

Women offenders serving long sentences in custody

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The 1998 Report of the Task Force on Long-Term Offenders² provided an overview of federal offenders serving long sentences as well as a number of recommendations on how their time in custody could be more productive.

This article profiles the characteristics of women offenders serving long sentences in federal custody as of February 1, 1999. The women offenders were divided into three groups: lifers serving sentences for first degree murder, lifers serving sentences for second degree murder and offenders serving fixed sentences of 10 years or more.

In 1999, 82 women were incarcerated in Canadian federal penitentiaries serving sentences of 10 years or more.³ The *Report of the Task Force on Long-Term Offenders* states that offenders serving long sentences should be managed differently from those serving shorter sentences. Eventually, offenders with long sentences will have their cases reviewed by the National Parole Board (NPB) to determine if they are ready for release to the community. Therefore they must be adequately prepared for their release if they are to be successfully reintegrated into the community.

The *Report* also points out that offenders with long sentences could serve as a resource for institutions. Given their long period of incarceration, they can be trained to provide services within the prison to make their period of incarceration more meaningful and productive. Skills that are developed in the institution can be transferred to community work sites upon release thereby increasing the likelihood of successful reintegration. With respect to women offenders in particular, the Service has implemented programs that appear especially beneficial to those serving longer sentences. For example, long-term offenders are particularly good candidates for the intensive training and continuous nature of the Peer Support⁴ and Canine Programs for women.

For this article, offenders serving a sentence of 10 years or more are considered long-term offenders. In Canada, most custodial sentences are for a fixed period of time and are referred to as determinate sentences. Determinate sentences do not require that the offender remains in custody for the entire length of the sentence. Rather, they may be released to the community to complete their sentences after having served one-third of the time in custody if the NPB grants full parole. If they are still in custody at two-thirds of their sentence they are normally

released on statutory release. In exceptional circumstances they may be required to serve their entire sentence in custody.

The courts give some offenders indeterminate sentences. The most common indeterminate sentence is "life." A woman offender sentenced to life remains under the authority of the Correctional Service until she dies, but does not necessarily remain incarcerated for the entire period. At the time of sentencing, an offender convicted of first-degree murder is automatically required to serve 25 years in custody before she is eligible for parole. Offenders sentenced to life for second-degree murder or other offences have the date they are eligible for parole set by the judge with the minimum period being 10 years and the maximum 25 years. When offenders have completed the minimum custody portion of the sentence they are eligible for parole and may be released to serve the remainder of their sentence in the community if the NPB believes they will not endanger public safety. If they are deemed to still be a danger, then they must remain in custody until the NPB is satisfied they are safe to release. Once released to the community, an offender may be returned to custody if she fails to meet the conditions of her release or if she commits a new offence.

Comparison groups

We compared all women and men offenders in custody serving long sentences. Long sentences were divided into three types:

Life-murder 1: offenders serving a life sentence for first-degree murder.

Life-murder 2: offenders serving a life sentence for second-degree murder. It is possible to get a life sentence for an offence other than murder, but no women are currently serving life sentences for offences other than murder.

Long-term determinate: offenders serving determinate sentences of 10 years or more.

Description

Approximately one-quarter of women offenders in custody are serving long sentences as compared to about one-third of men offenders. Table 1 presents a

Table 1

Comparison of Women and Men by Type of Sentence		
Sentence type	Women % (n)	Men % (n)
Life: Murder 1	20 (16)	15 (624)
Life: Murder 2 and other	54 (44)	39 (1,666)
Dangerous Offender	0 (0)	6 (243)
Long-term determinate	27 (22)	41 (1,758)
Number of cases	(82)	(4,291)

comparison between men and women offenders of the types of long-term sentences being served. As of February 1, 1999, there were 82 women serving long sentences, the majority of which were serving life sentences for second-degree murder (54%). About one-quarter of the women offenders serving long sentences have determinate sentences of 10 years or more, while two-fifths of the men offenders have long determinate sentences. Compared to their male counterparts, women offenders are slightly more likely to be serving a sentence for first- or second-degree murder (20%). However, they are less likely to be serving long determinate sentences than men.

Race. Approximately three-quarters of women serving long sentences are Caucasian, while 15% are Aboriginal, and 10% are from other racial groups. This is consistent to the race profile for the entire federally sentenced women inmate population. Women offenders convicted of first-degree murder were more likely to be Caucasian (24%) than the other racial groups, while Aboriginal women (67%) and women in other racial groups (63%) were more likely to be serving a life sentence for second-degree murder. Approximately one-quarter of the offenders in each racial group were serving a determinate sentence of 10 years or more.

Age. Women offenders in the life-murder 1 group were found to be, on average, over 10 years older than those in the other two groups. For example, the average age of women in the life-murder 1 group was just under 50 years of age while for women in the life-murder 2 group it was 38 years of age and for women in the long-term determinate group it was approximately 36 years of age. In addition, women serving life sentences for murder 1 were, on average, 41 years of age at admission compared to women in the other groups who were between 30 and 31 years of age when admitted. Interestingly, on average, women offenders in the life-murder 1 group will be 64 years of age when they reach full parole eligibility.

Table 2

Most Serious Offence of In-Custody Long-Term Women Offenders (n)			
Offence type	Life-murder 1	Life-murder 2	Long-term determinate
Murder 1	100% (16)	N/A	N/A
Murder 2	N/A	100% (44)	N/A
Manslaughter/attempt/conspire murder	N/A	N/A	59% (13)
Sexual offence	N/A	N/A	0
Assault	N/A	N/A	18% (4)
Robbery	N/A	N/A	0
Other violent offence	N/A	N/A	5% (1)
Non-violent offence	N/A	N/A	18% (4)
Total	19% (16)	54% (44)	27% (22)

Note: N/A = not applicable

Type of Offence. In this sample, the most serious offences committed by the majority of women in custody serving long determinate sentences are manslaughter, attempted murder or conspiracy to commit murder (13 offenders or 59%). An additional 18% of women serving long sentences have been convicted of assault while the balance have been convicted of other offences (See Table 2).

Time Served in Custody. The length of time women serving long sentences have been in custody since their admission is presented in Table 3. Most of these women have served a relatively short period of time in custody (5 years or less), and therefore have a considerable amount of time left to serve of their sentence. This finding is particularly important given that life sentenced offenders are not eligible for parole for between 10 and 25 years, and will therefore spend substantial amount of time in custody before their release.

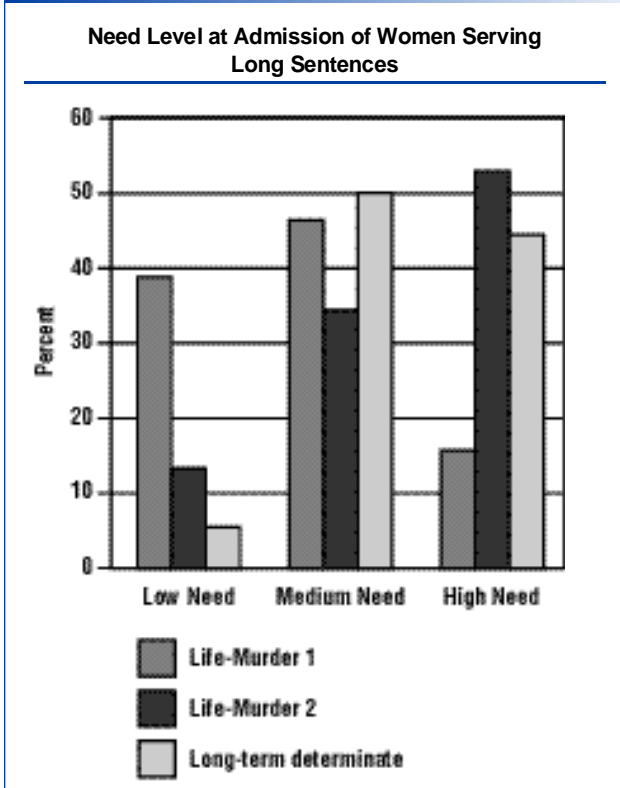
Need Level. Shortly after admission to a federal prison offenders are assessed to determine their level of criminogenic need. These needs impact on the risk of

Table 3

Time Served Among Women Long-Term Offenders in Custody			
Time served	Life-murder 1 % (n)	Life-murder 2 % (n)	Long-term determinate % (n)
5 years or less	37.5 (6)	54.5 (24)	47.6 (10)
5 to 10 years	18.7 (6)	25.0 (11)	33.3 (7)
10 years or more	25.0 (4)	20.4 (9)	19.0 (4)
Number of cases	(16)	(44)	(21)*

** Information missing for one offender*

Figure 1

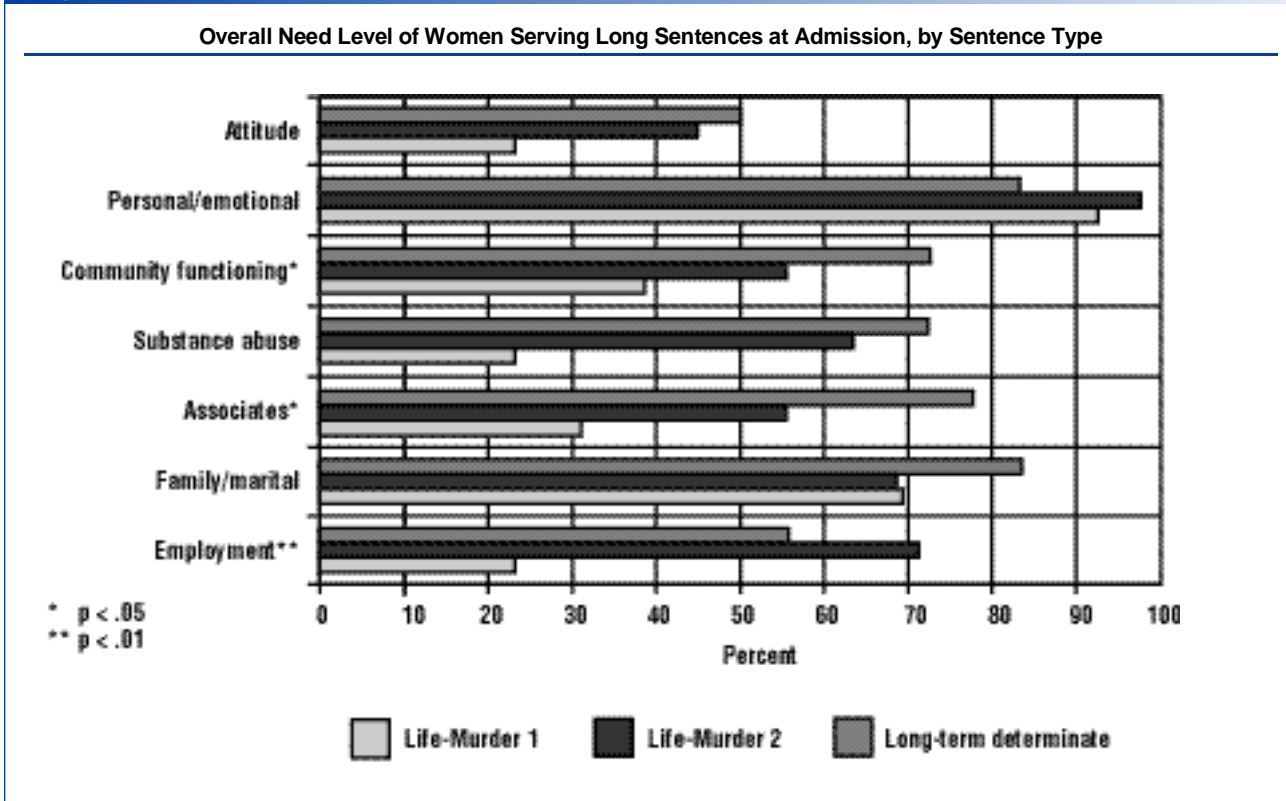


recidivism, but unlike the static risk measured with criminal history, criminogenic needs are dynamic and can be affected by correctional interventions. Programs that target problems like addictions, family dysfunction and employment are addressing dynamic risk factors or criminogenic needs.

Results presented in Figure 1 also show that those women in the life-murder 1 group have the lower levels of criminogenic needs than women in the other two long sentence groups. Offenders in the life-murder 2 and determinate sentence groups are most likely to be rated as medium- or high-need.

In addition to providing an overall rating of dynamic factors, the Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) process provides ratings for seven individual domains including employment, marital/family, associates/social interaction, community functioning, substance abuse, personal/emotional orientation and attitude. For four of these domains (attitude, community functioning, substance abuse and associates), women offenders serving determinate sentences had the highest need levels, followed by those in the life-murder 2 group, with offenders in the life-murder 1 group having the lowest ratings. While 71% of those serving life sentences for second degree murder had employment/education identified as a need, only 23% of the life-murder 1 group had this need identified at admission.

Figure 2



Summary

The majority of women offenders (89%) serving long sentences have been convicted of a homicide or homicide-related offence (including attempted and conspiracy to commit murder). However, between group differences, by sentence type, have been identified.

Overall, women serving sentences for first-degree murder appear to be different from other women offenders serving long sentences. In terms of demographic factors, they are older, were admitted at an older age and are more likely to be Caucasian. They have also been rated as having fewer criminogenic needs. Based on the comparisons made, women serving life sentences for second-degree murder show characteristics more similar to women serving determinate sentences of 10 years or more than women serving life sentences for murder 1.

The characteristics of women serving sentences for first-degree murder present an important challenge for correctional workers who recognize that these women will spend a considerable amount of their life, a minimum of 25 years, incarcerated. The skills that these women possess and the new skills they could develop during their long incarceration period could contribute to the operation of the institutions in which they must live and assist them to find meaningful activities to engage in while serving their sentences. ■

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² Implementing the Life Line Concept: *Report of the Task Force on Long Term Offenders*, Correctional Service of Canada, Ottawa, ON, February, 1998.

³ In Canada, sentences of two years or more are served in federal penitentiaries.

⁴ Blanchette, K. and G. Eljdupovic-Guzina (1998). "Results of a Pilot Study of the Peer Support Programs for Women Offenders." Research Report R-73. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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