



Research at a glance

A Review of the Women Offender Risk/Need Research: In Search of Gender-Neutral, Women Salient and Women-Specific Risk Factors

Current evidence favours the conclusion that criminal risk factors are more similar than different between men and women.

Why we did this study

Correctional agencies worldwide are adopting women-centered philosophies grounded in the assumption that women are different than their male counterparts. A review of research literature on the topic is important to determine if risk factors identified in the current tools used in the Correctional Service of Canada are relevant to women offenders, or if additional factors should be considered.

What we did

Studies included in the literature review examined whether any of the 'Central Eight' risk/need factors or gender responsive factors predicted criminal recidivism in samples including women offenders. An attempt was made to classify factors as gender-neutral, gender-salient, or gender-specific. The search focused on studies published after 1990 to March 25, 2016. In total, 30 articles were included in the final annotated bibliography.

What we found

Based on the results of this review the following conclusions are offered:

- Although only one study could be located that explicitly explored the need for differential risk factor 'weighting' as a function of gender, there is sufficient evidence to warrant more research in this area.
- There is sufficient evidence to conclude that the global constructs of 'substance abuse' and 'personal/emotional' are women-salient predictors of recidivism. However, Level of Supervision Inventory-based studies are driving this conclusion.
- The evidence suggests that the global risk/need domains of 'criminal history', 'criminal peers', 'criminal attitudes', 'employment', 'marital/family',

'community functioning' predict recidivism to the same degree in both genders.

- Very few studies have explicitly examined whether gender-responsive risk/need domains such as abuse, trauma, anxiety/depression, relational dysfunction, criminal intimate partners, parental stress, unsafe housing, are in fact women-salient or even women-specific factors.
- Some evidence suggests that antisocial pattern/psychopathy may be a men-salient predictor of recidivism; however this question has not been sufficiently examined.

There is little evidence to conclude that any of the risk/need factors examined to date are truly gender-specific—for men or women.

What it means

In summary, current research favours gender-neutrality (i.e., similar criminal risk factors for men and women) over gender-salience/specificity (factors that are more important for women or are only relevant to women). However, future research that explicitly includes hypothesized gender responsive risk factors may find more gender differences.

For more information

Brown, S. (2017). *A review of the women offender risk/need research: In search of gender-neutral, women-salient and women-specific risk factors* (Research Report R-386). Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada.

To obtain a PDF version of the full report, or for other inquiries, please e-mail the [Research Branch](#) or contact us by phone at (613) 995-3975.

You can also visit the [Research Publications](#) section for a full list of reports and one-page summaries.

