these results provide strong empirical evidence supporting the application of the CIS to both general and women offender populations, research regarding the applicability of this instrument to Aboriginal offender populations is lacking. Therefore, the purpose of the present investigation was to explore the predictive utility of the CIS for Aboriginal women offenders.

Sample

The sample for this study was extracted on May 1st, 1999, from the Correctional Service of Canada Offender Management System, an automated database. All the study participants were federal Aboriginal women offenders who:

- had been admitted to federal custody and received a comprehensive intake assessment to identify risk and needs;

- had been released into the community by the study extraction date;

- had available Canadian Police Information Centre records (which documents official offence history);

- had been administered the CIS at least once during their conditional release period.

Procedure

The need domains of the CIS are consistent with the Dynamic Factors Identification and Analysis (DFIA), the risk/needs assessment instrument administered to all incoming federal inmates.

The CIS, similar to its predecessor, the CRNMS, provides an overall rating for the offender on each need domain based on a four-point continuum. The scale ranges from 'asset to community adjustment' (not applicable to the personal/emotional and substance abuse domains) to 'considerable need for improvement.' The two intermediate ratings are 'no need for improvement' and 'some need for improvement'. For the present investigation, the rating scale was collapsed and the scores were dichotomized to indicate the presence or absence of a particular need. 'Asset to community adjustment' and 'no need for improvement' were combined to indicate the absence of a particular need. Thus, the domains that were scored as 'some' or 'considerable' need for improvement indicated the presence of need.

Analyses

The initial analyses investigated the demographic characteristics of the entire sample. The variables examined included age, marital status and overall risk level at intake and provided a reasonably comprehensive overview of Aboriginal women offenders currently under community supervision in Canada. These variables were compared with a non-Aboriginal sample to consider possible group differences.[6]

Subsequent analyses focused on the need areas of this sample of Aboriginal women offenders over an extended period of community supervision. Four different time periods were sampled (less than 6 months, 6-12 months, 12-24 months, and more than 24 months). It was hypothesized that as the length of time in the community increased, the proportion of offenders who experienced problems in a particular need area would decline. This trend has been found in previous research investigating changes in offender need during community supervision.[7]

Finally, each of the individual need domains was correlated with recidivism to explore its predictive utility. In other words, would those offenders who scored higher on these needs domains experience higher rates of readmission than those without such needs?

Results

Demographic Information

The present study consisted of a sub-sample of 113 federally sentenced Aboriginal women offenders included in the larger CIS report.[8] The vast majority (70.8%) of the Aboriginal offenders included in our study identified themselves as North American Indian. The remaining Aboriginal groups were Metis (23.9%) and Inuit (5.3%).

Their age ranged between 23 and 59 years, with a mean age of 36 years ($\underline{SD}$=7.8). The Aboriginal women offenders under community supervision were significantly younger than the non-Aboriginal women offenders (M=38.4, SD=9.7, t_{195}=2.86, p<.01). There was no difference between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women offenders in terms of marital status.

Risk Level

At intake, based on a comprehensive analysis of criminal history, escape risk, criminogenic need, and other relevant factors, an overall risk designation is assigned to each offender. Table 1 provides the breakdown of risk level for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women offenders. Clearly, the majority of non-Aboriginal offenders released on parole are categorized as low risk (72.1%). Importantly, this was true for only 49.6% of Aboriginals, a statistically significant difference (x^2 = 24.38, p<.001).

Table 1

Risk Designation of Women Parolees: Aboriginal Vs Non-Aboriginal

	Aboriginal (N=113)	Non-Aboriginal (N=520)
Low Risk	56 (49.6%)	375 (72.1%)
Medium Risk	21 (18.6%)	68 (13.3%)
High Risk	36 (31.9%)	76 (14.6%)

Community Intervention Scale Need Areas

The Community Intervention Scale is administered approximately every six months for women offenders who are under community supervision. The purpose of this re-assessment is so that changes in an offender's need level may be monitored and a level of supervision can be provided that is responsive to the offender's current situation. This dynamic risk assessment approach provides maximum flexibility for properly managing an offender on conditional release.

The proportion of offenders who experienced a problem in each need domain during the four-sampled time periods is listed in Table 2. This cross-sectional design permits an offender to contribute to more than one time period. For example, offenders who were in the community for 24 months or more would contribute to the analyses for each of the four time periods.

Inspection of Table 2 reveals that Aboriginal women offenders experienced problems in many different need domains during their period of community supervision (with the exception of Attitudes). Specifically, in four of seven domains, the majority of offenders had significant need. These women experienced significant problems in the employment domain during the initial stages of their conditional release period while problems in the personal/emotional domain were more predominant needs during the latter stages. This pattern of findings was essentially identical to those recently reported in a study on the CIS with a larger scale sample of women offenders.[9]

Although there were several similarities between the analyses reported for the entire and Aboriginal samples, there was one important difference. Notably, the proportion of Aboriginal women

offenders who experienced problems in these need areas did not diminish the longer they remained in the community. This finding was highly unexpected, as past research has strongly suggested that the need levels of offenders generally decrease the longer they stay in the community.[10] This suggests that the strategies to address and manage the needs of women offenders under community supervision may need to be revised to be responsive to issues such as culture.

Need Ratings and Recidivism

The above analyses provided a comprehensive overview of the problems experienced by federally sentenced Aboriginal women offenders throughout their conditional release period. However, the relation of these need areas to recidivism is also important for offenders' community supervision. Consequently, the purpose of this section is to investigate the utility of CIS need assessments for predicting post-release outcome. The relationship between an offender's *final* need rating and post-release outcome was examined through chi square analyses. The final need rating was operationally defined as either the rating received prior to

revocation (if the offender was revoked) or the most recent prior to the end date of the study. We believed that this definition should be the most valid as it reflected the most proximal assessment of an offender's current situation.

Analyses focused on whether having a problem in each of the need domains was associated with post-release outcome. Interestingly, the results revealed that only the attitude domain of the CIS significantly correlated with post-release outcome. More specifically, Aboriginal women offenders who experienced problems in this domain were significantly more likely to be readmitted than those offenders who did not experience these problems. In contrast, past research has shown that the vast majority of the need domains are significantly associated with post-release outcome. Therefore, the findings of the present study suggest the need for the differentiated application of the CIS as a risk management tool for Aboriginal women offenders.

Other considerations are also important to highlight in this research. First, the base rate for recidivism for the sample was 21.4%. A higher rate may yield higher and more significant correlations. Second,

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Table 2

Proportion of Aboriginal Women Offenders Who Experienced Problems in Each Need Domain Across Different Time Periods

Problem in Need Domain	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 4
Associates				
Yes	47.3% (52)	35.7% (15)	38.3% (23)	37.5% (12)
No	52.7% (58)	64.3% (27)	61.7% (37)	62.5% (20)
Attitudes				
Yes	8.2% (9)	7.1% (3)	6.7% (4)	25.0% (8)
No	91.8% (101)	92.9% (39)	93.3% (56)	75.0% (24)
Community Functioning				
Yes	55.4% (61)	42.9% (18)	45.0% (27)	53.1% (17)
No	44.6% (49)	57.1% (24)	55.0% (33)	46.9% (15)
Employment				
Yes	**73.6% (81)**	**66.7% (28)**	55.0% (33)	65.6% (21)
No	26.4% (29)	33.3% (14)	45.0% (27)	34.4% (11)
Marital/Family				
Yes	54.6% (60)	42.9% (18)	56.7% (34)	56.2% (18)
No	45.4% (50)	57.1% (24)	43.3% (26)	43.8% (14)
Personal/Emotional				
Yes	69.1% (76)	54.8% (23)	**58.3% (35)**	**71.9% (23)**
No	30.9% (34)	45.2% (19)	41.7% (25)	28.1% (9)
Substance Abuse				
Yes	35.4% (39)	23.8% (10)	26.7% (16)	43.8% (14)
No	64.6% (71)	76.2% (32)	73.3% (44)	56.2% (18)

the CIS is part of a dynamic process that directs correctional interventions. Accordingly, successful intervention (i.e., timely targeting need) should result in improved outcomes, (i.e., lower recidivism rates and therefore diminished correlations). Third, this dynamic aspect of the CIS raises questions about the preferred measurement strategy (e.g., first assessment, most recent assessment, or maximum change over time).[11]

For these reasons, an attempt was also made to link changes in need scores to recidivism. Change scores were calculated across consecutive time periods for each of the offenders who were assessed more than once in the community. The maximum change score was then correlated with post-release outcome. The results revealed that those offenders whose need scores increased (i.e. experienced more problems) throughout conditional release had a recidivism rate that was twice as high (23.4%) as that for offenders whose need areas stayed the same or improved (11.1%). This result, however, while consistent with the literature, was not statistical significant. In addition to the issues previously raised, the small sample size may also have been a factor.

A composite need variable was also created which reflected the number of needs (i.e. problem areas) an offender was experiencing at each assessment period. This composite score was then correlated with post-release outcome to explore whether the intensity of needs had greater predictive utility than the type of individual needs.

The number of offender needs for any given time period ranged between a minimum of zero and a maximum of seven. Not surprisingly, the composite need variable was significantly correlated with post-release outcome. More specifically, the greater the number of needs, the more likely the offender was to recidivate ($\underline{r}$=.18, p<.01). This finding demonstrates that needs that are not addressed in the community can have a significant impact on an offender's post-release success, even if this effect is not apparent at the individual domain level. Thus, it may be that profiles of needs as well as level of need(s) could be considered to enhance community supervision and risk management more generally.

Conclusion

This study explored the characteristics of federally sentenced Aboriginal women offenders while on conditional release. In general, these women are both much younger than their non-Aboriginal counterparts and also a higher-risk group. The results revealed that Aboriginal women offenders experience problems in most need domains (with the exceptions of Attitudes). However, contrary to previous research, surviving for a longer period of time in the community was not accompanied by a corresponding decrease in need rating. Clearly, CSC should examine more carefully how to incorporate such findings regarding the needs of Aboriginal women offenders into community supervision strategies.

The study also highlights issues regarding the use of the CIS for the management of Aboriginal women offenders' risk while under supervision in the community. In contrast to earlier research, only the attitude domain was related to recidivism. However, level of need across domains (or an offender's individual profile) was also related to risk of recidivism. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that utilizing the CIS in a more differentiated manner, responsive to issues of culture and gender, may enhance its contribution to community supervision in Aboriginal women offenders. ■

1   340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0P9.

2   L.L. Motiuk, *Assessment Methods in Corrections*, paper presented at the 4th Annual International Community Corrections Association Research Conference, Austin, Texas, 1996. See also L.L. Motiuk and F.J. Porporino, *Field Tests of the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale: A Study of Offenders on Caseload*. (Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada, 1989).

3   Criminogenic needs reflect risk factors of the offender that are changeable and, when modified, reflect changes in the likelihood of recidivism.

4   L.L. Motiuk, *Assessment Methods in Corrections* (1996). See also L.L. Motiuk and F.J. Porporino, *Field Tests of the Community Risk/Needs Management Scale: A Study of Offenders on Caseload* (1989).

5   C. Dowden, R. Serin and K. Blanchette, *The Community Intervention Scale and Women Offenders: A Preliminary Overview*. Manuscript in preparation.

6   The non-Aboriginal comparison sample was extracted from the larger Dowden, Serin and Blanchette CIS report previously referenced.

7   L.L. Motiuk, *The Community Risk/Needs Management Scale: An Effective Supervision Tool*. Forum on Corrections Research, 9, 1 (1997): 8-12.

8   C. Dowden, R. Serin and K. Blanchette, *The Community Intervention Scale and Women Offenders: A Preliminary Overview*.

9   C. Dowden, R. Serin and K. Blanchette, *The Community Intervention Scale and Women Offenders: A Preliminary Overview*.

10   C. Dowden, R. Serin and K. Blanchette, *The Community Intervention Scale and Women Offenders: A Preliminary Overview*. See also L.L. Motiuk, *The Community Risk/Needs Management Scale: An Effective Supervision Tool* (1997).

11   See L.L. Motiuk, *Using dynamic factors to better predict post-release outcome*. Forum on Corrections Research, 10, 3 (1998): 12-15.