Female offenders with and without major mental health problems: A comparative investigation (R-46, 1996)

This study focused on a sample of 76 federally sentenced adult female offenders incarcerated at the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario, in 1989. Each of these women agreed to participate and each completed an objective mental health survey at some point during the course of their incarceration. The instrument used to assess mental health was version 111-A of the Diagnostic Interview Schedule (DIS). Offenders with major mental health problems were then compared to their non-disordered counterparts as to case history, criminal history, institutional adjustment and postrelease outcome.

A review of the published research has indicated that the results of postrelease outcome studies of offenders with mental disorders depend, in part, on how the researchers define disorder and recidivism. This research was concerned primarily with whether diagnosis of a major mental disorder could aid in the prediction of postrelease outcome. It was expected that manipulation of the operational definitions of mental disorder and recidivism would produce different postrelease outcome results.

The investigation involved four stages of data collection. The first wave of data was the result of the mental health survey conducted at the Prison for Women in September 1989. A comprehensive coding manual was prepared for the second, third and fourth waves of the study. This involved data collection as to criminal history and case management/file information (such as demographic data and case history), institutional adjustment and in-program performance, and postrelease outcome.

The offenders were followed from first release after the DIS survey until May 1, 1995. Of the 76 participants who completed the DIS interview, 10 had not been released from the institution as of that date.

In brief, the investigation found no significant differences between groups with and without a major mental disorder. This was the case despite the fact that the groups were not matched for criminal history and that the offenders with a major mental health problem had significantly more prior violent offences. The study also presents cross comparative results of similar studies on male offenders in relation to female offenders.