



# Research at a glance

## Older incarcerated women offenders: Social support and health needs

**KEY WORDS:** *women offenders, older women offenders, health, social support*

### Why we did this study

Due to the increasing aging offender population, and the limited research on older women offenders, a recent profile of older federal women offenders was undertaken by the Research Branch. While that study provided a preliminary descriptive profile of the levels of risk and need of older women, it also identified several areas that would benefit from further investigation.

As a follow-up to the initial profile report, the goal of current study was to collect information concerning the unique needs of older women offenders in the areas of social support and health.

### What we did

Interviews were conducted with 30 federal women offenders over the age of 50. The interview focused on the women's perceptions and experiences with sources of social support both internal and external to the institutions. Additionally, women's concerns regarding their physical and mental health, as well as their experiences with health care services were also explored throughout the interview.

### What we found

Women were asked about their sources of social support outside (family, friends, community groups) and inside (staff, other inmates, programs/activities) the correctional facilities. All the women reported having at least one source of support available to them outside of the facility. Overall, they ranked the support they received from these external sources higher compared to institutional sources of support within the facilities.

Most older women offenders (96%) identified having two or more physical health problems at the time of the study. Three common physical health problems that primarily affect older women include menopause, cancer (breast, uterus, and cervix), and osteoporosis.

Half the women reported that they had experienced a mental health condition, symptom, or diagnosis since admission. Table 1 offers a summary of the reported

mental health issues experienced by older women offenders.

**Table 1.** Reported Mental Health Conditions, Symptoms, and Diagnoses among Older Women

Mental Illness	Percentage (n)
Depression	43.3 (13)
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)	23.3 (7)
Anxiety Disorders (Other than PTSD)	16.7 (5)
Schizophrenia	6.7 (2)
Bipolar Disorder	3.3 (1)
Borderline Personality Disorder	3.3 (1)
Dissociative Identity Disorder	3.3-6.7 (1-2) <sup>a</sup>

Note. <sup>a</sup>One respondent was uncertain whether she had been diagnosed. N = 30.

Overall, older women were mostly satisfied with physical health care and psychological services; however, they identified limited access to both physical and mental health staff as an area of improvement.

### What it means

Areas of improvement identified by the women include separate housing for older and younger offenders, and increased access to alternative health care options. Increased knowledge of these and other specific need areas will assist the Women Offender Sector in effectively addressing current barriers and planning for upcoming decisions relating to the use of new infrastructure.

### For more information

Michel, S., Gobeil, R., & McConnell, A. (2012). *Older incarcerated women offenders: Social support and health needs*. Research report R275. Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

To obtain a PDF version of the full report, contact the following address: [research@csc-scc.gc.ca](mailto:research@csc-scc.gc.ca)

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