

Female Offenders on Conditional Release: Who Gets Full Parole and Who Comes Back?

The parole decision-making process and the factors associated with post-release success in the community have been studied in large samples of male offenders. However, the situation of female offenders in these important areas of study has been relatively neglected. The Ministry of the Solicitor General recently released the results of a study conducted by Carolyn Canfield which was designed to address these gaps in our knowledge of female offenders.

The factors that influenced full parole decisions were investigated in a sample of 52 female offenders serving federal sentences. The sample was composed of all female offenders admitted on simple warrants of committal who were eligible for full parole during the 1983/84 fiscal year. Twenty-six of the women studied, or exactly half of the sample, were eventually granted full parole by the National Parole Board.

Criminal history appeared to play a key role in the National Parole Board decisions. Women serving their first terms of incarceration and those who were older when they were first convicted of an adult offence were more likely to be granted full parole. Thirty-eight percent of women who were under the age of 19 when they were first convicted received full parole. The comparable figure was 61 % for women who were 20 or over when their first convictions were recorded. Women who had been before the National Parole Board on previous occasions or had day parole experiences, were also more likely to receive full parole. However, Canfield discovered that characteristics of the offence (e.g., violence, property, etc.) and institutional disciplinary record were unrelated to whether or not full parole was granted.

The study also demonstrated that the recommendations of case management staff were usually followed by the National Parole Board. Eighty-five percent of the women who received favorable recommendations from the case management team were eventually granted full parole. The Board denied full parole to all of the women who failed to receive a positive recommendation from the case management team. File reviews indicated that case management staff and Board members agreed on the factors that determine their recommendations for release. The most frequently mentioned reason for granting parole was the offender's release plan, while risk of reoffending and alcohol problems were cited as reasons for denial.

Ms. Canfield also reported on a larger sample of 87 women who were released from federal custody during 1983/84. The intent of this component of the study was to explore factors related to recidivism. The sample included women released on parole and mandatory supervision. After two years post-release, 43 % of the women were convicted of new offences in the community. The recidivism rate did not include violations of community supervision.

The criminal history variables that related to full parole release decisions also were factors in recidivism. Women who were younger at the time of their first adult conviction were more likely to be reconvicted. In addition, successful completion of a day parole program signalled successful experiences in the community. Women who obtained employment after release were also less likely to return to criminal behaviour than women who were unemployed.

Research on female offenders is hampered by the fact that only a small number of women serve federal

sentences in Canada. Canfield's sample was too small to provide definitive answers to the questions posed about females or make valid comparisons between the factors that operate for male and female offenders. However, the study does suggest that some of the factors that influence parole release decision making and subsequent reconvictions for male offenders, may also apply to females. In particular, criminal history appears to be an important predictor for both males and females. However, it is clear that more research is needed to compare the relative impact of different factors on the post-release success of males and females in the community.

Canfield, C. (1988). *The Parole Process and Risk Upon Release for the Female Offender: Final Report*. Prepared on contract for the Ministry of the Solicitor General.